A question of 'who': Syrian statehood according to its actors

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Contents

Introduction

More than a decade ago, the Syrian Uprising catapulted the nation, the region and overseas allies into fresh conflict. National identity became a point of contention, giving rise to songs and slogans, chants and signs boasting artful rejections or affirmations of the al-Assad regime. It was during the protests of 2011 that the first battle for the Syrian identity was waged (Al-Ghazzi, 2013; Bartolomei, 2018). This was seen in the rise of political slogans: *Suriyya al-Assad* ('Assad's Syria'), a popular phrase that neatly highlights the deliberate overlap between Syrian identity and the Assad regime, and the protesters' rebuttal: *la Sunniyya wa la Alawiyya, badna huriyya* ('Not Sunni and not Alawi, we want freedom'). Moreover, the pre-existing plethora of different ethnic and religious groups prompted the protesters to call for unity under a single banner of 'Syrian' in an effort to counteract sectarian divides; whereas the Assad regime promoted these divisions in order to fragment the political message (Haddad, 2019; Ismail 2011). Supporters of the regime pushed back with campaigns suggesting foreign interference, uniting President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian people against external threats, while the opposition dissociated from the regime entirely. The disjunct here between the two groups signified a difference in a vision of Syria and what it meant to be Syrian. 'Syrian' changed depending on who was promoting it.

The question of whether one belongs or not has been a primary hinge of historical conflict, providing a narrative that is premised on both inclusion and exclusion. This struggle over national identity is important as imagining a nation comes with justification for social and political hierarchies (Elgenius, 2018). How one conceptualises the community they belong to—i.e. what qualities each member possesses, their history and aspects of shared culture, etc—is critical to how we see ourselves and how the community is entitled to act (van Zomeren et al., 2018, p. 123). Given the effect that the Syrian Uprising has had on the political, social and economic climate of the region and world at large, it is crucial to investigate how Syrian nationhood is framed.

This study follows Kohn's (1961) framework and uses it to determine the fundamental rationale with which various actors conceptualise belonging. Thematic analysis will be employed to reach an answer to this research's driving question. Before doing so, it will prove invaluable to explore the existing literature around the topic, concluding in a research question, before delving into methodological aspects of this study's design.

Literature review

In recent years, there has been ample attention cast onto the Syrian conflict, and even though Syria 'has fallen off the front page' in Antonio Guterres' words (UNOCHA, 2021), scholars have not turned their focus elsewhere. Now as the Assad regime gradually consolidates control over Syria's recesses, there has been increasing scholarship dedicated to examining the nuances of the Syrian civil war and how it has affected both its people and the region surrounding it.

Although the study of nationalism is not new, the study of *Syrian* nationhood is. Therefore, though many authors have devoted papers to nationhood generally, there are few studying the expression of Syrian national identity and only since 2011 has scholarship increased around this topic.

Nationhood scholarship can generally be separated into two schools of thought: modernist and primordial (Smith, 1996; Moreno-Almendral, 2021), also known respectively as the French and German schools. The former school posits the simultaneous and fluid development of states and nations (Anderson, 1983; Gellner, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1992), whereas the latter claims today's borders remain consistent with premodern societies (Hastings, 1997). Importantly, these schools were constructed in purely European context—having little applicability to other areas of the world—thus requiring context-specific means of analysis in non-European cases. This especially applies to Syria, whose history is more comparable with other regional states like Lebanon and Iraq with whom it shares an ideological history as well (Ahram, 2002; Haddad, 2019; Hinnebusch, 2015). Therefore, analysis on Syrian nationhood should remain embedded in its own context. Thus the following studies specifically explore Syrian nationhood.

In 2011, Ismail analysed the 're-imagining' of the Syrian nation wherein interviews with political activists and intellectuals formed the basis of their argument for sectarianism's role within the state's anti-protest strategy. Ismail (2011, p. 541) argues that the protesters' overhaul of Syrian nationhood is a direct result of divisive, top-down strategies as the fear of sectarian division is so potent that only a total re-imagining of the Syrian nation is necessary for the ultimate end of reform (2011, p. 540). Performative nationhood, as she calls it, is demonstrable in discourse—from anti-government songs like the infamous '*Yalla Irhal Ya Bashar'* ('Come on Bashar, Leave') to the government's slogans of '*Allah Suriyya, Bashar wi bas'* ('God, Syria, Bashar, and that is all')—which are manifested examples of one's imagined

political community. Ismail (2011) succinctly underlines the ways in which Syrian nationhood is used to motivate support for both the government and the protesters, and how its symbolic quality is important for the ideological battle. However, Ismail (2011) is a preliminary foray into the shaping of Syrian identity and thus a revisitation of what it presently means to be Syrian amongst involved actors is needed.

Luckily, this is what Bachleitner (2022) has recently accomplished in her comprehensive study of how Syrians both within and without the country perceive the future of Syria. Conducting interviews with 200 individuals and coding their perceptions as either aligning with civic or ethnic rationale, Bachleitner (2022) determines that most Syrians have a strong sense of the former. Exceptionally, she also finds that individual Syrians eschew sectarian identities. Instead, they redefine their hopes for the Syrian nation through a predominantly liberal lens—identifying unity, democracy and re-establishment of rule-of-law as foundational components of this vision.

