The Sectarian Dimension of Political Legitimacy in Syria: The National Roots of Sectarian Violence in the Syrian war

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Abstract: In dealing with the topic of sectarian violence in the Syrian War, the focus often lies on the international dimension and the relations between Iran and Arab Gulf states. Assuming the existence of national sources of sectarian violence as a prerequisite for international influences to take effect, the article focuses on the national dimension of this phenomenon. In doing so, it examines the historical entanglements of sectarianism with political legitimacy in modern Syria. Those shaped and drove the country's major episodes of violence: the rebellion that ended in 1982 and finally the current war. Therefore, any Syrian government that wants to end the war in a sustainable way will have to reclaim political legitimacy beyond common sectarian patterns.

Keywords: Religion – conflict – sectarianism – Syria – peace
Stichwörter: Religion – Konflikt – ethnischer Konflikt – Syrien – Frieden

The Syrian war is often blamed for having deranged the country's multi-ethnic and multi-religious stability.[1] Accordingly, it allowed regional influence of Iran and the Gulf countries to foster sectarian tensions and hatred within Syria, which sustain and drive the conflict. In any case, the opposing coalitions are characterized due to their religious affiliations: the Shia coalition comprising of the Syrian Alawite regime, Iran, the Lebanese Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias supported by Russia against the Sunni coalition comprising of the Syrian Sunni population, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar supported by EU states and the USA. Syria's religious minorities like the Christians and the Druze are attributed to the Shia coalition as well as Syria's significant ethnic minority of Kurds.[2] While remnants of a national coalition that transcends sectarian boundaries are still intact due to economic and political dependencies,[3] the regional Sunni-Shia divide is allegedly further tearing apart the relics of national unity.[4] Finally, international arrangements and readjustments between Russia, Turkey and Iran led to a partial ceasefire and new hopes surrounding a peace conference in Kazakhstan in February 2017. That emphasizes the impression that international factors shape and drive the fate of the Syrian people.[5]

As a result, various observers describe the Syrian war as one among many manifestations of the Sunni-Shia conflict that is driven by the regional struggle between Iran and the Gulf countries.[6] However, other experts suggest that the opposite view is more accurate. Accordingly, Syria's internal sectarian dynamics reconfigured the regional alliances along sectarian affiliations.[7]

In any case, regional and international dynamics take effect and become manifest at the national level. In the end, there is a consensus that national roots of sectarian tensions have to exist in order to allow external entities to escalate them. Eventually, the national focus is of utmost importance to understand the dynamics of sectarian violence. Therefore, this article shifts the focus to the national dimension in describing the roots of sectarian violence in Syria.

Currently, the Syrian regime relies on Russia's military, even in directing the diplomatic affairs towards peace negotiations.[8] Yet, given the insufficient manpower in the Syrian army and the prospect of Russian and Iranian support constantly diminishing, any Syrian central government will have to consider any possible means beyond military measures in order to sustainably reclaim control over the whole of Syria.[9] After all, only restoring political legitimacy in the eyes of Syrian society will bring about a sustainable end to the current war.

The article describes sectarian factors as crucial for political legitimacy in modern Syria. An elaboration on the relation between authority, political legitimacy and sectarianism will provide the basic theoretic framework for this endeavor. The main part will trace the origins of the sectarian discourses and describe their role in Syrian politics after independence and under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. That prepares the ground to relate those dynamics to their manifestations from the rebellion in the 1970s to the Syrian war from 2011 onwards. Having

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* Dieser Beitrag wurde anonym begutachtet (double blind peer reviewed).

1 R. Mahmoud & S. Rosiny (2015) Opposition Visions for Preserving Syria's Ethnic-Sectarian, *GIGA Working Papers* No. 279. Available at https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/wp279_mahmoud-rosiny.pdf, accessed February 7, 2017, pp. 4-6.

2 C. Phillips (2015) Gulf Actors and the Syrian Crisis, *The New Politics of Intervention of Gulf Arab States*, issued by the LSE Middle East Centre, Collected Papers, No. 1.

3 Philips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, pp. 360-361. While the Kurds are of relevance in the Syrian sectarian mosaic, ethnic sectarianism is of minor significance as a crucial fault line in the Syrian war.

