

# Impact of Regime Policies on the Rise of Sectarian Violence: Case of Syria

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By the late 2010, a series of popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring began in Tunisia and quickly spread across the Arab world, overthrowing regimes, sparking reforms, and throwing some countries into chaos – Syria among them. Although many argued that Syria was different and popular protests would avoid it, the opposite proved to be true (Lesch, 2012). Wary of the economic situation and regime repression, people started protesting in the city of Deraa in March 2011, eventually triggering countrywide demonstrations which escalated into an uprising, aimed at toppling the regime and eventually leading to a full-blown civil war that has, as of this writing, not yet ended. To further complicate the situation in Syria, the civil war soon became sectarianized and gave way to a rise of militant Salafism and groups such as the Islamic State. Syria is a highly heterogeneous country; as of 2010, its population consisted of Sunni Arabs (65%), Kurds (15%), Alawites (10%), Christians (5%), Druze (3%), Ismailis (1%), and Shia (1%) (Balanche, 2018). In addition, the country is led by a minority Alawi regime represented by President Bashar al-Assad. Therefore, one could argue that sectarian divisions played a significant role in the emergence of the civil war. Yet, when Bashar's father Hafiz was met with the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, the group failed to mobilise the Sunni Arab population and the uprising ended in failure.

This essay aims to find out if and how the regime's policies influenced the rise of sectarian violence through a comparison of Hafiz' and Bashar's policies and their responses to the uprisings. First, the author will introduce the concept of sectarian identity followed by a critique of primordialism and instrumentalism as two major approaches to the study of sectarian violence and will propose his own hypothesis. Then, root causes of sectarian division in Syria will be illustrated and Hafiz' and Bashar's policies will be described. Finally, the author will analyse these findings in order to determine why the two uprisings had different outcomes in terms of the spread of sectarian violence. It is imperative to state that numerous actors on different levels can exert influence on the emergence of sectarian conflict. However, due to the limited length of this essay, the author will focus only on the regime as it has arguably had the most power and impact on internal developments in the country.

### **Sect, Sectarianism, and Sectarian Identity**

Before delving into the question of what sectarianism is, it is necessary to first clarify what the term 'sect' means and how it is understood for the purpose of this essay. According to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (n.d.), sect is "a group of people with their own particular set of beliefs and practices, especially within or separated from a larger religious group". Thus, this essay will uphold the narrower meaning of sect and will therefore focus on relations between the Sunni Muslims and Alawites, leaving out political or ethnic minorities (Marbon & Ardovini, 2016).

Furthermore, it is necessary to take a closer look at the concept of sectarianism. Sectarianism lacks a single and clear definition and often carries a negative connotation, making its usage rather precarious. Haddad (2014) stressed the difference between seeing sectarianism as a violent conflict between sects and as a broader concept, including e.g. sect-centric bias, prejudice, or stereotypes. Due to different definitions, the phrase can act "as an all-purpose explainer thereby hampering sound analysis by the suspension of cause and effect" (Haddad, 2020, p. 125). Therefore, he presents a concept of sectarian identity which will be used in this essay.

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Sectarian identity can be framed as “belonging (not necessarily voluntary or active) to a collective that is marked by sectarian (here meaning major, institutionalized, intra-religious) cleavages” (Haddad, 2020, p. 126). However, it is necessary to emphasize that simply belonging to a certain group is not sufficient – it is crucial for a person to *identify* as a member of a group, in case of this essay as a Sunni or an Alawite. According to Haddad (2020, p. 126), “identities are reproduced through processes of social and political practice both from above and from below” – analysing these processes will be essential for this essay. Hence, it is imperative to clarify how the analysis of sectarian violence will be conducted.

## Primordialism and Instrumentalism

The two most prominent approaches to explaining sectarian violence are primordialism and instrumentalism – however, as have been argued by numerous scholars, these two are rather insufficient in analysing violent conflict between sects (Valbjørn, 2020). Primordialism, on the one hand, views ethnicity, or in this case sectarian identity, as naturally formed over time and as something that is deeply rooted in biology, culture, history, and traditions (Kataria, 2018; Valbjørn, 2020). Based on this assumption, primordialists explain sectarian violence as “the most recent expression of a millennium-old conflict within the Muslim community” (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 95). This implies that the conflict between Sunnis and Shias is inevitable due to the ancient hatreds that are deeply rooted in beliefs of people who belong to these groups. However, such approach is incompatible with the concept of sectarian identity used in this essay as it contradicts the idea of identity as being given.

