Sectarianism and Ethnic Group Mobilization: The case of the Syrian civil war

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Introduction

The coming of 2021 has marked a decade of Syrian Civil War, a conflict that is still ongoing, causing hundreds of thousands of deaths and refugees while devastating a whole country. Started with the Arab protests of 2011, the conflict aimed to liberate the Syrian people from the oppressive regime of Bashar al-Assad, which had equated with scarce economic output and poor civic freedoms (Chughtai, 2021). Actually, Syria has been living in a state of emergency since 1963, that is to say when the Ba'ath Party came to power through a coup, after which Hafez al-Assad declared himself the President by changing the constitution. The change consisted in abolishing the rule of a Muslim Syrian President, belonging al-Assad to the Alawites, an ethnoreligious minority that had struggled to be identified as Shiite Muslim, because of its distance from both Sunnism and Shiism in terms of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. However, it has to be noted that Syrian demography estimates a variety of ethnic and religious groups – among which the majority is of Sunni Islam, that are spread on the territory according to sectarian lines (Balanche, 2018, p. XV). Sectarianism plays a crucial role in Middle Eastern conflicts, as the Sunni-Shia divide accounts for many current domestic disputes and socioeconomic issues, where states fail to perform their key functions, such as ensuring civil rights (Kabalan, 2019). It comes that failed states mislead and reinforce ethnoreligious differences, discriminating communities who, in turn, no longer feel attached to their national identities but rather identify mainly as Sunni or Shia (pp. 133-134).

In the context of the Syrian Civil War, sectarianism was not obviously the inherent cause of the conflict. Yet, it was strategically exploited by Bashar al-Assad to frame the original secular and democratic revolution of 2011 into a sectarian issue, in order to divert the public attention from the shortcomings of his governance and to avoid that the popular discontent could overthrow him. In fact, sectarian differences were worsened by the regime side which presented itself as the representative of Syrian minorities, implying an ongoing sectarian hatred between Alawites – and more broadly, the Shias; and the Sunnites (Lakitsch, 2017, p. 94).

Drawing on the literature on the topic, this paper is interested in how such narratives on the revolts triggered groups' sense of identity and affiliation, pushing insurgents to organize and mobilize according to sectarian lines, during the first phase of the conflict. This thesis aims to research such dynamics at a more general level, trying to answer the following research question:

"How does the sectarian framing of civil wars motivate ethnic group mobilization?"

Although the initial complaints were nondenominational, the Syrian regime still managed to rally the opposition on a sectarian dimension (Hinnebusch, 2019); yet previous literature disregards the relevance of sectarian identities to account for the escalation of the conflict into a civil war. Hence, it is necessary to study the mechanisms through which al-Assad and authoritarian leaders shape this sectarian rhetoric. For this reason, the thesis will adopt a process-tracing method of analysis to understand how the content of the Syrian sectarian discourses affected rebels' counteraction. To do so, the coming sections will firstly grasp the existing knowledge on sectarianism, identity and its relations with governance; secondly, a theory will be built around the relevance of speech acts; to conclude with a recap of the study. This research hopes to offer an alternative viewpoint on sectarianism and civil wars in the Middle East, approaching the topic from a more constructivist side and to allow new findings not only on the Syrian conflict, but also on other well established sectarian wars, such as the Iraqi or Lebanese one.

Conceptualization

Before starting, this section will provide simple but fundamental remarks on how this thesis conceives sectarianism, sectarian identity, identity politics, religion and ethnicity on a continuum, and how these fields are interacting in the logic of this paper.

Migdal (1988) conceptualizes a theory on "weak states" (p. 5) and their "strategies of survival" (p. 27) with regards to how sectarian relations are controlled. These states are too fragile to dominate a diverse society thus, in order to stay in power, weak states rely on divide-and-rule tactics, which

maneuverer social and political cleavages. Building on Migdal (1988), Nasr (2000) infers that, given these mechanisms, weak states are the "principal agents in identity mobilization and conflict" (p. 174) in multi-ethnic societies and that identity politics are "a product of the dialectic of state-society relations" (p. 174). Authoritarian countries in the Muslim world, such as Syria, fit the category of weak states and comply with this rationale too.

However, it is especially Hobsbawm's (1996) vision on the topic that proves identity politics useful for this paper. The author argues that people have multiple and coexisting identities but that politics move from general to "sectional" (p. 41) only when people are pushed from the outside to pick one specific identity that will dominate. For instance, in a system of injustice and oppression, marginalized groups will cluster around unifying factors to counter the discrimination (Heyes, 2002). Similarly, Lynch (2019) confirms Hobsbawm's (1996) theory by pointing out that the aftermath of the Arab Spring has witnessed a rise of Arab identity politics, due to "state-society conflicts" (Lynch, 2019, p. 119). On this regard, this paper finds similarities between identity politics and sectarianism, arguing that the latter term might be embraced under the first label. In fact, the process through which identity politics become the end of authoritarian leaders' divide-and-rule strategies does not differ much from the ways in which sectarian identities are instrumentalized by elites, like in the Syrian case. Moreover, by just taking a definitional approach, sectarianism involves political conflicts on the grounds of religious and ethnic denominations (Hashemi & Postel, 2017), whereas a sect stands for "any social group whose members share a common identity and are able to create a strong solidarity link" (Balanche, 2018, p. xi).

It comes that applying Hayes' theory (2002) to a sectarian context, religion and ethnicity represent the pillars of a group identity and can be interpreted as the features that are chosen by a group to associate with, that is to say, at the centre of that group's identity politics. Given argument has important implications for this thesis. Defining anti-al-Assad's rebel groups as ethnoreligious groups might seem inaccurate, as it is depicting the Syrian civil war as a clearly sectarian conflict. However, having in mind how sectarianism is brought about and evaluating scholars' arguments in

the literature review, demonstrates how majority and minority ethnic group's identities have been manipulated by the regime, to the extent to which the parties involved had to organize back according to ethnoreligious lines.

Unfortunately, the existing research does not touch upon sectarian mobilization as a whole – which is the phenomenon that the dependent variable seeks to investigate –, instead it unpacks the concept in ethnic and/or religious mobilization separately. Kasfir (1979), Posner (2005) and Rothchild (1997) define ethnicity as a compendium of ethnic, class, region, religion, linguistic and tribal elements that might occasionally prevail one over the other. McCauley (2014) adds to this claiming that ethnic and religious self-identification differences mostly happen at the individual level (pp. 804-805) but, when it comes to elite perceptions, "a group is simply a group" (p. 803) which behaves in unison with the collective identity. In the light of this and considering how religion is a feature of one's ethnic identity (and not vice versa), for practical reasons this study will perceive the Syrian opposition mostly as an ethnic type of group. This will allow for more detailed theories on group mobilization that also contemplate the instrumentalization of identities.