Civic-ethnic nationhood

Criteria of belonging form the bedrock of nationhood and its political manifestation, e.g. citizenship laws. According to Kohn (1961), criteria of nationhood fall roughly into two categories: civic and ethnic. Civic nationhood denotes an inclusive framework through which, due to an evolution of national feeling prior to political manifestation, belonging is signified by adherence to rule-of-law, length of time spent living in an area, belief in the dominant ideology, etc. Ethnic nationhood, by contrast, is a category predicated upon ethnic salience. Should one fall outside an 'acceptable' ethnic bracket, whose identity markers are determined by the community, they do not belong. This study will examine how actors can broadly be characterised according to this distinction as means of investigating how they conceptualise Syrian nationhood.

The civic-ethnic dichotomy is an essential framework within the nationhood literature (see Arnason, 2006 on Kohn, 1961). Originating from Meinecke's *Kulturnation* vs. *Staatsnation* theory (Meinecke, 1970), this binary was adjusted by Kohn to explain the differences in 'Eastern' and 'Western' nationalism of the post-World War era—adapting Meinecke's work to fall into two basic strands of 'civic/Western/political' and 'ethnic/Eastern/cultural'[1]. States east of the Rhine were proposed to have had strong cultural and ethnic histories leading to the rise of states, whereas those west of the Rhine had political

[1] Framing borrowed from Larsen (2017).

representation prior to socio-cultural identity—thus each led to a different rationale of nationhood based on either civic or ethnic indicators. Despite the inherent normative flaws of this argument, the civic-ethnic dichotomy has been hugely influential in shaping how nationhood scholarship conceptualises belonging. Its influence has been partly due to its applicability whilst also providing a simple but elegant explanation of the cold-war epoch. Kohn's anticipation of civic or ethnic ideals developing over others was in close alignment with the western rhetoric of the time and the previous eighteenth and nineteenth centuries' politicking (Larsen, 2017, p. 973).

However, the civic-ethnic dichotomy does not explain everything. Shulman (2002) pointed out that Kohn's historical underpinnings have shifted as some Eastern states transition to largely civic rationale. Therefore, some of the theory's own foundations no longer apply, indicating a reduced accuracy stemming from inapplicability. Moreover, Kohn's framework has been criticised for its binary simplicity (Blackburn, 2021; Kuzio, 2002; Kymlicka, 2000; Shulman, 2002) as well as its mutually exclusive nature that reflects a simplistic understanding of identity (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Kaftan & Smith, 2000; Kuzio, 2002).

On the other hand, the civic-ethnic dichotomy has been partially supported in thirty-three states. A study conducted by Reeskens and Hooghe (2010) demonstrated significant results supporting its applicability to a variety of states. They conclude that general indicators of civic and ethnic rationale for nationhood exist and can be accurately attributed in a meaningful way (Larsen, 2017, p. 990; Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010, p. 595). This has been further confirmed by Larsen's recent study utilising multi-classification analysis (Larsen, 2017, pp. 990-991). Essentially, Kohn's dichotomy can be broadly applied to determine general approaches to nationhood but requires in-depth study of said cases.

Shulman (2002, p. 561) presents a table exemplifying cultural and political manifestations of civic and ethnic nationalism—a useful tool for outlining the nuances of each rationale (see Figure 1). Within Figure 1, civic, ethnic and cultural rationales are translated into cultural attitudes towards immigrants and the consequential immigration policies towards them.

FIGURE 1: *NATIONAL IDENTITY AND KEY POLICY ISSUES (SHULMAN, 2002, P. 561)*

CONTENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY	Cultural policy	Immigration policy
CIVIC	Promote no ethnic cultures or promote minority ethnic cultures	Open immigration
	Do not encourage assimilation	Entry for all immigrants
CULTURAL	Promote dominant ethnic group's culture	Conditional immigration
	Encourage assimilation	Preference for culturally similar immigrants
ETHNIC	Promote dominant ethnic group's culture	Restrictive immigration
	Do not encourage assimilation	Preference for similar immigrants

The Syrian case

The Syrian Uprising was the first modern instance of concentrated re-constructions of Syrianism as its history of national identity is relatively new compared to others in the Middle East (Beshara, 2011; Salameh, 2013 as quoted by Aldoughli, 2022; Zachs, 2001). This has prompted an enthusiastic top-down reconstruction of Islamic-Arab history in which Syria is a lynchpin to reassert its importance (Dukhan, 2022; Hinnebusch, 2019; Zisser, 2006, pp. 182-184). Manifestations of this top-down reconstruction can be seen in the creation of patriotic songs, in school curriculum, pop culture, even football team names in order to promote feelings of patriotic unity amongst the people[2] (Dukhan, 2022, p. 144).

Previous research has shown that the Syrian case occupies an undefined space between either rationale as it incorporates indicators of each. Some suggest this resulted from the combination of the Ba'th party ideology with Hafez al-Assad's rise to power in 1970, given

[2] The state's origins are hugely important as it is a matter of national pride to be seen as distinct from colonial manipulations (Zisser, 2006, p. 184).

that it overlaps 'ethnic elements of Arabism with civic elements of a social contract based on a socialist-nationalistic ideology' (Bachleitner, 2022, p. 180). This unique Syrian identity therefore confounds the civic-ethnic system on a state-level. However, there has been a comparative deficit in attention to meso-level communities and if or how they align with Kohn's civic-ethnic framework.

