Religion and the Syrian War

A Qualitative Research on the Role of Religion in the Syrian War

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Abstract

Religious identity emerged in several stages in the Syrian war. It is vital to consider the role of religion when searching for the causes of this war. The research seeks to answer the question of whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. The study conducts qualitative research to answer the research question. The data was collected from 21 Syrian refugees in Norway and the mass media as secondary sources. The research discusses four theories into religion and politics to analyze the data, focusing on political authority and foreign intervention and its impact. The research concludes that religion was not a direct cause of the war but played an important role later in manipulating, mobilizing the people, and legitimizing actions.

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Contents

1. Introduction

Syria today is suffering from a war that has torn the country. The war has been ongoing in Syria since 2011 under the Assad government (Lakitsch, 2018). The war is an offshoot of the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in 2010 and has spread to many countries in the Arab World. The story started in 2011 as non-violent protests to people arming themselves demanding to overthrow the Assad regime. The mounting resentment toward the Assad regime led the social unrest to become a war in 2012 (ARK, 2016).

The Regime escalated violence against the protests, and the country went into war. The opposition formed a Syrian Free Army military force to fight the regime forces; the Syrian Free Army controlled many cities, towns, and countryside. The fighting reached Damascus and Aleppo's city in 2012 (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, and Asare, 2016). The conflict gained a sectarian dimension that pushed the country's Sunni majority against the Alawite Shiite, the sect of the president (Lakitsch, 2018). Many religious or national groups, like the Syrian Democratic Forces, participated in the conflict, represent the Kurds, and Salafi jihadi groups, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIL (Lakitsch, 2018).

Therefore, it is vital to understand religion's role in this conflict to understand the Syrian conflict. Unlike other uprisings in Egypt and Tunisia, the uprising in Syria could not bring down the Assad regime, and it turned into a bloody war that tore the country apart. Focusing on religion in the Syrian conflict runs the risk of underestimating other factors in the war. However, the complex reality of Syrian society and the effect of religion on people's behaviors and the conflicting groups make religion a vital topic to research in the war. Besides, the involvement of Iran and Saudi gives the impression that there are religious motives behind the external involvement, which could be reflected on the ground as a conflict between Shia and Sunna. Therefore, to comprehend the conflict dynamics in Syria, it is essential to explore the role of religion in this war

The research is trying to answer this question: is religion the cause of the Syrian war? The study will look at different factors to answer the research question. It will look at historical factors such as the history of the sects in Syria and the history of the political Regime in Syria until the outbreak of the war. The research will look at external interventions and their impact on the war. Understanding the motives of the countries involved in the conflict is important because external support for the conflicting parties was a primary reason for continuing the conflict.

1.1.   Thesis structure

The research consists of six chapters, including the introduction as the first chapter. The second chapter discusses the theoretical framework that includes Huntington's theory about future wars, where religion causes conflict between civilizations. In addition, constructivism, instrumentalism, and primordialism approach to religion will discuss the role of the political elite.

The second chapter will discuss the study design. The chapter will present the qualitative research the study uses, semi-structured interviews, media content, and method of data collection methods and analysis.

The fourth chapter presents the background literature. The section briefly presents the sects in Syria, the political regime, and its history until the outbreak of the war and the foreign intervention.

The fifth chapter will present and discuss the results. The section consists of three sections that discuss the research results and are analyzed according to the theoretical framework.

The last chapter is the conclusion. The conclusion will present a summary and conclusion of the discussion of the results.

2.   Methods chapter

This chapter aims to introduce the research methodology for this research; the research aims to answer whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. The research design will be qualitative, with semi-structured interviews as primary data and media content as secondary data. The approach will allow for a deeper understanding and varied perspective of the causes of the Syrian war. The researcher chose the sample population to be Syrians who flee to Norway after the war in 2011. The researcher decided to conduct telephone interviews due to the COVID-19 situation and consider the interviewer and the interviewees' safety. The use of secondary data will be extracted from existing media content on the Syrian war. The chapter will discuss the sampling approach for the research, the data collection, data analysis, and research ethics.

Triangulation refers to using different sources or lines of sight on an issue better to understand it (Berg & Lune 2012). For many researchers, triangulation is defined as using multiple data sampling techniques to examine the same phenomena. For Denzin (1978), triangulation represents various data, researchers, theories, and methods (Berg & Lune 2012). Using triangulation in research eliminates or reduces biases and increases the reliability and validity of the study. Therefore, since one researcher will conduct the study, the use of triangulation is limited to the use of two data sources, media and interviews, and four theories.

Data triangulation involves using different sources of data to examine a situation. The two data resources in this research are semi-structured interviews and social media content. After conducting the interviews with Syrian refugees and gaining insight into their perspective about the Syrian war causes; The interviews' feedback will be compared to data collected from media contents to determine the agreement and divergence between them. The weakness of data triangulation tends to be linked with the quantity of data. For instance, having little data might not lead to meaningful data.

Theory triangulation involves the use of multiple theories or perspectives to interprets a single set of data. The researcher will use four conflict theories regarding religion to look at the phenomenon from a different perspective. Then the researcher will compare the four theories and contrast the finding from each of them and identify relevant causes of conflicts and the role of religion in these conflicts.

The nature of qualitative research focuses on capturing people's opinions and views (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Therefore, this research method is advantageous in this research for some reasons. The qualitative research method captures the changing attitudes of the target group, does not have many limitations; it is much more flexible and obtains data from first-hand sources (Rahman, 2017). However, the method will also have some disadvantages, including the sample size, sample bias, and self-selection bias.

2.1. Sampling methods

The sample population for this research is the Syrian refugees in Norway. However, two purposive sampling techniques will be used in this study to get only relevant data from the targeted populations and ensure a good deal of variety in the resulting sampling. Because of the

absence of a sampling frame, where no list of the population can be sampled (Syrian refugees in Norway), the researcher will initially select a small group of units based on research relevance using generic purposive sampling. When using purposive generic sampling, the researcher creates criteria concerning what kind of cases the research needs to address the research question, then identifies the cases and samples from those identified cases (Berg & Lune, 2012). Then the researcher will be using the snowball sampling technique, where the units will lead to other candidates with relevant characteristics (Berg & Lune, 2012).

The Snowball sampling approach has some disadvantages. Because of the hostility between sects and the many political views of the targeted population, the respondents may lead the researcher to other respondents who adopt the same ideas they want to emphasize. To minimize this bias, the researcher will maintain a critical view toward the respondents and the sources throughout the research process and use triangulation to check one source with another. Triangulation refers to using different sources to examine one phenomenon better to understand it (Berg & Lune 2012). So, to minimize bias, the researcher will check both sources with each other and compare the data to find the agreement and divergence between both data. Another bias the research might face is gender bias. Due to cultural considerations, it might be challenging to reach female respondents, and gender representation might not be equal. The researcher will try to include female respondents in the initial group; they will most likely lead me to more female respondents.

The researcher chose to interview 25 units for the research. The interviewees are Syrian refugees living in Norway above the age of 18. They have to be fluent in English. The researcher expects these criteria to lead to respondents with relevant qualifications answering the research question. The respondents are not chosen to represent the whole Syrian population because they saw the war's development and are most likely to provide the information needed to answer the research question. Also, interviewing 25 Syrian will not provide generalizable data to the entire population. Besides, Syrians who still live in Syria might have a different view from those who left Syria, as they are still living the war; they saw its recent developments and experienced more on the ground, which makes them look at things differently. In addition, Because a snowball sample lacks a sampling frame, units in the population of interest will not have the same chance of being included in the final sample, the results will not be generalizable.

The initial group of participants was recruited through online platforms. The use of online platforms consisted of using Facebook groups of Syrian refugees in Norway; the researcher posted in one of the Facebook groups about the research and ask for participants. Seventeen people were interested in participating in the study. An introductory statement was being sent to those who showed interest in participating (Appendix A). The introductory statement includes information about the researcher, the research institution, and information about the study. Yet, 9 participants call me back after they received the introductory statement. When the participant agrees to take part in the study, the interviews were scheduled. At the end of the interview, the participants were asked to candidate other people who fit the criteria to participate in the study. I was able to do twenty-one interviews in the end. Seven females and fourteen males. As a result of the difficulty of reaching English-speaking Syrians, I conducted 16 interviews in Arabic and translated them.

By using the online platform for sampling, the research might miss the units that are not active on social media; using snowball sampling will help the researcher reach these units. The initial group participants were asked to recommend new participants who are most likely not active on social media. People who do not have access to email or Facebook.

2.2.   Data collection.

The qualitative research approach is essential for collecting data that will explain 'why' religion became a factor in the war. Two qualitative research methods will be used to collect this data: semi-structured interviews as a primary resource and mass media outputs as a secondary resource. To reduce bias and increase the reliability and validity of the research, the data from both sources will be cross-checked and compared using triangulation.

The research will use semi-structured interviews to collect primary data in semi-structured interviews. The researcher has a list of questions or specific topics to be covered, referred to as an interview guide, but the interviewee has leeway on replaying and answering the question. The interviewer might pick up on something and asked a question that is not in the schedule. So it has a degree of structure, but the interview allows the interviewer and the interviewee to add, comment, or pursue topics not in the schedule (Brayman,2012).

The primary data for this research is the Syrian refugees in Norway's opinions on whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. Due to the COVID-19 situation and considering the

interviewer's safety and the interviewees, the researcher will use semi-structured telephone interviews. Therefore, the researcher came up with open-ended questions that would help me answer the research question and listed them as the interview guide, and under each question, there will be a list of topics that need to be covered (Bryman 2012). The interviews will be recorded using a telephone application called TapeACall, and the application will be tested many times before starting the interviews to avoid any technical problems. With this type of interview, Bryman states that emphasis is on "how the interviewee frames and understands issues and events" (Bryman,2012). The transcription of the recorded interview will be right after each interview.

As the Syrian war is still ongoing, mass media is a valuable resource of information. The use of secondary data will be extracted from existing media content about the Syrian conflict. The secondary sources consist of interviews from YouTube with prominent figures in the Syrian regime, Alba'th party, including parliaments and government members, the Syrian opposition, and other parties involved in the war. There are also clips from the war on the internet, like media reports or clips from different militias explaining why they are fighting. Reports from local and regional media networks like Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya, and Al Manar. The study will face an expected bias dealing with the mentioned media networks, where each network has a different agenda and supports various parties in the war. As the researcher speaks the Arabic language, the accessible literature gives an advantage to this research. There is access to many secondary sources in the Arabic language that the researcher will be translating rather than trusting someone else's translation and access to resources only available in Arabic.

2.3. Data Analysis

The research question aims to find whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. Many questions need to be highlighted in the Syrian case, like why the Assad's regime did not fall as Mubarak's regime in Egypt or why the Syrian army did not fracture like Muammar Qadhafi's in Libya why the war in Syria lasted for so long. These questions will remain pending until the cause of the war is understood.

