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To cite this article:

Ari, M. M. (2020). Questioning the Sectarian Discourse: A More Holistic Look Into Changing Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War *Horizon Insights*, 3(3), 36-51.
<https://doi.org/10.31175/hi.2020.03.03>

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ISSN: 2593-3582 (printed), 2593-3590 (online)

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Questioning the Sectarian Discourse: A More Holistic Look into Changing Dynamics of the Syrian Civil War

Mehmet Mükerrerem Ari¹

Abstract

The main effort in this article is to find out the main causes of the Syrian Civil War via questioning the common discourse that presents sectarian fault lines as the main cause. In this context, this article argues that instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner by taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Syrian civil war is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas have resulted in it being perceived as one. Thus, we have to be careful about over emphasized speech act of the actors in an effort to use their own agenda while politicizing the security environment. It can be argued that it is a proxy war battle ground for regional powers where the balance of power politics and superpower competition is played out. Deploying a reductionist approach is dangerous because not only it undermines the actual reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors of the war.

Keywords: Syria, civil war, sectarianism, proxy war, power politics, Middle East

Introduction

The Middle East and specifically the Levant¹ is a region that shares many similarities but at the same time is very different in terms of its political and social development observed among the states. Despite the very old tradition of civilization, the countries have relatively young state customs. When we look at Iraq, it is the cradle of human civilization, where the old practice of statehood was developed. On the other hand, the creation of a modern administrative and bureaucratic system is a recent phenomenon, and this is not unique to Iraq but can be argued as counterintuitive considering the historic significance of those states.

In addition to this paradox between the old tradition of civilization and the recently created “modern” states, boundaries of all these states in the Levant are drawn up by outsiders in line with the territorial interests of the WWI Allied Powers with little regard to linguistic, ethnic, and religious boundaries. The result of this was artificially imposed borders, which were merely a territorial translation of British and French competition and geostrategic interests. In other words, it was the imposition of the Western based Westphalian nation state system onto the Middle East, which in itself was out of synch with the realities on the ground (Lesch, 2013).

The breakdown of artificial states formed by external entities is assumed to be easy by some scholars (Jenkins, 2014). Arguably, as can be clearly seen from Syria, the distribution of these differences often preludes an easy disentanglement of ethnic and religious groups. However, the real question, is whether it is accurate to explain the current conflict in Syria through the unravelling of different religious and sectarian groups and how this manifest into a sectarian conflict? In short, the response would be “not necessarily”. Instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Of these; shallow political culture, weak institutions and economic motivation remain vital factors.

It is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas that

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has caused the war to be perceived as a sectarian one. Considering the artificial characteristic of the nation state building process in which the identity formation is closely tied to religion and ethnicity, exploitation of sectarian identity is a useful tool to delegitimize the counterparts. That is why underpinning sectarian dynamics as the defining root cause of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misdirected. The unprecedented increase in Sunni-Shiite tensions in recent years is not due to the subtle religious variances attached to 1400 years of Islamic history. The explanation should be the conflict of identity politics rather than the sectarian differences, which happen to be the factor 'on the surface' to blame, but in reality it is just being utilized for political agendas (Lynch, 2013).

What is more striking is the rapidly changing dynamics of the civil war through the emphasis put on sectarian language, that restructures the positions of all the actors directly and indirectly involved within the war. Politicization of sectarian identity formulates new losers and victors of the war.

In order to have a better understanding, this article will first present a historical and statistical overview concerning the ethnic and religious groups in Syrian society, before continuing to present the case that the Syrian civil war is not simply a sectarian conflict. In doing so, it will put emphasis on power politics dressed up in sectarian language and argue that the "alliance dilemma" has politicized ethnic and sectarian divisions to delegitimize the counterparts of the war, and even more seriously, to complicate the situation concerning the factions of the civil war.

Syria's Deeply Divided Society

The Syrian population, like those of several other Middle Eastern countries, comprises of different ethnic and religious groups. Sectarian differences certainly exist. In addition to the highly diverse ethnic and religious outlook of Syrian society, tribal and familial groupings as well as geographical differences play a significant role on the fractionalization of Syrian society. In order to better understand Syrian society, one must appreciate not only the history of the Levant, but also the nation's demographics.

The Ottoman Empire had controlled the Levant for centuries where different religious groups co-existed under the Ottoman umbrella. This peaceful cohabitation is used to highlight the "tolerant" rule of the Ottoman Empire, which is claimed to have been better than in contemporary societies (Page, 2015). The formal administrative structure of Syrian provinces under Ottoman rule was driven by "locally integrated regions" having a relative political autonomy governed by its local elite, and the boundaries of those Syrian provinces did not necessarily correspond to provincial lines drawn by Istanbul. Damascus, Aleppo, Acre were considerably effective city states where ethno-sectarian pluralism flourished. On the other hand, there were comparatively isolated entities generally dominated by singular or multiple communities as were the cases of Druze-Maronite Jabal ash-Shuf, the Twelver Shia Jabal Amil and the Alawite Jabal Nusayri (Slim; Hugo & Trombetta, 2014).