This gap is particularly problematic as the sectarian character of the civil war indicates a range of (non-)state actors competing for dominance in Syria, and each has a vested interest in their vision of Syria. These meso-level actors are important for the war *and* the character of Syria. It follows that there are different conceptions of nationhood within each imagined political community that would, if given the chance, prevail over the others and manifest Syria in unique and different ways (Philips & Valbjorn, 2018). How we might conceptualise these imagined iterations of Syria is directly relevant to their political manifestations and as such requires careful investigation.

Meso-level actors

Considering the comparatively greater attention cast on international actors and individuals within the Syrian crisis, the meso-level will serve as the primary level of analysis in this study. Meso-level actors provide fresh and interesting grounds for new study as many of these actors have a significant reach in terms of war efforts yet are significantly shaped by it (Saouli, 2020). Moreover, the factors involved in either driving meso-level actors away, inviting participation or simply incurring trauma, are definitively relevant for how they view Syrian identity as a whole and whether these actors feel attached to it. Meso-level actors, by definition, are communities who are both shaped by and capable of shaping discourse (Serpa, 2016). For this reason, it is necessary to study meso-level actors who act as 'social entrepreneurs' and who actively take part in re-shaping the narrative around who belongs in Syria's future.

While there has been much investigation into what Syrian nationhood looked like after 2011, there is comparatively little literature on how nationhood exists in relation to sub-state actors. Moreover, given the increased cast of transnational forces, this case study warrants another look. Consequently, this paper is guided by the following question:

How have actors adapted and reconceptualised Syrian nationhood?

Methodology

Syria is a state with a rich albeit short history of nationhood. It provides compelling and fresh insight into how constructed nationhood can be adapted and utilised as a tactic during war or even as a means of governing (see Tsaliki, 2007). Given its complex set of actors and national idiosyncrasies, using a case study research strategy is the best means to analyse its conceptions of nationhood (Kohlbacher, 2006). Case studies allow phenomena to be analysed within their context, signifying a more holistic approach to understanding said phenomena (Yin, 2003). The produced analysis is very specific, with little generalisability and a 'deep' understanding—appropriate for this discipline, where 'nationhood' as defined by each state is similarly specific with little generalizability elsewhere (Reeskens & Hooghe, 2010).

The research was conducted using qualitative content analysis (QCA) to investigate the case study of Syrian nationhood. QCA is uniquely appropriate for this study as it aims to identify patterns within a text—i.e. identifying salient themes to the research which are operationalised by a few key indicators (Devi, 2009). Especially when analysing discourse where language is rife with veiled meaning and nuance, QCA allows a researcher to synthesise core aspects of concepts, i.e. nationhood, to provide accurate categorization according to the theoretical framework, i.e. civic-ethnic framework (Bryman, 2004). Importantly, the compendium of information amassed according to various indicators remains within its context and previously unknown patterns can arise from the text, informing the context of said indicators within the wider narrative (Mayring, 2002). Thus Syrian nationhood is allowed to remain specific to its native context when analysed.

Guiding the QCA is Shulman's (2002, p. 559) model for indicating the political manifestations of civic, cultural and ethnic rationales (see Figure 2)—an important amalgamation of indicators for each nationhood rationale. This research will use the following indicators as ways to operationalise the concepts of civic and ethnic rationale. Given the lack of transferability of the cultural component as demonstrated in Reeskens and Hooghe (2010), it will be excluded from this analysis. However, for the purposes of providing awareness of other debated components, the cultural operationalisation is left intact.

FIGURE 2: *OPERATIONALISATION OF CIVIC, CULTURAL AND ETHNIC IDENTITY IN SHULMAN (2002, P. 559)*

CONTENT OF NATIONAL IDENTITY	Key indicators
CIVIC	Live on the territory Have legal citizenship status Express will to join political community Adhere to basic state ideology Adhere to political institutions and rights
CULTURAL	Believe in dominant religion Speak national language Share national traditions
ETHNIC	Ancestry, descent Belong to the dominant ethnic/racial group

Every process can be analysed along three main levels of analysis: the micro-, meso- and macro-levels. Given that there has already been in-depth analysis of the micro-level conceptions of Syrian nationalism (Bachleitner, 2022) and extensive research has been conducted on the macro-level (Philips, 2020; Philips & Valbjorn, 2018; Szmagier, 2014), this study will prioritise the meso-level.

Prioritising the meso-level actors contextualises community-level conceptualisations of belonging within the wider national and international landscape. This holistic study will focus on Hezbollah as a meso-level factor in shaping Syrian nationhood, while making secondary forays into micro-level conceptions and macro-level influences, in the respective forms of Bashar al-Assad and the United Nations (UN). Ultimately, this paper aims to present a broader picture of Syrian nationalism by assigning either a civic or ethnic character to each analysed actor.

The actors in question: Hezbollah, Assad and the United Nations

Transnational bodies are a key aspect of the Syrian civil war, given that they influence the flow of the war by providing or denying resources and troops. One of the first transnational

actors within this conflict was Hezbollah. Their narrative has the potential to influence conceptions of Syrianism given their prominence in the region and close relationship with the Assad regime. In essence, Hezbollah is able to disseminate their chosen narrative via media outlets that transcend regional boundaries and has a vested interest in doing so.

Bashar al-Assad's vision of Syria and what it means to be Syrian perhaps best demonstrates the power of an individual's conception of national identity (Szmagier, 2014). The practical power Assad utilises to project his vision across Syria and the Syrian diaspora has huge consequences for millions of individuals and multiple states. Assad exemplifies the importance of national identity during wartime and how it can significantly motivate one's actions.