Another point that needs to be clarified is the usage of concepts such as mobilization, rebellion and participation, for which Petersen's (2001) study is pivotal. The scholar articulates three consecutive stages that bring civil groups to the outbreak of a rebellion against strict regimes. These mechanisms display (1) a situation of neutrality that is changed and shifts to a "widespread, but unorganized, unarmed resistance"; (2) a moment when resistance becomes a "locally organized and armed rebellion", (3) which eventually will be sustained over time, possibly taking more violent forms (p. 32). Building on Petersen's (2001) structure, in this paper "rebellion" refers to an armed resistance; "(group) mobilization" indicates these actions that alter the original situation of neutrality; whereas "participation" incorporates any contribution that rebel can offer throughout the process. In the Syrian context, mobilization equates with the mass-protests, riots and demonstrations of the civil uprising phase of the war; while a case in point of rebellion is illustrated by the formation and organization of militias, such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) or other brigades, which signal the

potential of an armed insurgency. This thesis believes that such conceptualizations will allow for an alternative understanding of the dynamics of war, and for broader and more diverse sources on the topic.

Literature Review

i. Instrumentalization of Sectarianism

So far, the scholarly production has unpacked sectarianism through a dichotomy of approaches, between "primordialism" and "instrumentalism" (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016; Matthiesen et al., 2017; Nasr, 2000; Wehrey, 2017). The "primordialist" framing illustrates sectarianism as a product of ethnicities, nationalist sentiments, traditions, cultures and history around which a common identity is created, binding the individual to the collective, and possibly mobilizing people along these emotional lines – see the rhetoric of the "ancient hatred" rooted in Quranic episodes between Sunnis and Shia (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Jacoby, 2017; Jacoby & Neggaz, 2018; Matthiesen et al., 2017; Phillips, 2015; Salloukh, 2017; Wehrey, 2017). Despite drawing from the same theories of identity politics, the "instrumentalist" approach takes a "top-down perspective" (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 95), identifying how elites strategically exploit community identities to achieve interests or political power, while dividing the people, spreading fear of the "Other", etc.

However, the 2011 turmoil behind the Syrian Civil War was definitely not sect related, since the initially peaceful protests aimed at a more secular and democratic governance thus, it is clear that the conflict was sectarianized later on, as Hinnebusch (2019) explains (pp. 54-55). As Ba'thism started to lose support as an ideology and as an organization, the regime inevitably failed to handle the revolutionary mobilizations. The next move for the regime, was to pit Syrian minorities, represented by the government, against the protests, which were strategically labelled as Islamist terrorists voices. Baltacıoğlu-Brammer (2021) illustrates Bashar al-Assad's strategical instrumentalization of sectarianism by examining two-time ranges. During the first years of his power, he adopted a more secular governance, distancing himself from the sectarian alignments that

his dad and predecessor Hafez al-Assad had heightened, and encouraging changes and progress despite the continuity of leadership (Ghadbian, 2001), regardless of the Sunni-Alawi divisions. The change in rhetoric began when al-Assad started highlighting his Shiite identity in public appearances, forging the Alawites' perception of the Sunni-majority opposition as the threatening "Other", in order to gain support and political power from the fear of his sect (Baltacıoğlu-Brammer, 2021). As a consequence, the organized opposition was trapped in a sectarian situation and started adopting anti-Alawi and Sunni slogans too (Hinnebusch, 2020, p. 151). Therefore, sectarian discourses had become the main tool of recruitment for both rival parties, reinforcing the individual's sense of belonging to a certain sect identity and determining the sectarian development of the war. Likewise, according to Badran and Smets' (2018) essentialist frame, sectarianism worked as an "antinormative signifier" (p. 4232) used by both the Syrian regime and the opposition to dominate the other social group (p. 4234), while aiming for shifts in the power distribution and dynamics.

Even though the majority of the scholars concur on the existence of a "sectarian card" (Stolleis, 2015) that has been played throughout the conflict, it seems that the debate has lost track of the main actors and origins of such instrumentalization, and how it potentially changes the narratives of the conflict. Corstange and York (2018) demonstrate that the sectarian narrative actually acquires a strong effect on both government supporters and rebels' perceptions only when the discourse is isolated from other explanations, such as quest for democracy or opinion on foreign interventions in Syria (p. 450). However, when it comes to strengthened sectarian differences, it has to be noted that such framing impacts only the government supporters, an indicator of how the hatred was emphasized and instrumentalized by the regime propaganda (p. 442). In fact, being aware of the disastrous violations of human, civil and political rights that pro-regime people were implicitly and unconsciously embracing, Bashar al-Assad strategically needed to convince his supporters of the inherently sectarian roots of the conflict, in order to justify his actions (p. 453). Therefore, arguing that sectarianism constituted a tactic for rebels too, as the previous authors assert, largely underestimates the responsibility of Bashar al-Assad in endangering the various communities in the

first place (Stolleis, 2015, p. 10), by fuelling a situation where the Sunni-majority is threatening the remaining minorities. By doing so, the existing literature missed the background mechanisms that are instilled in rebel groups when the fight is transmuted into a sectarian one. The aim of this paper is to investigate the consequences of such politicization and instrumentalization of sectarianism and see how rebellious movements decide to organize and mobilize according to these inputs.

ii. Sectarian Identity Formation

As the conflict was increasingly being instrumentalized on sectarian lines, group identities were affected too. Building on Posen's work (1993), Hinnebusch (2020) links a scenario of "security dilemma" to the context of the Syrian chaos, when examining the shifts in communal identities: in the midst of a disorder, people's ultimate foothold was identification and reliance for protection on the sectarian community (p. 151), resulting in an increased perception of fear and insecurity vis-à-vis the "enemy", which enhanced receptivity towards sectarian ideologies (p. 151). Pearlman's (2013) alternative approach, based on the pivotal role of emotions when individuals decide whether to rebel or cede to authoritarianism, adds to the previously mentioned "security dilemma" account. The author claims that instrumentality and beliefs sometimes fail to provide a clear reason for individuals' behaviours; whereas, deriving from an external stimulus, emotions serve as guides to make sense of one's own essential values and to prioritize them according to the lived circumstances (p. 391). For instance, when external impetus touch personal dignity or prompt feelings like anger, joy, pride and shame, one's sense of identity and affiliation are reinforced, encouraging political resistance, even when it weakens security (p. 392). Thus, this paper considers that the effects of Pearlman's case for emotional micro-foundations of uprisings can be transferred to the formation of sectarian identities during the Syrian conflict.

On another note, Haddad's (2018) contribution to the debate is of replacing the label of sectarianism with sectarian identity, as the former notion is misleading and often presents a contrast with nationalism and national identity (p. 124). Rather, he prefers a four-layers concept of sectarian identity, involving a doctrinal, subnational, national and a transnational dimension (p. 127), which

are at “constant interplay” (p. 127). Consequently, these dimensions shape differing sectarian identities and relations according to the sub-level; simply put, the religious debates that create sectarian clashes at the doctrinal level, will not have much relevance at the subnational level, where other factors are ruling – see tribal disputes (p. 127).