The research will use primary and secondary sources to provide qualitative data analysis on whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. Interview types of data are often not amenable to analysis until the collected information has been condensed and made systematically

comparable ((Berg & Lune, 2012). The recorded interviews must be transcribed into text to make them amenable to analysis. Therefore, the research will adopt the content analysis method in analyzing the data collected. In content analysis, the data will be categorized based on the mode of extraction, verbal and non-verbal.

The use of content analysis will include manifest content and latent content. Manifest content refers to the surface structure in the message, and latent content is the deep structural meaning conveyed by the message and gives additional insight into manifest content (Berg & Lune, 2012). So, besides coding the manifest meaning, the researcher will consider any profound messages from the units that can be coded and give independent evidence with every latent meaning inference. For example, the textual features and the use of the language, if the sender uses a passive tense, so he/she tries to hide the agency. The researcher will be looking at recurring and consistent patterns of description, how the sender describes the war, for example, if the sender describes the war as a revolution. Hence, it indicates that the sender is against the Syrian regime, where the reveres effects apply here also (Berg & Lune, 2012).

In the context of mass media news reporting, coding the main figures in the news items and their characteristics is essential. The researcher must consider what kind of person produced the item (general or specialist reporter). Who the main focus of the item is (politician, government, or organization). What the context of the item is (interview or a report) (Brayman, 2012). So, the researcher will be looking at interviews with prominent figures from the parties involved in the war and focus on their usage of words describing the others (for example, terrorists, mercenaries, jihadists, rebels), and explaining the reason why they are fighting (jihad, revolution, patriotic duty). Furthermore, the same goes for the reports from local and regional media networks and the use of words in their reports. Conducting a content analysis of such news reporting shows the significance of the choice of certain words (Brayman, 2012).

2.4.   Trustworthiness, validity, and reliability

The trustworthiness and validity of the research depend on how and what the researcher hears and observes. To ensure the reliability of the study, the researcher must consider credibility, dependability, and confirmability. The researcher can ensure credibility by ensuring that the study participants have experience with the research topic (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). To ensure confirmability, the researcher must interpret what data tells the researcher in an unbiased way.. Transcribing the interview manually and coding them will provide the researcher s deep

understanding of the contents interview and what participants mean. Using triangulation will eliminate or reduce biases and increase the reliability and validity of the research.

Reliability means to which degree the study can be replicated. In qualitative research, it is difficult to meet; it is impossible to freeze a social setting and the situation of study to make it replicable. However, several strategies can be introduced to approach reliability. For example, the researcher needs to adopt a similar social role as the original researcher (Brayman, 2012). In this study, my knowledge about the culture of the interviewed population is an advantage. Speaking the same language would provide a sense of comfort, which could lead to truthful information.

Validity refers to the accuracy with which the conclusions accurately reflect the data and the integrity and application of the methodologies used. Generalization allows researchers to document those findings that occur in various contexts and are not idiosyncratic to a particular context. As it was emphasized before, triangulation can increase conclusion validity (Johnson & Christensen, 2004). Triangulation allows researchers to ensure consistency in findings by using different means of accessing those findings, increasing the confidence that the results are not driven from one data source. There is a benefit of obtaining convergence about the same phenomenon using different sources. Still, this study extends this to emphasize the strategic value of multiple data sources in conjunction with the two theories.

2.5. Ethics in Data Collection and Data Analysis

The research will uphold the highest ethical standards when collecting data. Therefore, it is essential to plan and mention the research measures to protect the participants involved. First, the people participating in the research will have to know the researcher, the name, country of origin, and the data's purpose. Second, the researcher will ask the permission of the participants before collecting the data from them. Third, the participant's information will be confidential, and that findings anonymous to avoid jeopardizing the participants' safety (Brayman, 2012). Finally, the data collected will be protected. No personal information from the participants will be collected. The research will follow the guidelines of the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD, 2019).

3. Theoretical framework

To define the religion's influence on conflict, it is crucial to identify the link between religion and politics. The rule of the political game varies over time and place. Political goals can be accomplished through peaceful political channels, but these efforts aren't always successful. That puts the state, group, or individual in front of limited options, accepting the current results

and continuing to use the peaceful political methods, hoping to achieve results in the future. The second option is to use violence to achieve these political goals.

Researchers and media have referred to the Syrian war in various ways. For example, the Syrian regime's media referred to the war as a global conspiracy targeting Syria. In contrast, the Syrian opposition's media referred to the war as a revolution to bring down the regime; besides, many researchers used the term Civil War in referring to the Syrian war (Balanche, 2018). Many explanatory models could be used to analyze the Syrian conflict and its causes. For instance: Gurr's theory examines why people engage in political violence and how regimes respond. Gurr examines the psychological aggression-frustration theory; he argues that the primary source of the human capacity for violence is the mechanism of frustration and aggression. Gurr says that frustration does not inevitably lead to violence, but it will eventually lead to violence when frustration is prolonged and felt (Gurr, 2015).

Gurr's theory discusses the popular discontent and analyzing its sources. Gurr explains his hypothesis using the term "relative deprivation," which means the inconsistency between what people think they merit and what they think they can get. There is a chance to rebel if there is a significant inconsistency between what they deserve and what they think they will get. However, Gurr does not look at depression as a definite cause of political violence because people can become acclimated to a bad state of affairs. According to Gurr, as frustration results in aggressive behaviors by individuals, the same does relative deprivation and predicts collective violence by social groups (Gurr, 2015).

According to Gurr, more variables influence the use of violence (Gurr, 2015). For example, society, culture, and the political environment. The culture, for instance, must accept the use of violence to achieve the goals. Gurr argues that people are more likely to use political violence if they see the current regime, the socio-economic or political system as illegitimate. Gurr argues that the state's legitimacy is a significant factor in whether people direct their action toward the government or not.

In a later 2011 article, Gurr adds that he thinks Why Men Rebel's argument is valid but incomplete. According to Gurr, the first step to analyzing political conflicts is understanding the peoples' grievances and where they come from. First, to understand grievances, there must be an examination of where people stand in society and their good and bad experiences with government and society. According to Gurr, economic and social structure are not enough explanations for political conflict; there must be an understanding of how people interpret the

situation they are experiencing (Gurr, 2011). So, the research uses four explanatory models, Clash of Civilizations, instrumentalist, constructivist, and primordialism approach to religion's role in policies.

The research chose the clash of civilizations theory because it argues that future wars will be religious-driven, which is the core of the research question. Moreover, the Syrian war was one of the most significant wars in the last ten years and is still ongoing. Looking at the developments in the Middle East, especially after the crises in Iraq and Syria, the theory of the clash of civilizations became noticeable. As acknowledged by several experts and researchers in international relations, Syria is a new stage of the conflict between the Western and Islamic civilizations. The war in this country will be a starting point for forming new regional and international systems. In this war, actors belonging to different civilizations participate in this war, the government of Bashar al-Assad, ISIL and Jabhat Al-Nusra, the United States and its Western allies, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, Iran, and the focus of the resistance.

3.1.   The question of Clash of Civilization

Samuel Huntington employed the term Clash of Civilizations in an article published in 1993 (Huntington, 1993). According to Huntington, cultural and religious issues will be leading factors in future wars. Huntington followed his article with the book the Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order in 1996. In his book, he described the Islamic civilization as the most vulnerable to conflict. He used the term "Islam's bloody borders" to describe Islamic civilization's borders with other civilizations as it is filled with wars to prove his point. In the Islamic civilization, there are distinct subcultures, including Arab, Persian, and Turkic (Huntington,1997).

This section will explain Huntington's theory of Clash of Civilization and how it explains the Syrian war. Huntington's argument on the new wars where the culture and religion will be leading factors of future wars is useful to this research; it allows to think of Syria as part of the Islamic world with different religious groups and ethnicity. To this end, Huntington's conceptualization of the new wars and differences between cultures and religious groups is generative for grasping how the difference between these groups in Syria caused the war. It is here that Huntington's argument attention to the absence of the core state in the Islamic world is of value for informing how that affected the war in Syria.

-    **Religion and new wars**

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Civilization can be defined by a few elements, such as language, history, religion, institution, and self-identification (Huntington, 1993). As religion is one of many elements that define civilization, it is the essential element that defines civilizations. He names three civilizations according to religion, Orthodox, Hindu, and Islamic. Furthermore, people from the same race and who speak the same language might be divided and kill each other, while people from different races might be united by civilization. Due to the increased interaction between these civilizations, the religious chasm will have a significant role. The technology revolution will ease the communication among the religious groups and increase their ability to spread the information; subsequently, this will strengthen the religious identities and weaken the local identities and traditions (Huntington,1997). Huntington divided the civilizational conflicts into three types. First, Conflicts between the dominant states in civilization. Second, the conflicts between two states on the fault line on the civilizational border. Third, domestic conflicts happen inside the state (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009).

Fault lines conflicts are communal conflicts between countries or groups belonging to different civilizations. Fault lines wars are conflicts that have turned into violence. These conflicts may be between states, non-governmental groups, or between states and non-governmental groups. Fault lines conflicts within states may include groups generally stationed in specific geographical areas, fighting for independence. In fault lines conflicts, one of the parties may expel the other party or kill them to seize the land, the so-called ethnic cleansing. These conflicts are often violent, resulting in massacres, and terrorism, rape, and torture. Fault lines conflicts have some features of sectarian wars. When these conflicts occur within states, they last for long periods and are related to issues of identity and power of the group, and it isn't easy to solve them through settlement. From reaching agreements, the disputing parties do not abide by the settlement (Huntington,1997).

Many international and regional parties have been involved in the Syrian conflict. The war on terror, the emergence of ISIS, the US military presence in Syria, the intervention of regional and trans-regional powers in the conflict, such as Russia, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and European countries, suggest a clash of civilizations. Syria, for example, is a part of the resistance axis, along with Iran. Iran is supporting Palestinian jihadist groups, especially Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hezbollah, in their fight against Israel. The axis of resistance is a Middle East coalition of states and non-state actors to counter Western interests, including the United States and Israel. Raising the strength of the resistance axis, including Hezbollah, is the US's main concern; thus, the US seeks to weaken the resistance axis (Mohns, & Bank, 2012).

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By supporting the Syrian opposition, the United States tried to help bring down the Syrian regime, one of the essential components of the axis of resistance which can be seen as a war between the United States against an Islamic alliance.

Huntington fails to see the divisions and fissures that exist within civilizational entities. The politics of the states inside a civilization are seen as following states' interests rather than being built on an abstract idea of civilization call some form of religious solidarity. As a result, viewing Asia and the Middle East as one civilization is a mistake. It negates the fact that numerous conflicts in these regions have happened within civilizations. The various actions of some countries can support this notion; for example, Saudi Arabia and Egypt's policies in ensuring their interests differ from Iran and Iraq's. Some of these countries cooperate with the United States, while others fight with it. Huntington appears to believe that if the West creates a unified bloc in such a situation, the West will demonstrate complete unity in the front of the "Islamic danger." (Heilbrunn,1998). Following Huntington's argument, confrontation with some Middle Eastern actors was on the agenda of the West and the United States when the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began in 2001 and 2003. For example, some of these actors (Hezbollah and Hamas, for example) hold different religious views, yet their political ideologies are remarkably similar. As the weakness of Western civilization appears to be reflected in the Middle East conflicts, the performance of the United States (as a symbol of Western civilization) in the Global War on Terror has increased over the past two decades. Thus, it can be said that the fundamental contradictions between Western and Islamic civilizations play an essential role in shaping the post-Islamic awakening developments in the Middle East. In this sense, the role of regional and trans-regional actors in the Middle East conflict appears to be the clash of Islam and the West.