After the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the highly controversial Sykes-Picot Agreement drew the borders of these Syrian provinces placing them into a nation state that had never existed before. This was the first time Syria as a nation state existed as an invention of the French and British powers. However, this newly created nation-state paid little attention to administrative configurations which prevailed under Ottoman rule. Syria's highly diverse population was squeezed into a single nation state.

It is also important to note that no Syrian census including a question regarding religion and ethnicity has been collected since the 1960s, making it especially difficult to delineate the various sects of Syrian society. Despite a lack of official data, it is well known that Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of the Syrian population and are traditionally located in the urban parts of Syria. It is estimated that 75% of the population is composed of Sunni Muslims; and Alawites, Christians, Druzes and Ismalis made up the remaining 25% of the overall Syrian population. More specifically, the ethnic division of Sunni Muslims and Sunni Arabs are by far the largest ethno-religious group in Syria, which account for approximately 65 (The Economist Data Team, 2015).

The Kurdish population, on the other hand, is the non-Arab Sunnis and Christians. The Kurds, being the largest ethnic minority in Syria, are thought to constitute somewhere between 10% and 15% of the

total population. The Kurdish population predominantly resides in the north and north-eastern parts of the country. The Syrian Kurds claim that they have been systematically discriminated against by the Syrian regime for decades through denial of their basic social, cultural and political rights. Considering the official name of the state as the Syrian Arab Republic, this claim clearly has some traction. Nevertheless, the relationship between the Kurds and the regime has been constantly evolving during the conflict, and therefore will be discussed in this article.

Apart from the largest ethnic minority population, Alawites, a branch of Shiite Islam, constitute the largest religious minority in Syria. Alawites represent around 8% to 15% of the overall populace. Despite representing a minority, the Alawite sect of Shia Islam controls the state bureaucracy, almost in its entirety (Slattery, 2012). Alawites occupy top positions in the government and military institutions that undoubtedly afford them a degree of power in Syrian society like no other groups. Intriguingly, somewhat paradoxically Alawites are also the most vulnerable group due to their association with President Bashar al-Assad, who is a member of the Alawite community, an issue that will likely arise if the conflict results in a regime change (Abdo, 2013) in a similar way that it did in Iraq post 2003.

Approximately 10% of the Syrian population is composed of Christians, with Greek Orthodox and Greek Catholics making up the largest denominations. Although Christians do not dominate a single community, Damascus, Homs and Latakia have the most Christian residents. It should be noted that Christians were thought to possess a comparatively high degree of religious freedom and relatively privileged economic position thanks to having good relations with the Assad family (Laub, 2016). Many observers speculate that most Christians did not participate in the protests against the government fearing that they would lose the majority of the privileges that they possess. Nevertheless, ISIL's involvement in the conflict put the Christian population's advantaged situation into jeopardy (Hof; Simon, 2013).

On the other hand, Ismailis, which is a branch of Shiite Islam with around 15 million worldwide followers, is a smaller minority group in Syria, which is thought to number around 200,000. There are also approximately 500,000 Druze, which is drawn on Ismailism that adopt a monotheistic religion. Druzes are the second largest branch of Shiite Islam, and they mainly reside in southern Syria (BBC Monitoring, 2011). Yazidis, on the other hand, are mainly Kurds living in and around Mosul, Northern Iraq who amount to an estimated 200,000 to one million. As a result of forced emigration due to the threat of persecution, there are smaller communities in the neighboring countries of Iraq, with an estimated 70,000 in Syria. Yazidis are arguably one of the most adversely affected groups of the civil war, and more specifically by the religious-sectarian narrative of ISIL.²

In addition to the complex ethnic, religious and sectarian mosaic of Syria, the tribal composition is another crucial marker of Syrian society. This complex societal structure has arguably been exploited by the internal and external actors due to oil, influence and power matters and this has compounded its fragmented societal structure even more. In short, Syria has always been influenced by the deep localism of its many ethnic, religious and sectarian groupings. The extensions of the grand strategies of great powers complicate this, too. Since its re-creation as a nation-state with the fall of the Ottoman Empire, the modern Syrian state has been a focal point of regional and international politics reflecting the balance of power dilemma, which is now clearly visible in the present Syrian conflict.

The Story is more than What Has Been Thought: It is Not Merely Sectarian

This segment of the paper addresses the kind of war that has been conducted in Syria. In short, this is more than a sectarian war. Before proceeding, it is essential to clarify the terms of civil war and sectarianism not only for the matter of definition, but also to be able to address the problem more effectively, and to have a clearer discussion on who has been –or will be– affected by this narrative more severely.