On the other hand, instrumentalism regards sectarian identity as an instrument of political elite who use it to mobilise people, defend its interests and to compete with other groups (Kataria, 2018). Hence, according to instrumentalists, sectarian violence stems from “political elites using sectarian fear-mongering to garner vested patron-client relationships, as a gateway to mass mobilization, to deflect popular attention or to divide an opposition, or as powerful levers in regional rivalries” (Valbjørn, 2020, p. 95). Nevertheless, such an elite-centric approach omits the fact that processes which influence sectarian identity can occur on different levels, ranging from individual to transnational. For example, Khan (2011) identifies several drivers of sectarianism such as the role of the clergy, discrimination and inequality, or geopolitical rivalry. These examples clearly demonstrate that sectarian identity can be reproduced by a state (discrimination and inequality) as well as on a local (clergy) or transnational level (geopolitical rivalry). Moreover, individuals can arguably reproduce their sectarian identity themselves, e.g. through following news and social media. Furthermore, modern technologies and social media allow groups such as the Islamic State or al-Qaeda to reproduce sectarian identity through propaganda on a global level. Besides disregarding different levels at which identity can be reproduced, instrumentalism also does not provide explanation for why sectarian identity can be successfully exploited on some occasions, but not on others. Thus, as both primordialism and instrumentalism do not seem to provide satisfactory framework, the author of this essay will work with his own hypothesis.

## From Banal Sectarian Identity to Militant Sectarian Identity

Sectarian identity can be viewed as a continuum that marks to what level an individual identifies with a group and how susceptible to violence they are, ranging from banal to militant sectarian identity. The two terms come from the work written by R. Hinnebusch (2016) where he identifies them as the variations of sectarianism. Banal sectarianism is described as “relatively un-politicized identity marker in multi-sectarian societies, operative largely at the local level, with few national normative implications and therefore compatible with sectarian co-existence and with state and supra-state identities”(Hinnebusch, 2016, p. 123). He characterizes militant sectarianism as a usually fundamentalist interpretation of religion which denounces others as unbelievers and cannot be readily compromised. However, identity is fluid and it is reproduced through social and political processes – therefore, rather than variations of sectarianism, these can be perceived as opposing poles of the sectarian identity continuum on which one can move back and forth, depending on what processes are currently influencing them.

Certain processes, such as discrimination, can strengthen one’s identification with a group and broaden division between groups and produce grievances, shifting sectarian identity towards the militant pole. As has been argued above, sectarian identity can be reproduced on different levels – for example, when a person is a member of a

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marginalized minority that does not have equal access to the job market, this individual will increasingly identify as a member of the discriminated group, thus broadening division between the groups, and as they will presumably perceive themselves as a victim of unjust treatment by the ruling elite; this feeling will produce grievances, resulting in a shift towards militant identity. Moreover, the longer such processes exert influence upon the person and the more serious they are, the more such a person will be pushed towards the militant end of the continuum. As a result, people whose identity is closer to the militant pole are more easily mobilised or can spontaneously turn to violence after a triggering event.

Now that the idea of sectarian identity continuum has been described, developments under Assad regimes in Syria can be outlined and the sectarian identity hypothesis can be used to explain different outcomes of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in 1970-80s and the 2011 Arab Spring.

## Root Causes of Sectarian Violence in Syria

Differences, discrimination, and persecution of non-Sunni Muslims existed during the Ottoman Empire, but sectarian identities were politicised under the French mandate (Philips, 2015). The French, as well as the Christians and non-Sunni Muslims, feared Arab nationalism which was mainly advanced by Sunnis. Moreover, the ambitions for independence and Arab nationalism were further strengthened by the French presence and its violence (Fildis, 2012; Philips, 2015). In order to prevent this, the French adopted a divide-and-rule policy, cultivating friendly relationship with Alawites and the Druze and eventually granting these two regionally compact minorities autonomy. To further forestall the spreading of Arab nationalism, the French cut ties between the cities and the periphery, limiting it to big cities such as Damascus, Aleppo, or Hama (Fildis, 2012). In addition, the French favoured minorities in security forces.