4 Phillips, Gulf Actors and the Syrian Crisis, pp. 45-51.

5 J. Landis (2013) *The Great Sorting Out: Ethnicity & the Future of the Levant*, in Qifa Nabki. Available at https://qifanabki.com/2013/12/18/landis-ethnicity/, accessed February 7, 2017.

6 See e.g. S. Rosiny & T. Richter (2016) Der Arabische Frühling: Missverständnisse und Perspektiven, *GIGA Focus: Nahost* No. 4. Available at: https://www.giga-hamburg.de/de/system/files/publications/gf_nahost_1604.pdf, accessed February 7, 2016; G. Abdo (2013) The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprising and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide, *Analysis Paper* No. 29, issued by The Saban Centre for Middle East Policy at Brookings; http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/01/22/the-war-for-islam-sunni-shiite-iraq-syria/; M. Darwich & T. Fakhoury (2017) Catering the Other as an existential threat: The securitization of sectarianism in the international relations of the Syria crisis, in: *Global Discourse*.

7 Thomas Pierret and Christopher Phillips both refer to the Palestinian Hamas or Qatar to emphasize their claim. Before the war, both were allies of the Syrian regime but distanced themselves more and more. Finally, Qatar became one of the most dedicated supporters of Sunni Islamist militia fighting. T. Pierret (2013) The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict, *USIP: Peacebrief* No. 162; C. Phillips, Gulf Actors and the Syrian Crisis, pp. 41-45.

8 F. Tastekin (2017) *Two Sides of Syria: Damascus and Aleppo* (10 Jan 2017), Al-Monitor. Available at http://al-monitor.com/pulse/en/originals/2017/01/turkey-syria-political-process-two-pronged-strategy.html, accessed February 7, 2017.

9 N. Bonsey (2017) *What's at Stake at the Syrian Peace Talks in Astana*, International Crisis Group (24 Jan 2017). Available at https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/what-stake-syrian-peace-talks-astana, accessed February 7, 2017.

marked the national origin of sectarianism as a major source of the Syrian war, the final part of the article will elaborate on the ramifications for Bashar al-Assad's regime in its abilities to restore political legitimacy.

1. Authority, Legitimacy and Sectarianism

While the term sect refers to politicized sub-national identity groups, the term sectarian can be used in a factual way to relate to the existence of a multiplicity of such politicized identity groups. Yet, it also refers to social discordance along such identity affiliations. For the purpose of the article's argumentation, sectarian or sectarianism will refer to the latter understanding.[10]

Before elaborating on the politization of subnational identity groups and the legitimacy of state authority, the terms authority and legitimacy have to be clarified in a first step. To keep it simple, legitimacy shall refer to Max Weber's definition as peoples' belief in the legitimacy of a government's authority ("Herrschaft").[11] If authority means – more or less – obedience to orders,[12] then legitimacy serves as foundation for the persistence of institutionalized authority. Weber's understanding of authority can be related to Hannah Arendt's conception of power as "human ability not just to act but to act in concert"[13] Arendt opposes power to violence. A government that applies violence in its exercise in power is about to lose the ability to govern its subjects. "Power is indeed the essence of all government, but violence is not."[14] Finally, the use of violence indicates a fading legitimacy.[15]

Edward Azar describes the existence of more than one sub-state identity within a society as a crucial precondition for conflicts. The first step towards conflict is the politization of those identity groups. That happens in case a number of people with an overlapping identity perceive themselves as a group that is being deprived of their basic human needs by the state's institutions. Consequently, Azar describes adequate access to governing institutions and the market as a foundation of legitimate authority. However, deprivation does not necessarily endanger authority: Often, national, religious or other discourses can maintain a government's legitimate authority even in cases of severe deprivation of basic goods.