Regional powers in the Middle East are trying to maintain their hegemony and influence in the region. Any power that can defeat the other will become the dominant power in the Middle East. The rivalry between Western and Islamic civilizations can be explained, and the victorious civilization will dominate the region. However, speaking of conflicts within the civilization, the religious and ethnic pluralism within the Islamic civilization will lead the states to establish an alliance in line with Western interests against states hostile to the West (Mohns, & Bank, 2012). Therefore, pushing towards the axis of resistance (Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah), increasing the arms race, and transforming the Arab Gulf states into the largest strategic market in the West in the context of the clash of civilizations (Islam and West) can be explained. This thesis will reaffirm Huntington's failure to see the fissures within a single civilization. It will emphasize

the importance of the Shiite-Sunni conflict, which he did not realize its importance and impact on Islamic civilization Huntington.

- **Internal factors**

Huntington claims that the Islamic culture is the culture that challenges the civilization of the West and can see the tensions and conflicts about Islamic civilization lines with the West, the spheres, or the fault lines of tension and conflict. Huntington believes that the inevitability of the conflict between the two civilizations is due to several reasons, such as the continuous increase of the Muslim population and the high unemployment rate, which will ultimately lead to young people's migration to the West. The West's attempt to globalize its values and laws, maintain military and economic superiority, and intervene in the Islamic world's conflicts has led to severe resentment among the Muslim people. Besides the collapse of the Soviet Union, which was considered the common enemy of the West and Muslims, the two civilizations saw each other as a threat. (Huntington, 1993).

Huntington argues that the recent global trends weakening the state's power will cause a "clash of civilizations." He claims that states are losing power and will lose even more power in the future. The states are losing control over money flows, the flows of technology, and people. The global news networks and the internet spread the news across borders. Besides, the weakening of the state might make the leaders more dependent on social sentiment, where the weakened state's institutions will put the leaders in need of popular support (Huntington,1997). In addition, Huntington believes that countries in the Arab world face the problem of legitimacy. The political regimes in the region came as a result of colonialism. Furthermore, its borders do not correspond to the borders of ethnic and religious groups. Islamic fundamentalism as a revolutionary movement rejects the nation-state for the sake of the unity of Islam.

Political grievances may contribute to hate and conflicts. Repressive regimes can be blamed for the rise of extremist organizations. Western powers supported repressive regimes like Iraq and Egypt in the Middle East; these regimes repressed and tortured religious activities (Tamimi & Esposito, 2000). therefore, these grievances were notable in the rhetoric of organizations such as Al Qaeda. The repressive regime's western support was an essential factor in changing the jihadist organizations' aim, from bringing down the local regime to attacking non-Muslims targets in the West. As Edward Said criticized the US of its strategy toward the Middle East could lead to a stereotyping of non-Muslims and make the clash of civilization more possible (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). Since its rise to power, the Syrian regime has entered into

an armed conflict with the opposition Islamist groups. As bloody confrontations took place between the two sides that left thousands of dead in 1982, and the Syrian regime pursued the Islamic groups and put most of their leaders in prisons until it ended all the activities of these groups in Syria until 2011 (Balanche, 2018).

This research categorizes the clash of civilizations' criticisms under two headings: epistemological and methodological. Epistemological criticism castigates Huntington's clash of civilizations based on its realist and orientalist direction. The methodological critique condemns its monolithic, inconsistent, and reductionist attitude.

The Epistemological critique claims that Huntington's theory was not new and compatible with what political realism argues. Huntington's focus on the enduring prospect of war between civilizations represents a fear deeply rooted in political realism (Hussein, 2001). Second, the epistemological critique believes that the clash of civilizations thesis is Orientalist. It claims that Huntington's thesis includes the language of "us" and "other." Edward Said believes that the other's theory in Huntington's thesis is problematic because cultural nomenclature and generalizations are ultimately insufficient (Dunn,2006).

Methodological critique condemns Huntington's thesis on three grounds. First, it objects to the monolithic concept of civilizations, which ignores the polycentric structure of both worlds. The Methodological critique argues that Huntington's thesis ignores pluralism and the many complications in Islam and the Islamic world. The Islamic world does not have a single culture, and there are different types of Political Islam in the Islamic world (Ahmad, 2008). Methodological critique points to contradictions in Huntington's thesis. For example, Huntington indicated that the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict is a civilizational conflict, but Muslim Iran has more relations with Christian Armenians than Muslim Azerbaijan (Marks, 2000).

Furthermore, a methodological critique suggests that Huntington's theory is reductionist and foundational since it minimizes the numerous causes of conflict and emphasizes the civilization factor. To this end, Huntingtin's theory's reductionist and fundamental nature will not be enough for explaining the Syrian war. Culture and religious differences might be one reason for the Syrian war, but not the only reason. For that, the research uses two more approaches to the role of religion.

John Esposito argues the reason why Huntington's theory got misapplied in the middle east. According to Esposito, Huntington's theory finds confirmation in all sorts of conflicts after the Cold War. Nationalist movements, religious and ethnic identity played a significant role in those conflicts, like Somalia, Yugoslavia, and Rwanda. Esposito thinks Huntington's portrayal of Islam as a threat is misleading (Esposito, 2009). Huntington insisted that the West's greatest threat was Islam, but Esposito rejects the notion that there is an organized central Islamic civilization. The recent conflicts within the Islamic world contradict the idea of organized Islamic civilization, such as the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, the Gulf War and its consequences in the region from 1990 to 1991, and the increasing Shiite-Sunni disputes in the region. There is, in fact, no civilization that can be called Islamic civilization: this term refers more accurately to the religion of Islam, which is one of the components that make up Islamic civilization. Likewise, the first and second world wars showed Western civilization's fragility (Esposito, 2009). Therefore, analyzing the Syrian war in terms of its position in the Islamic world and the absence of the central state may not be a complete analysis on its own, so the cultural and religious diversity in the country must be taken into account.

3.2.   Primordialism, Instrumentalism and constructivism by Identity and Elite Manipulation

3.2.1. Instrumentalism

The instrumentalist group is considered the biggest influential group among these three approaches (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). Instrumentalists disagree with Huntington regarding the cause of future wars. Instrumentalists believe that religious cosmologies' differences and differences in ethnic identity do not cause clashes or political violence but from increasing economic, social, and political inequalities in and between the nations. They believe that political entrepreneurs often try to cover and hide religious divides to make them able to mobilize their audience by exploiting them and using old myths and sacred traditions. In some instances, individuals do this to cover global structural problems for their benefit, and sometimes it is done by political leaders who use religion to gain support (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). Instrumentalists believe that as in the old century, politics in the new century between states will be driven by power and interest, not by culture and religion (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000).

Instrumental Marxism emphasized that the personal interests of policymakers affect their decisions towards the country. Instrumental Marxism is a theory that assumes that policymakers

have a common business or share a class background. Therefore, their decisions will either serve their personal interests or serve their class. Marx views the state and law as a tool for economically dominant individuals and serves their personal interests. In sum, Instrumental Marxism is agent-centered and emphasizes policymakers' decisions where the actors are individual elites, some of the ruling class, or the whole ruling class (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2004). Emotional content such as feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, and group feelings also play an important role in how political elites use ethnicity as political elites exploit these feelings to mobilize the masses and use them to achieve their goals.

The economic resources that political elites use to incite conflict can be considered a reasonable reason for these conflicts. If these material gains explain some politicians' behavior, then the genocide, rape, and torture in such disputes need an explanation. Saying that these events are part of a political strategy does not explain some groups' horrific actions adequately. The theory can explain the political elite's behavior, but it does not explain the actions of all members of the group (Williams, 2015).

Instrumentalism suggests that the Syrian regime mobilized and polarized sectarian identities to sustain itself. For example, the Syrian regime has used sectarianism to portray the conflict as a defense of religious pluralism in Syria against Sunni Islamic extremism. in an attempt to win minorities to its side and justify the use of violence against protesters (Wimmen, 2016). therefore, identity mobilization in the Syrian conflict was used by governmental entities, not by the community's elite. Besides, the Syrian state's ability to deal with the protests from the beginning was limited, as it relied on violence to survive. For example, the regime's sectarian military groups' presence led to an increase in the killing and repression of Sunni demonstrators. This framed the conflict as a struggle against a regime dominated by Alawites and hostile to Sunni Islam (Wimmen, 2016).

3.2.2. Constructivism

Another approach to the role of religion in politics consists of the Constructivists. Constructivists view social conflicts as an integral part of cognitive structures such as ideology, nationalism, race, and religion. These structures provide social actors with valuable insights about self and others, influence their strategic choices, and help to identify enemies and friends independently. In sum, actors' identity is formed by religious doctrine, which affects the behaviors of the actors according to what their doctrine says (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000).

There are several places where the constructivists and instrumentals agree. Both groups believe that conflicts do not occur inevitably. They locate the political leaders and the center stage because of their power and ability to mobilize groups, gain support for their plans, and try to invoke their society's religious tradition to legitimize their choices. However, unlike instrumentalists, constructivists believe that political leaders' ability to use religion to their own advantage is limited. Political leaders must follow some religious teachings to convince their followers (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). In both approaches, religion defines the action; leaders must also convince their supporters of the reasons to take a specific decision. For example, if leaders decide to go to war, claiming that it is for the sake of God, others can reject and discuss these claims by reading the scriptures that do not support this action (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000).

Through constructivism, one can see the identity transformation in Syrian society since the beginning of the war. The Arab Spring in Syria carries ideas of socioeconomic modernization and political liberation. Due to these ideas, the Syrian community experienced a redefinition of identity and interests. A transformation from the identity of oppressive to a new collective national identity was noticed in Syria. For example, the early slogans that the protests used, "Syria for all" or "the Syrian people are one, "show the national nature of the upspring (Williams, 2015). Nevertheless, the Assad regime's use of violence against the protests and accusing the opposition of takfiri extremism to fear the minorities created a new identity represented by terrorists whose goal is to establish a Sunni state and abolish minorities. The opposition who gathered under the Syrian national identity soon reconstructed a new religious and sectarian identity that brought a sectarian nature to the conflict.