On the macro-level, the UN forms an important seat of power for international affairs and as such will be utilised to explore how international perspectives adapted discourse around Syrian identity. The Geneva II conference, an initial mediation for the Syrian conflict, represents one of the clearest manifestations of the international aspect to the Syrian civil war, and provides crucial insight into how international actors frame Syrian identity (Clowry, 2022).

Sources

To fully inform the characterisations of Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad and the UN as holding either ethnic- or civic-based rationale, speeches, articles and reports were collected.

Firstly, the leader and public face of Hezbollah, Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, represents the most accurate portrayal of this group's conception of Syrianism. His speeches, which the Hezbollah-owned 'Al-Ahed' have transcribed and translated into English, are among the best indicators of how this group sees and adapts Syrian nationhood for their own purpose as Nasrallah acts as the literal voice of Hezbollah. Fourteen speeches from 2013, 2021 and 2022 were collected and subsequently analysed. Secondly, Bashar al-Assad's conception of nationhood was explored through seven speeches and two newspaper articles. Finally, transcripts on the key leaders of Geneva II were best for researching UN narratives around Syrian nationhood as they impacted the presentation of Syrians throughout the conference. Four leaders were selected based on their importance to the talk: UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, Special Representative Lahkdar Brahimi, the UK's Foreign Secretary William Hague, and finally, US Secretary of State John Kerry.

Analysis

History of nationhood in Syria

While the true impetuses of the Syrian Uprising were the Arab Spring and a horrific drought in the southern province Dar'a, what propelled the nation into action was the arrest and torture of a group of boys in Damascus. Protests erupted in March 2011 and while initial demands were modest, the brutal crackdown on protesters and any form of dissent encouraged anti-government groups to take a more extreme stance: removing President Bashar al-Assad entirely. With this in mind, reaching a consensus between both groups became unthinkable and mediation stalled (Sherlock et al., 2021). Over time and with the continued involvement of international forces, sectarian lines have become more divisive and over 12 million Syrians have been displaced either abroad or internally (Abboud, 2016; Connor, 2018; UNHCR, 2017). What these events have amounted to broadly is a crisis not of migration, but of humanity; and individually, the mass traumatization of an entire nation (Phillips, 2017). To understand the ideological forces that have facilitated the war, investigating how Syrian identity has been constructed in the past is crucial.

The foundations of Syrian nationalism are grounded in the early 1920s but top-down construction began in earnest from the 1960s onwards (Aldoughli, 2019, p. 128; Hinnebusch, 2019; Dukhan, 2022). Prior to this, there was very little momentum for solely Syrian identity, with the nation commonly referred to as 'Syrian' in the present historically aligning more with transnational identities like those of pan-Arabism, pan-Islamism and other transnational allegiances—e.g., Shiite Muslims and Iran (Zisser, 2006). Partly due to colonial obfuscations of the development of national identity[3] and partly due to its own diverse array of 'ethnicities, religions, sects, and national backgrounds including significant minorities' (Aldoughli, 2019, p. 141), Syrian nationalism only became a serious endeavour in the era post-inception.

It is generally agreed upon in the literature that the period between the year of Syria's political emergence and the present day can be split into specific segments according to changes in Syrian nationalism (Hinnebusch, 2022; Aldoughli, 2022). Gaining power in the 1920s, the Ba'th party was born out of a tumultuous period and was characterised by intense top-down construction of the Syrian national identity aligned with state borders. This initial

[3] Interestingly, some scholars have suggested that encouraging primordial underpinnings to national identity—a concept that posits a historically fixed and constant ethnic identity through which one involuntarily belongs—developed as a way of uniting oppressed people during the colonial occupation (see Fanon, 1967).

Ba'th conception of Syrianism rejected pre-existing tribal identities to implement a 'progressive socialist pan-Arab ideology' (Dukhan, 2022, p. 144). This meant that the party's leading theoretician and one of the founding members, Michel Aflaq, produced rhetoric heavily emphasising the transnational ties to the Arab region at large, manifested through linguistic and common regional history (see Aflaq, 1976). Aflaq's primordialist legacy would carry forward, even as other aspects changed.

In 1963, the Ba'th party staged a military coup and, in the period leading to Hafez al-Assad's assent, their style of primordialist nationalism took on a Syria-focused tone. Different to the pan-Arabist rhetoric from before, Ba'athists now promoted the fantastical idea of a united *Syria*, undivided by religions or ethnicities, and tied to a specific bounded territory (Aldoughli, 2019, p. 130). When Assad Snr took over, there was a gradual but noticeable shift in nationalistic rhetoric. Where Syrians were once singularly tied to each other in a constructed primordialist vision, now neo-patrimonial elements were incorporated (Hinnebusch, 2019). Assad's assent signalled not only a change in the literal face of the government, but also the administration. Loyalists were instated and dissent considered intolerable. For example, Wedeen (1998, pp. 503-505) opens with a story wherein a Syrian soldier is beaten and shamed for not responding with appropriate enthusiasm about the glory of Hafez. It is at this point in the modern history of Syrian nationalism that a cult of personality around Hafez al-Assad was imposed—making the act of being 'Syrian' synonymous with loyalty to Assad.