In contrast, Kabalan (2019) provides a further viewpoint by specifying the critical role that sectarianism has in Middle Eastern conflicts in general. If Haddad (2018) perceives sectarian identity as a flux that accompanies the individual from the bottom, Byman (2014), Kabalan (2019) and Wimmer (2002) affirm that such identities are a reaction to state failures. When states fail to respect their key duties – such as protecting civil rights, they also ruin ethnoreligious balances, while reinforcing sects’ differences (Kabalan, 2019, p. 133). As a consequence, communities are discriminated and the monopoly over security ends up in the private domain, signalling that people cannot rely anymore on their national identity as a guarantee for protection. Rather, they feel obliged towards their respective sectarian militias and thus, their sectarian identity (Kabalan, 2019; Kaldor, 2005; Zaartam, 1995).

iii. Sectarianism and Governance Interaction

To understand the nexus between sectarianism and governance, Hinnebusch (2019) claims that identity patterns must be initially analysed. Firstly, the author recognizes three forms or intensity of sectarianism – banal, instrumental, militant (pp. 43-44), which explains the role of sectarianism in the society, jointly with the “degree of polarization among sects” (p. 44), “the relative power of other identities” (p. 44), “modernization” (p. 44), “political agency” (p. 45), “regional geopolitical struggles” (p. 45). It comes that identity patterns are a product of all the previously mentioned factors, which determine the relevance of sectarianism in the “overall identity pattern of a society” (p. 46). Starting from these mechanisms, Freer (2019) affirms that when sectarianism takes the instrumental form, identities are more polarized and conflicting, becoming the object of divide-and-rule strategies, which are typically adopted by authoritarian regimes (p. 97). Likewise, militant sectarianism is linked with violent sects’ relations, which might give rise to civil wars, state failure (Hashemi, 2016) or

totalitarianism (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 47). The case of Syria could be identified both as a scenario of instrumental sectarianism as well as militant sectarianism.

When considering the opposite effect, Varshney (2009) states that political institutions can either obstacle or foster sectarianism, according to their structures (pp. 289-291); which should distribute power and ensure inclusiveness as much as a society is politically engaged and committed (Huntington, 1968). Bull and Watson (1984) further elaborate on the structural aspects of state-building and its relations with sectarianism, pointing out at the failure of the European Westphalian state-system exported to the Middle East and North Africa. During the imperial and colonial times, Western powers seized territories where multi-ethnic empires had been formed before, to establish new states, without considering how divided the various ethnicities would then be. After independence, the local leaders took over the defined territories and tried to set political institutions while homogenising the multi-ethnic population under a single national identity (Hinnebusch, 2020, p. 139), on the model of Western nation-states. Yet, the Westphalian state-system soon swayed for the new-born states: Buzan and Gonzalez-Palaez (2009) show that the asset of geopolitics was not in line with the pre-existing identities, creating situations of harsh coexistence among sects which lowered group's sympathy for sovereign states.

Another structural way in which governance affects sectarianism is through neo-patrimonialism, which is the main form of regime-building in the Middle East (Bacik, 2008; Hinnebusch, 2019). Relying on trusted and loyal members who, in multi-sectarian contexts such as Syria, belong to the same sect, the ruler acquires authority from assigning the highest positions of governance to his circle. The side tenet of neo-patrimonialism is a bureaucratic authority, which can balance out the sectarian differences to the extent to which it is more inclusive (Hinnebusch, 2019, pp. 47-48). Despite not making explicit connection with the neo-patrimonialism account, Salti and Chaaban's (2010) case of public expenditure allocation in Lebanon fits the features of such regime-building's interaction with sectarianism. In fact, the findings tell that the distribution of public funds follows a geographical pattern, according to each territory's dominant sectarian composition (p. 639).

If this outcome conforms the "one-man one-dollar distribution rule" (p. 639) conversely, it neglects a balanced and equal treatments of all sects, leading to disparities and denial of essential needs for groups who should be prioritized instead (p. 652). Although the same situation cannot be found in Syria, as the Alawite government is part of a minority compared to the other sects, the logic of "power sharing on the basis of confessional identity" (p. 639) is still present, testifying the large influence of neopatrimonialism on how sectarian differences are handled. Moreover, it could be argued that the literature on sectarian identity formation in the previous section has a twofold value, since it also describes the consequences that failed governance has on sectarian relations: escalation in intense conflicts (Rørbæk, 2019) and fortified sense of attachment to the sect.

iv. Theories of (Ethnic) Group Mobilization

Having in mind the logic detailed in the conceptualization part between sectarianism, identity politics, religion and ethnicity, it is obligatory to consider literature on ethnic group mobilization, to sense the analogy between the latter and how it changes when sectarian identities are instrumentalized.

Three established schools have worked on the issue, namely the "greed-and-opportunity perspective", the "diversity-breeds-conflict tradition" and the "minority-mobilization school". The first account does not award a special leverage to ethnic identity or ethno-political imbalances when it comes to rebellion, instead scholars argue that ethnic group mobilization is related to opportunities and organizational advantages. For instance, Fearon and Laitin (2003) consider governments moments of weakness to be the ideal time for rebel recruitment, while Collier and Hoeffler (2004) infer that in the presence of disposable state's economic resources, rebel groups are more likely to insurge, as they can easily take over these provisions and mobilize.

On the contrary, the second school does highlight the salience of ethnic ties for conflicts, supporting that heterogeneous states not matching the prototype of modern nation-states, experience more ethnic disputes (Gellner 1991; Nairn 1993). Vanhanen (1999) explains the phenomenon through kinship preferences; the argument fits the "culturalist" perspective of ethnic mobilization, hold by

Fearon (2006) as well. Scholars defending this account, argue that ethnic identities are based on socialized shared traditions and experiences, which make individuals behave in accordance to emotional ties and not rationally (Allahar, 1996; Oberschall, 2000). Culture also justifies economic outcomes, as Sambanis (2001) proposes, by stressing the strength of common ethnic identities, which results in the reduction of collective action's costs and eases the process of mobilization for political change (Denny & Walter, 2014). Likewise, Sambanis (2001) proves that ethnic diverse states are more likely to witness war because of group ties and not group size.

The third account starts by focusing on ethnic communal grievances, that is to say the history of discrimination and marginalization of that group, jointly with the domestic structure for political mobilization opportunities (Gurr, 1993). Ethnic groups have to take into account the whole set of institutional features that might constraint or favour rebellion, that is to say, the conditions that might suggest if group action will be successful or a failure (Tarrow, 1994). An example of political opportunity structure can be the composition of a state parliament, whether it assures fair ethnic representation or not (Kriesi & Guigni, 1995). However, more scholars have contributed to the "minority-mobilization school" by studying the effects of co-factors on Gurr's paradigm, such as external intervention (Cetinyan, 2002; Saideman, 2002). Among the forms of discrimination that are mentioned in this model, the economic one can be associated with the "reactive ethnicity" explanation for ethnic mobilization, developed by Hechter (1975). The scholar theorizes that differences in the provision of resources heighten economic inequalities between geographical "core" ethnic groups and "periphery" ones, escalating in conflict. With an eye to the Sunni-Alawi dispute, the "core" and "periphery" ethnic groups can be simply understood as majority or minority groups in terms of relative power.

With regards to the third model, Wimmer, Cederman and Min (2009) provide an interesting critique about how minority's position has been exaggerated, by assuming that governments stay "ethnically neutral" (p. 319) and without contemplating examples where insurrections are initiated by a ruled majority, which is the pattern that this research expects to find in the Syrian case-study.