Civil war is a contested term as well as sectarianism. Despite no agreed definition of civil war, Article 3 of the Geneva Convention has a useful definition outlining the responsibilities of the parties “in armed conflict not of an international character” with further explanation provided by the International Committee of the Red Cross. Additionally, most political scientists agree on using the threshold

of 1,000 dead per year for a conflict to be qualified as a civil war. Regarding this classification with the additional remarks indicated, we can argue that peaceful Syrian protests has turned into a civil war long before after the sixth month of the conflict³, but officially announced by the International Red Cross in July 2012 that the situation in Syria requires special attention which includes war crimes.⁴

Sectarianism remains a relatively vague and elusive legal term in addition to its contested nature. Broadly speaking, sectarianism can be thought of as the politics of identity consisting of ethnic, religious, sectarian and tribal boundaries. The deployment of sectarianism is a by-product of the modern Arab state, and it is the primary tool to shape the political identity of citizens. The modern Westphalian nation state with its distinction from religion has helped the politicization and deepening of sectarian identity in the region, if not created it (Osman, 2014). Taking these classifications into account, it is clear that Syrian conflict has the elements of civil war that includes various sects. However, this doesn't mean that the root causes of the conflict is a sectarian of historical animosities

If we go back in time and remember how it was when the apathy against the government in Syria began in 2011, it was peaceful and non-sectarian. Nevertheless, the Assad regime labelled its opponents as terrorists with the hope of discrediting them in the eyes of moderate and Western governments, while presenting itself as secular. Despite the label, the demonstrations were largely secular (Council on Foreign Relations, 2016). Arguably, this did not fit the interests and narrative of the Syrian regime that assumed itself as the protector of Syria's diverse ethnic and religious population.

Regardless of the comparatively recent and very well accepted sectarian rhetoric of the Syrian civil war, the reasons for the uprising were more than Sunni-Alawite contention. The acceleration of political repression by the Baathist regime arguably after the consolidation of President Hafez al-Assad's rule opened a new period in Syrian politics. The importance of personal links rather than institutional loyalty has been underneath the nominal structure of the state. The paradox becomes even clearer if the strong reliance on personal links is being understood. Following the death of his father, as a successor, President Bashar al-Assad assumed power in 2000. The Assad regime was unable to respond to the reform hopes. Instead, the regime maintained control and eliminated all possible channels for political opposition (Page, 2015).

Over the last five years before the conflict started, Syria has experienced a gradual economic growth; however, several economic and social challenges remained stagnant in society. The absolute and relative poverty rate remained high in Syria. This led to an apparent increase in social and regional inequalities despite the high annual economic growth rate. Rapid population growth also coincided with a very large movement from rural to urban cities resulting in high level of urbanization and political mobilization. The failure of Arab socialism as an economic and political model created uneven economic conditions. The social pact between the government and its citizens that prevailed in the 1980s and 1990s was no longer available. Syria's economic challenges have fed the population's growing anger giving impetus to the protests.

More specifically, rapid population growth resulted in many job-seekers entering into the labor market. However, both the public sector and the private sector were unable to satisfy the needs of the job-seekers. Official unemployment rate was 10 percent at the time the conflict began. What was even more striking in Syria was the youth unemployment rate, which exceeded 30% in 2011. Syrian youths were stuck in a period of "waithood".⁵ Syrian youths are better educated than their parents. However, the Syrian economy was not growing fast enough to absorb the better educated Syrian generation. The Syrian system that made who you know more important than what you know -nepotism- has not provided them with positive future prospects, either. Instead, a combination of these factors has created a high degree of frustration among the Syrian youth. Some scholars⁶ depicted this youth challenge as the most critical 21st century economic development barrier observed in the Middle East, and the resentment among youths as the defining feature of the region. Consequently, due to an increasing population with lack of employment prospects, Syria's rapidly growing youth population has become a demographic time bomb waiting to explode.

Compounding the youth unemployment, a persistent drought has devastated farming communities particularly in north-eastern Syria. The drought affected more than a million people in the last 3 years before the conflict. A lack of government support triggered the anger of farmers. The poverty rate in Syria's southern region has more than doubled before the conflict started. Despite the cash transfer program of the government that targeted low-income households to offset the effect of reforms on their living conditions, the impact was rather limited. When Syria tried to address these economic problems, it faced several other challenges. Among those is the regional discrepancy of the distribution of services. Drought and poor infrastructure increased the vulnerability of the eastern and southern regions where economic opportunities were in decline; child labor and deprivation were at stake (Landis, 2011).

Another challenge included the transition to a market driven economy as well as the need to open trade and investment to competition (Yousef, 2004). The Syrian government had to tackle the components preventing the emergence of a private sector; and to diminish corruption; and to increase efficiency through investing in infrastructure. However, a lack of transparency and the cumbersome nature of bureaucracy reproduced a vicious cycle in which the large companies that are on good terms with the regime dominated the private sectors. On the other hand, small companies tended to join the informal sector to avoid administrative barriers. Corruption and arbitrary decision making were the determinants of the administrative structure. This in the end favored families with personal links to Assad and caused the concentration of money in the hands of the few, leaving provincial Syria, where the protests began, hopeless and angry with no other option (Achy, 2011).

Although, Sunni population was disproportionately affected from Syria's economic and environmental problems, Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force of the coming conflict. Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force. Instead, the lines of this conflict are drawn on a complex mixture of factors including personal history, employment background, geographical location, family situation and past experiences with the regime. We suggest that the toxic mix including a shallow political culture, weak institutions leading to bad policy outcomes, social problems, unchecked ambitions of leaders and ultimately very high levels of violence were the main drivers of the protests.