In 2000, Hafez al-Assad died and his son, Bashar al-Assad, took his place. Initially portraying himself as a liberally minded and democratically inclined leader, Assad Jnr at the start of his reign expanded civic participation and enacted other reforms[4] much sought-after by political agitators (Aldoughli, 2022, p.132; Zisser, 2006). However, within a few years, this liberal picture was crushed as civic participation laws were rolled back (de Elvira & Zintl, 2914, p. 333). Instead, Assad Jnr built upon the work of his father to craft an image portraying him as the young and enlightened leader, in contrast to Assad Snr's stern-but-kind fatherly projection (Dagher, 2019; Sacranie, 2013). Since the onset of war, Assad has constructed an image that predicates the survival of the people on his own political continuation (Szmagier, 2014, p. 63); and as such has adapted its neo-patrimonial style by incorporating a violent method of dealing with dissent paired with exclusionary rhetoric (Khaddour, 2015). On an

[4] For example, in 2000, Assad also allowed the Internet to be introduced to the country, providing a key platform for the dissemination of dissent and for the mobilization of protests. This is arguably a measure designed to add to his initial image as a liberal leader (Sacranie, 2013).

individual level, however, Syrians increasingly identify along non-territorially bound lines, directly challenging the regime's nationhood construction (Abboud, 2016).

With such a dynamic history in mind, there arises the question of how Syrian national identity is framed through the eyes of Hezbollah, Bashar al-Assad and the UN.

Hezbollah

Rising in 1982[5] as a direct result of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Hezbollah at the time of the Syrian Uprising formed a fundamental component of Damascus' influence over Lebanon as well as part of the Resistance and Refusal Axis[6]. Initial reasoning for a pre-emptive involvement in Syria was that Hezbollah was only there to protect certain shrines and positioned themselves as the antithesis to extreme Islamic jihadists, whom they claimed were backed and funded by the West (Fadlallah, 2015 as cited by Saouli, 2020). Ultimately driven by a pan-Arab core (Ajemian, 2008, p. 3), Hezbollah's involvement in the war has consisted of providing 'manpower, military advisers, trainers for pro-regime militias, and, crucially for combat in urban areas, reconnaissance, sniper fire, and light infantry' to the Assad regime (Saouli, 2020, p. 77)—plus the 'founding of the militia served to supplement the Syrian army' (Saouli, 2020, p. 77) who was in desperate need of support. Hezbollah's prime reason for involving themselves was, in essence, to protect one of their main allies, the Assad regime, in a region it felt existentially threatened by (Saouli, 2020, p. 71; Wahab, 2022, p. 108).

The prevailing Hezbollah narrative, embodied by its leader Hassan Nasrallah's speeches, is one of pan-Arabism which influences much of Hezbollah's discourse around the Syrian civil war and ultimately, their conceptions of Syrian identity. Hezbollah's approach can be characterised by a regional unifying voice, encouraged by a simplified 'us vs them' narrative, and a commitment to civil legitimacy.

[5] There is some debate about this. One author suggests that Hezbollah was developing in a significant way from even from 1970 to 1982 (see Azani, 2009); however, the consensus is that 1982 crystallised Hezbollah's intentions in such a way that this date within the timeline is forever marked as a formative moment.

[6] An alliance between Iran, the Assad regime in Syria and Hezbollah founded on the principles of a common Islamic identity, a commitment to the religio-political Islamic Jurist and active, and armed resistance against Israel (Saouli, 2020). One should also note that this alliance is characterized by a strong anti-Western stance and actively dissuades regional players from allying with the US and Israel (Saouli, 2020). Since Hamas split from the Axis in 2012, the Shi'a character of the alliance is more pronounced and for some scholars, connotes sectarian entrenchment in the region as well as the conflict.

Regional identity

Nasrallah, and by extension Hezbollah, approaches identity with a regional focus—purporting to protect Arab interests and promoting the unity of Arab individuals, regardless of religion[7]. This has been ostensibly demonstrated by Hezbollah's initial claims of acting as a mediator between the opposing sides of the conflict[8]. However, the above is contradicted by Nasrallah's insistence that the Syrian opposition is both point-blank unwilling to negotiate with the Assad regime and that their ranks have been subsumed by '*takfiri'* or terrorist-adjacent forces.

> *I bear witness that President al-Assad agreed, but the opposition disagreed since the beginning. To anyone who's asking about legitimacy and jurisprudence, the current Syrian leadership has constantly declared its readiness to hold dialogue, reach a political settlement, and make the regime undergo significant changes. […] the opposition has constantly refused dialogue […].* (Nasrallah, 25/5/2013)

These *takfiri* forces are exemplified by ISIS or DAESH, a group whose central aim, in Hezbollah's view, is to disrupt the peace and incite as much violence and division as possible. The divisive aspect of this role is key to understanding who is important in Hezbollah's narrative, as will be elaborated on below. In direct relevance to nationhood, Hezbollah posited that the western-backed *takfiri*s (or terrorists) called for a moral reckoning that was presented as a 'national duty' (Saouli, 2020, p. 80).

