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6-1-2016

The Construction of Sectarianism: How Intermestics shaped "Other"ing in Iraq and Syria

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M.A. Thesis

The Construction of Sectarianism:
How Intermestics shaped "Other"ing in Iraq and Syria

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Chapter 1 – Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Research Question and Thesis Argument

Sectarianism has become almost synonymous with certain Middle Eastern countries. Since the US-led invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003, Sunni and Shia relations have deteriorated, resulting in massive bloodshed and 'cleansing.'[1] Like their Arab neighbors, Syria began with peaceful protests in a hopeful Arab Spring. But the once hopeful spring soon turned into a dark winter and Syria fell into one of the worst civil wars in modern history, displacing six million people internally and resulting in more than two million refugees. Events which would have been inconceivable at the start of the millennium are now central to political discussion. How have we gotten to this point?

This thesis applies a social Constructivist lens to the outbreak of sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the two countries in the Middle East which have seen an outbreak of violent civil wars in the past decade. The dominant explanations for these conflicts reduce the issue down to identities. This isn't surprising given the diversity of the two states' populations. What we aim to assess in this thesis is how these sectarian identities have been shaped and constructed. I refute the notion that sectarianism is a natural outcome of competing identities and religious myth-symbols. Instead, I explore the question of how intermestics, or what Bahgat Korany defines as "the organic relationship between the *inter*national and the do*mestic*," shaped the sectarian conflicts that broke out in Syria and Iraq.[2] The outcome of this research, which will be touched on in its conclusion, will put forth the common elements which have shaped the Iraqi and Syrian

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[1] Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival* 56:1 (2014), 2.

[2] Bahgat Korany, "Redefining Development for a New Generation: A Political Economy Analysis," in *Arab Human Development in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. Bahgat Korany (Cairo: American University in Cairo Press, 2014), 5.

sectarian conflicts. Such analyses can be used to better understand the potential dangers of future sectarian strife in the region. Furthermore, the argument of this thesis highlights the importance of looking at the complex dynamics of intermestics in international relations.

Two basic concepts dominate the study of these case studies in political science, the primordialist and modernist arguments.[3] The primordialist views the conflicts in Iraq and Syria as a result of ancient conflicts and competing ethno-symbolism. In this perspective, sectarian conflicts were inevitable due to the intrinsic differences among the populations in Iraq and Syria.[4] The modernist argues that political identities are imagined and manipulated by the ruling elites. I find neither argument sufficient in explaining the very complex relationships within Iraq and Syria. This thesis will argue that the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have been constructed by the international and domestic communities. Powerful ideas and interests domestically and internationally have brought forth policies and acts which allowed for the burgeoning of sectarian identities and conflicts, ones reacting to the dynamics of intermestics.

Due to the complex nature of the topic at hand, specific boundaries need to be made to maintain clarity and structure. As the research questions relate to how sectarian conflicts are constructed, my thesis will only assess the situations up until the first outbreak of what most consider "civil war," commonly agreed to mean 1000 combat deaths a year combined from each side.[5] In Iraq, our assessment will end in 2006 when sectarian violence ignited. In Syria, this means an analysis of the situation up until its civil war began sometime in 2011. The thesis will also draw upon references back to the mandate period. This is due to the fact that many political

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[3] Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 36:2 (2015), 354-358.

[4] Ibid., 356.

[5] Ibid., 358.

scientists claim that the divisions of the Ottoman Empire into various mandates imagined by the international community played an instrumental role in shaping the very structure of these societies and ensured the inevitability of sectarianism in the region.[6]

Furthermore, this research will be limited to the study of religious sectarianism. This allows for a more focused analysis, in part due to the predominantly religious tones of the conflicting sects. Sectarianism as a whole is understood as "a contextualized and historicized understanding of the concept, rather than an essentialized one, with an emphasis on sectarianism as being produced – and reproduced – by forces of both a structural and an agential nature; it utilizes an inclusive understanding of the elements that compromise sectarian dynamics – accepting communal/religious variables as a starting point (rather than an end point) of analysis yet recognizing that factionalism that typifies sectarian polities is generated by the complex interaction of a variety of factional dynamics."[7] In essence, sectarianism is understood as salient communal identities that create tensions between different communal groups. Since this thesis focuses only on religious sectarianism, I will not study the issue of ethnic minorities and groups, including the prominent Kurdish movement in the two states and the region. The Kurdish question in particular requires its own extensive analysis, which is both beyond the scope of this paper and has already been done extensively by various scholars. Any analysis of Kurds and other ethnic groups will be in the context of understanding religious sectarianism as a whole.

This thesis will be organized into four chapters that focus on a specific component of the argument. In this introductory chapter, I give an overview of the research puzzle, explain the theoretical framework and methodological issues and then situate this research within the overall

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[6] Ibid., 357.

[7] Paul Kingston, *Reproducing Sectarianism: Advocacy Networks and the Politics of Civil Society in Postwar Lebanon,* (New York: Suny Press, 2013).

literature on sectarianism. Chapter two will delve into the thesis's first case study on Iraq. The influence of the British mandate and its underlying Orientalist preconceptions will lay the foundation for understanding the modern Iraqi state. I will then dive into an assessment of intermestics during Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime and end with a similar analysis of the period of the American invasion of Iraq. Chapter three will focus on the Syrian case by similarly assessing the impact of the French mandate, followed by an assessment of how intermestics shaped sectarianism during the regimes of Hafiz al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad. Chapter two and three focus on key events and discourse in order to analyze the intermestic impact and how it contributed to fueling – or quelling – sectarianism. Chapter four will conclude by highlighting key patterns of sectarian construction from both case studies by assessing common structural and agent-level mechanisms that fueled sectarianism in the two states.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Issues

This thesis derives its theoretical inspiration from social Constructivism. The emphasis of social Constructivism on identities, intersubjectivity, the power of ideas and the malleable nature of interests allow for a more critical analysis of the creation of sectarianism in our case studies. According to the Constructivist corpus, all aspects of international relations are constructed by actors and are subject to change. As was written by one of the founders of Constructivist thought, Alexander Wendt:

> Social structures include material resources like gold and tanks. In contrast to neorealists desocialized view of such capabilities, Constructivists argue that material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded. For example, 500 British nuclear weapons are less threatening to the United States than 5 North Korean nuclear weapons, because the British are friends of the

United States and the North Koreans are not, and amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings.[8]

This last statement is the basic inspiration of this thesis, "amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings." In other words, we cannot neglect the importance of social norms and ideas in shaping politics. We must assess actions and reactions as linked to ideas and interests of actors to better understand the political scene. Accordingly, we must analyze the way in which state interactions and the international system as a whole constructed the sectarian identities within Syria and Iraq.