It is very remarkable to note that, the Daraa and the Hawran area, where the insurrection started, despite being dominated by Sunni Arabs, were very well known for their loyalty to the regime. During the 1976-82 Conflict in Syria, they did not show any support for the Muslim Brotherhood and remained loyal to the regime. Nevertheless, their stance was not the same in the 2011 unrest (Macleod, 2011). Economic reforms being introduced since the 2000s had caused visible social discontent in those towns. Youth arrests lit the Syrian flame. When the local notables approached the government after the arrests, they were faced with the government's humiliating and violent reactions to their concerns. Arguably, this refusal has helped spread the Syrian protests (Wimmen, 2014). Contrarywise, when the conflict started in 2011, there were almost no sectarian marks. Sunnis, which are in a comparatively privileged position, showed their support towards the regime. On the other hand, Alawites that are excluded from the system revealed their discontent with the regime by taking part in the protests. Likewise, there were pro and anti-government demonstrations among Ismailis who are part of Shia community.⁷ Hence, the conflict was not a battle to realize a Sunni takeover of the Syrian state (Slim; Hugo & Trombetta, 2014). Instead, the mobilization against the Assad regime was for reasons that are in fact not purely sectarian (Hurault, 2014).

Why A Sectarian Narrative Then?

If there is more to the story than sectarianism alone, why has the conflict in Syria been treated as a sectarian one? Arguably, the deployment of sectarian narrative is to accomplish the desired political ends. History tells us that religion has always been used as an excuse for intervention. As in the case of Ottoman domains, for local minority communities, sectarian conflict was a means to attract external

actors' assistance, and that was favored by the external powers having interest in particular communities. Hence, both sides have gained due to claims of sectarian conflict (Rogan, 2004).

For example, the 1860 events in Damascus where several thousand Christians died and the wholesale destruction of the Christian quarter of the city took place at the hands of a mob, were initially explained in terms of sectarian tensions arising from the 19th Century Ottoman Reform that provided religious minorities with privileges. That reform had objective to equalize their status with the majority Muslim population. However, this sectarian based reductionist approach was unable to explain the whole narrative. In this regard, social conflict in Damascus in 1860 was later interpreted in terms of political and economic matters. Sectarianism can thus be seen as an emission of 19th Century colonial interests on local societies that can also explain why the vast majority of chronicles of the 1860 events in the Levant followed a sectarian narrative having faith in influencing political events to their community's good (Ibid).

Syria has become the center of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. The balance of power through proxy wars, competition between superpowers, ideological quarrels and the desire to be a key player in the region has turned the war into a sectarian one (Heydemann, 2013). Thus, it is possible to hold that increasing sectarian violence in the Syrian conflict is driven either by the regime itself, or by elites who cynically exploit the sectarian identity for political purposes. When necessary, both the regime and opposition groups utilized help from actors with ethno-sectarian agendas (Philips, 2015). Politicization of sectarian language has been a willing strategy of the civil war spreading the fears of sectarianism. Therefore, the ideological symbiosis between the West that insists on "clash of civilization" and the political Islamists who insist on the religious and sectarian differences turned this civil war into a sectarian one.

In addition to identity politics played by internal and external actors, what we call the "ISIL effect" should not be underestimated. Arguably, ISIL dramatically influenced sectarianisation of the civil war by radicalizing Salafism. As a non-state actor, ISIL converted this civil war into a sectarian war through its Sunni Wahhabi ideology against other Sunnis, Shias, Christians or any other minority groups that clash with their ideological position.

What we see in the transformation of the Syrian civil war into a sectarian conflict is identity politics dressed up in sectarian rhetoric. The mobilization of sectarian identities by different groups, sides or even countries involved in this conflict is to control the political situation within the region as a matter of strategy. Sectarian language is designed to prevent the mobilization of the opposition aiming to weaken their position. Since religious civil wars tend to be longer and bloodier than other types of clashes, sectarian religious motives stand at the center of international politics to allow parties to make use of its opportunities (Synder, 2011). Consequently, reinforcing a sectarian reading of the conflict through reproducing ethnic maps for Sunni, Alawite, and Kurdish populated areas in Syria signals the message that the country has never been integrated or will never be integrated and moreover present spillover effect to neighboring countries.

Alliance Dilemma (Synder, 1984)

Syrian conflict is a proxy war battle ground fought between regional powers where the balance of power and superpower competition is played out. Every external actor has their own agenda that complicates the dynamics of the civil war. The rivalry between regional powers, the historic competition between superpowers, and what Glenn Snyder calls the "alliance dilemma" make not only the dynamics of the Syrian civil war more complicated, but also the sectarian language more compelling.

Some scholars (Alterman, 2013; Asseburg, Muriel & Wimmen, 2012) tend to approach the Syrian civil war as a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and other actor that is also visible in Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq and Lebanon as if Iran and Saudi Arabia are the puppet masters of the region's sectarian struggles. The role of these two regional powers on the Syrian civil war is undeniable especially with regards to the politicization of sectarian identity; this does not, however, necessarily mean that the current con-

flict in Syria is a sectarian civil war predestined for the historical competition between these actors due to the ethnic Persian versus Arab divide; or the sectarian Sunni versus the Shiite divide (Wehrey, 2013). The flare-up of the Sunni-Shiite conflict between Tehran and Riyadh has to a certain degree to do with intrinsic religious differences. Indeed, this rivalry should be seen as an outcome of numerous power shifts in the region within the discourse of power politics, which in turn has provoked both state and non-state actors with vested interests in the region to support their interests by capitalizing on religious sentiments. For Riyadh, Syria has been part of the great game of blocking Iranian influence. Thus, not the religion itself, but the interplay between state structures and individual identity is the key point that is mostly overlooked (Ibid).

