

# The Mobilisation of Sectarian Identities in the Syrian Civil War

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There is a wide consensus that the Middle East is witnessing a surge in sectarian based conflict, with ethnic and religious tensions appearing to have both widened and deepened since the 2011 Arab uprisings (Abdo, 2013; Gause, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2016; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Valbjorn and Phillips, 2018). In the post-2011 order, multiple states in the region are witnessing rivalries, conflicts, alliances and wars framed in sectarian terms (Malmvig, 2016). The Syrian civil war is considered one of the most severe representations of a sectarian based conflict in the region today, engulfed in a decade long conflict that has depopulated and destroyed much of the country (Lesch, 2012; Salamandra, 2013; Phillips, 2016; Balanche, 2018). Yet reducing the Syrian civil war to a sectarian motivated conflict mischaracterises and misrepresents the original motivations of the Syrian uprising. The uprisings, that commenced in 2011, were not initially fueled by sectarianism. Instead protestors were motivated by high unemployment rates, economic inequality and general discontent with Bashar al-Assad's regime (Goldstone, 2011: 11). However, within a month of the first protests, sectarian identities came to be a pivotal element in the escalation of violence that led to the civil war (Wimmen, 2018: 61). Further, sectarian identities have come to define the war's fault lines when religious minorities, predominantly Alawites, along with Christians, Druze and Shias, typically rallied behind the regime, whilst the Sunni majority came to dominate the opposition. This begs the question, how did these cross-sectarian, class-based protests turn into a civil war with a heavy sectarian dimension? This thesis seeks to investigate the process by which sectarian identities became security issues in the early stages of the Syrian conflict (2011-2012) and how their mobilisation contributed to Syria's descent into a civil war.

Whilst few dispute the upsurge in political mobilisation justified in the name of sectarian identity (Gause, 2014), the causality behind these mobilisations is a point of contention amongst scholars (Dodge, 2018). An outdated debate between the primordialist and instrumentalist approach still takes up much of the dialogue on sectarianism, attributing sectarian conflict to either a continuation of ancient hatreds or a complete manipulation by elites. The former primordialist position takes identities to be unchangeable social structures, accrediting sectarian conflict to a prolongation of a millennium old conflict within the Muslim community dating back to the seventh century (Geertz, 1963). By explaining away conflict as rooted in ancient sectarian differences between the Sunni and Shia sects, common narratives used in Western media and by policymakers, tell us that there is no choice but to "let them fight it out" in the Middle East (Bennett, 2013; Werman, 2013). For example, former United States President Barack Obama often used phrases such as "ancient sectarian differences" and "rooted in conflicts that date back millennia" to explain conflict in the Middle East, encouraging a primordialist view on the Syrian conflict (Hashemi, 2016: 65). Primordialism cannot explain why sectarian identities co-exist peacefully at moments in history but become a source of intense conflict during others, offering little value in understanding the resurgence of sectarian conflict in Syria. Promoting a 'Sunni versus Shia' narrative to understand regional conflicts only reinforces reductionist policy implications and Orientalist notions of the Middle East as all about religion.

On the other hand, the instrumentalist approach views sectarian identity in the Middle East as a tool open to manipulation and exploitation by political elites (Lynch, 2013; Gause 2014; Hinnebusch 2016; Hashemi and Postel, 2017; Valbjorn, 2019). Instrumentalists understand sectarianism to be a modern phenomenon, entirely about politics rather than centuries-old religious issues. Recent studies have focused on the process of "sectarianisation" to explain sectarian conflict, believing that political leaders mobilise identities for the purpose of perpetuating their

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political rule (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 3). Instrumentalism is correct in stressing the role of political elites, as authoritarian regimes have resorted to provoking sectarian tensions following the instability caused by the Arab uprisings (Mabon, 2019: 30). Yet, whilst instrumentalism offers clear advantages over primordialism, such an understanding assumes that without political actors strategically manipulating identity divides for political purposes, sectarian conflict would not take place. Instrumentalism bestows elites with total powers of persuasion and political mobilisation, reducing sectarian identities to an ideology and undermining the very meaning and content of sectarian discourses. Thus, further attention needs to be paid to how sectarian identities are produced and securitised in times of conflict, whilst also considering the history of sect-based identities and what it means to speak in sectarian terms.

The Copenhagen School and Securitisation theory<sup>[1]</sup> provides a better lens through which to understand Syria's descent into civil war and the role sectarian identities have played in shaping the direction of the conflict. The central argument of securitisation theory is that security can be analysed as a speech act, where an issue is presented as an existential threat before a referent object, requiring and justifying emergency measures outside the normal bounds of political procedure (Buzan, de Wilde, Wæver, 1998: 23). Studying sectarianism from a securitisation perspective illustrates how political elites portray a sectarian 'Other' as an existential threat to a particular society, warranting an extreme response to counter the threat. Although securitisation theory was developed through a Western lens, it is gaining ground in the Middle East, with scholars employing the framework to illustrate how sectarian identities have become increasingly securitised in times of conflict (Malmvig, 2014; 2016; 2019; Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Matthiesen, 2017; Mabon 2019). By focusing on both identity formation and power politics, this approach can bridge the gaps in the existing debate and provide a deeper understanding of the shape and cause of current conflicts in the region. However, little work has been done on applying securitisation theory to the Syrian conflict. Scholars have either focused on the involvement of regional actors in the conflict, such as Hezbollah and Saudi Arabia (Malmvig, 2014; 2016; 2019; Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016) or applying securitisation theory to other Arab uprisings, such as Bahrain (Mabon, 2019; Matthiesen, 2017). This thesis builds on the aforementioned approaches in order to better understand the dynamics of the Syrian regime's explicit securitisation and its role in contributing to the escalation of violence that led to the civil war. As the Middle East is increasingly defined through the politicised, ethno-sectarian terms of Sunni and Shia, a focus on how sectarianism plays out in conflicts can help breakdown this self-perpetuating narrative and attempt to defuse the trend of sectarianism consuming the post-2011 order. Hence, this thesis will utilise securitisation theory to ask: **How has the mobilisation of sectarian identities shaped the civil war in Syria?**

This thesis will argue that the Assad regime successfully securitised sectarian identities in the early stages of the uprisings, shaping the conflict into a civil war with a heavy sectarian dimension. Through an analysis of the discourses and securitising practices adopted by the regime and its security forces<sup>[2]</sup>, this thesis will illustrate how the regime employed a protector of minorities' narrative, deliberately provoking fears of the alternative to Alawi rule. By playing on pre-existing fears of insecurity deeply embedded in Syria's history of sectarianism, the regime was able to mobilise a support base, justify their crackdown and securitise the uprising's unfolding. Yet, in turn the sectarian narrative adopted by the regime, along with the security forces' violent response to peaceful protests, pushed the opposition to fracture from their initial class-based approach and mobilise along sectarian lines. A case study into the history and conception of the security forces will illustrate their role turning the regime's narrative into a reality. Further, this thesis will argue that Assad's main regional backers, Iran and Lebanon's Hezbollah, cemented Assad's securitisation, by elevating the domestic conflict into a regional security problem in the wider Sunni-Shia competition. In order to not overstate the role of sectarian affiliation in the development of the conflict, this thesis will also acknowledge the role socio-economic conditions played in mobilising support from minorities and security forces and contributing to the regime's securitisation.