Legitimacy can be defined as the belief by an actor that a rule or institution should be obeyed. The government's legitimacy is basically creating a feeling among its people that it is correct, so the people find a reason to follow the rules and believe that the government is worthy of ruling. Legitimacy helps governments and political actors to achieve their goals and maintain their power easily. Even dictators must maintain legitimacy among a group of elites who have the power in the country (Fox, 2018). In human history, religion has been a potential source of legitimacy. Religion can legitimate nearly anything, like government, an opposition movement, institutions, policies, leaders, and wars. Using religion to legitimize everything could be an appropriate use of religion or religion's interpretation (Fox, 2018). With the emergence of sectarianism in the Syrian war and the rise of religious groups, it has become essential to consider how religion has been used and employed within the conflicting parties.

The Syrian regime has always used the term cosmic conspiracy to refer to the Syrian war. Assad, the head of the Syrian regime, appeared in the media at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, accusing Saudi Arabia and Qatar of inciting and supporting the demonstrators. The Syrian regime described the demonstrations in the country in 2011 as "a project of sectarian sedition against Syria." (Abouzeid, 2014). The regime was trying to win other religious minorities and fearing them from Islam's rise to power, and excluding the rest of the religious components; after all, the minorities started to feel an internal and external threat to their religion.

3.2.3. Primordialism.

Primordialists argue that the "autonomous conflict-generating power of religious difference" and claim that irreconcilable understandings of religious similarities and differences will be the primary causes of contemporary and future conflicts. Primordialists agree with Huntington's argument, and they believe that after the end of the Cold War, religion will increasingly impact the foreign policy behavior of states of relevant civilizations (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009). According to primordialism, ethnic conflict arises when ethnic identities are politicized or manipulated to gain socio-economic and political advantages by one ethnic group over another ethnic group. "Ethnicity" is therefore employed as an instrumental tool and provides strategic ways to form alliances to achieve economic resources or political power. Primordialism emphasizes that differences in ethnic identities as an essential source of inter-ethnic hatreds, fear, and conflicts; primordialism suggests that ethnically heterogeneous states will unavoidably experience ethnic conflicts (Menchik, 2017)

Syrian sectarian identities were politicized during the French Mandate period. As mentioned in the literature background, Syria was divided under the French mandate into several states, where Lebanon was carved off Syria and became a separate state. The rest of Syria was divided into the states of Damascus and Aleppo, the Alawite state, and the Druze state. The demographics did not match France's vision of dividing the country, as the Alawite state has a large Christian and Sunni population. At that time, new concepts such as the "Sunni majority" or "the Alawi minority" appeared. This division did not last, as these mini states joined to form a Syrian state after reassuring minorities about the rule of the Sunni majority.

Sectarian political identity played a role in post-mandate politics. Where tribal and sectarian ties persisted, and the region remained beneath the national veneer. The army had a high

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minority representation, as mentioned in the literary background. That made minorities play an essential role in the coups during the independence period, which angered the Arab Sunnis, the largest ethno-sectarian group in the country. With the arrival of Hafez al-Assad to power, the presence of Alawites in the army increased, and his enemies described it as the Alawite regime. The Syrian regime's war against the Muslim Brotherhood, which ended with the 1982 Hama massacre, was a cause of strengthening sectarian identity. The Sunnis' fear of the regime increased, and the Alawites' fear of the Sunni rise increased. When Bashar al-Assad came to power, he removed many of his father's old supporters. He marginalized the old Sunni supporters such as Tlass and Khaddam in favor of his family members. Many new economic opportunities were handed over to the regime's elites, who are perceived as being dominated by Alawites. On the other hand, farmers (mostly Sunnis) suffered from a drought (2005-2010), which worsened due to the poor agricultural care of the regime. As a result, Syria witnessed migration from the countryside to the cities. That has fueled sectarian tension between Sunnis and Alawites.

4. Background Chapter

This chapter will give a background by briefly presenting the sect's history and Hafez al-Assad's rise to power, and the sects' gains on the political and economic level. Understanding the historical development of the Alawite sect and their access to power is vital for understanding the nature of the current political system and the sect's role in the war. Besides the Baath Party's history and the political regime in Syria during the reign of Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad until the outbreak of the war in 2011, it is essential to review the current situation and the Syrian regime's role as the study highlights the political elites and mobilizing the audience. Besides, the chapter briefly presents the foreign intervention in the Syrian war. Since the research question seeks to answer whether religion was the cause of the war, the section will begin by presenting the sects in Syria and the roles of the sects during the war. Then how the Ba'ath party came to power until the current political system and the outbreak of the war in 2011.

4.1. Alawite

The history of the Alawites dates back to the eighth century AD, shortly after the Prophet Muhammad's death, which resulted in the Shiite-Sunni schism. There is not much research on the Alawite sect, and much of their past is shrouded in mystery. The founder of the Alawite group is Muhammad bin Nasir al-Bakri al-Nimeiri during the 9th century (Talhamy 2011). Some researchers also refer to Hussain bin Hamdan al-Khasibi as the founder of the Alawite sect. The

tribes were known as Nasiriyah, after Ibn Nasir. In the twentieth century, under the French mandate over Syria (1920 _1946), their name changed to Alawites after Ali, the Prophet Muhammad's cousin, which gave them legitimacy among the Islamic tribes (Hassan, 2012).

During the Middle Ages, both Sunni and Shia Muslims had a hazy understanding of the Alawites. The Alawites initially appear in Shiite history as a group of ġulāt who were exiled from the Shiite Iraq society for their radical ideals and sexual misbehavior. Later Shiite sources maintain a hostile stance against Ibn Nusayr and his circle but are less harsh in their criticism of the Alawites of later centuries, who adopted taqiyya and occasionally lived among the Shiite as outstanding Shiite scholars (Peterson, 2019). The Alawites honor Ali bin Abi Talib alongside the Prophet Muhammad. Even among sect members, information about the nature of their beliefs is hazy and limited. They do not believe they should reveal their religion to other sects or attract other people (evangelism). Some have accused them of idolizing Ali. However, they do not recognize any other book as a holy book besides the Qur'an. They do not consider the hijab to be a religious requirement. They consider Ali's knowledge to be the divine purpose and content of the Prophet Muhammad's final message, and Ali is Allah's guardian.

Alawites in Syria were persecuted during the successive eras of Islamic rule after the Crusades. The Alawites took refuge in the mountains and resisted the Mamluks and, after them, the Ottomans. They were a persecuted sect during the Ottoman Empire; they lived in the countryside and the mountains and lived on Syrian society's margins. Whereas the Sunnis held high positions in the Mamluks and Ottomans eras (1283 - 1918) because the Sunni sect was the official religion, and they represented the middle class in the Syrian cities and the countryside (Goldsmith, 2011)

With the end of Ottoman rule in the region and Syria became under French control in 1919, a new and better phase began for the Alawites (Dib, 2011). After France sent military forces to take control of the coastal mountains east of the Syrian city of Latakia, local resistance was formed from the Alawites, and they repelled the French forces. France sent more forces in 1921 and took control of the Mountains of Alawites, and disarmed them. The French began to formalize the existence of Alawites as a sect and as a political entity. France started talking about a state for Alawites with a small population that did not exceed 300 thousand people. The French Mandate brought the Alawites out of their centuries-old isolation, put them back on the Syrian map, promised them self-rule, and brought them down from the mountain to the city of Latakia (Dib, 2011)

After the French completed the occupation of the region, they called it the Alawite State in 1922 (Provence, 2005). The Alawites region was declared an independent Alawite entity with postage stamps and a national flag. These steps gave the Alawites value and respect that were lost for centuries, which disturbed the Sunnis in the country who had the upper hand during the Ottoman Sultanate until 1918 (Dib, 2011). Despite this, the Alawite regions continued to suffer from poverty due to the taxes imposed by the French mandate on the population. So, the Alawites were forced to sell their livestock and property, and the Alawite girls went to work in urban homes; some of them went to work in some areas of Lebanon. Besides, the French recruited the local population and announced the Eastern Special Forces offices' opening, which was joined by Alawite youth and other minorities, such as the Druze and Ismailis. France also promoted these forces, especially in Alawite circles, in order to have a high percentage of them in the special forces (Pearse, 1949)

4.2. Sunni

Sunni Muslims in the world make up more than 87% of the total number of Muslims. Sunnah refers to the prophet Mohammad's tradition and the practice, which constitute a model for Muslims to follow. Sunnah is documented by Hadith (the verbally transmitted record of the prophet Mohammad's teachings and deeds) and the Quran (Haleem, 2008). Unlike the Shia Muslims who see that the twelve imams interpret the Sunnah, and the Sufi who believe that Muhammad conveyed the values of the Sunnah "through a series of Sufi teachers.

In Syria, Sunni Muslims make up about 74% of the country's population, making them the vast majority in the Syrian demographic landscape. The most widespread doctrine in the country is the Hanafi school. Sunni Muslims are concentrated in major cities, such as Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hama. They form the majority in all governorates in the country, except for Latakia and Tartus governorates, where they form the majority in the city of Latakia only. They are a minority in the Tartus governorate, where they are concentrated in the city of Banias and some villages. They form a minority in the governorates of the Golan and As-Suwayda, where the Druze majority prevails. (Balanche, 2018).

In Middle Eastern countries like Jordan and Saudi Arabia, the government is controlled by Sunnis (Roy, 1994). Syria, like many of its neighbors, is separated from such a trend. While Sunni Muslims have been the majority religious faction in the nation for centuries, their power and influence in running the country, and implementing Sunni Sharia law, have been at a minimum during the past four decades. This does not mean that all Sunni Muslims in Syria

desire the establishment of an Islamic state, as many moderate Sunnis who are fighting under the banner of the Free Syrian Army are content with the continuous promotion of the secular state. Reference.

4.3. Christians

Christians in Syria make up ten percent of the country's population. Christians are considered the original inhabitants of Bilad, and their history dates back to the beginning of the Christian religion, which is nearly two thousand years. Syria suffered from political turmoil for centuries, and the Umayyads and Ottomans ruled the country for hundreds of years. Thousands of Christians fled Syria or converted to Islam, leaving the Christian population of Syria depleted (Hitti 2002).

Christians lived in relative peace under the secular Ba'ath Party. Hafez al-Assad favored minorities during his rule, and this limited the persecution the Syrian Christians experienced in the past. The continued pressure of the Syrian government and its ban on Islamic groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda, has provided over the last few decades shelter for Christians and allow them to live freely and without repression (Mousa, 2012).

During the Syrian war, Christians supported the government of Bashar al-Assad. That is due to their fear of the rise of extremist Islamic groups to power, as these groups targeted Christian communities many times during the war (Hogan 2012). However, there are some Christians who support the opposition because of the violence used by Assad. The majority of Christians did not participate in the fighting. However, some Christian leaders, such as Orthodox Archbishop Luke Al Khoury, called on Christians to take arms against rebels and opposition forces. The Christians supported Assad, but they did not take up arms and did not engage in the fighting

4.4. Druze

The Druze population in Syria is about 700,000 people, who made up only about three percent of the total population of 23 million before the outbreak of the conflict. As-Suwayda Governorate in southern Syria is the main stronghold of the Druze of Syria, also in the neighboring province of Quneitra. In Hermon Mountain, which extends between Lebanon and Syria. Many accounts talk about the origin of the Druze and the beginnings of their presence in the region in general or in Syria. However, the Druze presence in Jabal Houran is likely dating

back to the end of the seventeenth century or the year 1685, when about 200 Druze people with their families immigrated to it from Lebanon (Gambill, 2013).