Similar to the regional balance of power game, Russia and the US competed to launch a new and even more complicated phase in the Syrian civil war. The involvement of Russia created a challenge for the US, which is not about Syria alone, but also about the role of the US in the wider Middle East and about the very concept of leadership. Taking the historical interplay between these two actors, it is not surprising to observe that the two most powerful nations aim to hold the stronger position when pushing for the Syrian peace process. Unlike the Tehran-Riyadh power struggle, it is not easy to clearly indicate that the unresolved rivalry between these two superpowers has fed into the sectarian rhetoric; however, it is clear that this struggle has not eased the peace process, either.

In addition to the already complicated nature of the balance of power dilemma, Syria's relation with these actors is another dimension making things even worse. What Glenn Synder calls alliance dilemma illustrates the importance of this complication. In order to understand Damascus's policies towards regional rivals, one must try to understand the efforts that aim to strengthen the strategic partnerships. However, it is crucial to highlight that the interrelationship between the alliance game and the adversary game is not straightforward. Accordingly, it is better to be cautious when analyzing the interplay within the alliance game. Whenever one ally embraces comparatively moderate hostility toward an adversary, the tendency of the other to engage in initiatives may ambush them in an unwanted situation full of unplanned conflicts. Besides, adopting an extremely welcoming position or to the contrary, assuming an excessively hostile stance toward an adversary can also result in unexpected alliance formation. Subsequently, a strategic partnership with one actor has had a direct and visible impact not only on the alliance formation, but also on the Syrian civil war in general (Lawson, 2006).

Arguably, sectarianism -thanks to its delegitimizing effect- has been used by all the above-mentioned actors of the Syrian civil war as a way to form allies to enhance its security and to preserve the balance of power. In other words, sectarianism can be seen as a resilient parameter for alliance formation that is less likely to entrap the allies in unwanted contention. Making sense of the connection between Damascus's alliance with Tehran and its recent policies toward other internal and external actors requires a reformulation of the alliance dilemma. Thus, framing the war as sectarian is conducive to achieve the endgame of these internal and external players.

Winners and Losers of the Sectarian Discourse

In this article, we do not buy into the cliché that suggests the Syrian civil war is solely a sectarian one. Instead, we recommend analyzing the conflict from a more comprehensive perspective including socio-economic and political factors. Deploying a reductionist sectarian approach is dangerous because not only does it undermine the reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors.

Regardless of the sectarian narrative, the Syrian people appear to be the biggest losers of the civil war, while being affected by the sectarian discourse the most. In line with the OCHA estimations, there are 13.1 million people that were affected by the civil war and in need of humanitarian assistance. Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis more than 5.6 million people have fled the country to neighboring countries as seeking asylum. Additionally, there are roughly 6.6 million people that are internally displaced and almost 3 million people live in hard-to-reach and besieged areas regarding humanitarian

assistance. Considering the total population size of Syria with 22 million, these numbers confirm how alarming the situation has become. Losing their homes, their families and their hopes undoubtedly put the Syrian people in a worse off position than at the beginning of the conflict (Reliefweb, 2020; UNCHR, 2020).

At least 1 in 10 Syrians has been faced with the physical and psychological effects of the war since the beginning of the conflict. More specifically, although the United Nations stopped counting Syria's death toll early in 2014, according to report (Syrian Centre for Policy Research, 2014) published by the Syrian Center for Policy Research. It is predicted that more than 550,000 people were killed (SyriaHR, 2018) since the beginning of the war, and that 11.5% of the total population has been wounded or killed. Even though the vast majority of deaths were caused by violence, an indirect result of the war such as the collapse of the country's health-care infrastructure, a lack of access to medicine, poor sanitation, the spread of communicable diseases, falling vaccination rates, food scarcity and malnutrition are also thought to increase the death toll.

Apart from the most catastrophic and visible effects of the war, economic and social facets are crucial areas to consider. In the wake of the civil war, approximately 85% of the population is exposed to the threat of extreme poverty and food insecurity, which stood at 11 percent at the start of the war in 2011, was thought to reach 50% by the end of 2015 (Ibid; Reliefweb, 2020). Although there is no official statistical information presenting the complete picture in Syria, arguably, there is no need to comment on the fact that the Syrian people in and outside of Syria are in a worse off position in the ninth year of the civil war than they were in 2011.

More significantly, there has been a sharp decline in the Syrian Christian population especially after the acceleration of the conflict, which coincides with the sectarianization of the war (Chiaromonte, 2013). Even though arguably it is comparatively a lot easier for the Christian population to seek asylum in Europe, it is uncertain as to whether they are on the winning side. Also, the demographic composition of the region will be completely changed once the conflict is over.