But one cannot simply claim to be "Constructivist" and not delve further into the meaning of this term within her or his analysis. The Constructivist corpus is massive, with as much variety as any other international relations theory. The basics agreed upon by different Constructivists include the focus on ideas, norms, knowledge, culture and argument in politics, specifically emphasizing the "intersubjective" nature of ideas.[9] There is also a general focus on the constitutive nature of agents and structures. The earliest Constructivists originally focused on simply showing that norms, rules and social structures of meaning actually matter in the world of politics. Katzenstein's work in *The Culture of National Security* tackled this basic issue by analyzing things like weapons taboos, military culture and identity politics and how social structures more generally construct interests and behaviors that materialize and shape international relations.[10]

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[8] Alexander Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," *International Security* 20: 1 (1995), 71-81.

[9] Martha Finnemore and Kathryn Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program in International Relations and Comparative Politics," *Annual Review of Political Science* 4 (2001), 393.

[10] Peter J. Katzenstein, *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1996.

With the growth and increased legitimacy of Constructivism, however, different varieties of Constructivists with competing research agendas burgeoned in the field of IR. I now attempt to place myself within this massive field of differences within the Constructivist school. One of the larger debates of the paradigm lies in its assumptions. Modern and postmodern variants of Constructivism, as named by Price & Reus-Smit, split Constructivist thinkers. According to Martha Finnemore and Kathyrn Sikkink, the difference can be understood by the following:

> Postmodernist Constructivists reject efforts to find a point from which to assess the validity of analytical and ethical knowledge claims. This stance makes it possible to deconstruct and critique the knowledge claims of others but makes it difficult to construct and evaluate new knowledge claims. For modern Constructivists, on the other hand, acceptance that the world is always interpreted does not imply that all interpretations or explanations are equal; some types of explanation and evidence are more persuasive or logically and empirically plausible than others.[11]

Between these two areas, this thesis is situated in the modern approach; more specifically it is aligned with one of the founders of Constructivism, Alexander Wendt. Wendt and Katzenstein helped pioneer the field of identity research within Constructivism.[12] The weight of international issues, however, is different for the two authors. Finnemore and Sikkink's analysis of Katzenstein and Wendt lead them to claim that while Katzenstein focuses primarily on the importance of domestic influence on identity formation, Wendt emphasizes the international and systemic impact. While Wendt does emphasize the importance of systemic factors, my own reading of Wendt has interpreted greater balance within his theoretical framework in terms of the weight of the agent as opposed to the social structure.

A Wendt-Inspired Constructivist Approach

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[11] Finnemore and Sikkink, "Taking Stock: The Constructivist Research Program," 394.

[12] Ibid., 399.

The following will aim to briefly highlight the important aspects of Wendt's theory that will be applied in this thesis. It should be noted that I do not aim to put forth a comprehensive description or analysis of his theory, as that is beyond the scope of this text. Instead, I aim to highlight the most essential terms and components of his theory which will be most relevant in the analysis put forth in this thesis. Following Wendt's own chronology in his classic book *Social Theory of International Politics* will also give us more structure in the process.

First, Wendt places an emphasis on the state system project, which he supports by elaborating on the central role played by the state. Despite the important role of other actors, he posits that states "are still the primary medium through which the effects of other actors on the regulation of violence are channeled into the world system."[13]   He elaborates that non-state actors may be "becoming more important than states as initiators of change, but system change ultimately happens through states." States are thus the central actor in the system, according to Wendt.

This thesis has a similar bias, focusing predominantly on states and state-actors instead of other units. Other actors, like intergovernmental organizations for example, are mentioned within the analysis. However, I use such intergovernmental organizations, like the League of Nations, to better understand the international system as a whole, instead of assessing them as actors within the international arena.

Wendt also differentiates between ideational and materialist theories and rightly places Constructivism within the ideational realm. In this way, Constructivism's overall project revolves around the structure of social consciousness or ideas.[14] He emphasizes that "It does not

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[13] Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999: 7.

[14] Ibid., 24-25.

mean that power and interest are unimportant, but rather that their meaning and effects depend on actors' ideas." This point is central to the argument and analysis of this thesis, since sectarianism is an idea, though it does have material foundations and outcomes, as will be seen later in the paper.

The holistic dimension of Constructivism is also elaborated upon. What does a holistic approach entail? Unlike one-dimensional approaches, holistic theories do not focus mainly on individual agents and interactions. One must delve into a deeper analysis which is not simply causal and focused on behavioral effects only. One must look at the property effects. For example, a Constructivist analysis can assess how interactions actually impact the system or actors' identity, not only behavioral changes.[15] Wendt's moderate approach is once again highlighted when he takes both behavioral and property effects into consideration. Wendt stresses that "the structure of the international system exerts both kinds of effects on state identities. These may be less than the effects of domestic structures, and certainly a complete theory of state identity would have a substantial domestic component."

Wendt continues throughout his book to elaborate on the importance of such unit-level interaction analysis, that of interactions between states which have behavioral effects. The unit-level analysis is needed prior to delving deeper into the property effects of the full structure. To elaborate further on these important concepts, he states: "The one [causal] describes a change in the state of Y as a result of a change in the state of an independently existing X. The other [constitutive] describes how the properties of an X make a Y what it is… The causal and

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[15] Ibid., 26-27.

constitutive effects of culture on agents can be exerted on just their behavior, on their properties (identities and interests), or on both."[16]

In terms of the structure-agent debate, Wendt makes it clear that both are central to Constructivism. "It is important that IR do both [agent and system] kinds of theorizing."[17] It is not enough for Wendt to focus on one or the other. Purely looking at interactions of agents – i.e. states – would be reductionist. Unit interaction-level analysis is considered micro-structural and the systemic approach is defined as macro-structural.[18] Both types of analysis are important to Wendt. My analysis will be biased towards micro-level interactions in earlier chapters but will aim to delve deeper into a macro-structural analysis in the concluding chapters. Another important highlight of Wendt's theory lies in his definition of the social system:

> The structure of any social system will contain three elements: material conditions, interests, and ideas… [They are] distinct and play different roles in explanation. The significance of material conditions is constituted in part by interest, but they are not the same thing…. Similarly, interests are constituted in part by ideas, but they are not the same thing… without ideas there are no interests, without interests there are no meaningful material conditions, without material conditions there is no reality at all…. The task of structural theorizing ultimately must be to show how the elements of a system fit together into some kind of whole."[19]

Herein is the basis of this thesis. I expand most on the ideological component of the state identities of Iraq and Syria and how domestic, international, micro and macro structures have constituted the current state of affairs. To do this, Wendt's three elements are assessed – material conditions, interests and at the heart of all of these, ideas. As Wendt so accurately points out, "people act toward objects, including each other, on the basis of the meanings those objects have

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[16] Ibid., 165.

[17] Ibid., 11.

[18] Ibid., 150.

[19] Ibid., 139.

for them."[20] Wendt narrows down this notion of "ideas" to knowledge – or a belief that is taken to be true by actors. Even this concept of knowledge is complex. Knowledge is a set of "interlocking beliefs" which is subjective and intersubjective at the same time. The system in which these beliefs exist automatically has a constitutive effect.