On the other hand, Wimmer et al. (2009) somehow oppose to the first school: they do not demonstrate that ethnicity per se moves individuals, rather conflicts arise from the "alignments along ethnic cleavages" (p. 335) that the struggles for power and prestige produce. By adopting a configurational strategy of analysis, Wimmer et al. (2009) maintain that ethnic groups rebel according to the degree of exclusion they are subjected to, in terms of public goods, state power and its services (p. 324). Such instrumental view of ethnicity is formulated in the "competition" perspective, which asserts that ethnic group identities only gain relevance when they start coinciding with resource allocation. Precisely, elites are the agents of ethnic identities, by strategically framing the competition on ethnic terms, affiliating and identifying with one group or the other, regardless of the actual identity and to protect material and political interests (Barth, 1994; Bell, 1975; Crowley, 2001; Denny & Walter, 2014).

Theoretical Framework

So far, this thesis has focused the discussion on sectarianism, its instrumentalization and its implications. Instead, the next paragraphs will closely look at one episode of such instrumentalization, that is the securitization of issues, along with framing theories that help leaders to fabricate messages of threat for the population, for their strategical purposes.

Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde (1998) explain that the securitisation theory is the process through which an issue is portrayed and labelled as threatening or risky for a referent object, justifying emergency measures to counter it (pp. 21-23). A speech act is the tool of securitization (Wæver, 1995), which implies that security is a discursive constructed phenomenon (Darwich & Fakhoury, 2016) by securitizing elites, who are charged of power and influence over the audience. Buzan et al. (1998) indicate that firstly, the threat and the object have to be recognized as such and put in correlation in a way that the object's security is actually undermined. The discourse detaches the issue from the domain of politics and favours the manipulation of the threat. Secondly, the securitising actor is allowed to implement all possible measures to ensure the survival of the referent object (p.

29). Lastly, an issue is securitised only if the targeted audience acknowledges and agrees on the existence of the threat together with the need to act upon the issue (p. 24).

This study argues that the instrumentalization of sectarian identities by al-Assad at the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, follows the securitisation theory. By acting as the securitizing actor, the Ba'athist leader strategically transformed the 2011 secular and pro-democracy demonstrations into threats to the Syrian minority groups, such as Alawi and other Shias, Christians, Druze, and further groups, which the government declared to be the representative of. When the sectarian narrative was applied, the opposition was presented as a Sunni-majority voice threatening the regime – the referent object, which could also endanger the smaller sects – the audience. Through speech acts, al-Assad reinforced the sectarian rhetoric, divided the Syrian people and took on extreme measures to suppress the turmoil, accomplishing the securitization of the issue. The literature review section has showed that as sectarian identities were externally polarized, groups implicitly had to pick an identifying trait around which to affiliate and mobilize; as a consequence, sect identity became the main grouping factor for the anti-regime protesters too. In other words, this theoretical framework believes that al-Assad's speech acts have been the mechanisms through which rebels mobilized along ethno-sectarian lines. Thus, this thesis posits:

H1: The sectarian framing of Syrian civil war enhanced ethnic group mobilization through speech acts.

To better understand the link between the securitisation theory and the purpose of this research question, it is convenient to inform the reader about the role of collective threat framing and framing theories vis-à-vis group mobilization in civil wars as well.

Shesterinina (2016) looks at the way social structures shape the meaning of actions and threats during conflicts and the effects they have on participation. From the case-study of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, the author establishes that social structures communicate parties about the "pre-existing notions of conflict" (Shesterinina, 2016, p. 412) while reinforcing this same information and

strengthening the salience of the identity frames (Chong & Druckman, 2007). The theory is advanced in a sense that it analyzes the actual content of the socialized information both at the national level and among informal networks, which enriches "the shared understandings of history and identity" (p. 413) at the basis of collective action. Therefore, social structure build "motives for mobilization and self- to other-regarding mobilization decisions" (Shesterinina, 2016, p. 412). Supposing that speech acts are basically the conveyance of threat frames spreading within national and informal social structures, Shesterinina's (2016) logic upholds the central hypothesis that speech acts affect identity's perceptions and influence group's decision of mobilizing.

Similarly, Aroopala (2012) investigates group-oriented frames – which is the case of the Syrian sects –, and threat frames effects binding identity and mobilization, concluding that "strength of group identity" (p. 197) determines frames effects and in turn, collective mobilization. For instance, if individuals are characterized by "moderate-strength identifiers" (p. 199) and are close to their goal, they will expect other group's members to participate and will feel spurred by their peers to participate too (pp. 199-201). The strength of group identity is mentioned in Shesterinina's (2016) logic as well, supposing that depending on the individual sense of attachment and affiliation to the collective, the threat is perceived differently. When it comes to our central theory, Buzan et al. (1998) claim that speech acts are more successful in securitizing objects, if these same objects are already perceived as dangerous (p. 33). Considering that the speech acts employed by al-Assad are conceptualized in identity terms, combining Aroopala's (2012) theory means that speech acts should be efficacious in sending threat frames and in mobilizing groups, only if identities are already strong. However, it has to be recalled that Sheterinina (2016) and Aroopala's (2012) framing theories match the securitization logic only because sectarian identities have been politicized at first, preparing the ground for speech acts.

In the Syrian case-study, we argue that as identities were politicized by al-Assad, it was possible for the leader to employ speech acts that would securitize the anti-regime protests, conveying the framing of a certain collective threat to the population. As a consequence, parties were induced

to participate in the conflict and mobilize according to sectarian lines. The previous framing theories are helpful for this research and for its question because firstly, they embody the constructivist approach to identities that this paper tries to highlight in relation to group mobilization in wars. Secondly, frames not only manipulate identities – see playing the "sectarian card" (Stolleis, 2015) or the propagandist sectarian narratives employed by al-Assad – but they also change the viewpoints over the conflict.

Methodology

Since this paper will use a process-tracing method, "descriptive and causal inferences" (Collier, 2011) will be made, studying the mechanisms through which insurgents are motivated to mobilize. Such research design aims to seek for evidence of a recurrent pattern on the basis of "prior knowledge" (p. 824) which is grounded in a compendium of threat framing theories, in this case. Process-tracing relies on causal paths deriving from descriptive inferences on the timing and sequences of events (Ricks & Liu, 2018). Such causal inferences might rely on mechanisms that are external to the independent and dependent variable relation, but that "yet provide valuable inferential leverage" (Collier, 2011, p. 828). In brief, studies building on causal mechanisms allow to discover the "micro-correlations" that lie in the logic of the "macro-correlations" connecting explanatory and dependent variable (Kanchan, 2006, p. 7). The Syrian civil war has always been overlooked for its sectarian component, as experts would mostly associate the popular uprising as a reaction to the state poor administration, indicated by the high unemployment rates, for instance (Goldstone, 2011). Yet, through a process-tracing analysis, this study is meant to unpack and delve into the unpopular and subtle links between the sectarian development of the war and how it translates in mobilization at the group-level. Furthermore, the Syrian conflict gives reasons for further research as it represents a case of disputed sectarian nature (Philipps, 2015), contrary to other Middle Eastern wars, such as the Lebanese or the Iraqi's one.