Nevertheless, if those discourses lose credibility and thereby their ability to support a government's claim to legitimate authority, the government has to adequately respond to the demands of the respective group. In case that does not happen, the conflict enters the phase of violence and counter-violence. That transforms the conflict along certain mechanisms like mutual stereotypization. Eventually, a social conflict about economic and political discrimination becomes a conflict about sectarian identities.[16]

Before the war in 2011, the legitimacy of the Syrian regime's authority did rely on various aspects: Firstly, on the ideological discourse of the Syrian nation, and the sectarian discourse in relation to the first discourse in order to portray the regime as the protector of all sects within one Syrian nation. Secondly, while the regime made sure that its core comprised of Alawites, Hafez al-Assad managed to balance interests by distributing political and economic access among various sects.[17]

When the war erupted, a severe drought from 2007 onwards had already deprived many Syrians of their basic human needs. In addition to that, the sense of public audacity that spread through Arab world ("Arab Spring") following the ouster of Tunisia's president Ben Ali had reached Syria. It shattered the discourses that had served as the ideological foundation of the regime: All at once, many Syrians were convinced that it was legitimate to have a say in their nation's political matters. Finally, the regime's inability to respond adequately to the concerns of the protesters initiated the violent phase of the conflict and the process of stereotypization activated sectarian patterns.

Introducing sectarian affiliations as a crucial cleavage and therefore a conflict-sustaining factor in Syria bears certain traps. In order not to overemphasize the polarization along group boundaries, Rogers Brubaker cautions not to treat cognitive categories such as groups as natural and primordial objects of everyday-life. Naturalizing group boundaries would obscure the socio-political process that led to the identification of individuals with a certain identity in the first place. In reality, not every individual identifies with an identity category to a sufficient extent – group cohesion is never total. Therefore, instead of speaking of groups, one should rather assume a certain level of groupness to describe the identification of individuals with a certain identity.[18]

In identity conflict theory, an individual's readiness to engage in conflict against another identity group relates to the primacy of in-group goals over individual goals. Thus, if an individual does not perceive its situation as socially and economically inferior, it is unlikely to identify with a subnational identity group that is in conflict with a national government. Rather, it will identify with a transcending national identity.[19]

Consequently, a crucial line dividing the Syrian population runs along economic characteristics: Sunni tribes that had been favored by the regime like the Baggara continued their support; so did the urban Sunni middle class that often comprised of merchant families and bureaucrats. Therefore, the war did not divide Aleppo along sectarian affiliations, but along economic cleavages. Not surprisingly, the wealthier Western half of the city became a stronghold of the regime. In those areas, sub-national religious and ethnic identities were less important than a transcending Arab and Syrian identity.[20]

10 C. Philips (2015) Sectarianism and conflict in Syria, *Third World Quarterly* 36(2), pp. 357; F. Haddad (2011) *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 31.
11 M. Weber (1978) *Economy and Society. An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*. Volume One, Berkeley et al., pp. 212-213. Max Weber describes three types of legitimate authority according to their sources of legitimacy: rational-legal, traditional, and charismatic. Ibid., pp. 215.
12 Ibid. 53.
13 H. Arendt (1970) *On Violence*, San Diego, pp. 44.
14 Ibid., pp. 51.
15 Ibid., pp. 43-56.
16 E. Azar (1990) The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory & Cases, Aldershot: Dartmouth, pp. 1-16.
17 See chapter three.
18 R. Brubaker (2002) Ethnicity without Groups, *European Journal of Sociology* 43(2), pp. 163-166.
19 K. Korostelina (2007) Social Identity and Conflict: Structures, Dynamics, and Implications, New York: Palgrave, pp. 71.134.
20 Philips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, pp. 359.

At the same time however, sectarian thinking in terms of suspecting the other of inciting sectarian violence was present from the beginning on. Soon, various incidents occurred that followed sectarian patterns in economically marginalized cities and provinces.[21] In those, violence added to the impression that the Sunni cause was at stake against a sectarian Alawite regime. Thus, in those areas, subnational identities became more salient than the common Arab and Syrian identity – sectarian thinking prevailed.

To sum up, the legitimacy of the Syrian regime's authority depends less on the sectarian affiliation rather than on economic factors and legitimizing discourses. In regions where the people were economically tied to the regime, adequate access to the market and traditional Syrian national discourses served as solid foundations for the regime's claim for legitimacy. In less advantaged areas, sectarian patterns occurred and became driving forces of the war against the regime. In those, the regime's ideological discourses in support of its legitimacy were unable to prevent the perception of economic and political deprivation. Thus, the war did not divide the country along sectarian affiliations, but between people who perceive the war through Syrian national narratives and those who deem it a sectarian war.