To clarify the above, Wendt gives the poignant example of two identical states that believe themselves to be the "hegemon," thus identifying themselves as stabilizing forces in the system. In the scenario in which the dominant state is legitimate within the system, it is empowered by others and thus can act on its self-identity. It is also constituted as the "stabilizer" and the "hegemon" by itself and the system. In the other case, the dominant state isn't empowered by others, thus other states will negatively perceive actions to balance the system, which will impact actions and reactions. In that scenario, the state is not actually a hegemon as this identity is limited to its own beliefs. In Wendt's own words, contrary to the Finnemore and Sikkink analysis, his approach to culture gives "equal weight to agency and structure."[21]

In addition to Wendt's theoretical framework, this thesis is also partially inspired by the theoretical work of Iver Neumann in "Self and Other in International Relations," which explored the role of identity in shaping international relations.[22] Neumann claims that, contrary to popular belief, eliminating the "Other" is not the purpose of politics. Instead, Neumann claims that the purpose of politics is creating and maintaining this other. This basic idea about the "other" and the "self" will appear often throughout the paper.

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid., 184.

[22] Iver Neumann, "Self and Other in International Relations," *European Journal of International Relations* 2:2 (1996): 139-174.

Through Constructivism and its elements, which have been elaborated upon, one cannot take sectarianism for granted. To claim that it was inevitable for sectarianism to erupt due to competing interests of religious groups, for example, would be reductionist. One must look further and assess how interests and identities were and are continually constituted.

Applying Intermestics and Other Methodological Issues

The works mentioned above focus on the construction of international relations – or relations between two or more states. This thesis expands on their work by bringing in intermestics to operationalize this critical social Constructivist lens. According to Bahgat Korany, intermestics is defined as the following:

> It is a reflection of creeping globalization, characterized by the retreat of exclusive state sovereignty, and the rise instead of the intensity of societal interconnectedness and speedy circulation of ideas, but without wiping out the impact of local features.[23]

Our aim is to understand how sectarianism within Iraq and Syria respectfully has been impacted by the organic connectedness of local and global influences, as the identities within the nations have been shaped by both factors. To ignore one or the other would, once again, lead to reductionism. Given Wendt's emphasis on the importance of domestic factors and the clear focus of intermestics on both domestic and international variables, I expand on Wendt's understanding of micro-structural level analysis by adding domestic factors in this area. While Wendt uses this term to define interaction-level analysis between states, we will view micro-level analysis as both between states and within one state (domestic). Macro-structural analysis will sustain its purely international systemic approach.

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[23] Bahgat Korany, "The Middle East Since the Cold War," in *International Relations of the Middle East,* ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 81.

Through a historical analysis which relies on both secondary and primary data, this thesis will explore the construction of identities, ideas and structures in Iraq and Syria which led to sectarian conflict. Materials used include secondary research from books and journals along with an exploration of memoires, interviews, state records, speeches, statements, news articles and survey data. Using this information, I will expand on the application of a Wendt-inspired Constructivism to the realm of intermestics, allowing for a more complete understanding of how sectarianism was constructed in Iraq and Syria.

The historical perspective of this thesis is worth a brief discussion. In International Relations, political scientists have predominantly focused on the current political moment with a hint of forward-looking analysis, to varying degrees of success. This thesis looks back on a period of approximately one-hundred years of intermestic occurrences and applies a Constructivist IR analysis. Why did I choose to have a longer historic perspective? In order to understand the states of Iraq and Syria and an issue as complex as sectarianism, one is obliged to look at a longer period of time, especially given that those who espouse sectarian sentiments contextualize themselves within a historic sense of victimhood.[24] Furthermore, early sectarian policies have materialized changes in the position of power of certain groups over others, as will be seen with the impact of the French mandate on Alawi domination in Syria.[25] We must assess different sectarian moments to see how intermestics have played into the construction of such sectarian identities. Given the real impact of history in shaping such identities, the only way to understand the issue is by going back in time to the original construction of the state itself and the politics that have influenced identity formation.

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[24] John Ehrenberg, J. Patrice McSherry, Jose Ramon Sanchez and Caroleen Marji Sayej, *The Iraq Papers.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 313-314.

[25] Nikolaos Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 26-27.

Situating the Thesis within the Research

The literature in political science analyzing sectarianism is split between two camps. One perspective emphasizes the intrinsic conflicts between different groups derived from competing symbols and ancient conflicts. This is known as the primordialist argument.[26] On the other side is the modernist perspective, which focuses on imagined political identities which are then manipulated by the ruling elite.[27]

The primordialist argument is quite simple to understand and that is perhaps why it has been the dominant explanation used by the general public and media. A look at the Sykes-Picot agreement could indicate that the issue lies with the way mandates were segmented, without taking into consideration the various ethnicities within. In this perspective, the story is simple. In the twentieth century, just before the end of World War I, the British and French divided the Ottoman Empire into French and British mandates.[28] The agreement, with its simple straight lines dividing the region, made no real effort to understand the tribal and religious diversity within the newly created mandates. As a result of this agreement, Syria, at the time of the outbreak of civil war in 2011, became a state with the following diverse population: 64 % Sunni Arabs, 9% Christians, 3% Druze, 1% Shia, 10% Kurds and Alawis.[29] In Iraq, according to Pew Research in 2011, 51 percent of the population identifies themselves as Shia Muslims and 42 %

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[26] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 357.

[27] Ibid., 358.

[28] Tarek Osman, "Why border lines drawn with a ruler in WWI still rock the Middle East," *BBC News*, December 14, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25299553.

[29] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 350-358.

identifies as Sunni.[30] This primordialist perspective thus claims that due to ancient hatred and competing ideologies, it was inevitable for sectarianism to run amok in 2011 Syria during the Arab Spring and in 2006 Iraq without the control of Saddam Hussein. This is a popular belief, one that even some world leaders hold to. According to U.S. President Barack Obama in a 2013 statement on Syria, "In that part of the world, there are ancient sectarian differences."[31]

Fanar Haddad makes a more sophisticated argument for the primordialist perspective.[32] Haddad claims that modern political identities in Iraq are based on ancient ethnic ties bound to certain myth-symbols. Those myth-symbols are dormant and ready to be reawakened in future crisis. This is a bottom-up perspective, unlike the modernist views as will be seen shortly.

In line with this perspective, Naser Ghobadzdeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh argue that "other"ing is intrinsic to Islamic thought. According to the authors, Islam uses "other"ing to justify itself, presenting a binary world of "core true believers" surrounded by disbelief.[33] This othering has thus evoked sectarian beliefs that ignited into violence against Shias in the Muslim world. Similarly, the authors claim that Shia Muslims also use "othering" against Sunnis, as exemplified by revolutionary Iran which depicted the Sunni governments as tyrannical and illegitimate.

> For the Islamists this is a battle between good and evil – a Manichean perspective which opens the door to the evocation of the concept of jihad to defeat evil. Holy war is the jihadists' answer to the above challenge, which presents the good vs evil (Islam vs Kufr) duel as a matter of existential urgency. While not all Islamists are jihadists, jihadism

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[30] Michael Lipka, "The Sunni-Shia divide: Where they live, what they believe and how they view each other," *Pew Research Center*, June 18, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/18/the-sunni-shia-divide-where-they-live-what-they-believe-and-how-they-view-each-other.