In addition to Christians, minorities within minorities have suffered the most. For instance, a report (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2015) published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights confirms that the Yazidis have been faced with abuses of international human rights by ISIL and associated terrorist groups. Sexual and gender-based violence; recruitment and use of children; use of prohibited weapons; extrajudicial killings, abductions and torture; forced displacement and preventing access to safe areas are some of the patterns of abuses and violations against the Yazidis. The systematic targeting of members of religious communities in areas seized has gained momentum after the deployment of sectarian narrative, which leaves the Yazidis on the losing side.

On the other hand, the Kurds have been able to use the conflict in an opportunistic manner to improve their own positioning. Having two superpowers, the US and Russia, as allies has placed them in a comparatively advantageous position, especially when compared to other minority groups in Syrian society including the Alawites. Further acceleration of the conflict has helped them to develop their relationship with the regime as well. Considering the changes in Syria's nationality law in the 1960s that made tens of thousands of Kurds stateless, the current Syrian government appears to be mending its past to keep the Kurds on side (Government of United Kingdom Foreign & Commonwealth Office, 2013). Regardless of Turkey's political maneuvering to ensure that the role of the Kurdish population in the Syrian peace process that does not translate to an international level of legitimization, the Kurds remain in a strong position when compared to their standing before the conflict. Hence, it could be the sectarian discourse that does overlook the ethnic narrative rewarding the Kurds. However, history reminds us that this better off position is likely not to last forever. They have not always been good friends of all of the regional external actors. Taking the geographical area that they are presently in control of into consideration, the number of Kurds does not seem sufficient enough to hold the territory without external support. Another critical threat is the inclusion of the ethnic narrative into civil war discourse. In other words, sectarian language may be beneficial for the Kurds at the moment.

Nevertheless, the resurgence of ethnic narrative may challenge this position later.

In addition, the sectarian narrative appears to be beneficial for the Syrian regime, which is arguably one of the key strategies of the regime itself, with the objective of taking over as the legitimate sovereign power, and to expose the opposition groups as terrorists. Sectarian narratives surely helped the regime to attract allies. Apart from Iran's obvious support, Russian involvement has changed the entire picture for the regime helping it to consolidate its position. Victory on the ground is believed to bring the victory at the table. Although some would argue that the stalemate has changed after the Russian military involvement in the Syrian civil war, we prefer to indicate that the involvement of Russia has altered the dynamics of the stalemate; however, it is still not a victory especially from the viewpoint of the Syrian regime itself. Overall, as is expected, the deployment of sectarian language appears to work for the regime as it helps the regime to form strong alliances. This does not necessarily mean that a sectarian narrative will remain beneficial for the regime. As we argue that sectarian discourse is nothing more than a dimension of power politics played by the powerful actors of the civil war, any change in this play can challenge the current situation of the regime too.

Apart from the status of internal parties, the roles and the positions of external actors have been very much affected by the sectarian discourse. The involvement of Russia in this civil war undeniably altered the dynamics of the conflict. It confirmed that Russia is still a key player in world politics. The old axiom -Russia is never as strong as she seems and never as weak as she looks- appears to be still valid still apparent. Putin's modified version of this axiom that's states -Russia is never as strong as it wants to be and is never as weak as it is thought to be- appears even more valid. What is of interest here, however, is not whether the exact quote or the modified version is more accurate, but the enduring truth of the notion that Russia is still a key player and will continue to be one.

Correspondingly, Russia's involvement has had a direct influence on the role of the United States in the region as well. Although the US has not been directly involved in the civil war against the regime, the US has been fighting against ISIL since September 2014. In addition to its counter ISIL efforts, the US has been actively involved in the Syrian peace process since the very beginning despite no direct role either against or for the regime. Also, one can argue that the attitude of the US concerning the future of regime has changed with Russian involvement. The US has started to apply a comparatively moderate approach with regard to the future of Assad unlike its preceding standpoint. Intriguingly, Russia as the only legitimate actor being called for help by the sovereign Syrian state makes things even more difficult for the US. This could in a way explain the observable change in US discourse over time. It may not be easy to comment on whether or not a New Cold War is superficially on, who the winning side is; however, it is easy to indicate that Russia being a key player is now also approved by the West.

Apart from superpower competition, regional contention between Iran and Saudi Arabia is another milestone of the civil war that feeds the sectarian discourse as well as being affected by it. Iran seems to be in a better position than where it was when the conflict began. The involvement of Russia, abolition of sanctions on Iran, weakening legitimacy of Wahhabi Islam after the rise of ISIL can be asserted to put Iran in a better off position. The increasing power of Iran, however, has not changed the position of Saudi Arabia. The relationship of Saudi Arabia with the US has always been beneficial to sustain its stronghold position regardless of increasing influence of Iran within the conflict. These two actors are the ones that use sectarian language not only to justify their actions, but also to delegitimize their counterparts. Although sectarian discourse appears to be working for both actors for now, it is not easy to forecast who will be the loser in the long term -if any.

Another key external actor is Turkey whose position has distinctively changed over time. Turkey could have bridged over the differences in the Middle East, as well as been a bridge between Europe and the Middle East. The shooting down of a Russian plane after it violated the very margins of Turkish airspace, and the worsening relationships with the crucial actors of the conflict were challenging enough for Turkey. But for some reason after the so-called coup attempt in Turkey on July 15th, 2016, she started having closer relationship with Russia and distancing herself from western front. Turkey has found itself in a position like no other since WWII that prompted its early entrance into NATO in 1952,

and now Turkey has fallen into Kremlin's limelight. Interestingly enough, Turkey's recently launched Operation Peace Spring on 9th October 2019 has come to a deadlock after the ceasefire with Russia on 5th March 2020 and locked the Turkish troops up in Idlib leaving no exit strategy without Russian escort (CNN Edition, 2020).