In order to better understand this ambiguous entanglement of sectarianism and political legitimacy in Syria, the origins of sectarian thinking will be explored in a next step.

2. From Pariah to Ruler

Long before the French came to Syria, the Alawi community was in a precarious position. Their religious syncretism and alleged belonging to the Shia tradition made them heretics in the eyes of the Sunni rulers. At the same time, the secrecy of their cult occasionally led to suspicions regarding Alawi conspiracies against the establishment – in order to succeed, they would even cooperate with the enemy. All those prejudices contributed to the massive economic, social, political and cultural marginalization throughout the centuries. As a result, the Alawi community mostly gathered in remote areas in the mountains to protect themselves from arbitrary persecutions that occurred from time to time. As an additional means of protection, Alawites practiced *taqiya* (religious dissimulation): they pretended to be Sunni, Shiite or Christian if it would suit their purpose. Finally, their often desolate appearance in the eyes of the urban population fostered further prejudices concerning the savagery of the Alawite community. Most of them remained undereducated and poor until at least the second half of the twentieth century.[22]

In the Ottoman Empire, the affiliation with a certain sect was only a marginal matter in politics. Yet, it became a relevant criterion for the colonial rule of the French from 1920 onwards. They divided their mandated area into various territories to be administered by different religious groups: the state of Aleppo and Damascus by Sunni Muslims, Lebanon by Christians, as well as an Alawite and a Druze state.[23] To ensure their influence on politics, the French empowered the leaders of the Christian, Alawite and Druze minorities in order to diminish the influence of the Sunni notables.

For the Alawi community, colonial rule meant freedom from Sunni oppression. Thus, while the Sunni Syrians boycotted the French-sponsored parliamentary elections, the Alawites made sure for an appropriate turnout. Furthermore, they overwhelmingly joined the colonial police and intelligence agency. Not surprisingly, they supported the French in trying their attempts to constrain the protests that eventually led to independence. As a matter of fact, the Alawi community feared retribution by the Sunni majority once the French would leave and therefore sought annexation of their Alawite state by Lebanon or Transjordan. In the end, the Alawite state became part of independent Syria.[24]

Contrary to the worst fears of retribution, the French episode did not have significant consequences for the Alawites under Sunni rule. However, it certainly did not improve their delicate situation. Nevertheless, the Alawites quickly began to accommodate themselves as part of independent Syria: Their rise within the Baath party and the army began. Both were attractive due to their emphasis on a common national and Arab identity, which diminished their disadvantage of belonging to a minority. At the same time, in the army and the Baath, their origin was no obstacle to equal treatment and social mobility. Soon, Alawites were represented to a disproportional high amount in the army and the Baath party.[25]

The Sunni community assumed that holding the army's key positions would maintain their control over it. Nevertheless, in numerous *coups d'états* between 1946 and 1963 many of those Sunni key figures eliminated each other and thus paved the way for various Alawites to inherit higher ranks of importance. Following the 1963 coup of the Baath party, the Alawites systematically purged colleagues with other religious affiliations and swamped the ranks within the army and the Baath. That crucially transformed the Baath party into an instrument of the Alawi community. The coup of Hafez al-Assad in 1970 finally concluded the Alawites rise to power.[26]

Before 1970, the elite comprised of Sunni Muslims from Aleppo and Damascus. That gradually shifted in favor of the Alawites. Suddenly, the Sunni elite found itself on an equal basis with Alawi parvenus. Nevertheless, the Sunni notables arranged themselves under those unexpected circumstances. The situation resembled more or less a cold peace based on mutual resent and shared interest. "Each group assumes the other's advantage: 'Alawis point to the enduring prosperity of Damascus' 'merchant princes;' Damascenes to the well-placed 'Alawis' control of licensing and smuggling."[27]

21 On the regime side: 5 to 40 Sunnis in Telkalakh (27 April 2011), 100 in Kfar Oweid (December 2011), 50 in Bab Driad and Karm al Zhoutan in Homs (March 2012), 100 in Taftanaz (April 2012), 108 in Houla (May 2012), 78 in al-Qubayr (June 2012), and 200 in Darayya in Damascus 8August 2012). All victims were Sunni ArAbs. On the opposition side: 15 in Karmallouz in Homs (April 2012), about 300 in Aqrab (October 2013). Most victims were Christians and Alawites. Philips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, pp. 359-361.
22 D. Pipes (1989) The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria, *Middle Eastern Studies* 25(4), pp. 434-440.