## 1.1. Structure

This thesis is structured as follows. After an overview of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the Syrian protests, I define sectarianism for the purpose of this thesis. Then, I present the main arguments of securitisation theory, setting up the framework, before turning to my analysis, which is structured in three parts. First, I examine the regime's mobilisation of sectarian identities, applying the three steps of securitisation theory to illustrate how the regime's speech acts, commencement of extraordinary measures and reception of the audience, contributed to the successful

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securitisation of sectarian identities in the initial stages of the Syrian conflict. Secondly, a case study into the history and conception of Syria's security forces will help illustrate their role as both the securitising actor and the audience, exploring their motivations for consolidating the regime's securitisation and propelling the uprising into a civil war by 2012. Thirdly, I emphasise Iran and Hezbollah's role in giving the conflict a transnational sectarian dimension, analysing their interests and role in Syria. Finally, I will summarise my arguments in the conclusion.

## 1.2 Nationalist Protests to Sectarian-based Civil War

The Arab uprisings began in Tunisia in late 2010, sparked by the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi, a street cart vendor who was protesting against the lack of formal employment in Tunisia (Durac, 2012: 186). Enraged with government corruption and economic deterioration, Bouazizi's extreme form of protest spurred a revolutionary wave that engulfed the Arab region (ibid: 181). The initial Arab uprisings were peaceful, with protestors uniting against the autocratic order of the day and the suppression of individual liberties in an increasingly modernising region (Salih, 2013). In Syria, peaceful protests erupted in Dara'a on March 15, following the arrest and torture of a group of teenagers who had written revolutionary slogans on a wall (BBC News, 2016). The unrest in Dara'a triggered nationwide uprisings, inspired by the hopeful mood spreading throughout the region. Protestors in Syria were dissatisfied with President Bashar al-Assad's mismanaged economic transformation, which had ultimately exacerbated social inequalities and pushed a significant part of the population into poverty (Wimmen, 2018: 61). Protestors sought political freedoms and economic modernisation, taking to the streets to demand change.

Assad initially believed that Syria was excluded from the "virus of protests" spreading elsewhere in the Arab world, confident in his hold over the state (Lesch, 2014: 41). In an interview with the Wall Street Journal in late January 2011, Assad stated that "Syria [was] stable", largely due to the "closely linked beliefs of the people" (Soloman and Spindle, 2011). Assad showed support for Tunisia and Egypt, believing the protests signalled a "new era" in the Arab world, but clearly not in his state (ibid). When the virus of protests spread to Syria, the regime and its security forces were prepared to respond with immediate force, attempting to disperse the demonstrations from the beginning. These first confrontations came between crowds of unarmed protests, often chanting "peaceful, peaceful", with security forces responding with gunfire (Human Rights Watch, 2011). The regime's repression of legitimate demands only worked to inflame rather than quash public anger. Demands for the president's resignation spread, yet the crackdown intensified. By July, hundreds of thousands of Syrians were protesting the regime, with opposition supporters beginning to take up arms in defence of the security forces' violent crackdown (BBC News, 2016). The continued escalation of violence between the opposition and security forces formed the setting of the civil war that began early 2012.

## 2.0 Theoretical and Conceptual Framework: Sectarianism and Securitisation Theory

### 2.1 Defining Sectarianism

Whilst there is a consensus that sectarian conflict has recently taken centre stage in the region's dynamics, there is considerable disagreement on how to define the term sectarianism (Haddad, 2011; 2017), inhibiting our understanding of its presumed role and significance in Syria. Without a proper definition establishing its limits, sectarianism as a term risks many manifestations and interpretations. Sect can be defined loosely as any social group "whose members share a common identity and are able to create a strong solidarity link" (Balanche, 2018, xi). A religious sect, a subset or subgroup of a larger religion, would share a common identity on a religious basis. Sect and sectarian identities can become a political player when leaders utilise sectarian solidarity to compete for authority (ibid). Hence sectarianism will be understood as the politicisation of differences between sects within a religion, often leading to discrimination, hate or tensions (Phillips, 2016: 20). Whilst sectarianism can be defined as simply as a "groups sectarian affiliation" or "the championing of issues relating to a particular sect" (Haddad, 2017: 377), this thesis will instead utilise a negative understanding of the term, in order to illustrate how a discourse and practice of sectarianism allows religious identities to be mobilised in times of conflict (Phillips, 2015: 359).

However, it is important to understand that by focusing heavily on politicisation, such a definition can overlook belief as a potential driver of sectarian tensions. Political leaders are products of their own societies and reflect it,

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meaning “the state can only amplify extant fissures ... and is unlikely to be able to create new ones overnight” (Haddad, 2011: 7). Hence, whilst sectarianism can be defined in political terms, political leaders can only manipulate existing, usually latent, divisions in society. Further, this thesis will acknowledge that sectarian identities, like any mass identity, are too complicated for simplified definitions and set binaries such as Sunni and Shia. In Syria, approximately 12 percent of the population are Alawi or Alawite, 64 percent are Sunni Arab, 10 percent are Kurds and the remaining percentage are made up of Druze, Christians, Shia and other smaller minority groups (Phillips, 2015: 357), representing the complexity of Syria’s ethno-religious makeup. For the purpose of this thesis, simplified sectarian binaries will be employed in-line with the securitising actors’ own simplified rhetoric.

## 2.2 Theoretical background: Securitisation Theory

In order to apply securitisation theory to the Syrian conflict, an understanding of its central tenets is first necessary. The Copenhagen School of security studies understands security to be a constructed social phenomenon, essentially a discursive construction rather than an objective reality (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 715). The main argument of securitisation theory is that security is a speech act. By labelling something as a security issue, then it becomes one (Wæver, 1995: 54). In the process of securitisation, securitising actors attempt to declare an emergency situation, claiming the right to use whatever means necessary to block the threatening development and in turn justifying their response (Buzan, de Wilde, Wæver, 1998: 21).