The Alawite and other minorities prevalence in military recruitment created further resentment among Sunni Muslims. Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and other minorities formed a significant part of the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* which were used by the French to maintain order and suppress rebellion, later developing into the Syrian and Lebanese armed forces. The Sunnis, however, were not encouraged to enlist – they despised the army as a profession and subsequently indirectly reinforced the uneven representation by refusing to send their sons for training (Van Dame, 2011). Therefore, Alawites and other minorities were regarded by Sunnis as those who sided with the French and participated in repressive policies against them, fuelling antagonism between them.

Thus, the already existing cleavages between Sunnis and other religious minorities were further exacerbated by the French divide-and-rule policies, strengthening sectarian identity, and weakening prospects for national identity along the way. In addition, the Alawites' dominant role in the armed forces helped them to rise in social and political arenas. This rise would peak with Hafiz al-Assad's rise to power.

## Assad Regime' Policies

After a series of coups, the Ba'ath party came to power in 1963. It was a secular, socialist, pan-Arab party that depended heavily on poorer, rural people for support and the army for security. Due to its ideology, the party attracted a great number of Alawites and other religious minorities which were suspicious of the Arab nationalism that was previously associated with Sunni Islamism. Yet, the party suffered from internal divisions between the moderates and the radicals that led to more coups in 1966 and 1970 respectively – as a result, Hafiz al-Assad became the first Alawi president of Syria in February 1971. He was able to consolidate power and rule the country for 30 years (Fildis, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2015; Van Dam, 2011).

More often than not, authoritarian regimes depend on neo-patrimonial practices which can be perceived as discriminatory. According to Pitcher, Moran, and Johnston (2009, pp. 130-131) neo-patrimonialism is understood as “systems in which political relationships are mediated through, and maintained by, personal connections between leaders and subjects, or patrons and clients. Authority and the social linkages through which it is exercised are vested almost as personal property in an individual, rather than in impersonal institutions or in a mandate conferred and withdrawn by citizens”. These personal connections can run, for example, along religious, ethnic, or tribal lines

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and it would seem likely that a leader would look for the most loyal supporters among his group rather than outside of it – other groups would therefore become discriminated against. In the case of Assad's Syria, the favoured group was Alawites.

In order to secure his position, Assad adopted a neo-patrimonial state-building strategy centred around the Alawites. As Assad led a minority regime, he decided to depend on Alawi solidarity – in practice, this meant that key security and military positions were allocated to Alawites, often Assad's own kin (Hinnebusch, 2015; Wimmen, 2018). He then built a dispersed power structure in which regime representatives, intelligence officers and members of local society cooperated in running a certain area – they provided loyalty and material goods to the regime in exchange for authority (Wimmen, 2018). Yet, the regime could only become stabilised after incorporating other segments of society.

Co-opting members of other groups, including Sunnis, was crucial for the stabilisation of the regime. For example, Assad was able to secure loyalty from Sunni peasants through co-optation and land-reform – Ba'athist policies benefitted “wide sectors of the lower classes, particularly peasants who got land, high state prices for their crops, subsidised inputs and electrification of their villages and whose children got better access to education and state careers” (Hinnebusch, 2015, p. 9). Moreover, his Sunni allies were installed to important positions, e.g. both Foreign Minister and Vice President were Sunni Arabs (Philips, 2015). Thus, Wimmen (2018) argues that the regime worked with groups based on active loyalty rather than passive group membership. In fact, Assad tried hard to accommodate the Sunni majority. For example, he not only abstained from oppressing Sunnis, but actually prioritised Sunni culture – his aim was to integrate the Alawites, who were rejected by Sunnis as heterodox, and encourage them to assimilate (Philips, 2015; Wimmen, 2018). But at the same time, Assad upheld the secular, Arab nationalist narrative of the Ba'ath party.

The Ba'athist regime ousted the sectarian, regional, and tribal loyalties in favour of Arab nationalism. The constitution of the Ba'ath party states that “The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. Any differences existing among its sons are accidental and unimportant. They will disappear with the Awakening of the Arab consciousness. The national bond will be the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among citizens by melting them in crucible of a single nation, and combats all other forms of factional solidarity such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial, and regional factionalism” (as cited in Van Dam, 2011, p. 15). According to Philips (2015), Assad actively promoted national identity which comprised of Arab nationalism and Islam as a cultural heritage. Yet, despite Assad's efforts to overcome sectarian divisions, there were a number of those who opposed the regime, perceiving it as Alawite dominated – most notably the Muslim Brotherhood.