[31] Barack Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria," The White House, August 31, 2013.

[32] Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

[33] Naser Ghobadzdeh and Shahram Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the prevalence of 'other' in Islamic Thought," *Third World Quarterly* 36:4 (2015), 691.

draws on the Islamist world-view and is sustained by practices and traditions of othering in Islamic scholarship.[34]

While the authors of the above focus on the construction of "other"ing, there is an assumption that this is an intrinsic part of Islam, and thus the argument becomes a mix of primordialist and Constructivist. The authors claim that the construction of the "other" is a natural part of Islam, its history and its myth symbols. This assumption leads to the logical conclusion that there can be no reconciliation among different religious groups in Muslim-dominant countries.

On the other side of the spectrum are modernists who claim that political identities are imagined and manipulated by ruling elites. Different scholars have focused on varying aspects of the creation of sectarianism. Research agendas in the past have usually focused on politics from above and have been able to come up with a variety of intriguing studies.

According to Christopher Phillips, for example, Syria has been the subject of manipulation by the Ottomans and French as well as Syrian politicians in the 50s and 60s and the Assads after them.[35] Phillips argues that sectarian propaganda was also used by the Muslim Brotherhood, through the use of anti-Alawi writings of Ibn Taymieh. In the Bashar al-Assad era, Alawi elites were favored and Sunnis marginalized in the interest of the ruling elites. Such modernists thus view sectarianism from the top-down, whereby ruling elites have the control, unlike the primordialists.

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[34] Ibid., 692.

[35] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 362-363.

Another author, Benjamin White focused most of his energies on the analysis of the Syrian mandate period.[36] White's research is an intriguing Constructivist analysis of the concepts of majority and minority in Syria. He does not focus on sectarianism explicitly but is instead interested in the constitution of identities within this dichotomy of minority and majority and how the mandate period brought these terms into popular coinage among both elites and the general population.

There is a plethora of other writings currently available for those interested in researching sectarianism in Iraq and Syria. Many research projects have delved into the impact of the mandate periods on Syria and Iraq. Others have focused on a single issue like White's research into the construction of minorities. Phillips, for example, focused on to what degree the conflict in Syria can be characterized as sectarian. It is agreed in most of the literature that there is an element of religious sectarianism to the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. This thesis is not interested in proving this point specifically, but instead will look at the elements of sectarianism historically in both cases in order to analyze *how* sectarianism has been constructed.

This thesis aims to create an analysis that is as unbiased as possible towards either only top-down or bottom-up perspectives. The primordialist approach is viewed as bottom-up while the modernist approach focuses on the top-down. Such analyses deny the dynamism of politics and bind actors, interests and ideas to a single vertical motion. The use of diaries, journals and eyewitness reports through the Constructivist perspective will allow for a more dynamic analysis than either the traditional primordialist or modernist perspective can attain since it is not bound by these limited views. Actors, interests and ideas are seen as dynamic and bound to act and react to each other and thus are not bound to any single vertical motion.

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[36] Benjamin Thomas White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East: The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2011), 40-45.

This thesis thus aims to do two things. First, it aims to bring forth a Constructivist analysis of information available on Iraq and Syria. It will assess secondary sources through the prism of Wendt's Constructivist approach, and it will count on primary sources, including speeches, diaries, journals, eyewitness reports, literature and newspaper articles which include first-hand accounts of events. This thesis is unique in its historic perspective on both cases and its approach in analyzing sectarianism in Iraq and Syria in order to form both a case-study Constructivist analysis of each state's sectarian character and also assess the common agent and structure elements in both. Through an assessment explicitly using Wendt's approach, this thesis will bring forth additional insights about the construction of sectarianism in Iraq and Syria.

It is important to have both a case-study component as well as a synthesis of the two cases. The case studies will allow for a deeper assessment of the particular elements of each state. Ignoring the individual components would lead to too much generalization that could be misunderstood. Still, identifying the key similar patterns of the cases will allow us to identify some of the more generalizable points in the construction of sectarianism that could potentially be used for future research.

Chapter 2 – Constructing Sectarianism in Iraq

Introduction

The Shia-Sunni divide in Iraq is one that has been constantly conveyed in media and in research. The first question one must ask is, are sectarian identities salient? The second question is: if they are prominent among the population, are they expressed in opposition to one another in a way that would lead to sectarian violence? According to Pew Research in 2011, 14 percent of Iraqi Sunnis said that they do not consider Shias to be Muslim; in contrast, only 1 percent of

Iraqi Shias made the same claim that their Sunni countrymen are not Muslim.[37] While these may seem like small percentages, one can interpret this viewpoint as the more radical perspective, as it completely ostracizes the other group as outside of the Muslim tradition, which, as will be seen, is central to Iraqi identity. It is also significant in that it shows greater animosity on the side of the Sunnis than the Shias, which will be understood through the analysis in this chapter.

Another Pew Research finding is able to paint a more complete picture. In a survey of thirty-nine predominantly Muslim countries in 2011 and 2012, research noted that a significant share of Muslims globally don't see a distinction between Sunni and Shia Islam and thus view themselves in a non-sectarian manner by affiliating as "just a Muslim." On the other hand, in Iraq only 5 percent answered "just a Muslim" and more than ninety-percent of respondents categorized themselves in one of the affiliated groups.[38] This is significant because it shows a salient sense of affiliation with a particular sect of Islam. However, these numbers alone cannot portray the complex identity conflicts at play in Iraq. One must delve deeper.

The twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Iraq are intriguing for the study of Constructivism and intermestics for a variety of reasons. The country's history is deeply complex with the intermingling of international and domestic influences, both of which have resulted in concrete effects that can be seen throughout its history. Other cases may give way to interesting analyses based on international diplomatic ties or international pressures, but Iraq has seen its fair share of direct international interventions, whether during its early years as a nascent state under the British mandate or its recent experience as an occupied territory under the United

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[37] Lipka, "The Sunni-Shia divide," *Pew Research*.

[38] Ibid.

States of America. And, of course, it has experienced the ramifications of changes in neighboring countries and the globe. This history has entrenched intermestics in the country, with both domestic and international influences shaping Iraq's identity and the internal relations of its peoples.

Before delving into our analysis, we first briefly revisit some of the main principles of Constructivism. Wendt can shed light on some of the main principles that will be used to assess intermestics in our case. According to Wendt, "Identities and such collective cognitions do not exist apart from each other; they are 'mutually constitutive.'"[39] He also goes on to claim, "It is through reciprocal interaction... that we create and instantiate the relatively enduring social structures in terms of which we define our identities and interests." These interactions are thus integral to our analyses. We will assess the interactions between states and within them to see how sectarian religious identities have become such an integral part of the Iraqi narrative and identity, sectarian identities which continue to plague the nation during its current civil war. We begin by assessing the period of the British mandate in Iraq, followed by an analysis of the Baathist regime and ending with the impact of the American invasion in Iraq.