A successful securitisation consists of three steps. In the first step of securitisation, securitising actors bring a certain referent object and existential threat into existence by uttering them as such (Malmvig, 2016: 9). Actors present the issue as an issue of supreme priority constructing a threat in an area not generally considered to be a security threat (Mabon, 2019: 30). This language of security allows a political issue to move into a realm of expediency. In a speech act, actors who securitise do not necessarily need to say the word ‘security’ (Wæver, 1995: 66). Instead, it is more likely that one can create a security threat if certain objects are generally held to be threatening (Buzan et al. 1998: 33). Further, securitising actors must be in a position of authority, usually a political leader who holds enough influence to be deemed believable by an audience. Securitisation is hence largely based on power and capability, as leaders must have the means to construct a threat.

The second step involves the commencement of extraordinary measures to protect the referent object. A referent object must have a legitimate claim to survival, allowing actors to act above the realm of normal politics. Leaders are given the opportunity to exploit threats and “claim a right to handle something with less... control and constraint” (Buzan et al. 1998: 29). Hence, security is ultimately about survival (ibid: 21).

In the final step, the speech act must be received and accepted by the audience for an issue to be successfully securitised (Buzan et al. 1998: 24). Without the acceptance of the audience, the speech act can only be considered a securitising move. The audience is the collective group to which the process of securitisation is directed (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 726). Securitisation theory does not claim that anything can be easily securitised, as there is no certainty on how the audience will receive and process speech acts. If the audience does not accept the securitisation, “we can only talk of a securitising move” (Buzan et al. 1998:25). However, the role of the audience in the securitisation process remains underdeveloped (Balzacq, 2005), with Buzan and Wæver even suggesting that it is impossible to identify audiences (2009). Hence, the Copenhagen School leaves the concept of the audience as relatively broad, warranting individual interpretation. This thesis acknowledges the possibility of multiple audiences in Syria; however, I focus on understanding the minority-based audience and its acceptance of the regime’s speech acts, which this thesis will go on to develop further.

Securitisation theory was originally developed through a Western lens, dealing with democratic understandings of the state and security issues. Some scholars have argued that the theories concepts are incompatible with non-Western contexts. For instance, Greenwood and Ole (2013), believe that the theory assumes a basic level of stability which cannot be applied to contexts where there is no such thing as normal politics, using the example of Egypt’s 2011 uprising. Further, Wilkinson (2007) argued that speech acts are unsuited to non-Western cases as there are significant limitations to speech and the discussion and debate needed for audience acceptance. Yet, despite criticism, securitisation theory is increasingly being applied to non-democratic and non-Western contexts, in order to

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understand how discourses and political actors can construct something as a security threat (Kapur and Mabon, 2018: 1). By adapting concepts without changing their original meaning (referred to as concept travelling by Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016), scholars have found that securitisation theory offers a rich framework to understand the cause and nature of Middle Eastern regional conflicts (Malmvig, 2014; 2016; 2019; Darwich and Fakhoury 2016; Mabon 2019). Scholars have argued that Middle East politics, especially since 2011, has witnessed a redefinition of security, where sectarian identities have been rearticulated within a security dimension (Lord, 2019: 52). Due to the insecurity caused by the Arab uprisings, regimes have securitised the sectarian 'Other' in order to weaken the source of the threat and regain legitimacy (Mabon 2019: 32). The process of securitisation has even been considered a policy strategy by authoritarian states to deflate the 2011 demands for social, economic and political reform (Matthiesen, 2017: 201). By studying Syria's conflict from a securitisation perspective and utilising 'concept traveling', this thesis builds off the existing literature in order to further understand the increasing salience of sectarian identity and its involvement in Middle East politics post-2011.

## 3.0 Analysis: Securitising Sectarian Identities in Syria

I now turn to an examination of how sectarian identities were securitised by the Assad regime, applying the three-step process of securitisation theory to the Syria. I then provide a case study into the history and conception of the security forces to understand their role in consolidating Assad's sectarian narrative and acting as both the securitising actor and a part of the audience. Finally, I evaluate the secondary role of external actors in turning the Syrian uprising into a regional conflict divided along the sectarian lines of the "new Arab Cold War" (Gause, 2014) between Iran and Saudi Arabia, looking at the regime's key regional backers, Iran and Hezbollah.

### 3.1 Assad's Sectarian securitisation

In order to understand how the regime securitised initial protests and in turn sectarian identities, an application of the language of securitisation theory to the Syrian uprising is first necessary. In the wake of the uprisings the Syrian regime chose to securitise the Sunni majority protests as an existential threat to the referent object (being the regime itself). Bashar al-Assad was threatened by a united front challenging the regime's power, deciding to "play the sectarian card" (Stolleis, 2015: 7) in order to maintain control. The target audience of the regime's securitisation was Syria's religious minorities. These included the Alawites, who remain the main supporters of the existing regime, along with the Christians, Shia, Druze and other small religious communities. The regime's portrayal of the protestors as an existential threat, allowed them to move the issue from normal politics to the exceptional, with extraordinary measures required to counter the source of the threat in order to secure the regime. Whilst normal politics is difficult to define in an unpredictable authoritarian regime like the Assad's, the regime and its security forces were acting outside the normal bounds of political procedure (Buzan et al. 1998: 23) by heavily repressing the peaceful protests. Sectarian identities began to acquire a security dimension when the minority-based audience accepted the regime's speech acts. Audience acceptance will be evaluated in terms of minority neutrality or support during the initial protests and during the civil war. An evaluation of the three phases of securitisation will illustrate how the regime's discourse and practices securitised the peaceful protests, where this sectarian fear mongering stemmed from, and how the audience received this sectarian narrative.

#### 3.1.1 Step 1: The speech act

The first step involved in the regime's securitisation of the Sunni majority uprising is the speech act, which can be analysed through the discourses and political practices adopted by the regime from the beginning of the uprising. The regimes securitisation of sectarian identities came from an "explicit political decision" (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 714) to depict the protests as radical *Salafist* Islamists, armed gangs, criminals, terrorists and so forth, in their rhetoric (Lesch, 2012: 101). The heavily censored nature of the State-controlled media allowed the regime to promote this narrative to minorities removed from the protests and unaware of the peaceful message being spread in the uprising. Assad's first address to the People's Assembly on March 30 illustrated the regimes desired approach to dealing with the uprising. He first stated his primary objective, asserting that his "responsibility remains with protecting the security of his country and ensuring its stability" (Lesch, 2012: 76). Assad chose to establish the protests as a threat to Syria's security and stability, instead of taking responsibility for the socio-economic and