Interestingly, this division is broadly between regions, and would indicate that although there is a cross-border allegiance between Middle Eastern states, there is an underlying dual rationale to Hezbollah's conception of nationalism. Considering its atypical position as a transnational group, this transnationality would signify a dedication to global causes; however, its focus is the Middle East and its 'people' are Arabs living in this area—specifically Shi'a, but also purporting to represent those who do not belong to this sect. What this regional focus signifies is a unique combination of both ethnic rationale, where people are united both by blood as well as a shared history predicated upon ethnic markers, and pluralistic civic

[7] Perhaps this is most obviously demonstrable by the following quote: "*Do you even know anything about "Israel", the Zionist project, and the massacres these gangs committed against Muslims, Christians, Arabs, and Jews who refused to emigrate to Palestine and rejected the idea of the state of "Israel"?"* (Nasrallah, 1/3/2022). The alignment of different religious sects, even including some opposition-minded Jewish individuals, are to highlight the 'true' enemy in Nasrallah's mind, which is Israel. Therefore, unity amongst 'like-minded' people carry beyond religious affiliations.

[8] "*I, along with the Hizbullah brothers, have worked with Mr. President Bashar al-Assad and opposition officials as well so as to reach political dialogue and a settlement since the beginning*." (Nasrallah, 25/5/2013)

rationale[9], where the internal divisions between the people living in the region are devalued and unity promoted. Therefore, Hezbollah's rhetoric can be characterised by this melding of rationales.

The US-Israel axis

Another key aspect to understanding Nasrallah's conceptions of Syrian nationhood is the US and Israel. For Hezbollah, who sits on the terrorist list of the US, the Americans are allied with the Israelis, an enemy so profound in Nasrallah's rhetoric that he makes mention of it in every speech. Hezbollah sees itself as the regional protector of Arabs[10] and the Israelis as usurpers of Palestinian land. This is obvious, for example, in how Hezbollah transcribes Nasrallah's speeches: with every mention of Israel, its name is placed within quotation marks to call in question its legitimacy as a state. Whilst this is a superficial indication that Hezbollah views Israel with disdain and outright animosity, it is significant in its consistency. In the eyes of Hezbollah, the US has grown to be nearly as inimical as Israel and represents much adversity in the region. Significantly, Hezbollah claims that the US has aided and abetted *takfiri* groups in the Middle East—whose final goal in the eyes of Hezbollah is to sow such division that 'Arab' identity is destroyed.

> *Syria cannot equate between those who were partners, supporters, and financiers of the global war against it, aimed at crushing, destroying, and dividing it and allowing the* takfiris *to govern it and those who stood by Syria […].* (Nasrallah, 3/1/2021)

These messages are conveyed in emotive language that hystericizes their plight and implies the formation of a 'rally-around-the-flag' effect. Important to the discussion of Syrian identity here is the link between the US foreign interference and the *takfiri* groups purported to be actively fighting the regime. The Syrian opposition is characterised as an insidious, and thus illegitimate, part of the former. Through this characterisation, Hezbollah casts doubt on the sincerity of the Syrian opposition as a legitimate force acting on the interests of real Syrians.

[9] Other examples of this regional pluralistic type of civic rationale can be found in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Esseili (2020) applies civic rationale to the case of the UAE's educational policies and finds that policies aimed at the preservation of cultural identity through language (arguably based on ethnic and/or cultural rationales according to Figure 2) are able to coexist with a civic-based rationale as found in policies promoting pluralistic approaches to education.

[10] '*I am fighting in Syria because that has to do with the fate of Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and the entire region as well as the fate of the sanctities of this nation*.' (Nasrallah, 20/12/2013). The martyred tone of this quote highlights the way that Nasrallah views Hezbollah and himself as the regional protectors and portrays fighting in Syria as a noble and just cause.

> *America is responsible for the war that took place in Syria. It should not be forgotten – by the Syrians and us – that the one who killed the Syrians, destroyed Syria, and brought it into the cosmic war is the American administration and the successive American administrations*. (Nasrallah, 3/1/2021)

This has changed over time as initially the Syrian opposition were presented as legitimate, although steadfastly obstinate in not responding to negotiations. The introduction of DAESH provided an opportunity to delegitimise the genuine political complaints of the Syrian people, and now in 2022, this has carried forward to a total ignoring of the political opposition in favour of blanketing them with the title of *takfiri.* This also lends itself to the construction of an 'us vs them' logic, wherein Hezbollah can present itself as *of* the Arab people and the US-Israel axis as *against* the Arab people.

> *In order to block the parliamentary and official demands of the people […] the Americans brought back Daesh. They also brought back Daesh in Syria to fight the axis of resistance as well as the people and the countries in the region*. (Nasrallah, 8/1/2021)

Essentially, this amounts to Syrians who disagree politically with the Assad regime being erased from the narrative. The 'Syrian identity' as presented by Hezbollah is one who is victimised by the West and implicitly trusts in the regime.

> *Brothers and sisters, the listeners in the Arab and Muslim worlds, it is no longer a matter of people rebelling against their regime or a matter of reformations. The Syrian president has been ready to make reforms, so why did the opposition refuse dialogue?! You can see something else is required*. (Nasrallah, 25/5/2013)

By casting doubt on the goals of the Syrian opposition, Nasrallah is clearly already laying the foundation for what would come later. Syrians with legitimate political concerns are set aside and disregarded within Hezbollah's wider discourse on belonging in favour of simplifying the nuances of the oppositional forces into *takfiri*/US/Israel versus the Arab world/regional peoples who are both simultaneously characterised as freedom fighters and victims. The victimhood aspect to Nasrallah's portrayal of Syrian identity—which is also salient to an overarching Arab identity—is a significant tool to justify their involvement in the Syrian conflict (Wahab, 2022, p. 113). Wahab (2022, p. 18) points to the usage of a victim rhetoric to encourage a feeling of belonging amongst fighters that would in turn galvanise their actions against the enemy, i.e. the US and Israel. Consequentially, Syrian identity is subsumed

by political alignment with Assad because the direct parallel is ethnically inconceivable. In this way, Hezbollah's dichotomising of the narrative points to an underlying ethnic rationale as agreeing with a regime's political ideologies is no longer an important marker for Syrian nationhood. What matters is one's shared ethnic histories and the rest is inconsequential.