Besides, what is even more challenging for Turkey in the long run is the refugee population, which is officially estimated as around 3.6 million according to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2020). Negative public perception of refugees in Turkey is highly likely to be a critical problem that may trigger more polarizations in Turkish society despite not being the main concern of any actor. More specifically, despite the lack of media coverage, there is little public appetite for a refugee influx in Turkey similar to Europe, and resentment towards refugees may fuel other national grievances in the long term.

As a non-state actor of the war, ISIL complicates both internal and external dynamics making it more vulnerable to international intervention. As is highlighted, ISIL has played an undeniable role for the sectarianisation of the conflict. Politicization of sectarian identity seems to be beneficial for ISIL as it complicates the dynamics of the civil war and makes who is fighting who even more unclear. Syria's war is intensifying, and the spiraling of the conflict between regime forces and opposition groups works for ISIL whose position has not been weakened until now by the deployment of sectarian narrative. I guess it is fair to say that Russia's active involvement in the Syrian crisis is not due to a fear of terrorism stemmed from ISIL despite the popular rhetoric. In line with this claim, Russia has been targeting anti-Assad groups, which has paradoxically helped ISIL, and complicated the situation both in Iraq and Syria.

With regard to Iraq, some may argue that it is more stable when compared to Syria. It can be argued that Iraq is still a very vulnerable player in the region that can be affected by the sectarian language the most. In addition to the ISIL effect, the Syrian conflict has a Sunni disenfranchisement effect in Iraq. Unlike the boundaries of the countries, sectarianism does not have one, and this is eloquently argued by former Iraqi Prime Minister al-Malaki, sectarianism will be likely to knock on the doors of everyone because the wind of sectarianism does not require a license to move to another country, and there is not only a wind behind it, but also money and plans (BBC News, 2013).

Unlike Iraq, despite not being directly exposed to sectarian discourse, Jordan and Lebanon are on the losing sides where the sectarian language has a tendency to indirectly transform the societal structure of those countries. The Palestinian majority, which was estimated at around 50 to 70 percent of the overall population, has been the largest historical threat for the unity of Jordan. However, this looming threat has been challenged by the influx of Syrian refugees to Jordan. According to official UNHCR data (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees Syria Regional Refugee Response, 2020) there are 656,213 Syrian refugees in Jordan although the actual number is predicted to be more than that, which constitutes more or less 11 percent of the its total population. The massive refugee influx has strained Jordan's public resources to the breaking point and is highly likely to impact upon the stability of the kingdom (Carrion, 2015).

On the other hand, the situation in Lebanon can be asserted as even more severe than the case of Jordan. Since the start of the war in Syria, more than a million Syrians have entered Lebanon as refugees, which make up almost a quarter of the overall population. The majority of the refugees are Sunnis whose presence in Lebanon has upended the demographic balance between Sunnis, Shi'ites and Christians. Although it is not possible to present a clear outlook of the medium- and short-term implications of the refugee flows, it is clear that the long-term impacts will be profound considering the lack of a unifying national ethos of these two countries. Hence, sectarian discourse through intensifying refugee influx is doing harm for Jordan and Lebanon, and the situation in these two countries in the long term could even worsen. Since a sectarian narrative proved too successful to heighten the conflict, the politicization of a sectarian identity is likely to continue to dominate the region. Therefore, one of the biggest losers of this civil war will be the region itself; transformed demographic structure will redefine the region in which stability is less likely to remain stagnant and would be conducive atmosphere

for the continuation of proxy war.

As is indicated, these are the expectations for the civil war on its ninth year that arguably has been transformed after the deployment of a distinctly sectarian narrative. Despite these projections, it is essential to remark that anything in this formulation is subject to change. Consequently, one should be cautious when voicing speculative assertions based on past trends. In this regard, as George Friedman⁸ puts it very remarkably, it is far more difficult to make predictions about the short term especially when compared to the long term. A century is about events whereas a decade is about people. Therefore it would be much easier to predict the “Next Century” as opposed to the “Next Decade” Hence, we suggest that the winners of the civil war can easily change especially in the short term but in the long term, the biggest losers of this civil war will be the Syrian people and the region itself where the demographic change is likely to provoke more instability than it had before.

Summary

This article argues that contrary to the prevailing belief and appearance at the surface, Syrian civil war is more than a sectarian war. Instead of a reductionist sectarian approach, it is better to understand the changing dynamics of the Syrian civil war in a more comprehensive manner taking the socio-economic and political factors into account. Of these, shallow political culture, weak institutions and economic motivation remain vital factors, with the perception of a fragmented society as the main driving line of the civil war.