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political problems his people were protesting. In this initial securitising move, Assad asserted that external conspiracies and terrorist activities were the cause of the protests, even though protests were still peaceful and use of Islamist slogans were rare (ibid). The regime continued to spread this narrative following Assad's first address to the nation. On April 18, the interior ministry announced it was facing an "armed insurrection under the motto of jihad to set up a *Salafist* state" (Phillips, 2016: 55). Further, on June 20, Assad delivered another public address to the nation, again blaming armed gangs and external conspiracies for the violence. He stated that "there are those who are killing in the name of religion and want to spread chaos under the pretext of religion", going on to compare his opponents to germs that could not be exterminated (Lesch, 2012: 114). On multiple occasions, Assad associated the growing protest movement with the label sectarian, utilising the negative connotations of the term to portray members of the Sunni sect as "guilty of inciting an undefined sectarianism" (Haddad, 2017: 376). The presence of a so-called sectarian taboo in Syria, allowed the regime to accuse the 'Other' of being sectarian, while the 'Self', being the regime, was portrayed as non-sectarian (Malmvig, 2019: 5). As Malmvig (2019: 4) states, the sectarian taboo in Syria has historically been a "form of political silencing or ambiguity which inhibits overt sectarian expressions in official and elite political discourse". Hence, the regime's discourse portrayed the protests as an existential threat, and thus a security issue from the beginning, utilising deliberately ambiguous but negatively charged terms for political purposes.

The regime employed a sectarian narrative through its speech acts, aiming to delegitimise protestors, neutralise the political threat to the regime, and rally pro-regime sentiment (Haddad, 2017: 376). In securitising the protests as a threat to the survival of the regime, Assad sought to exploit pre-existing vulnerabilities in Syrian society. One of these pre-existing vulnerabilities was minority, particularly Alawi, persecution in the face of Sunni domination. The regime believed that minorities had benefited from over forty years of Alawite dominated rule and protection, playing on fears of what could occur if Assad was removed and a conservative, Sunni-dominated regime took control, seeking revenge. The regime's speech acts securitised the uprising as an existential threat to minorities in particular, provoking fears of minority persecution and Sunni extremism (Malmvig, 2014: 157). The regime essentially placed the protection of Assad as central to the protection of minorities, implying that if "we go, you will be left to the wolves" (Houry, 2011). As securitisation theory states, the referent object being existentially threatened must have a legitimate claim to survival (Buzan et al. 1998: 36). By tying the regime's survival to minority survival, minorities were made to fear the opposition movement, aiming to secure support or at least neutrality from those who had not got involved in the initial uprising and justify the regime's crackdown.

Further, by tying sectarian identities to the conflict occurring, the regimes speech acts aimed to promote a separation between the 'Self', being the minorities, and the 'Other', being the Sunni protestors (Darwich and Fakhrouy, 2016: 725). A separation between the 'Self' and the 'Other' would push minorities into feeling more loyalty and safety within their communities and thus the regime. As Buzan said, a language of security can prompt "a retreat into specific societal identities and a focus on upholding cultural norms to reinforce community cohesion" (2003: 191).

Additionally, the regime's use of undefined and subjective terms such as terrorism to define the protest movement, allowed Assad to capitalise on Iraq's experience with militant religious activists and violent sectarian conflict. Iraq, a similarly ethnically and religiously diverse neighbour to Syria, witnessed severe sectarian massacres following the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003. In particular, Sunni and Shia extremists in Iraq have heavily persecuted Christians, causing the Christian community to dwindle by approximately 83 percent in Iraq (Gardner, 2019). In the language of securitisation theory, it is "more likely that one can construct a security threat if certain objects can be referred to that are generally held to be threatening" (Buzan et al. 1998: 33), justifying the Syrian regime's use of ambiguous terms such as terrorism. Thus, the regime's speech acts aimed to construct an anti-minority climate, stroking fears of the alternative in order to mobilise support.

## 3.1.2 Step Two: The commencement of extraordinary measures

Whilst the regime was describing protestors as Islamic terrorists, armed gangs and sectarian thugs, the security forces were ordered to employ disproportionate force against peaceful demonstrations. The force used against protestors was presented as necessary in order to secure and protect the regime as the referent object. The commencement of extraordinary measures further consolidated the regime's speech acts, as deliberate securitising

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moves allowed fears to spread on top of the state's official discourse. For instance, the regime reportedly delivered arms to Alawite villagers around Jisr al-Shughour in June, after cracking down on protests in that Sunni-majority town (Balanche, 2018: 8). By spreading fears that protestors in the Sunni-majority town would brutally attack Alawite villagers, the regime exploited fears of minority vulnerability and presented the regime as their only protectors. Further, the *Shabiha*, an Alawite militia loyal to Assad, delivered sandbags to Alawite villagers, claiming that the sandbags would protect them from oncoming Sunni rampage (Phillips, 2015: 369). Whilst the *Shabiha's* activities are not always directly linked to Assad's inner-circle, they are led by extended members of the Assad family, allowing Assad to profit off their fierce loyalty but avoid direct association (Holliday, 2013: 7). Additionally, the Government broadcasted many reports of stories and videos that exhibited deliberately violent behaviour by Sunnis against Alawites. For instance, a prominent opposition leader in Homs was filmed chanting, "exterminate the Alawites" (Lesch, 2012: 108). The regime's sectarianised rhetoric was now being accompanied by sectarian acts of violence against Alawites, acting to confirm the narrative being woven and further justify the strong crackdown by the security forces and their extreme measures.

### 3.1.3 Step 3: The receiving of the speech act

The reception of the speech act is the third phase of securitisation, warranting an investigation into the regime's target audience and its inclination to accept the aforementioned speech acts and commencement of extraordinary measures. The issue is securitised only if and when the audience accepts it as such. Hence, a successful securitisation lies not within the "subject or the object but among the subjects" (Buzan et al. 1998: 32). Yet, securitisation theory was originally conceptualised to understand security issues within democracies, implicitly assuming that audience acceptance will be achieved through democratic practices such as debate and free discussion (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 726). However, in the case of the Middle East, audience approval cannot be achieved through such practices, as the highly censored nature of many authoritarian regimes inhibits open discussion and debate. Thus, audience approval needs to be understood through more subtle and nuanced means. Audience acceptance in Syria will be understood through the Alawites, and the decision of other minorities, to stay removed from the protests and as Balanche (2018: 36) said, remain "staunchly loyal to Assad since the beginning of the war". By remaining silent, this form of audience approval prevented the creation of a united front capable of toppling the regime, giving Assad a significant support base to remain in power. Additionally, the audience's internalisation of the regime's speech acts granted legitimacy to the security forces violent crackdown and the regime's continued campaign of violence (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 726). However, minorities cannot be considered a monolithic religious community that unconditionally supports the Syrian regime and its actions (Khaddour, 2015a: 11). Instead, an evaluation of the context of their current situation will help understand their perceived solidarity and how Assad was able to strategically secure their support.