To answer the research question, this thesis places the speech act mechanism within the causal chain proceeding from the sectarian framing of the war – the independent variable, and ending with ethnic group mobilization – the dependent variable. In order to assess causal relations, a comparison will be established before and after the incidence of such mechanism, following a timeline of events, throughout the first year of the Syrian uprising (2011). The span of time is defined so to avoid any interference on the mechanism's effect, that is to say to exclude other factors that played a part in the independent-dependent variable's relation later on, such as foreign meddling. Likewise, the analysis will only look at the uprising phase because of the conceptualization that was provided for mobilization – protests, marches, etc. The level of analysis will focus on the group, which is said to be the "channel" through which individuals give a concrete "direction" to their emotions (Nussio, 2017, p. 928). However, individuals' accounts will also be considered to make statements about the group, simplifying single experiences to get sense of an "aggregate human behaviour" (Sinno, 2008, p. 28).

The analysis will begin by drawing a parallel between al-Assad first two public speeches – March and June 2011, after the beginning of the turmoil, and the actual features of the initial Syrian protests. This paper claims that the leader's appeals have informed the audience of a threat, moulding the democratic revolts into "conspiracies" that adopted the "sectarian element" (al-Assad, 2015a, 2015b) for recruitment against the country. The speeches not only securitized the issue but, applying framing theories, they also portrayed sectarianism as the leading identifier and motivator for groups' mobilization. Secondly, to test the main hypothesis and to assess the evidence of the mechanism, the analysis will study the demonstrations that followed after the leader's speech acts, holding as corroboration of the central argument, the increasing overlap of anti-regime mobilizations with ethno-religious divisions – namely, the Sunni-Shia divide. In fact, due to the consolidation of the sectarian narrative overtime, rebels started acquiring sectarian slogans or anthems during the consequent demonstrations (Parker, 2018), signalling that the speech act mechanism brought about the expected results.

Primary and secondary data will be tested, ranging from the content of al-Assad's speeches to, graffiti, reports, mass protests, in order to explore the assets and changes of group mobilization. Four appendixes support the research: Appendix I and II for al-Assad's speeches, whose excerpts have been organized according to recurring themes; Appendix III on rebels' interviews; Appendix IV on the slogans adopted during the demonstrations. The speeches were transcribed and translated by *al-Bab,* an information resource on the Arab world; whereas, newspaper and scholarly articles are of help to have access to rebels' interviews. Lastly, the *Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution* archive supplies slogans, chants and graffiti of the early demonstrations.

Analysis

Two weeks after the first episode of unrest in Syria, al-Assad faced the country's Parliament to give a speech on the current situation. The President mainly expressed the frame of an opposition identified as conspirators (Appendix I, Section 1), moved by foreign actors (Appendix I, Section 3) and likely to forge and manipulate a sectarian distraction (Appendix I, Section 2) against the Alawi-run Syrian state. The result was a strong message of division and unachievable compatibility between the government and the protesters' demands, who were implicitly labelled as enemy of the state (Appendix I, section 4). The address could have provided a momentum to the discussion of and possibility for much-needed democratic reforms, such as removing the state of emergency which had endangered free civic and political activities for 48 years back then; while it ended up in a praise to the Ba'athist rule (Cody, 2011). The speech ended up being undetailed and hasty, since the President did not mention the identity of the "enemies" and always referred to the subjects as "they", "them" or "someone" (Appendix I, section 1c and 3a). Likewise, the prospect of reforms was vague both to protect the image of a strong state that would not "bow under pressure" (Appendix I, section 3c) and to pretend that concessions were planned, while still having chances to instrumentalize the revolts (Marsh & Chulov, 2011). In fact, al-Assad claimed that unnamed agents started exploiting the

"sectarian element […] in order to get a reaction" (Appendix I, section 2a), "using reform as a cover, using sectarianism" (Appendix I, section 2b) to destabilize the country and to oust al-Assad.

Eventually, al-Assad manifested gratitude and duty for the people who took pro-regime stances during the riots, promising them a "Syria which is invincible to its enemies" (Appendix I, section 4b) thus, signalling to be willing to an armed fight with the opposition (Appendix I, section 1d). This thesis considers that such logic hints at a "us vs. them" narrative which is related to the divide-and-rule strategies of authoritarian leaders (Freer, 2019). In the case of Syria, the President had entrusted the security apparatus to Alawite militias to ensure loyalty to the regime, granting the Alawi community of more "potentially exploitable link(s) within the state" (Balanche, 2018, p. 7) than the Sunni-majority had. Even though the protests mainly arose in Sunni neighbourhoods, the complaints did not have any ethno-religious scope, instead they contested such system of favouritisms (p. 6). As the economic crisis spread, the disparity was highlighted in terms of unequal "opportunities to join the public sector, obtain real estate, secure agricultural loans, and take advantage of exemptions" (p. 8), which motivated the 2011 protests for reforms. Therefore, with his speech act the chief of state constructed and sent out a frame of collective threat for whoever was represented by the government – after having exchanged allegiance indeed, and propagate the notion of a sectarian alignment of Sunni-rebels against the Shia and minorities-regime. In overall, what was conveyed was a mysterious and confusing message of threat, which at times derived from "inside the country", "nearby country" or "far-away countries" (Appendix I, section 1a), and that contributed to the dissemination of fear and uncertainty with regards to the demonstrators' intentions.

On 20th June 2011, Bashar al-Assad appeared with a second speech at Damascus University as the demonstrations had covered all the country. Even though he mostly cited the same patterns as in March, new sentiments of national unity emerged in the speech, which were being "weakened" by a "detestable sectarian discourse" adopted by protesters (Appendix II, section 2c). After having promised multiple reforms in April, al-Assad focused his rhetoric on modernization and development. While reiterating the existence of a conspiracy, the President claimed that a small group of

demonstrators embodied "extremist and *takfiri* ideology" which translated in chaos and terrorism in the name of freedom and reforms (Appendix II, section 2a). Such a form of destruction certainly constituted a threat not only for civilians' security but also for the national discourse at the basis of the domestic project, since rebels were invoking a sectarian divisive ideology for "national, pan-Arab and moral identity" (Appendix II, section 2c). Thus, as the issue was framed in terms of security threat, the only path for the state was to eliminate these sectarian voices to ensure oneness and progress, neglecting any middle ground.