23 Philips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, pp. 363-365.
24 Pipes, The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria, pp. 437-440.
25 Ibid., pp. 440-442.
26 Ibid., pp. 442-446.
27 C. Salamandra (2013) Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections, *Middle East Critique* 22(3), pp. 304-305.

3. Maintaining the Sectarian besides the National Discourse

Once Hafez al-Assad took over power, the series of continuous coups found an end and the country experienced political stability and prosperity for the first time. Under his guidance, the regime successfully fostered a national discourse that transcended sectarian boundaries in order to serve as a comprehensive foundation for the legitimacy of its authority. This Syrian Arab discourse drew from the land's glorious past and related it to Syria's solid present as an indication for its prosperous future. It portrayed itself as the guardian and incorporation of this discourse and thus the guarantee of a prosperous and united Syrian.[28] Finally, the president himself served as the embodiment of this discourse. The regime organ *tishrin* about Bashar al-Assad:

"Bashshar al-Assad is the clearest and most explicit national voice today, articulating the goals of the Arab nation and its values and principles with vigor and courage but also with logic, wisdom and discretion. He represents not only Syria, which in itself constitutes an Arab and a regional force of importance, but the aspirations of the [Arab] nation wherever it is, from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Arabian] Gulf, its hopes and its fears."[29]

On the other hand, the Assad regime retained the *Personal Status Law* from the French, which attributed each legal subject a religious identity. That served as a solid foundation for a sectarian discourse besides the discourse of the Syrian nation. Unlike the latter's characterization of Syrian politics as a matter of the whole nation, the sectarian discourse describes politics as competition between various sects. This discourse was maintained not least due to a disproportionate distribution of government and security apparatus posts to Alawites – often belonging to the Assad familiy's tribe (Numailatiyya). As a result, the narrative of Alawites as related to the regime persisted, even though many Alawi families still lived under very poor conditions. At the same time, the regime itself maintained the sectarian discourse by portraying itself as the protector of Syria's minorities and a bulwark against sectarian violence. In doing so, it maintained a sense of suspicion towards an always-present possibility of sectarian violence.[30]

"The Hafez al-Assad years were therefore paradoxical. Sect was officially dismissed and inclusive, Syrian Arab nationalism encouraged, but politicised sect identities were simultaneously reproduced, either by the regime or by its internal and external enemies."[31]

4. Sectarian Jihad

Many representatives of the elite that was displaced by the Baath regime belonged to the Muslim Brotherhood. Driven by their marginalization, they engaged in opposition activities against the alleged Alawi regime. At the same time, many younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood opposed to the regime due to religious reasons drawn from Sayyid Qutb. According to Qutb's principle of a ruler's duty to uphold the truly Islamic character of a society, the Baathist regime of a group of Alawites was a heretic regime – the practice to declare a fellow Muslim an apostate (kafir) is called takfir. The first riots peaked in 1973 when the regime stated its intentions of dropping the constitutional clauses of Islam being the religion of the president and the source of jurisprudence.[32]

In order to emphasize the Alawite's roots in Shia orthodoxy, Hafez al-Assad convinced Lebanese Shiite Imam Musa Sadr to issue a fatwa and declare the Alawite religion as part of the Twelver Shia. Nevertheless, many use the derogatory term *Nusayri* to neglect the Alawites' Islamic roots and thereby diminish their claim to rule a Muslim country. Instead of linking their origin to Ali ("Alawi"), they refer to their religion as arbitrary heresy of its founder Ibn Nusayr who himself had been a follower of Shiite tradition. This theological delegitimization has firm roots within Sunni tradition. Already the Muslim scholars Al-Ghazali (1058-1111) and Ibn Taymiya (1268-1328) had denounced the Alawi religion as a heresy, infidelity and describe their followers as distrustful people. They declared their killing to be a duty for every Muslim.[33]