Syria's long-standing history of politicised sectarian divisions is central to understanding audience acceptance and the regime's successful securitisation. Whilst the regime was central in igniting sectarian conflict, the regime could only fan existing fears deeply embedded in Syrian society (Balanche, 2018). By looking beyond official political discourse and into the particularities of sectarian identity on the ground, we can understand how Assad's sectarian narrative became a reality and how the war came to be defined in religious terms. Fears of minority persecution and repressive Sunni Muslim rule is not a new fear, instead a frequent narrative in modern Middle East history in the wake of conflict (Lesch, 2012: 106). In Syria, modern-day fears of Sunni dominated persecution stem from the French Mandate period, where sect identities became politicised under a divide and rule strategy (Phillips, 2015: 364). Prior to the French mandate, the Sunni majority largely repressed minorities in the Ottoman Empire, discriminating against non-Sunni Muslims like Alawi's and Druze (ibid: 363). In particular, the Alawites were the poorest peasants in Syria, made to work for Sunni landlords in the coastal mountains of northern Syria (Fildis, 2012: 151). Yet, differences were not institutionalised into the system until the French Mandate. Under the French administration, religious and ethnic differences were deliberately promoted in order to subdue Arab nationalism and inhibit the Sunni led national independence movement, seen as a threat to French rule (ibid: 149). Specifically, the French mandate placed different sects at the head of a variety of institutional branches of government, meaning that one ethnic or religious group dominated an institution. The Sunnis were dominant in politics, the officer corps and the police, whilst the Alawites were dominant among the soldiers (ibid). Through the military, the Alawites' social and economic standing improved, enjoying a secure income and increased social role. The French saw the Alawite

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military presence as a counterbalance to Sunni domination, whilst the Alawites came to view the French as their protectors against Sunni aggression. Hence, the Alawites largely benefited from French rule, gaining regional autonomy and inclusion in the military (ibid: 148). The French evidently sought security through building friendly relationships with minorities, yet their administration ultimately aggravated relations between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority, inhibiting the development of any cohesive loyalty to a Syrian nation state during the independence era and beyond (ibid: 151).

During the independence era, Alawi officers came to dominate the Ba'ath party, initiating coups in 1963, 1966 and 1970 (Phillips, 2015: 364). Hafez al-Assad rose up through the Ba'ath party, coming to power in 1970. During his thirty-year reign, he presented an inclusive nationalist rhetoric, yet ultimately pursued a divide and rule strategy similar to the French. Whilst Hafez promoted a veneer of a Syrian national identity and secularism, politicised sectarian identities were simultaneously reproduced and institutionalised into the regime. Hafez organised his regime around a network of loyalist Alawis, favouring members of his historically marginalised sect, especially in the security forces (Ali, 2019). He subtly portrayed his regime as the protector of minorities, frustrating the majority Sunni population that had traditionally ruled prior to the 1970's (Valbjorn and Phillips, 2018: 8). Minorities were made to fear the alternative of Alawi rule, as a sense of Sunni superiority and dominance remained in Syria's culture (Phillips, 2015: 366). The Muslim Brotherhood added a significant sectarian element to Syrian society, seeking to expose the supposed sectarian face of the regime. The nature of the Muslim Brotherhood's rhetoric against the Alawites, hardened sectarian identity amongst certain Alawites and also found an audience in the displaced Sunni elite (ibid). The brutal shutdown of the 1982 Hamas massacre against the Muslim Brotherhood allowed Hafez to present his regime as the protector of minorities against the face of Sunni extremism. Hence, Hafez subtly and strategically played the sectarian card, believing he could ensure the continuation of his regime through the loyalty of his historically marginalised sect (Lesch, 2012: 31). Yet, fears of Sunni aggression were allowed to breed under the surface, hidden by the regime's vague secular sentiments.

It initially seemed that Bashar al-Assad might loosen the sect-based favouritism Hafez institutionalised, marrying into a Sunni family and promoting liberal economic reform across sects. However, despite an increased dialogue of change, elite circles remained predominately Alawite, maintaining perceptions of the regime as an Alawi regime (al-Omar, 2016). When Syrians protested against the regime's mismanaged economic reforms in 2011, Bashar resorted to reviving sectarian tensions from the early stages. He was able to exploit the same sectarian divisions the French institutionalised and his father reaffirmed, forwarding a narrative based on fears of a potential violent, sectarian Sunni regime. As Harling (2012: 4) stated, the regime sought to convince the Alawite community "it risked slaughter at the hands of an opposition movement depicted as murderous terrorists...Sunni fundamentalists [and] global conspiracies". This narrative that painted Assad's regime as religiously tolerant, found a receptive audience in Syria's religious minorities. As Balanche (2018: 36) stated, many Alawites came to see "the war as an existential fight against a Sunni Islamist threat". As the conditions historically associated with the threat play an important role in the securitisation of an event (Wæver, 2000: 252), the deep-rooted feelings of insecurity in minorities allowed Assad's narrative to become a reality (Khaddour, 2015a: 26). Minorities came to fear for their survival in the face of Sunni aggression and viewed the regime as the source of their protection. Hence, by exploiting pre-existing fears, Assad successfully securitised sectarian identities, finding a responsive audience in Syria's historically persecuted minorities.

However, the role of sectarian affiliation in the Syrian conflict should not be overstated, as minorities cannot be considered a single entity with one-dimensional beliefs. As Hurd (2013) said, Syrians do not fit neatly into the "boxes of religious identification demanded by the narrative of sectarianism". The tendency to claim that the sectarian narrative perpetuated by the regime was actually believed, leans toward a primordialist understanding of the conflict. Just as it is a political choice to securitise, it is also a political choice to accept a securitisation (Buzan et al. 1998: 29), warranting an investigation into audience acceptance beyond sectarian affiliation. A pivotal factor that motivated support for the regime and its securitisation of sectarian identities was socio-economic interest. For the most part, the business elites and urban middle class of Syria have supported the regime, regardless of their sect (Lesch, 2012: 95). Powerful economic elites had little reason to bite the hand that fed them, viewing the growing opposition movement as "dangerous for the business climate" (Balanche, 2018: 14). The lack of significant anti-regime protests in Syria's two largest and richest cities, Aleppo and Damascus, illustrates the neutrality of many



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elites that dominated the population of these cities (Lesch, 2012: 95). The Assad regime played a great deal of attention to Damascus and Aleppo, allowing citizens to benefit from “foreign investment, infrastructural improvement and... tourist sites” (ibid). As the relationship between the speaker and audience largely dictates the likelihood that the audience will accept the claims made (Buzan et al. 1998: 33), those living in affluent cities may have been more inclined to remain in Assad’s sphere of protection for economic reasons rather than sectarian. Therefore, the socio-economic conditions that motivated the initial protests may have also sustained a level of support for the regime, removed from sectarian affiliation.