By extrapolating a sectarian narrative from the rebels' request, al-Assad articulated a different message of threat: the opposition was not only dangerous for Syrian minorities as in the previous speech, but it also prevented Syrian process of "creation and protection of the homeland" (Appendix II, section 4b). Appealing to patriotic and nationalist feelings, the leader again created a "us vs. them" situation (Appendix II, section 1b), intensifying the polarization of identities within the society. Kuznar, Suedfeld, Spitaletta and Morrison (2014) concluded that al-Assad's speeches usually present the same main narratives to "persuade (the) audiences" (p. 4), among all, Syrian Arab nationalism and the importance of kinship and heritage as a resistance against foreign intervention (p. 5). According to the Ba'athist values, nationalism is the constant "struggle" of defending the distinctive Syrian Arab identity vis-à-vis foreign meddling; such effort builds on "courage", "duty", "honour", "kinship", "sacrifice", "strength" and "resistance" of Syrians (p. 5). The June speech is a case in point: in fact, the President praised the "martyrs" of the nation (Appendix II, section 4c) who were not only fighting the "conspiracy", but also laid the foundations of Syria's leading "model" (section 4e) in the politics of the Arab region. Moreover, Kuznar et al. (2014) remarked that in the leader's speeches, certain themes suggested an upcoming escalation to conflicts or repressive actions, such as "figurative language" – symbolism, metaphor (p. 5). In his last address, the ruler actually compared conspiracies to "germs multiplying every moment everywhere" (Appendix II, section 1b) or sectarianism as a "snake" that could poison the country (section 2d); potentially indicating the crackdown that protests would always receive during the conflicts.

However, Syrians engaged in the movements held a different narrative of the early mobilizations. Protesters saw themselves as mouthpieces of freedom, dignity and unity values (Brønd, 2016, pp. 21, 23). People from various background joined the uprisings, unified by the dissent for corruption, emergency laws and more broadly the Ba'athist governance, as expressed in the slogan "God, Syria, freedom, and nothing else!" (Appendix IV, slogan a). In Jableh and Baniyas on 25th March 2011, demonstrators sang chants like "Pacific, pacific - we don't want sectarianism" and "Sunnis and Alawites - We want freedom - There is no fear, there is no fear". The slogan "One, one, one - the Syrian people is one" which was widely repeated across the country, implied that sect differences were not only felt, but were likely to be abolished (Brønd, 2016, p. 27). It is clear that anti-sectarianism was among the main interests of rebels, who in the name of oneness, "didn't acknowledge that (the sectarian issue) was a problem" (Appendix III, interview 4). In fact, it was "not a Sunni revolution" (interview 3), since it requested political reforms in terms of freedom and openness. Yet sectarianism was a dormant factor for their mobilizations because promoting anti-sectarianism implied the awareness of an ethnoreligious bias (interview 2). Furthermore, it has to be stressed that demonstrations happened in a peaceful way, by gatherings, chanting or painting graffiti until the *Shabiha* – civilian militia formed by Alawite patrons of the regime, would reach and suppress the revolts with gunfire (Folkeson, 2011), causing hundreds of deaths despite the non-violent nature of uprisings.

According to the central hypothesis, this paper expects al-Assad's speech acts to be the "micro-correlations" between the sectarian issue in Syria and a shift to ethnic group mobilization. In other words, this research argues that through his narrative on the unrest, the leader manipulated a political struggle into a sectarian one and encouraged ethnic mobilization. The frames of threat and enmity portrayed in the two previous speeches by the President, took root on the parties involved, fuelling "self-sustaining cycles of mutual recrimination, fear, and violence" later in time (Wimmen, 2016, p. 4). By representing the anti-regime mobilization as a Sunni, Islamist, terrorist opposition (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 24), al-Assad warned Syrian minorities about the possible consequences of a

Sunni take-over. Likewise, Sunnis were incited to anti-Alawite resentments since the *Shabiha* was enforced to silence their movement, in the name of order and defence, "adding to a vicious circle of sectarianism" (p. 25).

The President's discourse was effective as protests actually acquired sectarian tones and became more violent. The most controversial slogan that started echoing during the anti-regime protests was "Alawites into the coffin, Christians to Beirut!" (Stolleis, 2015, p. 8), as in the demonstrations of Tartus in July 2011 (Erlich, 2011). Further events of Alawi discrimination were performed by Sunni groups in Akrab addressing sectarian slogans towards an Alawite interviewee and her family, through graffiti stating that "their blood will be spilled" after the defeat of the regime (Appendix III, interview 5). Local Sunni imams got involved in the protests too, yet few were the instances of religious-based speeches aimed at guiding and inciting the crowd against the Alawites. A case in point is the sermon at the Freedom Square during the Homs strike on 18th April 2011, when the Sunni Sheikh Asad Khalil vehemently "vilified infidels", although not condemning the regime (Hasan, 2011, p. 9). Additionally, opposition groups increasingly embraced the appeals of Salafist clerics, such as Sheikh Adnan al-Arour, who proceeded from anti-Shiite backgrounds and opposed the Syrian National Council (Pierret, 2013). The demonstrations in Deraa on 27th April 2011 and in Homs on 4th June 2011 followed the Sheikh's encouragement of resisting the Syrian forces by pronouncing the *takbir*, even though the Sheikh's ideologies were not purely in accordance with the anti-regime ideas of the protests. In early 2012, al-Arour appeared with statements of threat for the Alawites who obstructed the revolts, whose punishments will be of "chop(ping) their flesh and feed them to dogs" (pp. 236-237). Thus, such event can be understood as a hint of the impact of al-Assad's speech acts in fuelling ethnic mobilization, as civilians started abiding to clerics' religious agendas too.

In overall, the analysis indicates that the Baathist leader's speeches motivated ethnic group mobilization during the first phase of the civil war, but the results are not as extensive as expected. The reason behind it is that protesters had acknowledged al-Assad's efforts in "stoking the sectarian

conflict" (Ismail, 2011, p. 543) and tried to not submit to the strategical provocations of the regime by seeking communication with the minority sects. Yet, as the protests became more violent and bloody, the moderate factions in the opposition were overshadowed by the rise of Sunni-Islamists, who were more eager to engage in armed conflicts and to die as martyrs (Diehl, 2012). Starting from this last argument and having seen the occasion of anti-regime demonstrations inspired from Salafist figures and beliefs, this thesis deduces that the President's appeals laid the foundations for the Sunni-Islamist mobilization that followed in the war. Looking at the discussed framing theories, this paper infers that through his speech acts, al-Assad reinforced the existing differences between sects and their relevance, contributing to the awakening of more extremist and radical feelings, which guided group mobilization by the fall of 2012 (Lawson, 2020).

Conclusion

Going back to the research question and hypothesis, this thesis concludes that through speech acts, the sectarian framing of civil wars motivates ethnic group mobilizations. However, the analysis has shown that after the enactment of the mechanism, only few groups took the streets by praising their own sectarian identity or by inciting slogans against the other sect. On the contrary, the majority of the protesters kept spreading anti-regime messages and refusing al-Assad's strategies of sectarian incitement, in the name of the Syrian unity. Furthermore, looking at the conclusion of the analysis, it can be claimed that speech acts acquired more leverage in mobilizing groups when those already shared more radical ideologies, such as Salafism. Hence, we consider that speech acts functioned as catalysts for the Sunni radicalization at the end of 2012. On the other hand, the central argument of the thesis is confirmed through the examination of the Baathist leader's speeches, which accomplished in securitizing the originally secular and pro-democracy protests, sending messages of threat for the local minorities and harshly suppressing the revolts.