The British Mandate: Orientalist Thought & the Early Construction of Iraqi Identity

Many have claimed that Iraq's current chaotic state is a simple result of the fact that the nature of the "state" and Iraq's borders were created through a Western lens. One can take a look at the Sykes-Picot agreement and interpret that the issue lies with the way mandates were segmented, without taking into consideration the various ethnicities within the boundaries. Just before the end of the First World War, the British and French segmented the Ottoman Empire

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[39] Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politic," *International Organization Foundation* 46:2 (1992), 405-406.

and took control of territories under their respective mandates.[40] The agreement's overly simplistic straight lines dividing the region gave no heed or consideration for the tribal and religious diversity within the newly created mandates. Referencing back to the Pew Research of 2011, 51 percent of the Iraqi population identifies as Shia Muslims and 42 % identify as Sunni, in addition to a number of other minorities such as the Kurds and Assyrians.[41]

It is not sufficient to chalk up sectarianism to diversity, as there are countless success stories for quite diverse states. As Wendt notes, "it is through reciprocal interaction" that social constructs are created and reinforced.[42] What reciprocal interactions have shaped Iraqi sectarianism? We first turn to the powerful British ideas about Iraqi society in the early twentieth century and how these notions led to concrete constructs in terms of social institutions and actions which irreversibly impacted the population.

The League of Nations handed Great Britain the mandate of Iraq after World War I in 1920, with at least the superficial appearance that the 'mandate' was a step away from the former model of European domination in the form of colonial conquest.[43] Britain's inherited ideas about Iraqi society influenced the policies enacted in the nascent state; policies which helped define Iraq's early identity.

Britain's acting commissioners throughout the beginning of the early twentieth century give insight into British perception of Iraqi society. As Acting Civil Commissioner in Iraq from

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[40] Tarek Osman, "Why border lines drawn with a ruler in WWI still rock the Middle East," *BBC News*, December 14, 2013, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-25299553.

[41] Lipka, "The Sunni-Shia divide."

[42] Wendt, "Anarchy is What States Make of It," 406.

[43] Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation Building and a History Denied*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 4.

1918 to 1920, A.T. Wilson put no trust in the Iraqi people to rule their own country.[44] Under his time as commissioner, he largely ignored Iraqi sentiment in the new state. According to Wilson, Great Britain must not be "diverted by a handful of amateur politicians in Baghdad." After tribal uprisings overcame the mandate in 1920, Percy Cox replaced Wilson and took the mantle of High Commissioner in Iraq.

Orientalist Ideas Re-Constitute Identities around Tribe & Religious Divisions

British commissioners came to power with preconceived notions of the former Ottoman Empire and the Orient in general. Toby Dodge describes the Orientalist lens through which British personnel viewed the remnants of the Ottoman Empire. Their understanding of Iraqi society was based on the "popular imaginative constructions influential in British and wider European society from the eighteenth century onwards."[45] This meant that these ideas played a key role in how the British mandate operated by influencing the types of interests Britain had which thus materialized into policies on the ground. With the negative stereotypes of the Ottoman Turks in mind, the new personnel considered the urban class educated under the Ottoman Empire "tainted by training and working within corrupt institutions." This powerful idea about the inept Ottoman-corrupted class needed an "other" to which it could be juxtaposed. Rural Arab tribes, who were seen as "true" Iraqis that remained unadulterated by the vile nature of the Turkish enemy, filled this "other" role. As Dodge states:

> With the entry of the Ottoman Empire into the First World War, British propaganda had begun to use Orientalist tropes to portray "the Turk" as degenerate, slavish and brutal. As the war progressed, strategic thinking and public imagination focused on the role of the Arab revolt and hence on the non-Turkish populations within the Ottoman Empire. This conscious and subconscious separation of Ottoman and Arab became more accentuated

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[44] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 14-15.

[45] Ibid., 43.

with the birth of the mandate ideal in 1919 The Arab populations of the Ottoman Empire were now allies of the victorious powers. Free from Turkish oppression, they were worthy candidates for states of their own, capable of benefiting from European tutelage.[46]

The discourse around the urbanites clearly shows the negative perceptions and one-dimensional constructs created by the British due to Orientalism. Commissioner Cox called the urban elite "impecunious and backward," whereas a British Political Officer in Najaf called for the isolation of the "half-fledged intelligence of Baghdad" who would adulterate the rest of society.[47] With these notions in mind, the British turned their eyes to the tribes – or the romanticized version of the tribal system which the British helped bring to life.

Such images were powerful and continued to influence British perception of Iraqis whose progression during the Ottoman era was completely ignored. In *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, written in 1925, Longrigg claims that Iraq passed through four hundred years of stagnant Ottoman rule.[48] As he put it, the country had experienced "almost no progress" either in "mind and spirit, or of material wealth and modern method." Longrigg posits that Iraq at the turn of the twentieth century may be a "little less wild and ignorant, as unfitted for self-government, and not less corrupt."

Furthermore, not only did the British project constructs of popular Ottoman Orientalist sentiments onto Iraq, but they also falsely projected their own society's experience onto the Iraqi one. In an attempt to organize society, Britain placed a single unifying tribe above others in different regions.[49] Through the new British policy, tribal leadership would pass down through

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[46] Ibid., 44.

[47] Ibid., 72.

[48] Stephan Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925), 321.

[49] Youssef H. Abdoul-Enein, *Iraq in Turmoil: Historical Perspectives of Dr. Ali Al-Wardi, from the Ottoman Empire to King Feisal,* Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2012, 82.

familial ties, from father to son or brother to brother. This was a direct reflection of the British monarchical system and had no foundation in the organic relations of tribes in Iraq. In fact, the process for the bequeathal of Iraqi tribal leadership had once been based on consensus, with tribes collectively selecting a leader who was deemed most qualified. Such policies and the allowance of privileges to certain tribes to tax and lord over others led to animosities that grew into the revolt of 1920. As Dodge states, "the British projected simplistic but powerful notions of their own historic past on to the rural population of Iraq."[50]

The consequence of these British perceptions was a concrete construction of Iraqi society, which directed society towards rural divisions instead of paving a pathway for the urban class to build a more modern state. The British put power into the hands of the tribes, through the tribal sheikhs, who would be used as intermediaries between the people and the state.[51] The sheikhs became the rural aristocracy and the educated urban class was completely stripped of power. All of these real changes arose from powerful Orientalist ideas.

The emphasis on the tribal system can be seen through the efforts of the British to categorize and order society according to tribal lineage. Tribes were chronicled and details were put together at length in relation to the origins of each tribe, the larger group from which it came, and the degree of tribal "purity," which was measured by how directly leaders were descendent from early tribal founders.[52] British records from the period show long, elaborate lists detailing information about various tribes across Iraq. Headlines include the number of men within tribes,

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[50] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq,* 57.

[51] Ibid., 61.