Additionally, while minorities may dislike the dictatorial regime as much as other groups, they are deeply entangled with the regime, placing them in a precarious position. As previously mentioned, Alawites have come to dominate State-run economic and military institutions, gaining financial stability through secure government jobs and benefiting from the economic, social and political incentives that come with working for the regime (Balanche, 2018). As the livelihood of many minorities depends on these state-run institutions, socio-economic conditions also heavily underpin their solidarity with the regime (Khaddour, 2015a: 11). Pairing socio-economic interests with the regime’s narrative of the conflict as anti-Alawite, minorities perceived their survival as lying with the survival of the regime, whether it was on sectarian or economic terms.

As securitisation theory has helped show, the regime sought to aggravate sectarian divides through their speech acts and commencement of extraordinary measures, aiming to retain a level of control and suppress the growth of the protest movement. Yet, in reigniting latent divisions and spreading fears of the alternative to Alawi rule, the regime caused protestors to depart from an initially class-based message and fracture into an anti-government sectarian form. The regimes securitisation of identities provoked “counter-sectarianisation among the opposition” (Hinnebusch, 2019: 60), which helped push the country into civil war. Only witnessing the violent crackdown of protests with legitimate demands, the Sunni majority opposition became more radicalised, creating an increasingly coordinated movement to topple Alawi rule instead of solely protesting for economic changes (Lesch, 2012: 101). Hence, the securitising practices and discourses adopted by the regime turned into self-fulfilling prophecies, leading to the creation of the current battle lines of the civil war. The Alawi sect was further absorbed into the regime and the security forces, and the Sunni into the opposition, pushing both sides to seek war as an existential struggle (Hinnebusch, 2020: 114). Through an important evaluation of the role of socio-economic factors, it is clear that audience acceptance was not purely based on sectarian affiliation, as social divisions also spread fears of the alternative to Alawi rule. Yet as Balanche (2018: xi) said, the war has evidently compelled Syrians to “cling to their sectarian identities more tightly, whether out of socio-economic interest or simply to survive”. Whilst audience acceptance does not necessarily mean complete belief in the speech acts, it is clear that fears of the alternative justified decisions to show some semblance of solidarity with the regime and accept their securitisation.

Next, a case study into the history and conception of Assad’s security forces will help further understandings of the securitisation of the conflict, evaluating their role in propelling the conflict into a civil war.

## 3.2 Case study: The Role of Assad’s Security Forces

The regime’s success in the early stages of the uprising is heavily attributed to the loyalty of the security forces in carrying out the regime’s orders. The Assad regime did not have complete powers of persuasion, allowing the security forces to add a physical dimension on top of the regime’s rhetoric. It is estimated that only a few thousand of the estimated 220,000 members of the military defected during the summer of 2011 (Nepstad, 2011: 488). A successful peaceful revolution requires a split between the regime and the security forces, yet in the case of Syria, the security forces’ loyalty allowed the regime to “retain its coercive and co-optative capabilities” and quash the revolution (Hinnebusch, 2019: 55).

Why did the security forces remain loyal in the face of peaceful protestors and why did their repression cause the opposition to depart from a class-based form and mobilise along sectarian lines? An overview of the history and conception of the security forces will help illustrate their role in shaping the Syrian civil war and consolidating Assad’s sectarian narrative. Further, their role as the audience and as the securitising actors needs to be evaluated in order to understand their motives in fighting alongside Assad.

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## 3.2.1 Security forces history and conception

As previously argued, the Assad kleptocracy has fed perceptions of sectarian privilege for over four decades (Salamandra, 2013: 305). One of the key means in which sectarian privilege was institutionalised was through the security forces. During Hafez-al-Assad's reign, he resorted to emphasising the sectarian identities that the previous Ba'ath party rejected; believing the only way to ensure stability was through building a trusted security force. Hafez created a "highly centralised and personal chain of command, reaching directly from the president to individual unit commanders" (Holliday, 2013: 42), ensuring his close friends and family members commanded the highest ranks. As Balanche (2018: 7) said, Hafez pursued a strategy to "make the Alawite community a loyal monolith while keeping Syria's Sunni majority divided". Yet Syria became a police state, enforcing stability through threat of brute force repression. For instance, when the Muslim Brotherhood attempted to revolt against the regime in 1982, Hafez selectively deployed his most politically reliable Alawi units with the task of carrying out his orders (Holliday, 2013: 10). The Alawite dominated army brutally suppressed the attempted Islamist insurgency, killing approximately 20,000 people in Hama (Wikstrom, 2011). This event illustrated not only the loyalty of the security forces but also the repercussions of countering the regime's rule. Bashar al-Assad's approach to the initial stages of the conflict was heavily underpinned by his father's strategy of enforcing stability (as seen in the Hama massacre) (Holliday, 2013: 12). Bashar had already followed in his father's footsteps, carefully manoeuvring his most loyal allies into the military-security apparatus, government ministries and the Ba'ath party (Lesch, 2012: 50). When the uprisings began, he was able to capitalise on the conception of the security forces in order to carry out his orders.

## 3.2.2 Sectarian narrative

The sectarian history and conception of the security forces not only help illustrate the forces compliance, but also how the forces were key in consolidating the sectarian narrative the regime provoked. From the beginning of the Syrian uprisings, the regime was careful in its force selection, hedging against defections by relying on small detachments of its most loyal Alawi dominated security forces (Holliday, 2013: 13). As the majority of the protestors were Sunni, the regime chose not to rely on the Sunni rank and file of the military; afraid they would defect en masse (Lesch, 2012: 105). Maher al-Assad, the President's younger brother, headed the Syrian Army's elite Fourth Armoured Division, as well as the Republican Guard (Holliday, 2013: 44). The Fourth Armoured Division has remained Assad's "indispensable elite unit" since the beginning of the uprising (ibid). It is estimated that 80 percent of the division's ranks are Alawite, giving the unrest an undeniable sectarian dimension, when the largely Sunni protests were shut down by the predominantly Alawite forces (ibid). As Hinnebusch (2019: 55) stated, the employment of "military units and militias recruited from the Alawis to repress protests concentrated in majority Sunni areas", directly influenced the opposition to take on a sectarian dimension. Whilst the regime's speech acts spread fears among Alawites and other minorities, the Alawi security forces violent repression of peaceful protests inflamed the Sunni opposition to band around sectarian lines, giving the conflict a definitive sectarian dimension.