Civic legitimacy

> *Those* Takfiris *believe that whoever takes part in the parliamentary elections is a "disbeliever" who should be killed and disgraced, and whose money should be seized! Therefore, anyone taking part in the parliamentary elections- a Sunni, a Shiite, a Muslim, or a Christian- is publicly announced as someone that should be killed*. (Nasrallah, 25/5/2013)

An important stipulation of Hezbollah's presentation of themselves is a commitment to civic representation. Nasrallah advocates for political revolution, grounding his narrative in policy recommendations, such as calls for increased efficiency when forming a government[11], anti-corruption measures, advocation for transparency, etc. It can be clearly inferred that despite the militarized aspect of Hezbollah's actions, which one might expect legitimacy to be gained via force, there is a strong importance placed on civic legitimacy through political representation and participation.

> *[…]"Pursuant to my constitutional powers, I see that Lebanon's salvation is in forming a national unity government; thus, I will form a national unity government." This is a constitutional responsibility. This is a national responsibility.* (Nasrallah, 20/12/2013)

This association of legitimacy with civic means is translated into presentations of the Syrian identity. The regime is justified as legitimate in part because it is civically relevant in the eyes of Hezbollah, having attained its position through formal channels, and as such is entitled to respect and obedience from the Syrian people. In this way, we might characterize Syrian nationhood as having civic rationale according to Hezbollah.

[11] See speech made on the 1st of March, 2021—where Nasrallah discusses the relative unimportance of choosing exactly eighteen ministers to forming a functioning government, so that '[n]o one will feel excluded, intimidated, or targeted' (Nasrallah, 1/3/2021).

Bashar al-Assad

Assad's rhetoric shares many qualities with Hezbollah's narrative: accusations of external influence in the form of terrorists, inability to form a dialogue with the opposition, casting aspersions on the veracity of the Syrian protests, and a call for civil legitimation.

Again, there is a dichotomised political field, where Syria with Assad at its helm postures as a brave nation standing against the western forces and regional turncoats, and Assad goes so far as to call the conflict a war 'between the people and killers' (Assad, 6/1/2013). Like Nasrallah, Assad aligns western forces with *takfiri* terrorist threat, calling them a 'fierce outside aggression in a new disguise' (Assad, 6/1/2013) and thus delegitimising western presence in the region. However, differently to Nasrallah, Assad uses the external influence as a supplementary tactic to distance Syrian nationhood from those who agitate for political reform—presenting them as either simply 'misled' or 'enemies of God' (Assad, 6/1/2013). Instead of Hezbollah's pan-Arab unity, there is an imposed vision of a united Syria, highly reminiscent of Hafez's attempts at unifying different sects. In fact, the Syrian people are presented as singularly unified behind Assad—a claim he believes due to the continuation of the war because it would be impossible 'if you don't have the support of your own people' (Assad, 22/9/2016). According to Assad, the revolution is an 'import from abroad […] most of whom are non-Syrians' fighting to undermine the sovereignty of Syria and its people (Assad, 6/1/2013).

Sisters and brothers, the homeland is above all, and Syria is above all. (Assad, 6/1/2013)

Unique to Assad is the use of highly emotive and primordialist language. There is a consistent claim that 'patriotism runs in [the Syrian people's] veins' and that 'the homeland' must be defended—what amounts to a rallying cry. Frequent usage of familial terms like the above also strengthens the imagined bond between Syrian citizens so that kinship-esque loyalty becomes part of the criteria of nationhood. For Assad, 'Syrian' means one whose patriotism is both ingrained and arising from a long line of important cultural history that cannot be forgotten—'[a] country that is thousands of years old knows how to manage its affairs' (Assad, 6/1/2013). Therefore, in conjunction with a profoundly ethnic tone, there is a set of expected behaviours and opinions one must have in order to qualify as 'truly' Syrian. One such qualifying behaviour is the return of diasporic communities and refugees to Syria. By not returning to Syria, Syrians inadvertently abdicate their Syrian-ness.

> *We call upon all those who left the country because of terrorism to return to it and contribute to the reconstruction process. The country is the homeland for all the Syrian people*. (Assad, 19/2/2019)

The internal conditions are cause for enough concern that Syrians stay away, however, Syrians abroad form a key part of Assad's justification for leading and a point of pride (Ahram, 2002). In their absence, he lacks both political and economic power (Hubbard, 2020). This is partially why Assad's Syrian nationhood is one predicated on ethnic ties: there are little civil or economic incentives to return so patriotism must be based on blood. An irrational commitment encouraged by faux emotional connections is one of Assad's only tools in ensuring political power.

As outlined above, Assad's conception of Syrian nationhood has a fundamentally ethnic rationale—focusing on blood and descent—with an integrated civic-based argument to justify his rule.