While the Brotherhood's opposition was moderate in Damascus, its members from Aleppo pushed towards escalation. The Damascenes were mostly among the urban elite and therefore had more to lose than to gain compared to their northern colleagues. Thus, while the Aleppo wing called for protest, the Damascus group sought to moderate and calm tensions. Yet, escalation was very likely when the Aleppo wing inherited the Brotherhood's leadership in 1975 under Adnan Saadeddine. He called for open confrontation with its Damascene members and the heretic Baath regime.[34]

Singly individuals fueled the escalation: While Said Hawwa called for the implementation of Ibn Taimiyya's fatwa against the Alawites, Marwan Hadid started to recruit young Muslims to engage in jihad against the atheist heretics of the Baath party already in 1963. He later founded a militia to serve as an instrument of the jihad against the regime: the infamous "Fighting Vanguard".[35]

Finally, in 1980 the Brotherhood openly called for jihad and established the "Islamic Front" as its instrument. At the same time, they issued a manifesto that legitimated its jihad: firstly, believers are fighting heretics, and secondly, believers intend to correct the obscurity of a minority ruling over a majority.[36] Those sectarian concerns had led to the founding of the paramilitary youth organization "futuwwa" already in 1946. It had been tasked with upholding Sunni supremacy in the Levante.[37]

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28 E. Zisser (2006) Who's afraid of Syrian Nationalism? National and State Identity in Syria, *Middle Eastern Studies* 42(2), pp. 179-198; G. H. Talhami (2001) Syria: Islam, Arab Nationalism and the Military, *Middle East Policy* 8(4), pp. 110-127.

29 Tishrin, Damascus, 16 December 2002, cit. acc. to Zisser, Who's afraid of Syrian Nationalism?, pp. 180.

30 Salamandra, Sectarianism in Syria, pp. 305-306.

31 Philips, Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria, pp. 366.

32 L. Porat (2010) The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad Regime, *Middle East Brief* No. 47, issued by the Crown Center for Middle East Studies, pp. 1-3.

33 A. Farouk-Alli (2015) The Genesis of Syria's Alawi Community, in: M. Kerr & C. Larkin (eds) (2015) *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, London: Hurst, pp. 44; R. Lefèvre (2015) The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Alawi Conundrum, in: Kerr & Larkin (eds.), The Alawis of Syria, pp. 130.

34 R. Lefèvre (2013) *Ashes of Hama: The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria*, London: Hurst & Company, pp. 82-101; Lefèvre, The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's Alawi Conundrum, pp. 130.

35 Ibid., pp. 125-128.

36 Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama, pp. 20; Porat, The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad Regime, 4-5.

37 J. Teitelbaum (2011) The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, 1945-1958: Founding, Social Origins, Ideology, *Middle East Journal* 65(2), pp. 229.

5. Awakening of Sectarian Forces: Jihad is Coming Home

The regime fiercely crushed the rebellion by it military's brute force, which peaked in the Hama massacre in 1982.[38] Also due to the threat of death penalty for being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood, many of them left the radical path.[39] In fact, the period between 1970 and 1982 stands in stark contrast to the time before and after, where the organization was commonly considered as politically liberal, highly flexible and pragmatic. With the rebellion crushed, open anti-Alawi violence also ceased and sectarian resentments retreated beneath the surface where they had come from.[40]

Nevertheless, some of the Syrian jihadis that had already made the acquaintance of Abdullah Azzam in a Palestinian training camp in the 1970s in Jordan joined him in Peshawar to prepare for international jihad against the Soviet Union. In fact, the Syrians formed a considerable group among the fighters. Some of them served as role models: Marwan Hadid and Adnan Uqlah (last leader of the Fighting Vanguard) served as jihadi archetypes for many young people who joined the jihad. Among the Syrians in Afghanistan, there was a young man who was to become of great ideological influence for the next generation of jihadis himself: Abu Musab al-Suri.