## 3.2.3 Socio-economic fears

However, it is important to not overstate the role of sectarian allegiance in understanding the security forces perceived loyalty. Whilst many elite officers were drawn from the tight knit Assad family, many Alawite officers exist outside of that circle, warranting an investigation into their motivations for remaining a largely cohesive Alawite force and consolidating Assad's narrative. Many security force members feared retribution if they did not comply with the regime's orders, hearing stories of soldiers that were shot or tortured if they defied. Human Rights Watch interviewed a soldier from the Republican Guard who had defected after his unit was deployed to put down a protest in Harasta on April 18, 2011. In Harasta, commanders told the soldiers that they were being deployed to deal with "armed militias, yet what they saw upon arrival was a peaceful demonstration" (HRW, 2011). The soldiers were given "clear orders to shoot with no conditions, no prerequisites" (ibid). The desire for self-protection would have motivated compliance in multiple situations similar to this. Additionally, security forces were evidently fed a sectarian narrative on top of fears of retribution, told they were shutting down "armed militias" instead of peaceful protests. Whilst some security force members would oppose the Assad regime as much as other groups do, they are deeply entangled with the current order causing them to not only fear retaliation from Assad, but retaliation from the opposition if Assad falls. Particularly, some 500,000 of Syria's military are from the Alawite dominated *Dahiet al-*

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*Assad*, or “the suburb of Assad” (Hinnebusch, 2019: 57) enjoying military housing benefits and a life removed from mixing with wider Syrian society and other sects. Military housing means that officer’s personal and familial fortunes are heavily linked to the survival of the regime. The precarious position of officers within this suburb, and beyond, influenced many to view the uprisings of 2011 as a “personal threat to their assets and livelihood” (Khaddour, 2015b). Thus, whilst sectarian affiliation can be cited as a motivating factor for remaining in the armed forces, fears of the alternative also fueled much of the blind loyalty that occurred in the initial stages of the peaceful uprisings.

Whilst we do not know if the security forces were motivated by genuine beliefs or fear, they have remained largely loyal and allowed Assad to stay in power, at least until external forces offered aid. In terms of securitisation theory, the security forces should be considered both the audience and the securitising actor. As a securitising actor, the security forces repressive shut down of Sunni majority protests, caused many opposition members to take up arms against the Alawite regime and its Alawite security forces. By adding the physical element on top of the regime’s sectarian discourse, the security forces gave the conflict a sectarian dimension that helped lead the opposition to militarise along sectarian lines. As the audience, many security force members were forced to believe Assad’s narrative out of fear of retribution and fears of the alternative to Alawi rule. Assad’s securitisation of the protests pushed security forces members to believe they faced an existential threat if the regime collapsed. Further, the heavily interconnected nature of the security forces and the regime deterred force members from defecting and joining a disjointed opposition, motivating their continued loyalty.

Next, in order to understand the continuation and direction of sectarian conflict in Syria, we must also look at the pivotal role of Iran and Hezbollah in sharpening and extending the sectarian narrative Assad initially provoked and the security forces consolidated.

## 3.3 External Dynamics: Iran and Hezbollah within the Syrian Conflict

Whilst the regime and its security forces were central in portraying the conflict as a fight against Sunni religious extremism and “lighting the fire that led to the civil war” (Phillips, 2016:55), regional powers have exploited and reinforced this narrative for their own benefit. As the conflict in Syria descended into civil war, the Assad regime began to rely heavily on Iran and Hezbollah for its survival. Iran and Hezbollah have provided extensive support to Assad’s Alawi security forces, developing relationships with pro-government militias and recruiting external Shia militias since the early stages (Holliday, 2013: 10). The outcome of the Syrian conflict is of key interest to Iran and Hezbollah, warranting their involvement from the beginning. Yet, both actors have justified their involvement in sectarian terms, amplifying the upsurge of sectarian consciousness that had been spreading post- 2011 and extending Syria’s conflict into a regional one (Hinnebusch, 2016: 145). By elevating Assad’s sectarian narrative to a transnational affair, Iran and Hezbollah have further prepared the ground for sectarian conflict in Syria and allowed Syria to turn into a theatre for multiple proxy wars. This chapter seeks to evaluate Iran and Hezbollah’s motivations in Syria and how their involvement cemented the conflicts sectarian edges and securitisation.

### 3.3.1 Iranian interests and role

Since the beginning of the conflict, Iran has provided an unprecedented amount of political, financial, cyber and military support to the Assad regime (Jones and Markusen, 2018: 2). The survival of the Assad regime is crucial to Iran’s regional and strategic interests, motivating their involvement from the beginning of the conflict. Syria has historically been Iran’s closest ally since the Republic’s inception and a central player in the so-called axis of resistance, an Iranian-led alliance between Syria, Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militants, which aims to counter Western interests in the region, mainly from the United States and Israel (Sullivan, 2014: 1). The conflict in Syria presents a significant threat to this alliance and thus Iran’s quest for regional hegemony. In particular, the removal of the Assad regime would weaken Iran’s alliance with Hezbollah. Syria acts as an important transit route for Iranian supplies to Hezbollah, transporting personnel, weapons and finances through Syria (Holliday, 2013: 10). Without direct access to Hezbollah, Iran’s ability to extend its influence in the region would be hindered. Further, Assad’s defeat could lead to a Gulf backed, Sunni led successor regime, strengthening key backers of the opposition such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia. The outcome of the Syrian conflict is pivotal to the on-going Iranian-Saudi rivalry, considered the centre of the “new Cold War” (Gause, 2014: 1) occurring in the Middle East. Both sides have amplified regional

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conflicts to the status of a Sunni versus Shia war, yet as Gause (2014: 6) argues, their motivations are not “centuries long religious disputes but a simple contest for regional influence”. As neither country is confronting each other militarily, one of the ways their contest is being played out is in Syria. The outcome of the Syrian conflict will heavily influence Middle Eastern perception of “who won this round of the contest for regional influence” (Gause, 2014:1). Hence, Iranian interests in Syria coincide with a new “struggle for Syria” (Seale, 1965), with multiple powers in the region believing regional power lies with the victor of the conflict.

In light of the above, Iran has utilised a distinct sectarian narrative to mobilise support for the Assad regime (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 8). The common use of the Sunni versus Shia shorthand in the new Cold War has allowed Iran to mould the Alawi sect to fit into the Shia camp, basing their involvement in the conflict on sectarian alliance (Gause, 2014: 5). Iran claims it is involved in Syria to fight ISIS and protect Syria’s legitimate government in Damascus, yet the Syrian rebels and opposition are commonly referred to as *Salafi-jihadis* who will exterminate all minorities if Assad falls (Hashemi and Postel, 2017: 8). Further, Iran has capitalised on a sectarian narrative in its recruitment of external forces, organising a transnational Shia militia from vulnerable Shia communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq (ibid). Iran has drawn on classic Shia themes of “persecution, martyrdom, and sacrifice”, whilst also offering financial incentives, educational opportunities and Iranian citizenship in its recruitment (ibid). By outsourcing most of the fighting to thousands of loyal Shia militias, Iran has been able to claim it only sent advisors to Syria (Slim, 2019). However, despite this claim, Iran still sent elements of its elite Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, led by Major General Qassem Suleimani, to retrain Syria’s military and direct the war effort in their benefit (Phillips, 2018: 21). Additionally, Iran has assisted pro-government *Shabiha* militias within Syria, partly to hedge against Assad’s fall by pushing such militias to become dependent on and loyal to Iran (Fulton, Holliday and Wyer, 2013: 6). Iran is now deeply embedded in the conflict, exploiting a sectarian narrative in a classic balance of power game. Sensing an opportunity to gain greater geopolitical influence than Saudi Arabia, Iran has supported Assad’s securitisation, heavily contributing to the wave of sectarian consciousness extending throughout the region.