Since the outbreak of the conflict in Syria, the Druze minority has succeeded in neutralizing itself. It did not take up arms against the Syrian regime, nor did it agree to engage in its battles. The Druze of Syria have been divided since the beginning of the conflict between loyalists of the regime, which presented itself as a "protector" of minorities in the face of extremism, and sympathizers and activists with the protests against the regime before it turned into an armed conflict, while others remained neutral (Gambill, 2013).

4.5.   Syria under the French mandate

After the first world war 1918, following the allied victory over the Ottoman Empire, the British and the French took control over the greater Syrian region. The Ottoman Empire controlled this region for four centuries; during that time, Sunni Islam had dominated the religious demographic within the Empire and had played a significant role in its governance (Kayalı 1997). after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, Britain and France signed the Sykes-Picot Agreement, which aims to divide the Ottoman Empire's territories between them. According to the agreement, Britain was given parts of modern-day Iraq, Jordan, and Palestine, while France was given modern-day Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey's south-eastern parts (Khoury, 1981). The French received various reactions from the local population after taking over the lands. The Christian population viewed the French as liberators while facing stiff resistance from the Muslim, Druze, and Alawite populations. The French tried to demonstrate their control and divided the territories they controlled into several regions. Until 1922, there were six countries: the state of Aleppo. Damascus, Greater Lebanon, Sanjak of Alexandretta, Jabal Al -Druze, and Alawite State (Rabinovich, 1979). Furthermore, the Jazeera region in northeastern Syria, where the Kurdish and Assyrian minorities live, stayed under the French administration.

The French faced difficulties gaining international support for the division of Syrian land. The French believed that Syria does not have a cohesive entity and that Arab countries, in general, do not have nationalities but are composed of religious factions (Rabinovich, 1979). Therefore, this heterogeneity must be transformed into an organized entity that reflects its religions. The French treated minorities such as Christians, Druze, and Alawites with special treatment; Alawites enjoyed subsidies, legal rights, and low taxes that they had not received under Ottoman rule. The French used the Alawites in the army, police, and intelligence services to

help subjugate the Sunni Oppositions. That played an essential role in the Alawites' future and increased the Sunni reactions rejecting this policy (Rabinovich, 1979).

On 1 January 1925, the State of Syria was born from the States of Damascus and Aleppo. The Alawi state was not included. In 1925 the Great Syrian Revolt started against the French mandate. The revolt started in the countryside of Jabal al-Druze, led by Sultan al-Atrash. A group of Syrian nationalists adopted the movement, and the movement spread to the states of Aleppo and Damascus (Rabinovich,1979). The rural Alawite territory was mainly not involved with the Great Revolt. According to Itamar Rabinovich, different reasons led to the non-involvement of alwite territory with the revolt: first, Alawi predominance in the Alawi state was not absolute, where the Alawite territory had significant Sunni and Christian populations, and the Sunni majority dominated the economy, which caused resentment among the Alawite. Second: The Alawi region was hampered by its isolation, poverty, and social structure; this was balanced by a strong sense of camaraderie, a sense of belonging to the community, and a sense of exclusivity (Rabinovich,1979).

In 1936, Syria and France signed the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence; this treaty allowed the Druze and Alawite states to be integrated into the Syrian Republic and the Lebanese region to become Greater Lebanon (Goldsmith, 2011). The Alawites' decision to join the republic was not a simple one. The French had granted them autonomy, and a decision to join the larger Sunni Muslim society could jeopardize all they had previously accomplished. However, the Muslim leaders vouched for the Alawites' Islamic credibility. They assured their protection in the new Sunni state through a fatwa provided by Sunni cleric Muhammad Amin al-Husayni. This was enough to encourage Alawite representatives to join the republic (Goldsmith, 2011).

4.6.   After the independence

Not only had the country achieved independence in 1946, but minority groups had also started to gain political traction (Khoury, 1981). When the new, Sunni-led government took power, one of the first policies it implemented was to exclude communal representation in parliament. That was furthered by the removal of jurisdictional rights granted to minority groups under the French Mandate. As a result, there were several rebellions against the new policies in the early years. (Khoury, 1981) In the years that followed, Alawite clansmen and other minorities started to participate in Syrian politics. In only a few years, Syria's political climate had changed. New and emerging political parties such as the Communists, Muslim Brotherhood, Syria Social Nationalist Party, and Ba'th Party all expressed modern ideologies and intellectual ideas. The

secularist and socialist parties attracted the attention of minorities by emphasizing social reform and ethnic equality (Ma'oz, 1972).

4.7.   The Ba'ath Party

The Ba'th Party was One of Syria's nationalist groups, and it was a pan-Arab party. Michel Aflaq (a Syrian Orthodox Christian) and Salah ad-Din Bitar (a Syrian Sunni Muslim) founded the party in 1947 (Fildis,2012). Its ideals aimed to bring the Arab people together. In theory, it aimed to separate religion and state, with all Arab ethnicities and religious groups included. On the other hand, the Ba'th saw Islam as an essential component of Arab nationalism, understanding that it was the religion of the majority of people (Ma'oz,1972). Parties such as the Ba'th party helped reform nationalist ideologies from constitutional and parliamentary forms to social and economic justice for all.

The Ba'th received much support from the lower/middle classes, like peasants and workers, and those living in rural areas and on the outskirts of cities. Rural communities who wanted to benefit from the new reforms looked for a way to get involved in the country's administration. So, many of these people, especially Alawites, who had a reputation as fierce tribal fighters at the time, began to infiltrate the military ranks (Ma'oz,1972). Since the independence, the military was under the Sunni command, but the number of Alawites was increasing inside the military, and they soon took over the chain of command. In 1958, the Ba'th party, due to the influence of the Soviet Union and the rising threat of communism, decided to unite with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic. However, the Union did not last because the Syrians were concerned about the Egyptian dominance. In 1961, Syria was re-established as an independent state after Abd al- Karim al-Nahlawi launched a coup (Teitelbaum,2004).

Multiple revolts and coups happened in 1960 in Syria. In 1963, the Military Committee, a Ba'th military division, toppled the regime that had broken the Syrian–Egyptian union in 1963, marking a significant shift in Syrian politics. Military personnel from minority religious groups overthrew the Sunni Ba'athists who had previously dominated the party. The coup, which was led by Alawite officers Salah Jadid, Hafez al-Assad, Muhammad Umran, and Hamad Ubayd, placed the Sunni majority in a weak position (Galvani 1974). The new Baathist control was considered as a Neo-Ba'thism and adopted the policy of Arabization. The move maintained the separation of Arabism from Islam and state from religion. The Sunni Muslims opposed that and demonstrated against the regime. Sunni demonstrators used the slogan "Allah Akbar! Either Islam or the Baath!" (Ma'oz 1972). Following that, there were violent clashes with government

forces, which resulted in several deaths. In 1969, the Arabization policy was passed, effectively abolishing the policy that proclaimed Islam to be the president's religion. Instead, a hazy reference to Islam was made, with the statement that "Islamic jurisprudence is the primary source of legislation."

Salah Jadid was the president of Syria at that time. He and Hafez Al Assad, the Syrian Air Force Commander and Syrian Defiance Minister, worked together to place Syria under Alawite control. However, their relationship split after Israel's defeat in 1967 to retake the Golan Heights. This split created a schism between the Army Command and the Baath Party. Using his military force, Hafez al-Assad launched a bloodless coup in 1970, ending a series of coups that had happened before his rule (Galvani 1979)

Dib mentions in his book that Hafiz al-Assad saw that the role of cities must be strengthened, and he has to win the middle class to his side. Hafez al-Assad understood Syria's religious, ethnic, and social structure. Therefore, he did not push the idealism of the secular Baath Party to its fullest extent, as Salah Jadid wanted, but instead went along with the Sunnis of cities and the traditional Islam and became closer to them. This policy was a significant factor in the stability of the country later. Therefore, when Hafez al-Assad waged war on the Muslim Brotherhood in the eighties, the Sunnis of the cities did not support the Islamic movement, as they saw their interest in the stability of the current political regime (Dib, 2011).

4.8. Syria under Al Assad's rule

Hafez' rule over Syria (1970–2000) was the country's most extended period of continuous governance since World War I. He kept a firm grip on the nation, enacting strict laws and reforming long-standing policies (Bhalla,2011). As he belongs to the Alwite sect, that brought power to the sect that Alwite Syrians never experience at any time before. Alawite clansmen started moving into cities in the 1960s and 1970s, mostly Latakia but also Damascus. The military and vast bureaucracies were the main sources of income for the Alawites. Sunnis, on the other hand, appeared to adhere to the conventional private economy. Sunni Muslims were quickly unhappy with the influx of 'heretical' Alawite tribesmen into the towns, which intensified sectarian tensions between the two communities. Furthermore, despite possessing a secular ideology, Hafez al-Assad has been accused of supporting his people in a way that pertains to sectarian ideals (Goldsmith,2012).

In 1973, the question of a Muslim president was once again debated. Religious leaders demanded that Syria be restored to its place as an Islamic state, and Hafez al-Assad, who tried

to downplay the role of religion in the secular state, was confronted with mass violent protests in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Damascus. To calm the crowds, Hafez al-Assad reverted the previous amendment, changing it to: "the religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam" (Goldsmith, 2012). These demonstrations outlined the value of religion in Syria at the time, proving that Sunnis were still a powerful opponent (Goldsmith, 2012).

As a result, a new debate erupted about whether Alawites were Muslims. That had a direct impact on Hafez al-Assad's leadership legitimacy. With the assistance of Abd al-Halim Khaddam, it was decided that the president did not need to be a Sunni Muslim or an Alawite as long as he was a Muslim. Sunni Muslims reacted with skepticism, stating that this argument did not convince them. Thus, Hafez al-Assad turned to Ayatollah Hasan Mahdi al-Shirazi, a close friend and ally, who issued a fatwa regarding Alawites, saying, "I found them, as I expected, to be Shi'a of Ahl al Bayt [of the prophet's house] who are loyal and totally committed to the truth" (Talhamy ,2010).

Even after the fatwa was issued, Sunni Muslims still had doubts about Hafez al Assad-legitimacy. One of Hafez al Assad's main opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunni Islamist organization), fueled this skepticism. The Muslim Brotherhood vehemently opposed the government's secular stance. Throughout the 1970s, they organized numerous anti-regime protests and demonstrations. They launched a massive attack against the regime in Hama city in 1976, and the Syrian regime eliminated their rebellion. In the Muslim Brotherhood's eyes, these conflicts were a religious war waged between two rival groups, Sunnis, and Alawites (Goldsmith, 2012).