A noteworthy finding, that was not expected within the logic of the sectarian framing of conflicts, is the introduction of nationalist discourses in al-Assad's speeches. The leader appealed to

nationalism not only to pit the country against the apparently divisive protests, but also to propagate the fear and hatred towards foreign intrusion. An explanation for al-Assad's tactic might be rooted in the geopolitical relations of the region, meaning that the leader feared possible sectarian alignments between the rebels and other Sunni countries. In fact, as the conflict escalated, the "call for solidarity" (Baczko, Dorronsoro & Quesnay, 2018, p. 155) attracted Sunni foreign powers to support the rebels and Shia countries to ally with the regime. Moreover, this research affiliates with Corstange and York's (2018) conclusions that sectarian framing has more impacts on pro-regime groups than on protesters. This is demonstrated by the fact that with regards to ethnic mobilization after al-Assad's speeches, most of the data that could be employed proceeded from Alawites' accounts, who were more susceptible to the revolts, since a message of threat was conveyed specifically for them.

On another note, the main limitation of this research is the quantity of the data concerning ethnic group mobilization. Even though the literature upholds that the Syrian conflict did become a sectarian issue later on, the poor evidence of the dependent variable might depend on the specific traits that were adopted for mobilization – as in, non-violent protests. Such argument adds to the problems of the narrow time range of analysis, yet both choices allowed the study to have a precise understanding of what was direct evidence of the speech act's effects. Further research could be elaborated changing the operationalization for mobilization – for instance, ICT as tool of collective action (Aslan, 2015), to get to deeper findings.

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Appendix I

President Bashar al-Assad's speech to the Syrian Parliament on 30th March 2011, after the firsts protests in the country (al-Bab, 2015a).

Section 1: excerpts on "conspiracy"

a. And I am sure you all know that Syria is facing a **great conspiracy** whose tentacles extend to some **nearby countries** and **far-away countries**, with some **inside the country**. This **conspiracy** depends, in its timing not in its form, on what is happening in other Arab countries.

b. The conspirators are few in number, this is natural. Even we, in the government, did not know, like everybody else, and did not understand what was happening until acts of sabotage started to emerge. Things became clearer; for what is the link between reform and sabotage? What is the link between reform and murder? Some satellite T.V. stations actually spoke about attacking certain buildings an hour before they were actually attacked. How did they know that? Do they read the future? This happened more than once. Then, things started to become clearer. **They will say that we believe in the conspiracy theory. In fact there is no conspiracy theory. There is a conspiracy**.

c. In any case, I am sure there will be **someone** on the satellite T.V. stations who will say that this is not enough. What is enough for them will destroy our country and we simply cannot afford that. By the way, do not get angry for what some T.V. stations have done, because they always fall in the same trap when **they try to fabricate things for us and for the Syrian people**. The fact is that **they follow the principle of lie, lie until they believe you. So, they believe their own lie and fall in the trap.**

d. So there is no compromise or middle way in this. What is at stake is the homeland and there is a huge **conspiracy**. We are not seeking battles. The Syrian people are peaceful people, loving people, but we have never hesitated in defending our causes, interests and principles, **and if we are forced into a battle, so be it**.

Section 2: excerpts on “sectarianism”

a. In the beginning they started with incitement, many weeks before trouble started in Syria. They used the satellite T.V. stations and the internet but did not achieve anything. And then, using sedition, started to produce fake information, voices, images, etc. they **forged everything**. Then they started to use the **sectarian element**. They sent SMSs to members of **a certain sect** alerting them that **another sect** will attack them. And in order to be credible, they sent masked people to neighbourhoods with **different sects** living in them, knocking on people’s doors and telling each that the **other sect** has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction. And it worked for a while. But we were able to nip the sedition in the bud by getting community leaders to meet and diffuse the situation. Then they used weapons. They started killing people at random; because they knew when there is blood it becomes more difficult to solve the problem.
b. There is some confusion in the country for different reasons, mainly under the headline of reform. With is chaos, **using reform as a cover, using sectarianism**, where sects become nervous, they clash with each other, virtual defeat is achieved in another form.

Section 3: excerpts on “foreign actors”

a. But we are concerned with the outcome because the last stage for **them** is for Syria to get weaker and disintegrate, because this will remove **the last obstacle facing the Israel’s plans**.
b. There are support groups in more than one governorate linked to **some countries abroad**.
c. So, did we make these reforms because there is a problem or because there is sedition? If there was no sedition wouldn’t we have done these reforms? If the answer is yes, it means that the state is opportunistic, and this is bad. If we say that these things were made under the pressure of a certain condition or popular pressure, this is weakness. And I believe that if the people get the government to bow under pressure, **it will bow to foreign pressure**.

Section 4: excerpts on “enemy”

a. I intentionally postponed it (the speech) until I have a fuller picture in my mind, or at least some of the main features of this picture, so that my speech should depart from the emotional rhetoric which puts people at ease, but does not change anything or make any impact at a time when **our enemies** work every day in an organized, systematic and scientific manner in order to undermine Syria's stability.

b. Your solidarity and unity in fighting sedition assures me about the future and if you, in the slogans you chanted, expressed **willingness to sacrifice yourselves for your president**, the more natural thing is for the president to sacrifice himself for his people and homeland. I shall remain the faithful brother and comrade who will walk with his people and lead them to build the Syria we love, the Syria we are proud of, the **Syria which is invincible to its enemies**.

Appendix II

President Bashar al-Assad's speech at Damascus University on 20th June 2011, after the protests spread all over the country (al-Bab, 2015).

Section 1: excerpts on "conspiracy"

a. It is only natural that the common question today is: What is happening to our country, and why? Is it a **conspiracy**, and if so, who stands behind it? Or is it our fault, and if so, what is this fault? And of course there are many natural questions during these circumstances. I do not think there is a stage in **Syria's history where it was not the target of some sort of conspiracy**, both before and after independence. Those conspiracies took place for many reasons, some relating directly to the **important geopolitical position that Syria occupies**.

b. Conspiracies are like germs, after all, **multiplying every moment everywhere**. They cannot be eliminated, but we can strengthen the immunity of our bodies in order to protect **ourselves against them**. It doesn't require much analysis, based on what we heard from others and witnessed in the media, to prove that there is indeed a conspiracy. We should not waste time discussing it or being frightened by it. Rather, we would to identify the **internal weaknesses** through which this conspiracy can infiltrate the country. Then we should work on correcting

these weaknesses. The solution, at the end of the day, is for us to solve our own problems and to avoid ramifications that could weaken **our national immunity**. Germs exist **everywhere**, on the skin and within the guts.

c. The delegations I met with were from all sectors of society and all religions as well. We need to differentiate between those people, and others who were involved in destruction. The latter are a small group. It is true that they made an impact; **they tried to manipulate others**. They tried to manipulate the good majority of the Syrian people in order to achieve different purposes.