### 3.3.2 Hezbollah’s interests and role

Further, Hezbollah has played an important, although lesser role, in consolidating Assad’s sectarian narrative. In terms of Hezbollah’s interests in Syria, the potential fall of the Assad regime presents a threat to the axis of resistance, along with the safe passage of Iranian Army shipments, pursuing similar interests to Iran. Hezbollah has coordinated with Iran’s strategy, training government and pro-Assad militias inside and outside Syria. Hezbollah took on a more direct combat role in 2012, supporting the regime with a well-trained Shia force after Assad began losing control of Syrian territory (Fulton, Holliday and Wyer, 2013: 6). From the early stages of the conflict, Hezbollah presented the uprisings as an existential threat to Lebanon, justifying their military involvement through the use of a sectarian rhetoric (Phillips, 2015: 158). Hezbollah’s speech acts have openly portrayed the Syrian opposition as Sunni *takfiris*, a term used to refer to Sunni extremist religious activists. Hezbollah’s leader Hassan Nasrallah has stated that the rise of Sunni *jihadism* is an “unprecedented danger in history” declaring a war against all *takfiris* (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 723). Further, Hezbollah has claimed that the involvement of their forces was to protect important Shia religious sites, such as the *Sayyida Zeinab* Shrine in Damascus (Sullivan, 2014: 11). By portraying the conflict as an existential threat of Sunni extremism, Hezbollah has legitimised their involvement and departure from its usual military activities in southern Lebanon (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016: 723). Yet in turn, Hezbollah has heavily contributed to divisions within Syria, as Assad’s Alawi security forces began to be aided by a Shia force against a Sunni opposition. Further, by depicting itself as the defender of Shia in Syria, Hezbollah has portrayed the rebel opposition as a direct threat to Shia in Lebanon and in the Middle East more broadly. Hence, Hezbollah has accelerated sectarian conflict in Syria and extended Assad’s narrative onto a regional scale (Abdo, 2013: 38).

### 3.3.3 External intervention and securitisation theory

In securitisation theory, actors beyond the state can capitalise on and manipulate events for their benefit, even if they are not directly involved in the initial securitisation (Mabon, 2019). Iran and Hezbollah have evidently capitalised on and manipulated Assad’s narrative for their own political benefit. Their involvement is not linked to a shared sectarian identity instead popular justifications of minority protection serve as a front for their own strategic

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interests. Both actors have depicted the conflict as a security issue to all minorities across the region, contributing to the wider context of the Sunni-Shia regional rivalry. As securitisation theory argues, audiences can exist across borders, within and between states. By presenting the Sunni opposition as the 'Other', Assad's key backers have represented this 'Other' as an existential threat to the Shia of the whole region (Malmvig, 2016: 8). As events in the Middle East tend to resonate across state borders due to shared norms, religion and identities (Mabon and Lynch, 2020: 3), Iran and Hezbollah have exploited the interconnected nature of the region to mobilise a Shia support base. Further, Iran and Hezbollah have used a sectarian narrative to establish a foothold in Syria through local Shia militias. By securing a support base dependent on them if Assad falls, both actors have embedded themselves within post-civil war Syria, yet further complicated the nature of the conflict. Hence, Iran and Hezbollah have added a transnational sectarian dimension to the conflict, heavily contributing to the transformation of the conflict into a regional power struggle along sectarian lines.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the sectarian dynamics within the Syrian conflict employing the lens of securitisation theory to understand how sectarian identities were mobilised and securitised by the Assad regime and how this successful securitisation contributed to the shape and direction of the civil war. Through an examination of the regime's speech acts and securitising practices, this thesis argued that the regime stroked fears of the alternative to Alawi rule, playing on pre-existing insecurities stemming from the French mandate period and institutionalised by Hafez al-Assad. This thesis cited fears of minority survival in the face of Sunni rule as a key reason underpinning minority acceptance, also acknowledging the secondary role of socio-economic conditions in contributing to the regime's successful securitisation. By tying minority survival to the regime's survival, this thesis argued that Assad was able to secure a support base that prevented the development of a cross-sectarian opposition movement challenging his rule. Yet the regime's securitisation and the violent crackdown of security forces, ultimately led to 'counter-sectarianisation' in the Sunni opposition, accelerating Syria's descent into a civil war along sectarian lines. Further, this thesis examined the pivotal role Iran and Hezbollah played in cementing Assad's securitisation, turning the domestic conflict into a region wide struggle for Syria with a heavy sectarian dimension. Hence the mobilisation of sectarian identities ultimately poured fuel on an already raging fire, exacerbating and complicating the Syrian uprising and contributing to the creation of a civil war.

The sectarian nature of the Syrian civil war has not only complicated the trajectory of the conflict, but will complicate the future peace and stability of Syria in the eventual aftermath of the conflict. As Slugget (2016: 40) argued, once the "sectarian genie has been released, it is extremely difficult to force back into the bottle", speaking to the difficulty of pacifying sectarian identity divides magnified by the horrors of war. Yet, only through an understanding of Syria's complex fault lines can reconciliation efforts be furthered (Salamandra, 2013: 306). Securitisation theory evidently offers a fruitful framework to understand the development of conflict in Syria and the Middle East more broadly, helping to illustrate the process through which sectarian identities can become security threats. Whilst more work is required in order to successfully apply this framework to cases outside the Western world, this thesis has contributed to the development of securitisation theory beyond its Western lens, adapting and developing concepts to understand the securitisation of sectarian identities in the Syrian civil war. As the regions rivalries, conflicts, alliances and wars become increasingly connected on sectarian terms, further examination into the region's security practices can help defuse the trend of sectarianism engulfing the region today.

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## Notes

[1] This work will use Barry Buzan, Jaap de Wilde and Ole Wæver's conceptualisation *Security: A New Framework for Analysis (1998)*

[2] There are multiple security types involved in the conflict, including the Syrian Arab Army, the intelligence apparatus, paramilitaries and so forth, yet I will refer to them under the all-encompassing term of security forces.