The tension between the regime and the Muslim Brotherhood continued until 1982 and culminated in becoming known as Hama Massacre. A clash between regime forces and the Muslim Brotherhood took place in Hama city; Hafez al- Assad sent 12,000 Alawite soldiers to thwart an attempted coup. Approximately 30,000 Sunni Muslims were killed in the city in the massacre. The confrontation was the sign of the regime's sectarian insecurity (Goldsmith 2012, Kaplan,1993). This important event in Syrian history led to the end of all political opposition to the Baathist regime. Hama's event was not considered a success by the government; instead, it failed to integrate various religious factions into a unified Syrian society. That forced the government to take a coercive stand that would define its principles for years to come (Goldsmith, 2012).

Hafez al-Assad gave his son Bassel al-Assad, who was rumored to be Hafez's intended successor, a more significant position, which sparked jealousy within the government (Batatu,1999). Bassel al-Assad died in a car accident on January 21, 1994. Hafez began preparing his 29-year-old son Bashar al-Assad for succession almost immediately after Bassel's death.

Bashar al-Assad, during his tenure, tried to find a balance between satisfying the Alawite elites, preserving Alawite control over the government, and trying to satisfy the country's Sunni majority. In an interview with David Lesch, Bashar was asked if he considered himself an Alawite or a Muslim; Assad replied: "If God wanted sects, he would have sent sects and not one religion." When he was asked if he considers himself a devout Muslim, Assad replied: "Being good is the most important thing, and doing good things, not only praying and performing rituals. I am devoted because I want to be a good person – this is more important." (Lesch, 2005). From his statements, it appears that al-Assad did not attach much importance to religion in his personal life, nor did he support or oppose the Alawite sect. Therefore, Alawites believed that Assad abandoned his Alawite roots, especially after his marriage to Asma al-Akhras, a Sunni. However, some saw it as a step in the right way to reduce sectarian tension between the Sunnis and Alawites in the country (Goldsmith, 2012).

Tensions escalated inside Syria after the 9/11 attacks and the events that followed. After the attacks of September 11 and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, Islamism emerged again in Syria after years of the Syrian regime's imposition of secularism. The United States of America classified Syria as a "rogue state" and was placed on the "axis of evil," as America believed that Syria was involved in terrorist activity. Bashar al-Assad tried to appear impartial to the Americans, as the Sunni community considered them infidels. Besides, he worked to prevent the emergence of the Islamists and Sunni extremists who spread in the Middle East during that period (Goldsmith, 2012)

There was no improvement in economic conditions in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule. More than 50% of the country's population lives below the poverty line, and job market options have not increased. Poverty during that period led to a migration of people from rural areas to urban areas and large cities (World Banck, 2021). That has fueled sectarian divisions, as many different societies now live together in cities after they were divided geographically during Hafez al-Assad's era. The poor economic conditions aroused the resentment of the Syrian people and increased sectarian tension, for example, the Sunni community's resentment towards

the Alawite community, as they were all considered linked to the authority, and here shows the growing role of sectarianism in Syria. Among the other reasons for the migration of people from the countryside to the cities are the severe droughts that occurred in the country and led to an economic and agricultural crisis, leaving middle-class farmers without their sources of livelihood. That led to the Ba'ath Party losing support for its most important original strongholds, such as Daraa and Homs (Salamandra, 2013).

Arab nationalism remained the focus of Bashar Al-Assad's attention at the beginning of his rule. However, Syria has become more isolated internationally, and with the decline of allies, Iran and Hezbollah have become the most important allies of the Syrian regime. The reason for the isolation was the American punishment due to the Syrian regime's alliance with Hezbollah and the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon. With this isolation, it became difficult for Bashar al-Assad to continue focusing on Arab unity and focusing on the Syrian interior instead (Strindberg, 2004).

Because of the Syrian isolation, it was necessary to have allies supporting Assad in his struggle with Western powers such as the United States. Hafez al-Assad allied with Iran, Iran, and Syria share common interests, and Bashar preserved these relations Perthes (Perthes, 2006). As a result of this alliance, the sectarian divide escalated in the first decade of Bashar Al-Assad's era. Iran allied with and financed the Shiite community in Syria and promoted Shiite shrines, institutions, and religious practices in Syria. That led to the increase in the Shiite sect's visibility in Syria, which led to the Sunni majority's resentment. Thus, the external alliance during the era of Bashar al-Assad increased the sectarian divide.

Another important alliance is with the Lebanese Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Shiite-led political faction founded in 1980. The Assad regime benefited from the alliance with Hezbollah to gain its legitimacy for its anti-Israel and Western ambitions stance. Both Presidents Assad tried to downplay the potential sectarian character of this alliance. Bashar al-Assad wanted to show that the alliance with Hezbollah is out of common strategic and political interest. But in the years before the Syrian war, the Shiite affiliation to the party was clear, and the pilgrimage of Shiites from Lebanon and Iran to Syria became very common. In addition, Hezbollah fighters joined the Syrian regime from 2011 onwards (El Husseini, 2010).

Al-Jazeera published an analysis paper on the reasons for Hezbollah's support for the Assad regime. The paper shows that the reason for Hezbollah's intervention in Syria is purely strategic. As Syria is the main artery through which the party receives weapons, the fall of the Syrian

regime means losing the party's most important ally. In addition, Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian war cannot be separated from the close relationship that binds the party to Iran, nor can it be separated from Iran's fears and ambitions in the region (Aljazeera, 2017)

4.9.   The Syrian War 2011

Today, Syria suffers from a war that has torn the country apart. The war began in 2011 as an offshoot of the Arab Spring. The war started as demonstrations demanding freedom and democracy. The Syrian security forces confronted these demonstrations with violence, which led to the spread of protests in many Syrian cities demanding to overthrow the regime. The protests did not remain peaceful. The regime's violence escalated against the demonstrations, and the country went to war. Rebels formed the Syrian Free Army to fight the regime forces to take control of cities, towns, and the countryside. The fighting reached Damascus and the city of Aleppo in 2012 (Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2016). The Syrian regime believes that these demonstrations are a foreign conspiracy aimed at overthrowing the Syrian regime and breaking the axis of resistance composed of Syria, Iran.

In a meeting with the former Prime Minister of Syria, Riyad Hijab, who defected from the Syrian regime in 2012 on Al-Jazeera, he narrates how the Syrian regime has dealt with the demonstrations. Hijab says that the Syrian regime was insistent on using violence to suppress the demonstrations. It is the only solution that the regime adopted to confront the widespread protests. Hijab says: ''*There was a decision taken by the regime to continue with the military solution, and as Muhammad Makhlouf, the uncle of the Syrian president, told me that the only solution is the military solution, and this is what Bashar Al-Assad has done for the past ten years''*. Riyad Hijab said his opinion on the role of religion in the revolution: ''*The statements of the Syrian regime that the Muslim Brotherhood are the ones who fueled the revolution are not true, this revolution was spontaneous, started by children in the city of Daraa'' (*Aljazeera Channel, 2021).

The Syrian war is out of the Syrians' hands after many countries have intervened in the conflict. The Syrian regime, dominated by a minority Alawite, receives support from Iran, the Shiite power in the region, and Hezbollah, the Iranian arm in the region. Syria is an essential part of Iran's sphere of influence, and the Assad regime has been a strong ally for a long time. During the early stages of the Arab Spring, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei initially expressed his support for the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt, describing them as an "Islamic awakening" similar to his country's revolution in 1979. When protests erupted in Syria, Iran changed its

stance and condemned it. Besides, the regime has recruited militias belonging to the Shiite community from several countries (Gause, 2014). On the other hand, the Syrian opposition receives support from several countries, and the primary support was from Saudi Arabia, the Sunni powers in the region. Saudi backed different Salafi fighting groups and the Syrian Free Army (Gause, 2014)

At times, relations between Iran and Saudi have witnessed different stages of relative friendliness and sometimes hostility and rivalry. That can be traced back to changes in the identity of the dominant state in the Islamic Republic of Iran during each period. Besides, the geopolitics in the region.[1] However, each country's identity changes played the most critical role in shaping their foreign relations (Nejad, 2017). The sectarian dimension in this conflict emerges from Iran's Islamic discourse and the idea of exporting the revolution of Ayatollah Khomeini, also accusing neighboring countries of working for the benefit of imperialist powers and Zionism. The countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council considered these policies as implicit calls for regimes change, especially after Iran incited Shiite minorities in neighboring countries to revolt against the rulers (Nejad, 2017). The two countries are playing a balance of power games and they use sectarianism as a tool. According to Huntington, the absence of the core state played an essential role in the Islamic world's external and internal conflicts; it is a source of weakness for Islam and a threat to other civilizations' practice.

5. Findings and Discussion
5.1. Revolution and the causes

To answer the research question, I asked the participants about the causes of the Syrian war. The term Syrian war was unacceptable to many of the research participants. The answers were that what is happening in Syria is not a war but a revolution against the regime that has ruled

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[1] The conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the ongoing struggle for influence in the Middle East and surrounding regions between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is referred to as a proxy conflict or the Middle East Cold War. The two countries have provided varying degrees of support to the conflicting parties in nearby conflicts such as the war in Syria and Yemen and the conflicts in Bahrain. Today's rivalry is mainly a political and economic conflict exacerbated by religious differences, and both countries exploit sectarianism in the region for geopolitical purposes. Iran is mainly Shiite Muslim, while Saudi Arabia considers itself the leading Sunni Muslim power (Nejad, 2017).

Syria for 40 years. One of the informants replay the question about the causes of the Syrian war:

> *"First, I do not see it as a war; by the way, it started as a revolution by the Syrians, with all religions and ethnic groups. Personally, I know people with a different religious background, Muslims, Christians, who have participated in that revolution since the beginning. So, in the start, there was no role for religion at all.*
> *"*

The demonstrations in Syria began in March 2011. The demonstrations began in the city of Daraa, in southern Syria, due to the arrest of some children by political security personnel in the city after writing anti-regime slogans on the school wall. Soon the demonstrations spread to the rest of the Syrian cities. At first, the demonstrations were peaceful and demanding more freedom and democracy. However, the use of excessive violence by the Syrian regime led to calls for the regime's overthrow. One informant adds, describing the causes of the demonstrations:

> *"The causes of the revolution, firstly, corruption, secondly, seeking freedom. There are many types of freedom, political freedom, economic freedom, religious freedom, and media freedom, that what we did not have in Syria. For example, there were many forbidden books. There were no multiparty in Syria, only the ruling party, the Baath party. For example, there is no economic freedom, the cousin of the Syrian president, Rami Makhlouf, who controls the entire economy."*

The predominant sect in this movement was the "Sunnis," which is understandable, given the size and distribution of Sunnis in the country (Bakour, 2015). The Druze community participated in small groups in the peaceful demonstrations against the rule of al-Assad. It quickly faded and was surrounded by the local party and security leaders of the ruling al-Assad regime. The majority of the Alawite sect declared its solidarity with the regime of Bashar al-Assad from the first day. It refused to deal with these demonstrations as a popular revolution, considering them a foreign conspiracy against their regime led by Takfiri and Wahhabi groups funded from abroad. Syrian Christians can be divided into three groups, a group that participated in demonstrations and a group that participated in relief work, but the majority sought to silence and observation (Bakour, 2015).