## The Muslim Brotherhood Uprising

The Muslim Brotherhood, Syrian offshoot of the Egyptian group, was a major opposition to the regime (Hinnebusch, 2015). The Brotherhood became active during the 1940s and was involved in religious, social, and political fields. However, radicals started to dominate the organization in the mid-70s, and a faction called Combatant Vanguard emerged. Eventually, the Muslim Brotherhood started an uprising through armed struggle in 1976 that lasted until 1982 (Lia, 2016). There were several reasons for radicalisation of this group.

The Brotherhood resented the anti-Islamic, infidel, Alawi, and repressive character of the regime. From the beginning, the organization tended to the interests of the urban middle classes – it was allied with the merchant class, old oligarchy and Muslim clergy who were antagonized by the party's secularism and socialism (Hinnebusch, 2015; Lia, 2016). As mentioned previously, regime policies benefitted mainly the poor and peasantry who gained wealth at the expense of the Sunni merchants. However, these policies were perceived as favouring the Alawites, producing further resentment among Sunni Arabs (Lia, 2016). Hence, the Brotherhood decided to exploit the sectarian division.

Alawites and the regime were branded as infidels and the uprising was defined as a fight between the suppressed Sunni Muslim majority and the Alawi minority (Van Dam, 2011). Thus, from 1976, the organization began a campaign during which they assassinated Alawites and spread sectarian propaganda (Philips, 2015). One of the worst incidents occurred on 16 June 1979 at the Aleppo artillery school, where at least 32 cadets were murdered and 54

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were wounded – the Brotherhood deliberately targeted Alawites and spared the Sunnis (Van Dame, 2011). The incident proved to be a turning point of the conflict – while the Brotherhood did not claim any of the attacks between 1976 and 1979, they openly declared jihad on the regime after the artillery school attack. Subsequently, the violence against the regime escalated – individual Alawites were assassinated and a number of guerrilla attacks targeting police stations, Ba'ath militias, and security apparatus facilities increased (Lia, 2016). The regime answered with repressive measures.

In a response to the uprising, Assad's regime moved forcefully against the opposition, utilising army, heavy weaponry, and brutal tactics. Regime forces were used to suppress the unrest, to conduct searches in cities and tanks, helicopters and aircraft were used against Islamist hotspots, often resulting in massacres (Lia, 2016). Eventually, the conflict culminated with the Battle of Hama in 1982. The battle unfolded in early February 1982 and some accounts put the number of victims at 40,000 (Wimmen, 2018). On February 24<sup>th</sup>, Assad declared that the violence in Hama had ended – although the Muslim Brotherhood called for a general uprising in other cities, the call remained unanswered and the remaining members of the organization fled into exile (Hinnebusch, 2015; Lia, 2016). Thus, Assad's regime was able to avoid wider sectarian conflict and possible civil war – something that his son Bashar would fail to achieve in 2011.

## Changes under Bashar al-Assad

Hafiz al-Assad continued to rule the country until his death on 10 June 2000. On the following day, his son Bashar was nominated by the Ba'ath party as president – the parliament voted for the nomination and he received 97.29% of votes in a nationwide referendum. Bashar al-Assad took his oath on the 17 July 2000, becoming the second Alawi president (Lesch, 2012). In the years leading to the 2011 uprising, Assad made several changes that would prove to have a significant impact on the emergence of the rebellion and its subsequent sectarianization.

After he assumed office, Assad made major changes in the ruling elite ranks by removing many of his father's old supporters in order to strengthen his position. Among those who were swept from power in 2005 were, the Minister of Defence Mustafa Tlass and the Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam – both Sunnis (Philips, 2015). In addition, he further dissolved second rank and sub-branch leaderships (Hinnebusch, 2012). As a result, Assad started to depend more heavily on the Assad-Makhlouf family clan which came at the expense of other regime clients. Furthermore, as the regime weakened the clientelist networks that incorporated key segments of society, its penetration of neighbourhoods and villages waned (Hinnebusch, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2015). This was further exacerbated by Assad's economic reforms.