Geneva conferences

An important theme throughout the Geneva II discourse is the polarised political scene, where the Assad regime is contrasted to the victimised-yet-united Syrian people.

The constant reprisals of 'humanitarian catastrophe', refugee displacement and terrorism all point to an international association with victimization and an inability on the part of Syrians to pull themselves from the wreckage. This is perhaps best demonstrated by the lack of either regime or opposition in the first Geneva talk. Even though the call for a 'Syrian-led' approach is now commonplace, the fact that this was not present from the start is telling. The presented helplessness of the Syrian *people* becomes a quintessential part of the narrative, paralleled to the Assad regime (Pandir, 2019).

Moreover, it must be mentioned that the proposed 'Syrian people' are equally united in their subjugation by the regime and points to a populace undivided by sectarian lines.

> *Syrians are still united in their deep love of their country, pride in their cultural and religious heritage, and long history of living in peace*. (Moon, 22/1/2014)

The Assad regime, on the other hand, is represented as a tyrannous overlord so bent on the prolongment of its own power that it is willing to do whatever to achieve it, even if it means the deaths of thousands.

> *And it was because of [the Assad regime's] repression that those protests escalated into a mass uprising and civil war, and it is this instability that has created a foothold for extremists*. (Hague, 22/1/2014)

Significantly, Assad and the regime are separated from the title of 'Syrian'. They are characterised as a 'small minority' yet not truly associated with *being* Syrian. In the words of UN officials, they do not represent the Syrian people nor do they appear to protect them, thus they are estranged from their Syrian identity. This allows the UN to compose an implicit narrative around Syrianism that aligns it with civic values and distinguishes them from 'true' Syrians who are characterised as civic-minded, peaceful and united. At the time of Geneva II, Kelly describes Syrian people as desirous of a civic future where liberal principles are upheld, minorities protected, and stability is commonplace.

> *I believe the alternative vision of the Syrian people is one that can gather the respect and support of people all around the world. It is a place that doesn't force people to flee or live in fear, a Syria that protects the rights of every group*. (Kerry, 22/1/2014)

The Geneva peace talks were meant to do just that: facilitate the discussion of peace. Yet their narrative heavily favours one side over the other, eventually manifesting in policy recommendations whereupon 'power-sharing' and the ensuring of political transition are encoded. Both of these are antithetical to the goals (and existence) of the Assad regime, inherently disabusing the peace talks of their purported neutrality.

> *All of us who have endorsed the Geneva Communiqué know what the goal is: a transitional governing body in Syria with full executive powers, formed by mutual consent, which means no one included without the agreement of the others, including a President who has destroyed his own legitimacy*. (Hague, 22/1/2014)

In essence, the UN framing of Syrian nationhood could be characterized as having civic rationale due to its strong association with liberal principles, but also incorporates a

dichotomized narrative where the Syrian people are victimized by the regime and thus justifies the UN's involvement.

Limitations

This paper aimed to provide insight into how various multi-scalar actors frame and reconfigure Syrian nationhood; however, it does suffer from a range of methodological flaws that might reduce the applicability of the findings.

As it stands, this study has prioritised a few actors in favour of analytical depth and as such has limited the scope of its investigation. A multi-scalar study of nationhood amongst actors would benefit from a plethora, rather than a select few. Diasporic Syrian communities, for example, are also transnational actors that meaningfully impact conceptions of nationhood from abroad and their experiences vary depending on their context. The same limitation could be said of both micro- and macro-levels: analysing more actors on either level would contribute to a better understanding of Syrian national identity in its totality. Future researchers should focus on incorporating more local perspectives, not only prioritising Assad's as, for example, other local non state actors such as tribal groups are increasingly important for preserving local and national identity (al-Azm, 2017). This study would have also benefited from a range of sources, including interviews with relevant individuals at all levels of the conflict to provide a fuller picture of Syrian nationhood.

Conclusion

This study has rendered some interesting conclusions that might prove inspirational for future research. The investigation of Hezbollah's narrative revealed that its political alignment with Assad is echoed in perceptions of Syrian identity, whilst maintaining overtones of its ideological beliefs in the presentation of the aforementioned. Hezbollah, through Nasrallah, presents a more civically minded Syrian; whereas Assad predicates his vision on ethnic ties. The UN, claiming to be a neutral arbiter, contradicts itself within its own narrative and supports the dichotomization of civic/Syrian/victim and ethnic/Assad/belligerent. Interestingly, all three present a simplified narrative of 'us vs them', wherein each cast themselves as martyrs or heroes and their opposition as the enemy. These actors frame Syrian nationhood in ways that justify their presence or dominance, similarly fulfilling a perceived political necessity by grounding themselves within local narratives and identities. Yet the true local communities remain unheard.

Considering the above conclusions, it is no wonder that mediation has stalled. In light of the UN's approach, policy-makers should re-evaluate their own impact on the conflict so as to grant Syrians the dignity that they deserve. Assad's perspective enlightens scholars on how regional despots can consolidate power through the weaponization of national identity. In similar fashion, Hezbollah's support of the Assad regime through material *and* ideological dissemination indicate how transnational actors may contribute to future conflicts. Implications of the above also include the need for recognition that the region has polarised around this conflict and the dominance of Assad and the opposition's rhetoric have overshadowed the voice of the Syrian sects. In essence, broadening the picture of important actors to include transnational and local groups is critical to the empowerment of all.

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