Most of the participants argue that the revolution began for internal reasons. The Syrian regime and its dictatorial rules were the leading cause and widespread corruption and the suppression of freedoms. The Arab Spring and the demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt played an important role in encouraging Syrians to demonstrate. One of the informants adds:

> *"It started as a revolution but was not organized. It started to break the fear because of the dictatorial regime in Syria. The Arab Spring revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt encouraged Syrians to go out and demonstrate against the Syrian regime. In other words, what happened in Syria, in the beginning, was the revolution, then it turned into a conflict."*

The Syrian regime during Bashar's rule faced several economic and political challenges. For example, low oil reserves, persistent droughts, and mismanagement of the water supply system led to the disintegration of the region. The migration of hundreds of thousands of people from the countryside to cities suffering from a lack of services increased unemployment (Haddad, 2011). The Assad regime has focused on foreign policy and left Syria primarily run by members of his family and the intelligence services. Corruption increased with time; a class appeared close to the ruling family. The Sunni majority, which was formed from the lower and middle class, felt deprived of economic and political participation. Therefore, the Syrians, composed mainly of Sunnis, demonstrated to demand an end to corruption and economic discrimination against them.

Most of the participants who mentioned the term revolution also talked about the role of religion in the revolution. The participants see that the revolution was not a religious revolution initially, but that religion was used later. Several participants in the research highlighted the issue of demonstrations starting from the mosque after the prayers, most of the time. There are many reasons for that; the mosque is the only place where Syrians can gather in large numbers because the Syrian regime used to prevent gatherings. It was not easy to organize demonstrations through social networks or by phone. One informant describes his personal experience with demonstrations:

> *"I do not think that the revolution is religious from the beginning. The demonstrations indeed started from mosques, but this does not mean that it has a religious character. We in Syria did not have the freedom to meet in parties, organizations, or other places, as they were prohibited. We did not have this luxury in Syria. The demonstrators took advantage of their gathering for Friday prayers*

and went out to demonstrate. As you know, the Syrian people are predominantly Muslim, and many of them go to prayer. I remember when I was in the university when we try to arrange a demonstration. We couldn't because it was the biggest challenge to us to have as many people before the secret police attacked us."

Participants argue that the demonstrations were peaceful in the beginning and that the regime's use of violence turned it into an armed revolution. The demonstrators were waiting for the army to protect them. However, the army and intelligence services were using violence to suppress the demonstrations, which made them appear as a threat to the Syrians, as one participant adds:

"*The Syrian people became seeing in the Syrian regime as a threat threatening their existence and all the army and security officers as criminals who want to kill the people. This led the people to take up arms to protect themselves. Step by step, jihadist ideas crept into the minds of young people. In any country where the law is absent, the sounds of weapons become louder than anything else."*

When talking about the role of religion in the revolution, the participants see that religion was manipulated and involved in the revolution and was not a major cause. The Syrian regime tried hard to suppress the demonstrations by all means, as it tried to portray the demonstrations as Islamic to frighten minorities from the rise of extremist Islam to power, thus excluding minorities. One participant says about his experience with the demonstrations in 2011:

"*Okay, I have a really deep knowledge of that. So personally, I know how it has been driven to be as a radical Islamic, war or revolution. First, the people who started that revolution has tried many times to make the protests in front of courthouse of my city. And there is a lot of YouTube; I do not know if it is still on YouTube until now. The government was pushing all the people always back to let them be near the mosques. So when they start protests near the mosque, the government does not do anything for them. However, when they start to move again, near to the courthouse the government was using the force using real weapons to kill people to bush them to go back near to the mosque, the Omari mosque."*

The regime sought to radicalize the demonstrations by releasing extremist Islamist prisoners from prisons. The regime had prior knowledge of their orientations and their intention to establish groups with a radical orientation. So, it appears to the public and world opinion as fighting extremist groups; several informants highlighted this point. In an article in the

Guardian, the writer talks about four jihadists whom Assad released from his prisons at the beginning of the protests. The article mentions what those jihadists did after their release and the armed factions they formed. '' *The author adds: If President Assad's Sednaya amnesty was indeed a considered plan to subvert the revolution, it worked*'' One participant says his opinion of the rise of extremist groups:

> *"If we went back to when the regime made the presidential pardon in 2011 and opened the jails like Sednaya jail and released all extremist people who were fighting in Iraq. The regime indeed knows that these people will start and merge in the revolution and make a radical Muslim group to fight the regime. Since the first day of the revolution, the regime said there were extreme people have opened fire and shot the policemen. And there was no one, but when he opened the jail and sent those ones. And I think the head of Al Nusra, Al Juliani, was in Said Naya jail, and he was released by this presidential pardon."*

In 2011, the presidential pardon was issued in Syria. Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad issued a general amnesty for all those involved in crimes committed before May 31, 2011, as the amnesty included all detainees belonging to political parties. It also included amnesty for detainees belonging to the banned Muslim Brotherhood. The Muslim Brotherhood entered into bloody confrontations with the Syrian authorities during the eighties, and since then, a law was issued to punish the members of this group (BBC, 2011).

Ahmed Abazid, a Syrian journalist and activist, tells in an interview on YouTube why the demonstrations started at the mosque. Ahmed says that due to the spread of security branches in the city centers •in Syria, it was difficult to organize large demonstrations in the main squares in the cities. Hence, people went to the city's outskirts and rural areas to demonstrate. Furthermore, the mosques were the easiest and fastest way for people to gather. Ahmed says: "*Activists or political parties did not organize the uprising, but it was a people's revolution against an authority that they feel is their enemy.*" (Tanwin, 2021)

The research results show that the events in Syria began as peaceful demonstrations against the ruling regime. The protesters were looking for more political freedoms and an end to corruption in the country. Religion was not the motive and motivator for these demonstrations, but religion was used in many ways. Violence was not the only means

used by the regime to confront the protests; it used religion to gain the support of the people in its war against opponents.

The Assad regime charged its opposition with "terrorism" and "belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood," especially after the events of the eighties in which Hafez al-Assad brutally waged war against his opponents, such as the Hama massacre, Palmyra massacre, Jisr al-Shughur massacre, and others. Bashar al-Assad used the same tactic to confront the protests in 2011. In an interview with al-Assad with the Sunday Telegraph in 2011, Al-Assad said what happening in Syria is not similar to what happened in Egypt and Tunisia, described the demonstrators as terrorists, and considered what is happening in Syria is a war between nationalists and Islamists (The Telegraph, 2011). The participants believe that Al-Assad tried to present the demonstrations as an Islamic revolution to frighten minorities from rising Islamists to power. Thus, it justifies its war against the demonstrators as a war against terrorism.

The results of the research agree with the discussion of the instrumentalists. Instrumentalists argue that religious difference will not be the cause of the war but the country's economic and political inequality. Instrumentalists believe that the political elite uses religion to achieve their personal interests or the interests of their race. Emotional content such as feelings of fear, anger, anxiety, and collective feelings also play an essential role in how political elites use religion and manipulate the people. (Goldstein & Pevehouse, 2004). That can be seen in the Syrian case. The regime tried to use the feelings of fear among minorities to gain their support, and it radicalized the protests in its media to justify its war against them.

peaceful demonstrations into an armed conflict in which the religious identity is clearly visible. There has been a clear shift in the Syrian identity, which led to the emergence of Islamic groups. The regime's excessive use of violence against demonstrations, denying the existence of protests and describing them as terrorist groups, led to the emergence of extremist Islamic groups after they were national protests affected by the Arab Spring and looking for more freedoms. That can be understood through constructivism; constructivists see the identity of the actors shaped by religious belief, which influences the behavior of the actors according to what their faith says (Hasenclever & Rittberger,

2000). One of the participants says, "When the Syrians found themselves alone in this conflict without help, they turned to their God to be executed." Hence, it is possible to understand the reason for the emergence of extremist Islamic groups.

5.2.   Sectarian tension

After few months of the protests, sectarian identity became a central element in the escalation of violence. Religious identities emerged in the war when religious minorities, mostly Alawites, alongside Christians, Druze, and Shiites, rallied behind the regime, while the Sunni majority dominated the opposition (Holliday, 2013). The participants were asked what the causes of sectarian tension in Syria are. The participants see that the Syrian regime is the biggest beneficiary of this tension. The regime sought to create sectarian tension to serve its interests, by marketing the Syrian regime itself as it is the protector of ethnic and religious minorities and frightens minorities from any alternate government. Yet, two participants highlighted a different idea, they believe that sectarian tension exist befor the war started, where the Alawites taking control of the army and security institutions.

After Hafez al-Assad took power in a military coup in 1971, changes took place at the governance, security apparatus, and army level. As mentioned in the background chapter, The Alawites dominated the security and intelligence services and army leaders, and all central government positions were marginalized from the decision-making position. The prime minister or parliament was no longer important. According to the data, marginalizing the Sunni community from decision-making has created sectarian tension. One informant answering the question of the sectarian tension:

> *"The Syrian regime is primarily responsible for the sectarian tension in Syria. It is the one who raised the status of the Alawites and demeaned the rest of the sects since he took power. Alawites occupy important positions in the state. Let me tell you that 80% of Alawites in Syria live below the poverty line. But the regime uses sectarianism in order to find people fighting on its side."*

Primordialists say that the "autonomous conflict-generating power of religious differences" and incompatible understanding of religious similarities and differences will be the fundamental causes of current and future conflicts. (Hansen, Mesøy & Kardas, 2009) The ethnic conflict originates, according to primordialism, when ethnic identities are politicized or manipulated in

order for one ethnic group to achieve socioeconomic and political advantages over another ethnic group. The Alawite sect and members of the Assad family occupied important and sensitive positions in the state. In addition, many new economic opportunities were captured by the regime's elites, who are seen as under the Alawites' control. On the other hand, farmers (mostly Sunnis) suffered from drought (2005-2010), exacerbated by poor agricultural care of the system. As a result, Syria experienced migration from the countryside to the cities. The Sunni majority found itself marginalized. That fueled sectarian tension between Sunnis and Alawites.