During his inaugural speech, Assad made clear that economic reform was one of his top priorities, however, this further alienated the regime's constituency (Lesch, 2012). Because Bashar wanted to open Syria to the world market and the age of globalization, he abandoned the Ba'athist ideology and aimed to expand the private sector and reform the public sector (Hinnebusch, 2012). However, this had numerous negative consequences for the regime, e.g. liberalization of the economy diminished the role of the Party which, until then, provided social services and was committed to egalitarian values. The private sector was exploited and led to increased social inequalities and the alliance with the rural population was broken due to the urban-centred nature of the economic strategy (Hinnebusch, 2015; Wimmen, 2018). However, while social mobility slowed down for most people, a small stratum of extremely wealthy businessmen emerged. In fact, many of the new economic opportunities were handed to the regime's elite (Philips, 2015; International Crisis Group, 2011). As Alawites were prominently represented among this class, many believed that their success was linked to sectarian connections (Hinnebusch, 2015). Due to the regime's inability to keep its broad base of support, it had to increasingly rely on this business class as well as numerous religious leaders.

After the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, Hafiz al-Assad embarked on a strategy of appeasing the Sunnis which his son Bashar continued. In order to marginalise the Sunni militants, Hafiz tried to foster a moderate, non-political Islam by building mosques, patronising the ulama and propagating the religion (Hinnebusch, 2015). Bashar continued to co-opt religious leaders and relied on them for support. Moreover, he also allowed militant Islamists to be harboured and trained in Syria and, after the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq, he let jihadists cross the borders in order to fight the

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coalition troops (Khatib, 2018). This allowed Islam to expand on both an organizational and ideological level and, as the regime lost the Sunni peasantry, Islamist opposition filled the void and penetrated rural areas for the first time (Hinnebusch, 2015; Khatib, 2018). The deteriorating economic situation and Assad's loss of the powerbase his father built, eventually contributed to the 2011 uprising.

## **Syrian 2011 Uprising**

A dire economic situation, corruption and repression led to anti-regime protests which soon engulfed the whole country. Economic hardships created by reforms were further exacerbated by several years of droughts – as yields of crops plummeted, approximately one million people were driven to food insecurity and more than 1.5 million people, most of them farmers, moved from rural areas to cities, creating further pressures on an already strained job market (Gleick, 2014). In addition, people were dissatisfied with the corruption and the oppressive security apparatus that aimed to intimidate people in order to shut any dissent. After the security services imprisoned several young boys who spray painted anti-regime slogan on their school and were reportedly tortured, people in the town of Daraa took to the streets (Lesch, 2012). The protests subsequently spread across the country, prompting a violent response from the regime. As a result, armed opposition emerged, and the country descended into a full-blown civil war. However, the heterogeneity of the opposition led to chaos and rise of sectarian violence.

The disorganisation of opposition led to the creation of numerous groups backed by different actors and eventually gave way to the emergence of radical Islamist groups. In July 2011, defectors from the regime formed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which was soon followed by creation of its civilian counterpart known as the Syrian National Council. The Council, subsequently called National Coalition, claimed to be the government-in-exile of Syria and was recognized by the US, Turkey and the Gulf countries. Yet, these two lacked sufficient organisation and legitimacy at home, leading the FSA fighters to join rival coalitions, often Islamist which were more successful on the battlefield, primarily thanks to financial backing from the GCC. Most notably, the chaos was exploited by two Sunni extremist groups – Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State, which were formed in 2012 and 2013, respectively (Laub, 2019). As the two organisations joined the fray and adopted tactics of unprecedented brutality, they further fuelled the increasingly sectarian nature of the conflict. In addition, the number of parties involved grew and the civil war became more internationalised.

Both Assad and the opposition became dependent on external sponsors, with Russian involvement being arguably the turning point of the civil war. While the opposition groups found support from Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or Qatar, the government was primarily dependent on aid from Iran and Hezbollah. However, this changed in September 2015, when Russia began an airstrike campaign that tilted the balance in favour of the Assad regime. As a result, the government was able to reclaim large swathes of territory, including the rebel-held stronghold in Aleppo in 2016. Moreover, the Islamic State lost most of its territory in both Syria and Iraq. As of this writing, Idlib remains the last major area controlled by opposition forces (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021). Yet, despite the government's gains, the conflict will likely not end any time soon.