[52] Ibid., 74-77.

number of rifles and number of towers controlled.[53] The only individuals explicitly named in these lists were the key sheikhs from each tribe, who were heavily investigated to better understand their personality and lineage. The clear emphasis on these individual personalities and Britain's negligence of the rest of society shows the importance placed on tribal leaders' shoulders. A report on the land revenue in the region of Kirkuk in 1919 summarizes the centrality of the tribe in the British mandate of Iraq:

> Political freedom cannot be attained except through a community. We must therefore look for some simple form of responsible community on which to base our system. The simplest form of community in the purely Kurdish area is the tribe or the section of tribe: elsewhere the village.[54]

Often, written accounts by British personnel during the mandate make reference to the tribal nature of Iraqi society, with A.T. Wilson describing the "unsophisticated" Arab, Kurd, or Persian with their deep loyalty to family and tribe. Thus, it became policy to only consider the tribal sheikh when considering policy issues. As Gertrude Bell states, the "rank and file of the tribesmen, shepherds, marsh dwellers, rice, barley, and date cultivators of the Euphrates and Tigris, whose experience of statecraft was confined to speculations, as to the performances of their next-door neighbors" would hardly be useful in advising the nascent state.[55]

The unstable nature of this formalized tribal system, in which the sheikh soon became the ultimate source of power and authority over whole areas, becomes quite clear by looking at just one example of the failure of its authority. Ali Sulaiman, who ruled the Dulaim on the upper Euphrates, was seen by the British as an instrumental force of authority.[56] In 1922, Yetts, a

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[53] Jane Priestland and Alan de L. Rush, *Records of Iraq: 1914-1966,* vol. 2 (London: Archive Editions Limited, 2001), 140-144.

[54] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq,* 77.

[55] Ibid., 78.

[56] Ibid., 89.

divisional adviser, had placed his greatest hopes in Sulaiman's ability to wield authority over the region: "if a place can be found in the body politic for the type which Sheikh Ali Sulaiman represents with their rights clearly defined the whole-hearted support of this class can be counted on." But despite this enthusiastic vote of confidence, Sulaiman failed in his role and it became apparent that the power placed upon the sheikhs was shallower than expected. While several sectional leaders had recognized Sulaiman as their supreme sheikh, as the British desired, in an attempt to avoid British retribution for their part in the 1920 rebellion, this show of support came without real foundations. In 1924, Sulaiman was unable to collect revenues from the people and needed to call the British to help him fulfill his duty. As it turned out, perhaps the sheikh's power and influence were not as strong as the British imagined.

Some of the points mentioned above are useful in understanding that the British did not base their perceptions of Iraqi society on an objective perception of reality. The British formed their own constructs that in many ways altered Iraqi society. Giving power to tribal leaders in geographically divided territory inevitably brings political power struggles in this arena. The salience of the tribal identity, when it is the main identifying marker used in government, would thus be higher in such a society. Instead of being organized by wealth, education, or other identifiers, the tribal root is activated as the main identifier. Not only did the British bring greater salience to tribal identity but they also fed into Shia-Sunni tensions.

Empowering the Minority: Disenfranchising the Shia & Constructing the Shia "Other"

Dodge affirms that religious divisions were a very important category for British personnel during the time of the Iraq mandate. According to Sir Henry Dobbs:

> The Jews and the Christians . . . are the most progressive of the inhabitants of the country. Although they number only about 7 percent of the population, the proportion of

wealth in their hands must be very much greater. They are much more interested in the development of the country.[57]

A prominent element of the Orientalist perspective that dominated British thought is thus the concept of the backwardness of Islam. Longrigg states that "no Islamic state in modern times had reached the first rank of nations."[58] The effect of Islam meant that "in the very air and aspect of the East there seems to lie an acquiescence, a lack of the forward impulse." Just like with the tribes, the British categorized groups based on religious affiliation. While Islam as a whole was viewed negatively, Shia Islam seemed "more Islamic than Sunni Islam," according to Dodge's analysis.[59] The British, weary of the Shias, gave preferential treatment to Sunnis and Sunni tribes.

Just as will be seen in later years in Iraqi history, the Shia were categorized under British rule as "alien" – Persians who had no real or authentic connection to Iraq. The Shia ulama, intellectuals, or *Mujtahid*s were looked at with suspicion under British rule. Gertrude Bell, an influential administrator and advisor in the creation of the British mandated Iraq, seems highly skeptical of them and repeatedly references Shia clerics as "alien popes," "exercising real temporal authority . . . and obstructing the Government at every turn."[60] The *Mujtahid*s were a hindrance to Iraq's development due to their backward nature. The rebellion of 1920 was blamed fully on the Shias – and their foreign nature. British intelligence reports between 1920 and 1927 focused on the alleged role of the Shia *Mujtahid*s in inflaming the violent rebellion amongst the Shia tribes along the Euphrates. The British used these suspicions to justify consolidating power

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[57] Ibid., 67.

[58] Longrigg, *Four Centuries of Modern Iraq*, 322.

[59] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq,* 67.

[60] Ibid., 69.

and authority with Sunnis. It thus appears that the British, whether knowingly or unintentionally, were fueling sectarianism by dividing societal power and placing Sunnis above their Shia counterparts, more specifically Sunni tribes over Shia ones.

It may be useful in this analysis to go back to some primary texts written by those who supported in the administration and creation of the new Iraqi state. We can take a brief look at the published letters of Gertrude Bell, the previously mentioned administrator and advisor in the creation of the British mandated Iraq. Her words are quite revealing of the attitude of the British – as well as, in some cases, the Iraqis – in the formation of the state. Specifically, we will assess her discourse on the Shia-Sunni relations and on how the British went about forming the new state when it came to religion.

In her letters, Bell frequently mentioned the animosity between Sunnis and Shias, and points to the hostility of the Shias towards the new mandate. Bell states that "the Naqib's Council has against it almost the whole body of Shias, first because it's looked upon as of British parentage, but also because it contains considerably less Shias than Sunnis."[61] She then goes on to highlight an important aspect of British attitude, which influenced the formation of the new government. "The Shias, as I've often observed, are one of the greatest problems." As Dodge noted, Shias are often mixed with Persians, with no distinction made between the two. In a letter by Sir Henry Dobbs, he also notes the threat of the Shias in the following:

> The frontiers having thus been strengthened and the Turkish menace for the time staved off, the field was free to deal with the agitation of reactionary Shia divines against the elections for the Constituent Assembly. By July 1923, their demeanour towards King Faisal and towards the Iraq government had become intolerably arrogant, and King Faisal saw no other way than to authorize the deportation of their leaders, Sheikh Mahdi al Khalisi… [This] was followed by the voluntary exodus to Persia of several other prominent Persian divines as a public protest.[62]

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[61] Gertrude Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*, (London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1927), 573.

[62] Ibid., 544.