Abdullah Azzam's understanding of international jihad saw it as a duty of the whole Muslim *umma*. Therefore, he rejected the practice of takfir as creating *fitna* (division) within the community. In addition to that, he opposed the involvement of civilians as targets. Abu Musab al-Suri however, brought the practice of takfir into the concept of jihad again by merging Azzam's internationalism with Sayyid Qutb's ideas. Already in 1991, his writings provided the organizational and ideological framework of al-Qaeda. Al-Suri's 1.600 pages work "The Global Islamic Resistance Call" that he published in 2006 became the strategical and operational background for the apocalyptic, de-centralized jihad in Iraq and in Syria that also targeted Shiite civilians. Al-Suri explicitly suggests the use of savagery as a weapon of jihad.[41]

The strategies and techniques of al-Qaeda in Iraq's leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi were the flawless manifestation of what al-Suri had pictured. Zarqawi's hatred for Muslims that had already alienated Osama Bin Laden and his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri were the perfect predisposition for Al-Suri's takfir-inspired jihad at the perfect place, where sectarian resentments peaked after the ouster of Saddam Hussein's regime.[42]

Also due to the Syrian regime's facilitation, Syrians had been the third largest group in the Iraqi jihad. Thus, the rise of sectarian jihad in Syria was quite a likely scenario once unrest and turmoil would unfold. As Islamic State rose from the Iraqi desert in 2011 and found its way into Syria, many former jihadis were there to join a jihad they had already been acquainted with.[43]

Eventually, the takfiri-based jihad against infidels that came to Syria from Iraq had originated in Syria. It emerged on the foundation of a sectarian discourse that has firm roots in the country. A closer look at Syria's past and the relations between the Sunni and the Alawi Muslims reveals considerable historical sources that fostered and shaped this sectarian discourse. Therefore, the escalation of violence along sectarian affiliations both in the 1970s and after 2011 are to be related to the national sectarian discourse, that was not only not eradicated by the Baath regime, but maintained due to reasons of political legitimacy.

6. The Struggle for Political Legitimacy: The Regime Between Sustaining and Overcoming the Sectarian Roots

On the one hand, sectarian sentiments led to fierce armed opposition to the Syrian regime. On the other hand, the advent of open sectarian violence provided the regime with an opportunity to legitimate itself based on the national Syrian Arab discourse transcending sectarian identities.[44] As such, the regime portrays itself as a stronghold of Syrian unity and the defender of its ethnic diversity – quite successfully in the areas that are economically linked with the regime and where thus not alienated.[45]

Yet, after years of unrest, massacres and deadlocks, also many Syrians that had been alienated from the regime are beginning to reconsider their stance. Although acknowledging the sectarian nature of the regime and its interests, they prefer a continuation of the Baath regime as the best option for a pluralistic and diverse Syria.[46] The regime might have been well aware that the existence of sectarian sentiment constituted its *raison d'être* to a considerable amount. Therefore, the fight against the Islamic State militia as a fierce proponent of sectarian violence did not rank among the highest priorities of the regime and its allies.

Beyond any doubt, the regime will successfully seize the current mood of war exhaustion to strengthen its claim for legitimate authority. In order to do so, it is highly likely that it will rely on its common strategies of portraying itself as the protector of Syrian unity and the bulwark against sectarian violence. Accordingly, Bashar al-Assad describes the chemical attack on the village of

38 Porat, The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Assad Regime, pp. 3.
39 Ibid., pp. 3.
40 Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama, pp. 20.
41 Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama, 150-154; J. Stern & J.M. Berger (2015) *ISIS: The State of Terror*, New York: HarperColling, pp. 223-228.
42 W. McCants (2015) *The Isis Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*, New York, NY: St. Martin's Press, pp. 7-15.

43 Read more on the roots of the present Islamic State militia in Camp Bucca at McCants, The Isis Apocalypse, pp. 75-76; Lefèvre, Ashes of Hama, pp. 150-154.
44 See e.g. the random use of the label "terrorist" for anyone attacking Syrian military or political targets. H. Sabbagh (2017) *Two People killed by Terrorists' Gunfire in Sweida Countryside* (8 Feb 2017), SANA: Syrian Arab News Agency. Available at http://sana.sy/en/?p=99763, accessed February 8, 2017.
45 See e.g. H. Sabbagh (2017) *Mikdad: Syria is subjected to Terrorist War due to its Positions regarding Arab Issues* (4 Feb 2017), SANA: Syrian Arab News Agency. Available at http://sana.sy/en/?p=99521, accessed February 8, 2017.
46 See e.g. former FSA rebel commander Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir how recently returned to Damascus and loudly pledged Allegiance to the regime. Al-Waght (2017) *Ex-Rebel Leader Rejoins Syrian Government* (5 Feb 2017), Al-Waght: News and Analysis. Available at http://alwaght.com/en/News/86831, accessed 7 Feb, 2017; F. Tastekin (2017) *What will be the cost of Aleppo victory for Damascus?* (16 Jan 2017), Al-Monitor. Available at http://al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/01/turkey-syria-was-aleppo-a-pyrrhic-victory.html, accessed February 7, 2017.