Section 2: excerpts on "sectarianism"

a. The third and more dangerous component, despite its small size, consists of those who have **extremist and takfiri ideology**. We have known and experienced this kind of ideology decades ago when it tried to infiltrate Syria; and Syria was able to eliminate it thanks to the wisdom and intelligence of the Syrian people. **The ideology we see today is no different from that we saw decades ago**. It is exactly the same. What has changed, however, is the methods and the persons. This kind of ideology lurks in dark corners in order to emerge when an opportunity presents itself or when it finds a handy mask to put on. **It kills in the name of religion, destroys in the name of reform, and spreads chaos in the name of freedom.** It is very sad to see in any society in the world some groups that belong to other bygone ages, that belong to a period we do not live in and we do not belong to. […] **Therefore, we have to encircle this ideology if we really want to develop**.

b. […] therefore we have no option but to succeed in the domestic project in order to succeed in our external project. The pressures are directed against Syria's role in **resisting the schemes of sectarian division** in the region which will mean that there is **neither resistance nor rights, but collapse and surrender.**

c. By doing so**, they tried to weaken the national political stand**, which adheres to the full return of national rights and supports the legitimate rights of our brothers and supports their

resistance. **They invoked detestable sectarian discourse** which we have **never endorsed** and in which we only see an expression of a **hateful ideology** which has never been part of our religion, history or traditions and which has been **an anathema and a sacrilege to our national, pan-Arab and moral identity**. In all these issues, and with the exception of the first component, I am talking about a small minority which constitutes only a very small part of the Syrian people.

d. It is **you** who prevented all attempts of **sectarian sedition** scrambling at the gates of the homeland and cut off the head of the snake before it could bite the Syrian body and kill it.

Section 3: excerpts on "threat"

a. In some cases, peaceful demonstrations were used as a pretext under which armed men took cover; in other cases, they attacked civilians, policemen and soldiers by attacking military sites and positions or used assassination. Schools, shops and highways were closed by the use of force, and public property was destroyed, ransacked and put to fire deliberately. Cities were cut from each other by blocking highways. All of this has posed **a direct threat to the normal daily life of the citizens and undermined their security**, education, economic activity, and communicating with their families.

b. What some people are doing today has nothing to do with development, modernization, or reform. What is happening is a **form of destruction**, and with every act of destruction we are driven away from our objectives in modernization and development and from our aspirations.

c. That is why we should rebuild what has been destroyed and we need to correct these **destructive elements** or **isolate** them. Only then can we proceed with development and modernization.

d. […] However, as for terrorizing citizens and committing acts of killing and **terrorism**, this is another issue and the state cannot but enforce the full extent of the law.

Section 4: excerpts on "nationalism"

a. Had it not been for this **patriotic** feeling that many people have, the situation in Syria could have been much worse. The response came from the Syrian people who have once again come up in force to express their **national and patriotic feelings** in a manner that superseded all expectations.
b. […] And we see that some people are trying to endorse such practices and are gradually enshrining disrespect for state institutions and what they stand for on the national level. This will lead to a **slackening of the patriotic and national feelings** which are essential for the creation and the protection of the homeland.
c. A number of **martyrs** died and others were injured during these incidents, being ordinary citizens, security personnel, and the Armed Forces.
d. Corruption is the result of moral degradation, the spread of patronage and nepotism, and the absence of institutions, which means the **absence of the protector and the guarantor of national feelings which are replaced by narrower feelings of identity**.
e. This generation has to prepare itself for the next political phase so that we become the **model** for the whole region. Instead of taking lessons from others, **we will teach them**.
f. It is you who prevented the confusion between the greed and designs of superpowers, on the one hand, and people's desire for reform and change on the other. It is you **who protected the flower of youth from being sacrificed to the greed of international powers.**
g. External political positions, after all, are applying pressure on Syria and trying to interfere in the internal affairs of our country. Their target is a price that we know in advance, related directly to us **abandoning our principles, rights, and interests**.
h. Otherwise, **Syria will be besieged within its borders**, rather than reaching out to its natural and vital regional dimension, and thus to turn into a state of rival tribes living on the crumbs thrown to her children from outside the borders.

Appendix III

Interviews to protesters involved in the uprisings of March 2011 (Brønd, 2016).

1. “Most of us were from minority groups… this that we were from minority groups confused the guards and interrogators. The General asked me: “Aren’t you Isma’ili? Don’t you know that the Sunna will come and kill you?!” And all of the guards – none of them are Alawi, they were all Sunni! (…) We were from Salamiyya, Masiaf, Hasakeh, Suweida and they [i.e. the interrogators] asked: “How come you know each other?” How couldn’t we know each other? **Here it became clear that it was embarrassing that we were from minorities.**” (p. 24).
2. “The original revolutionaries were tortured and killed. There was a clear structural policy to alienate them and make them flee… ‘The revolution has deviated’ – it seems very naïve to propose this and totally disconnect it from reality. Clearly the ground was fertile. I’m against the idea that Syria was never sectarian. But if you say it’s sectarian you are a traitor! [i.e. you are perceived by other revolutionaries to betray the revolution] **I found it funny that “wahid, wahid, wahid!” [“one, one, one”] was one of the first slogans. From first hands on you feel there was an awareness of sectarian threat**.” (p. 25).
3. “The rumors in the neighborhood were that the Muslims were coming to kill them [i.e. the Christians]… And the people, they want to believe that. After this we knew we should act as Christians. **We wanted to say no – it’s not a Sunni revolution. Our group – we were everything, we were all the minorities, Druze, Alawi. We wanted to show sympathy with the minorities, saying we are with you in the revolution!”** (p. 26)
4. “In the group [which the revolutionary was part of] it has never been an issue [i.e. sectarianism]. **We talked about the sectarian issue; they didn’t acknowledge that it was a problem. Majority of Syrians don’t think there is a sectarian issue.** No single activities targeted sectarian groups – except for the Christian symbols to say Christians are part of the revolution. (…) I remember that I sent many links to demonstrations to Al-Jazeera – they refused to broadcast them. So it was not just the regime but also the stations that promoted sectarianism.” (p. 27).

Interview to an Alawi living in Akrab (Rosen, 2011)

5. “At first it was every Friday, then every day, they burned state buildings and attacked some shops and they called for jihad. My husband’s name was written as a collaborator with the state because he called security to protect us. There were papers on the streets and walls with his name and others’ names written and it said they were collaborators – and [that] after the fall of the regime ‘their blood will be spilled’.”

Appendix IV

Chants and slogans of the uprisings of March 2011, that is to say, before al-Assad’s speeches (Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution, 2021).

a. “Oh Syria, where are you?! - God, Syria, Freedom, and nothing else! - Pacific.. Pacific.. Pacific!”. Damascus, 15/3/2011. Retrieved from https://creativememory.org/en/archives/50662/first-demonstration-in-damascus-15032011/
b. “Sunnis and Alawites - We want freedom - There is no fear, there is no fear.” Jableh, 25/3/2011. Retrieved from https://creativememory.org/en/archives/36689/jableh-demonstration-sunni-and-alawite-we-all-want-freedom/
c. “Pacific, pacific.. we don't want sectarianism. - Pacific, pacific, until we get our freedom back. - There is no fear, there is no fear - From now on, there is no fear - No matter what happens, there is no fear - Oh free people, there is no fear. - The people of Baniyas salute those of Daraa.” Baniyas, 25/3/2011. Retrieved from https://creativememory.org/en/archives/34796/baniyas-demonstration-peace-peace-we-dont-want-sectarianism/
d. “God.. Syria.. Freedom, and nothing else. - We are all united.” Baniyas, 18/3/2011. Retrieved from https://creativememory.org/en/archives/34786/baniyas-demonstration-on-march-18-2011/