In the above, it is clear that no distinction is made between the Shia and the Persians. Dobbs begins by noting the threat of the "Shia divines" and then makes reference to the exodus of the "Persian divines." One can only assume that he uses the two interchangeably. Bell continues with this similar identification of the Shia as Persian when she explains the lack of representation of Shia in the acting Government. In one letter, Bell recalls the memory of an Iraqi asking her why a certain cleric wasn't included in the government. In this recollection, she responded by highlighting the Persian descent of the individual cleric in question and thus his inability to serve on the Iraqi cabinet.[63] In her words: "their [i.e. the Shia's] leading people [are] the learned vines and their families are all Persian subjects."

To assess whether or not these Shias were truly of Persian origin or if their allegiance lay with Persia is beyond the scope of this thesis, and to a great degree, it is irrelevant to this analysis whether or not this link was fact or fiction. What matters is that there seems to be an intentional exclusion of the Shia people by the British mandate. These Shia within Iraq, regardless of their origin, had been placed under the new Iraqi borders by the mandate and the Sykes-Picot agreement. Thus, they were – and are – constituents of the Iraqi state. As Bell notes, they were – and remain – the majority of the state. The purposeful exclusion of this large group would inevitably lead to animosity based on sectarian religious divides as this is the identifying trait by which they were excluded from participating in the nascent state.

Yet, despite these clear indications that the exclusion of Shia from power was a purposeful exercise by the British, the blame for sectarian division is later placed on the Sunnis in power. Whether true or false, it seems that the British imagination of the contentious Orient is

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[63] Ibid., 573.

quite strong, even if their leaders show the same bias. In a letter written on January 22nd, 1921, Bell writes:

> I hear rumours that the Sunnis of Bagdad are considering whether it wouldn't suit their book best to have a Turkish prince as King. They are afraid of being swamped by the Shias, against whom a Turk might be a better bulwark than a son of the Sharif. The present Government which is predominantly Sunni, isn't [sic] doing anything to conciliate the Shias. They are considering a number of administrative appointments for the provinces; almost all the names they put are Sunnis, even for the wholly [sic] Shia province on the Euphrates, with the exception of Karbala and Nejd where even they haven't [sic] the face to propose Sunnis…If they want popular native institutions, the Shias, who are in a large majority, must take their share.[64]

This sentiment is at odds with Bell's previous observation when she labeled Shias "one of the greatest problems."[65] The paternalistic tone is prevalent in the selected passage as well as others, with Bell appearing to offer sage advice to the Iraqis who were unable to rule fairly among their diverse population. Regardless of the attempts by the British, it is clear that it was not only the Shia who were opposed to the mandate and the way in which it ruled, despite attempts to categorize discontent as purely a Shia problem. As Bell herself states "It's true that few are pleased, but they wouldn't have been pleased with any line whatever."[66]

It is important to note that none of the above analysis claims that the constructs present during this time period were created by the British or during the British mandate. It would indeed be an oversimplification and factually inaccurate to exclusively blame the British for the sectarian conflicts that have paralyzed the country in recent years. During the Ottoman Empire, Sunni Iraqis were similarly favored over their Shia brethren, as there was also the same

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[64] Ibid., 585.

[65] Ibid., 573.

[66] Ibid., 573.

contentious fear of the Shia's potential connection to Persia. However, the British imagination did make its impact during the early years of the Iraqi state.

Given the power and ability to create a new state, the British chose to strengthen tribal and sectarian identities. This has been highlighted by the explicit statements from Gertrude Bell and Stephen Longrigg, both of whom have negative perceptions of the Shia. The British brought forth a tribal system of organization, instead of supporting the already established educated middle class. Out of fear of the Ottoman influence and their belief in the Ottoman's backwardness, the tribal sheikh policy emerged. Furthermore, Sunni tribes were favored over Shia ones, even in predominantly Shia-majority areas. This gave Sunni Iraqis power over Shia Iraqis and built the foundation of the sectarian history that has allowed for the development of Shia Iraqi sense of victimhood. As the Grand Ayatollah Sayyid Kadhim Al-Haeri would state almost a century after the mandate in 2002, "The rights of the Shia have been violated for a long time and up to our period today… as a result of tyrannical governments."[67] As early as the Iraqi state's inception in the 1920's, the Iraqi Shia can point to a sectarian policy enacted by the state against them in favor of their Sunni counterparts. These nurtured feelings of sectarian victimhood would only be further aggravated throughout the decades, specifically in the period of the 1990s and after the 2003 American invasion of Iraq.

This section aimed to give a brief look at and assessment of the early roots of sectarianism in the Iraqi state. The British mandate in Iraq and the attitude of the colonizers has been analyzed to focus on the possible signs of early sectarianism that were emphasized during the early twentieth century. While many eventful years followed, we now fast forward decades

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[67] John Ehrenberg et. al, *The Iraq Papers,* 316.

later to the 1990s when sectarianism burgeoned as a result of intermestic interactions which are vital to the understanding of Shia-Sunni relations in recent years.

The Baath in Power: Minority Domination & Intermestics Reinforce Sectarianism

> We must not submerge ourselves in the theoretical pan-Arab and neglect the direct, local patriotic (*al-watani*). . . . We must speak of the Iraqi who comes from Sulaymaniyya [i.e., a Kurd] and he who comes from Basra [i.e., a Shia], without pointing to his ethnic origins. . . . Let us delete the words Arabs and Kurds and replace them with the term the Iraqi people.[68]

The speaker of these reconciliatory words was none other than Saddam Hussein, the then Vice President, in a speech given in 1975 to Iraq's teachers. This approach was generally sought by Saddam in his early years and up until the 1990s.[69] In the beginning, the regime spent lavishly on supporting artists and poets, commissioning new festivals, building new museums and renovating older ones. Generally, the regime pursued a policy that celebrated Iraqi history as far back as not only the early Islamic era but also the Babylonians and Assyrians. According to Saddam in his early years, his Baathist vision for Iraq was not theocratic. He stated: "Our party is not neutral between atheism and faith. It is always on the side of faith, but it is not a religious party. . . . What we must do is to oppose the institutionalization of religion in the state and in society. . . . Let us return to the roots of our religion—but not bring it into politics."[70]

However, such liberal and unifying policies were ephemeral. Domestic and international interactions led Saddam to pursue a new method, one that unrepentantly and explicitly harbored sectarian sentiments. Jerry Long states that from 1968 to 1977, the regime had no religious overtones. However, from 1977 to 1989 this began to change with more Islamic themes in the

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[68] Long, Jerry. *Saddam's War of Words.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004, 55.

[69] Ibid., 55.