## **Impact of Regime's Policies on Sectarian Violence**

As described in previous chapters, both Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad were challenged by uprisings – yet, while Hafiz managed to quell the rebellion, the 2011 uprising evolved into a civil war that eventually became sectarianized. Therefore, the question is what caused the different outcomes of the two uprisings and how the regime's policies influenced these. By using the sectarian identity hypothesis, this section aims to find plausible answers to this question.

First and foremost, sectarian identity has been strengthened and reproduced during the Ottoman Empire and has become politicised under the French mandate and the Assad regime. In the interwar period, sectarian identities were reproduced at the expense of national ones. Subsequently, when Assad ascended to power he promoted Arab nationalism, however, sectarian identities were already rooted in society and their reproduction within some segments of society was stimulated by the regime's power structure that favoured some, while neglected others – in this case primarily urban and merchant population which was predominantly Sunni. Thus, despite Assad's efforts to

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co-opt parts of Sunni population, which were arguably successful, some people still resented the regime and perceived it as Alawi dominated. Based on this, it is fair to assume that neo-patrimonialism is inherently discriminatory, especially in heterogenous countries like Syria, and as such always reproduces sectarian identity. But, while Hafiz gave some of the most important positions to Sunnis and created a broad support base, his son adopted a different approach.

Hafiz stabilised the regime by co-opting Sunnis and drawing support from rural areas and the predominantly Sunni peasant population – in contrast, Bashar removed his father's Sunni supporters from power and installed individuals from his own family, making the regime more Alawi-dominated. As Philips (2015, p. 365) argues, rather than being Alawi, Hafiz' regime was 'run by some Alawites'. Hence, as many Sunni networks were loyal to the regime, the Muslim Brotherhood failed to mobilise larger portion of population and, without sufficient support, was eventually defeated. When Bashar came to power, his changes in the composition of the ruling elite had two major impacts. Firstly, he lost the important base of support that backed his father during the uprising. Secondly, he strengthened the perceived dominance of Alawites in the regime, fuelling the feeling of discrimination among Sunni population that moved them closer to the militant end of sectarian identity continuum. This was further exacerbated by Bashar's economic reforms.

While Hafiz pursued socialism and focused on the country's poor, Bashar abandoned the Ba'athist ideology and switched to a market economy, further alienating the people. Thanks to the former's approach, many Sunnis did not feel they were being discriminated against and remained at the banal end of the identity continuum. As a result, the Muslim Brotherhood could not easily mobilise them based on the sectarian division. In contrast, this constituency became impoverished by Bashar's reforms which favoured the urban population. This rift was further widened by the fact that the new business elite, which was predominantly Alawi, ostentatiously displayed its wealth. Hence, yet again, discrimination pushed many Sunnis closer to the militant identity. Furthermore, Islam's role in society changed.

Hafiz's policies were nationalist, secular, and non-sectarian in nature, however, after the end of the Muslim Brotherhood uprising, he started to promote Islam – a strategy that was continued by Bashar. On the one hand, such an approach might have reconciled some of the more conservative Sunnis and added to the fostering of moderate Islam. On the other hand, it also might have helped to reproduce religious identity at the expense of national identity. For example, as was previously mentioned, the state stopped providing welfare to the disadvantaged due to changes in its ideology which led to the end of the Ba'athists social contract. These activities were taken over by NGOs and charities, many of which were religious. The most prominent among them, The Zayd movement, was able to emerge as a 'charitable empire' and enjoyed significant support and influence (De Elvira & Zintl, 2014; Pierret & Selvik, 2009). Hence, it might be argued that Islamic identity played an increasingly important role in comparison to national identity. However, while national identity serves as a uniting factor, transcending regional, tribal, and sectarian divisions, religious identity entrenches these divisions. The question is if and how the regime addressed sectarian identity during the uprisings.