The acceleration of political repression by the Baathist regime arguably after the consolidation of President Hafez al-Assad's rule opened a new period in Syrian politics. The importance of personal links rather than institutional loyalty has been underneath the nominal structure of the state. Syria's economic challenges have fed the population's growing anger giving impetus to the protests. Due to an increasing population with lack of employment prospects, Syria's rapidly growing youth population has become a demographic time bomb waiting to explode. With this respect, minority rule through which the top positions in state institutions and in the security apparatus are in the hands of the Alawites has become an issue for the Sunni Muslim population, not the Alawites per se. Sunni-Alawite tensions were not the primary driving force. Instead the lines of this conflict are drawn on a complex mixture of factors including personal history, employment background, geographical location, family situation and past experiences with the regime.

Nevertheless, the Assad regime labelled its opponents as terrorists with the hope of discrediting them in the eyes of moderate and Western governments, while presenting itself as secular. Considering the artificial characteristic of the nation state building process in which the identity formation is closely tied to religion and ethnicity, exploitation of sectarian identity is a useful tool to delegitimize the counterparts. That is why underpinning sectarian dynamics as the defining root cause of the emerging Middle East seems dangerously misdirected. The sectarian discourse runs the risk of knocking the door of the neighboring countries and flare up the whole region. Syrian civil war is not solely a sectarian civil war but the involvement of actors with ethno-sectarian agendas is successful enough to make the war perceived as one. Syria has become the center of regional conflicts and competition in the Middle East. The explanation, however, should be the power politics rather than the sectarian differences, which happen to be the “on the surface” factor to blame but it is just being utilized for political agendas.

The balance of power through proxy wars, competition between superpowers, ideological quarrels and the desire to be a key player in the region has turned the war into a sectarian war. Politicization of sectarian language and spreading the fears of sectarianism has been used as a strategy to shape the conflict outcome by different actors strategy of the civil war. Therefore, the ideological symbiosis between the West that insist on “clash of civilization” and the political Islamists who insist on the religious and sectarian differences turned this war into a sectarian one. Contrariwise, reinforcing a sectarian reading of the conflict through reproducing ethnic maps for Sunni, Alawite and Kurdish populated areas in

Syria signals the message that the country has never been integrated or will never be integrated and endanger of prolonged civil war in the region similar to thirty years war in the 17th century.

Indeed, Syria is a proxy war battle ground fought between regional powers where the balance of power and superpower competition is played out. Every external actor has their own agenda that complicated the dynamics of the civil war. The rivalry between regional powers, the historic competition between superpowers and the “alliance dilemma” make not only the dynamics of the Syrian civil war more complicated, but also the sectarian language more compelling. Making sense of the connection between Damascus’s alliance with Tehran and its recent policies toward other internal and external actors requires a reformulation of the alliance dilemma.

Above all, deploying a reductionist sectarian approach is dangerous because not only does it undermine the reasons for the conflict, but it also redefines the positions of the parties by creating new losers and victors. This article projected that the winners of the civil war can change especially in the short term, but also in the long term. The biggest losers of this civil war will be the Syrian people⁹ and the region itself where the demographic change is likely to provoke more instability than it had before. Most likely the region will be involved in the effluent of Syria’s civil war for some years and the rest of the world will continue to be impacted by the secondary effects such as influx of refugees.

Last but not least, the language we use about a crisis or an issue is of great importance. As indicated in the concept of securitization theory originally devised by Ole Waever, the speech act refers back to the idea that by labeling, saying, and repeating something, the speech act brings something into effect in the course of time (Wæver, 1995). The conflict in Syria and particularly the root causes of the conflict has been a battleground for narratives and securitization. If the past is a good guide, we can expect the future of Syrian conflict narrative to be shaped around interests rather than hard truth.

Endnotes

- ¹ The Levant is a region composed of Jordan, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq as well as historical Palestine.
- ² Yazidi or Yezidi is a Middle Eastern religious community whose beliefs incorporate elements of Zoroastrianism, Sufism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and Judaism.
- ³ According to the regime sources, the combat deaths reached over 500 by August 2011. For more detailed information, please see "Latest Regime Fatalities" (2014) Violations Documentation Centre in Syria www.vd-c-sy.info/index.php/en/.
- ⁴ Red Cross Declares Civil War in Syria, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18849362>. Accessed on 04 Jan 2020.
- ⁵ James Gelvin (2011) in his book *The Arab Uprisings: What Everyone Needs to Know* Oxford University Press describes "waithood" as a period in which youth wait for (good) jobs, wait for marriage and intimacy, and wait for full participation in their societies.
- ⁶ There are several scholars considering the implications and opportunities of the youth bulge and the response mechanisms as a key defining feature of the region that will redefine the future of the Middle East such as Navtej Dhillon, Fellow/Director of the Middle East Youth Initiative; Honorable Marwan Muasher, Senior Vice President at the World Bank.
- ⁷ There have also been reports of pro- and anti-government demonstrations in the city. A state-organised rally in support of the government was reported in November. Anti-government protests were reported to have been staged in the city in June.
- ⁸ George Friedman's books entitled *The Next Decade* and *The Next 100 Years* that highlight the attempts to predict the major geopolitical events and trends in the respective time periods were referred.
- ⁹ There are 11.1 million people in need and 4.7 million of them are children. <https://www.unocha.org/syria>. Accessed on 01 May 2020.

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