The majority of the participants believe the Alawites fear the Syrian regime's fall and replace it with a Sunni regime that will expel them. As mentioned in the background chapter, Alawites have benefited since Hafez al-Assad's ascension to power after years of injustice and marginalization. The Syrian regime's attempt to radicalize the demonstrations is to scare Alawites and other minorities from the rise of Sunnis to power. As the regime has always promoted itself as the protector of minorities, as one participant says:

> *"Bashar Assad started to scare the minorities that there is an Islamic Revolution here; if they take control of Syria, they will kill all minorities. He reminds the Alawites of what happened in the Othman Empire when they were persecuted minority. So they tell them that these troops are Islamic Sunni, they will take over and kill the rest of the minorities."*

In 2011, the Arab League sent a mission to Syria to monitor the situation. Anwar al-Malik, a former Algerian officer, participated in the Arab League Observers Mission in Syria. However, he later withdrew from the mission and gave testimony about the Syrian regime's repression against the protesters (Aljazeera Mubasher, 2012). In an interview with Anwar al-Malik on Al-Jazeera, he talks about the sectarian tension at the beginning of the Syrian war:

> *The regime encourages sectarianism by frightening minorities from demonstrations. It says, for example, the Alawite sect and Christianity will be exterminated if this revolution escalates. I entered the neighborhoods where there were demonstrations, and they say we have no problem with the Alawites; our problem is with the Assad regime.*

The regime tried to legitimize itself and its actions by using religion. The Syrian regime presented itself as the protector of religious minorities, and the rise of any other party to power

would threaten minorities. It portrayed the opposition groups as Islamic extremist groups to legitimize the war against them. The constructivists believe the legitimacy of government is to create a sense among its people that it is correct. Hence, people find a reason to follow the rules and believe that the government is worthy of governing. Legitimacy helps governments and political actors quickly achieve their goals and maintain their power. Even dictators must maintain legitimacy among the group of elites who hold power in the country (Fox, 2018). Religion has always been a tool that can be used to legitimize a government, organization, opposition, or leader.

5.3.   Foreign intervention

The participants' opinions differed on the reasons for foreign intervention in the Syrian war. Participants used the term proxy war or the term third world war several times when talking about foreign intervention. Some of the participants believe that the foreign intervention aimed to thwart the Syrian revolution. Some countries aimed to bring down the Syrian regime, and other countries aimed to destroy Syria. However, the participants agreed that the countries intervened driven by their interests first and foremost.

The participants were asked about the Iranian and Saudi intervention in the war and its causes. Most of participants agree that the two countries' intervention is for strategic and not religious ends and interests, even if it seems religious. The participants see that Iran supports the Syrian regime for expansionist goals, where Iran has sent weapons and fighters to help the Syrian regime. It sees Syria as an excellent strategic location on the Mediterranean. Few participants believe that Iran is interfering for religious purposes, but religion was one of its weapons where it seeks to spread the Shiite sect.

> *Iran wants to be present on the Mediterranean, and Syria is its excellent geographical location, and this Iranian expansion worries Saudi Arabia. clear. They have their own project in their region, they want to expand, they want to reach everywhere. And as you can see that they will put all the efforts to the control to make sure that Syria will stay under their control .*

Iran's expansion worries Saudi Arabia. The participants see that Iran and Saudi's intervention is for geostrategic reasons, not religious. Saudi supported the Syrian opposition to fight the Syrian regime and Iranian troops because Saudi Arabia considers itself the leader of the Islamic nation. Several participants mentioned that Saudi policy is unclear, and it is difficult to know

what Saudi Arabia is seeking. For example, it supported the opposition for a while, then stopped and left the Syrian conflict. An informant says about Saudi intervention:

As they say that they intervene for religious reasons, but I don't think so. It is for political reasons. Because Saudi wanted to fight Iran and don't want them to spread regardless of who they are, if Iran was a Sunni country, will Saudi Arabia allow Iran to spread and be more powerful than Saudi Arabia? I don't think so. It's a matter of who has the control over the Middle East, who is able to be the core state in the middle east. Iran wants to be present on the Mediterranean, and Syria is its excellent geographical location, and this Iranian expansion worries Saudi Arabia. clear. They have their own project in their region, they want to expand, they want to reach everywhere. And as you can see that they will put all the efforts to the control to make sure that the Syria will stay under their control.

Some participants believe that some countries were seeking to destroy Syria. Countries like Israel and America do not want Syria to be a stable country with a strong army due to the importance of its strategic location and its proximity to Israel. One of the participants says about the reasons for external intervention in Syria.

I think that Syria was targeted by the major countries. Syria was a battleground between Russia and the United States, for example. Russia wants to expand its influence in the Middle East, and America as well, especially after it invades Iraq. Therefore, Syria was targeted because of its important geographical location and its possession of riches such as oil. Syria is also close to the borders of Israel, and this is an important issue. The safety of Israel is a fundamental issue to America.

Participants also see that Syria has been affected by its position in the Middle East, which contributed to the emergence of extremist groups in Syria. For example, the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) was present in Iraq before the Syrian war. After the Syrian war, and because of the weakness of the Syrian state and its inability to control the borders, the organization infiltrated into Syria. As one informant answers:

"First of all, we are neighbors with countries that struggle with terrorism, like Iraq after the American occupation. Also, many people have just come back from Afghanistan. We are in the middle of an area that is the core of terrorism. So this was kind of the reason how we get fed by that terrorism. This is where the tourists

come from. We are in a region where most of the political regimes are repressive.
So we have zero political freedom. And the only thing that the young people find a
solution is to go in the terrorist way to express themselves. So, it is a kind of an
edge expression, to express their political view of point."

The data collected from the participants did not agree with what was discussed in the theoretical framework concerning the clash of civilizations theory. It can be said that the data did not agree with the essence of Huntington's theory and that religion is the main cause of conflict where the participants saw that the countries and parties involved in the conflict were not motivated by religious motives. However, it was for strategic or political motives. Some participants mentioned that Iran and Saudi Arabia are striving to be the dominant countries in the region. Perhaps this part agrees with Huntington's argument about the absence of the central state in the Islamic world, where the absence of the central states led to the weakness of the Islamic world and the occurrence of conflicts within civilization.

Iran recruited Shiite groups from several countries and sent them to Syria. Thousands of Shiite militia members came to Syria with the support of Iran. These militias varied between Iranian, Afghani, Pakistani, Iraqi, and Lebanese, motivated either by ideologies or financial temptations for them and their families. Commanders from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards supervise the recruitment and training of these militias in Syria. Here we can see Iran's use of religion to recruit elements to serve its interests. Instrumentalists argue that as in the old century, politics in the new century between states will be driven by interest and power, not by culture and religion (Hasenclever & Rittberger, 2000)

6. Conclusion

As mentioned, the research attempted to answer whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. To answer the research question a qualitative methods were used in the research. Twenty-one Syrian refugees were interviewed as a primary source of information, and available online data were collected, such as articles, reports, and interviews as a secondary source of information. Triangulation was used to compare data to answer the research question. This research discussed four approaches to religion and politics: the clash of civilizations, constructivism, instrumentalism, and primordialism.

The importance of the clash of civilizations in the Syrian war is illustrated by foreign intervention. The war seemed to be a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia on the one hand.

The war can be viewed as an extension of the war between Western civilization and Islamic civilization. It was essential to look at the Syrian war through Huntington's lens to understand the external factors and conflicts and their impact on the war. The Syrian war began as protests against the authority, and the sectarian identity later emerged in the conflict; through primordialism, the research discussed how those identities affect the war. In addition, the study looked at the role of political leaders, through constructivism and instrumentalism discuss.

The research results show that religion was not a cause of the Syrian war, and it started to play an essential role as the war continues. The Syrian war began as protests against the ruling regime and later turned into a war due to the excessive violence by the regime. The demonstrations starting from the mosques most of the time gave them an Islamic character. However, mosques are the easiest way to gather in Syria due to the regime's ban on gatherings. The regime accused the demonstrators of sectarianism and always warned, through the media, of the rise of radical Islam to power to frighten minorities and justify the war.

It can be said that the regime's attempts to radicalize the protests have succeeded. The Syrian regime used several methods to radicalize the revolution, as mentioned. Religious minorities in Syria sided with the regime. Minorities did not participate in the war, fearing the Islamic orientation of revolution, which emerged later due to the regime's suppression of the demonstrations, which pushed the religious identity to emerge and made some protesters form religiously oriented groups.

Further research can be done on why the Arab spring failed in Syria. The research finds that the war in Syria was not religiously driven, but religion becomes an essential factor as the war continues. It started as a protest inspired by the Arab spring; it is vital to look at why the Arab Spring failed in Syria and why it failed the Assad regime survived. Unlike Egypt and Tunisia, the protests in Syria did not remain peaceful and turned into a war. Ten years later, the regime is likely to survive after controlling many cities back, and protests receded.

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Appendixes

- **Appendix A**

Are you interested in taking part in the research project?

"(Religion and the Syrian War)"?

This is an inquiry about participation in a research project where the main purpose is to answer the question whether the religion was the cause of the Syrian war. In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.

Purpose of the project

The project is a master's thesis degree that aims to answer the question of whether religion was the cause of the Syrian war. The Syrian war has been going for almost ten years. The war left millions of refugees and hundreds of thousands of victims without a clear solution soon. Given the multiplicity of the conflicting parties, the interference of regional actors, and many religious and extremist organizations, an important question arises whether religion is the main cause of this conflict.

Why are you being asked to participate?

To answer the research question, we decided to interview 20 Syrian refugees. The participants for this project will be Syrian refugees who fled from Syria after the war in 2011 and came to Norway. We will reach them by Facebook groups or recommendation of other participants.

What does participation involve for you?

There will be an interview by telephone at the time convenient for you, and it will be recorded. It will take approx. 30 minutes. The interview will be in English. During the interview, you need to be in a separate room with a closed door. Few questions will be asked concerning the Syrian war and its causes. You will not be identified in any way, and all the provided information will be anonymous. You have the opportunity to ask any question. At the end of the interview, you will be asked about other participants who could participate in the research.

Participation is voluntary
Participation in the project is voluntary. If you chose to participate, you can withdraw your consent at any time without giving a reason. All information about you will then be made anonymous. There will be no negative consequences for you if you chose not to participate or later decide to withdraw.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data
We will only use your personal data for the purpose(s) specified in this information letter. We will process your personal data confidentially and in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation and Personal Data Act). I will replace your name and contact details with a code. The list of names, contact details, and respective codes will be stored separately from the rest of the collected data.

What will happen to your personal data at the end of the research project?

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The project is scheduled to end on 15/3/2021. All the participant's names will be anonymized before the registration, and the digital records will be deleted by the end of the project. Anonymous data will be archived with the Norwegian Canter for Research Data (NSD). NSD has approved the treatment of personal data in this project.

Your rights
So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:
- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer or The Norwegian Data Protection Authority regarding the processing of your personal data

What gives us the right to process your personal data?
We will process your personal data based on your consent.

Based on an agreement with Norwegian University of Life Science, NSD – The Norwegian Centre for Research Data AS has assessed that the processing of personal data in this project is in accordance with data protection legislation.

Where can I find out more?
If you have questions about the project, or want to exercise your rights, contact:

Project manager	**Master Student**
Stig Jarle, Hansen	Yaman Almahamid
stig.hansen@nmbu.no	ymanm840@gmail.com

Contact person for protection of personal data (NSD) at NMBU.
Jan Olav Aarflot Jan.olav.aarflot@nmbu.no

Yours sincerely,

Project Leader   Student (if applicable)
(Researcher/supervisor)