Khan Sheikhoun on 4 April 2017 as a – Western sponsored – terrorist act that intends to tear apart the Syrian nation.[47]

However, sustaining sectarian thinking and fears as a means of legitimizing one's political claim is a volatile foundation for a stable future. That way, sectarianism remains a permanent potential source of instability – the two major armed rebellions against the regime in the 1970s until 1982 and the recent war were crucially driven by those sources. Eventually, revelations like the torture and mass killings (more than 13.000 alleged killings) in the regime's prison in Saydnaya serve as constant reminders why the protests against the regime started in the first place – for many Syrians, Saydanaya is an exemplification of the brutal suppression of an Alawi security apparatus against Sunni Muslims.[48]

Finally, the recent years of open rebellion have broken the taboo of not questioning or even talking about politics. Political audacity as a legacy of the Arab spring might survive the end of the armed rebellion against the regime. This audacity translates into high expectations towards the abilities of the Syrian regime to initiate considerable change. As a university professor in Aleppo stated in the beginning of 2017: "[W]hen the war is finally finished, people will want drastic changes. The government is aware of this mood and is trying to change some things. Be assured, nothing will be the same as before".[49]

Eventually, the regime will be able to restore its legitimacy on the foundation of the nationalist discourse against the background of the sectarian discourse in the short run. However, in order to restore its political legitimacy in the long term, it has to overcome the sectarian patterns in its claims for political legitimacy and at the same time enable access to political authority and the market. However, it is doubtable that the current Syrian regime will initiate the reforms that are necessary to maintain its legitimacy. After all, a strategic long-term vision for Bashar al-Assad's government has been absent even before the war. Finally, the regime is used to explain away mistakes rather than to learn from those.[50]

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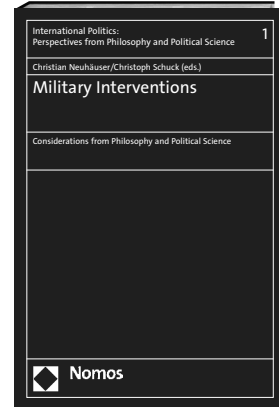
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Militärische Interventionen – ein Forschungsstand

Military Interventions

Considerations from Philosophy and Political Science

Herausgegeben von Prof. Dr. Christian Neuhäuser und Prof. Dr. Christoph Schuck

2017, ca. 350 S., brosch., ca. 67,– €
ISBN 978-3-8487-3528-0
eISBN 978-3-8452-7862-9
(International Politics: Perspectives from Philosophy and Political Science, Bd. 1)
Erscheint ca. Juli 2017
nomos-shop.de/28338

Der Band diskutiert und erweitert den aktuellen Forschungsstand zu militärischen Interventionen. Hierbei werden sowohl Fragen der Legitimität von Interventionen als auch ihrer Durchführung sowie spezifischer Akteure betrachtet.

Der Band gliedert sich in drei bewusst interdisziplinär angelegte Teile mit jeweils eigenem thematischem Schwerpunkt. Teil I widmet sich der Frage, wann eine Intervention legitim ist und, so sie erfolgt, wie sie durchgeführt werden sollte. Teil II geht darauf aufbauend der Frage nach, ob und wenn ja, warum die hohen Hürden, die für Interventionen bestehen, eine Berechtigung haben. Teil III schließlich stellt die Frage nach relevanten Akteuren und danach, wer intervenieren sollte, sowie welche Bevölkerungsgruppen nach Ende des Konflikts in den Wiederaufbau eingezogen werden sollten.