Hafiz regime's discourse played a crucial role in preventing a full-blown sectarian conflict. From the onset, the Muslim Brotherhood uprising was framed as sectarian and the group spread sectarian propaganda – however, the regime remained strictly secular in its discourse. Van Dam (2011) argues that the regime refrained from religious arguments because it was secular and because it would confirm the allegations that the regime was dominated by Alawites, which would most likely stimulate sectarian antagonism. Instead, as the Brotherhood relied primarily on the urban class, the regime portrayed the insurgency "as an attempt by urban interests to reverse the land reform" (Hinnebusch, 2015; p. 11) with the aim of mobilising the Sunni peasants. In addition, the Supreme State Security Court stated that the uprising was orchestrated by imperialists and Zionists (Van Dam, 2011). Therefore, the regime succeeded in promoting its socialist and non-sectarian message, preventing the majority of Sunnis from sliding towards the militant sectarian identity, and denying the Muslim Brotherhood the chance to gain more followers for their cause. However, Bashar chose to go down the opposite path.

In contrast, Bashar decided to rely on Alawi solidarity and employed a sectarian discourse to rally support. At first, after the protests started and were geographically limited, Assad promised certain reforms in his first speech that addressed the protests and he blamed external conspiracy for inciting the uprising – the same strategy that his father

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adopted. Yet, while announcing reforms, the regime simultaneously cracked down on protesters around the country (Lesch, 2012). The regime was using crack troops, perceived as Alawi, and minority militias to suppress the rebellion, often targeting Sunni mosques that sheltered the protesters, and entire Sunni districts (Rifai, 2018; Wimmen, 2018). These troops often displayed community identifiers, such as tattoos, which showed that they were Alawi. Moreover, videos of Alawites torturing Sunnis, whether real or fabricated, circulated on social media (Rifai, 2018). Furthermore, as the protests were spreading around the country, Assad was shifting his discourse more towards the sectarian strife, depicting protesters as al-Qaeda terrorists. His aim was to create a shared threat perception among the Alawites and other minorities, none of whom wanted a new system ruled by Sunni extremists, in order to ensure support for the existing power structure. This rhetoric was coupled with a depopulation campaign which aimed to force Sunni population out of towns by using artillery shelling, air strikes and massacres of Sunni villages (Bartolomei, 2018; Rifai, 2018). Arguably, this strategy was a major factor that contributed to people's slide toward the militant end of sectarian identity continuum which resulted in a sectarianization of the civil war and was a decisive factor in different outcomes of the two uprisings.

To summarise, four major factors that contributed to different outcomes of the two uprisings can be identified: 1) Bashar dismissed some of the Sunni elite and installed more Alawites, 2) his economic reforms impoverished a significant portion of the population, 3) Islam started to play a more prominent role, and 4) the regime adopted a sectarian narrative. Of course, it is imperative to bear in mind that there were other factors in play as well, such as social media, Islamist groups, or regional actors (Lesch, 2012; Rifai, 2018).

## Conclusion

How did regime policies influence the rise of sectarian violence? Neopatrimonialism is the root cause of sectarian division that allows the reproduction of sectarian identity – unless the regime is able to co-opt or buy-off all segments of society, some groups will always believe they are discriminated against. In fact, discrimination seems to be a major factor in people's slide towards the militant end of the sectarian identity – as Wimmen (2018, p. 66) argued, “systematic and conspicuous discrimination in access to labour and life opportunities effectively leads to a deeper identification with the sect or other particular category on which this discrimination is based”. While Hafiz focused on co-opting significant portions of the population, ensuring support against the Muslim Brotherhood, Bashar's changes and economic reforms led to a stronger perception of discrimination that reproduced sectarian identity and made it easier for people to be mobilised along sectarian lines. Despite that, popular protests ensued because of repression and economic hardships, cutting through sectarian divisions and uniting protesters from different groups. Therefore, it seems that the regime's discourse played a decisive role – Bashar exploited the divisions that were broadened in previous years and effectively caused the sectarianization of the conflict, although arguably aided by actors on other levels as well.

As people were not mobilised along sectarian lines in the beginning of the uprising, it is probable that sectarianization of the conflict could have been avoided had Bashar decided to uphold nationalist, secular discourse like his father did. The decision he has made inflicted serious damage on Syrians and the national identity. Therefore, it would be fair to assume that once the civil war ends, post-war reconstruction will not be the most difficult goal – uniting the deeply divided Syrian society and healing the wounds caused by sectarian violence.

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