[70] Ibid.

official state discourse. From 1989 and onward, Long described the period as one of "deliberate Islamic flag waving."[71]

This is not to say that the Shia-Sunni issue had been resolved prior to 1989. Briefly, we can return to the prior period and point to how sectarianism continued after the Iraqi mandate. During the days of the monarchy, there was a famous saying that permeated the Shia community. "The taxes are on the Shia, death is on the Shia, and the posts are for the Sunnis."[72] This clearly shows a sense of victimhood that continued throughout the twentieth century. After the monarchy fell, top posts still remained for Sunnis who held approximately eighty percent of the highest positions, with Shias only making up sixteen percent, despite their majority in the country. Even during the Baathist early years, the Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) was made up of fourteen Arab Sunnis and one Kurd – with no Shia representation. By the 1980s, two Shias were part of the seven-person council. Saddam favored his own family members and the Tikritis tribe over others – most of whom were Sunni. The Islamic Call party, formed in 1957, was led by an Iraqi Shia who felt disenfranchised from politics and continued to remain active throughout the following decades.[73]

Yet, despite many clashes and the arrest and execution of Shias from such parties throughout the 1970s and 80s, the government attempted to co-opt Shias through its policies. The Baathist government gave cash gifts to Shia communities and worked to improve infrastructure in Shia-majority areas, including the holy cities of Najaf and Karbala.[74] From 1974 until 1982, the government spent more than 100 million dollars in Karbala, a predominantly Shia area. In

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[71] Ibid., 59.

[72] Ibid., 60-61.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid., 64-66.

general, things were looking up for the Shias who saw real improvements in their communities. The party aimed to not only improve the social development of the southern regime which was heavily Shia, but it also opened up new opportunities for Shias to participate in government. By 1990, before the tides would turn once again, Shia held nearly the same portion of Baathist posts as their Sunni counterparts.[75] Furthermore, they made up approximately twenty percent of the general posts in the Iraqi army and were heading approximately half of the state-owned enterprises. These improvements were, of course, aimed to sustain Saddam's power and portray the Baathist party in a benevolent light. As long as the Shia did not present a threat to the ruling party, there was no reason for their total disenfranchisement.

Two elements shifted the discourse and policies towards the Shia: the Iranian Revolutionary threat and the 1991 revolt. The Iranian Revolution presented an ideological threat to Saddam's rule. Khomeinism was an ideology that, like Baathism, presented itself as total, able to encompass society and government.[76] Its appeal to Iraqi Shia was a very real threat that Saddam faced. The secular nature of the Baathist party, which may have once been part of its appeal, now seemed to be a potential weakness. After the invasion of Iran by Iraq, Khomeini put the conflict in religious terms: "You are fighting to protect Islam, and [Saddam] is fighting to destroy Islam." As a result of Iran's assaults in religious terms, the Baathist regime began its transformation. The war with Iran became a jihad and Saddam was named a mujahid. Islamic terms became more common and the recitation of the Quran became a regular occurrence in the media.[77] The two sides constituted the conflict along religious lines. All of this was in fact, not

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[75] Ibid., 65-67.

[76] Ibid., 67.

[77] Ibid., 70.

outwardly sectarian in nature. This was an attempt to ensure the support and loyalty of Shias in Iraq, whom Saddam and the party feared would find the Iranian Islamic principles appealing. It didn't take long for the regime to switch tactics again when the revolt of 1991 threatened Baathist power. The increased prevalence of Islamic terms and Islamic references meant a greater salience of religious identities. Even before the outright oppression of the Shia, such religious rhetoric became more central to Iraqi discourse and thought.

The 1991 Revolt & Its Sectarian Legacy

In 1991, as the Iraqi soldiers retreated from Kuwait in defeat, there was a sense of resentment towards the party as the nation felt the sharp sting of national humiliation.[78] The international community had condemned the invasion and the weakness of the state seemed palpable. Days before the uprising, on *Voice of America* radio President George H.W. Bush encouraged Iraqis to "take matters in their own hands" and bring Saddam Hussein's regime to an end.[79]

The exact details of the rebellion are not necessary for our purposes. It is enough to say that rebels attacked government institutions, intense fighting spread and important Shia holy sites were vandalized.[80] Perhaps because of the war's proximity to the southern region which was predominantly Shia, the rebellion took on a sectarian tone. Protesters lifted images of turbaned men, including Khomeini's portrait. By March, all nine of the Shia-dominant governorates were in an uproar. The apparent sectarian nature of the rebellion dissuaded Sunnis from joining. A

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[78] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq,* 68.

[79] Ehrenberg et. al., *The Iraq Papers,* 216-217.

[80] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 68.

Human Watch Report paints a dark picture of the events that followed.[81] Thousands of Kurds and Shia were either executed or seized by the regime, according to the report which depicted disturbing details.

> In the remote marshes along the southern border with Iran, thousands of Shia who fled during the uprising lack adequate food, hygiene and medical care and are at risk of Iraqi military operations in the area. Their numbers include active rebels, army deserters and displaced persons afraid to go home. Little is known with certainty about the numbers or magnitude of the military operations… [the] displaced population in the marshes has been virtually ignored by the world community.[82]

Henceforth, the regime's slogan became "There will be no Shia after today."[83] On March 16, Saddam claimed that the rebellions were part of a larger foreign plot and specifically linked the rebellion to neighboring Iran.[84] As James Baker noted, "The Iraqi Shia were quite naturally perceived as being aligned with Iran." Shia clerics were put under house arrest and religious shrines were destroyed.[85]

It is important here to note that the construction of Shia Iraqis as part of an Iranian conspiracy, a threatening "other," came from the top and below. While one could simply put the responsibility of constructing the Shia "other" on the regime itself, this is overly simplistic and denies the people the power to constitute their own identities as well as the identity of the state. Narratives of the event point to the fact that the protests began by both Sunni and Shia Iraqis initially, but when the demonstrations took on more explicit "Shia" tones with the pictures of

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[81] *Endless Torment: The 1991 Uprising in Iraq and Its Aftermath*, New York: Human Rights Watch, 1992, accessed February 20, 2016, https://www.hrw.org/reports/1992/Iraq926.htm.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 216-217.

[84] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 76.

[85] Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 216-217.

Khomeini, among other signs, this discouraged the involvement of Sunnis.[86] This narrative shows that the people themselves also viewed the Shia with suspicion, as they refused to be involved in what they perceived might constitute a Shia uprising. Had there not been a sense of sectarian identity, the Sunnis could have very well demonstrated along with the Shia, regardless of the images displayed. Instead, we see that the state and the people constituted the situation along sectarian lines. The Shias displayed "Shia" images – like Khomeini – and thus framed their plight around an explicitly Shia identity. Sunnis perceived the Shia framing as dangerous and thus did not join the demonstrations. The regime played the Sunnis against the Shia and instigated a sectarian attack on Shias. All of these factors led to sectarian tensions. Furthermore, not only did the consequences of the rebellion fuel sectarianism, but the outcome of the 1990's sanctions by the United Nations pushed sectarianism to new heights.

UN Sanctions Fuel Sectarian Strife

The unprecedented severity and length of the UN sanctions enacted in 1990 along with the decades of war that plagued Iraq prior to the late twentieth century crippled Iraq and set in motion shifts in the social fabric of its society.[87] According to the United Nations' Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (UNESCWA), real GDP per capita declined by 72 percent between 1990 and 1992 and again plummeted by 51 percent between 1992 and 1996. As incomes fell, food insecurity rose and overall health declined. The paternalistic state which had once been central to national economy and employment withdrew from its role in an attempt to focus on an equitable food rations programme. Iraq successfully averted famine but overall

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[86] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 68-76.

[87] Bassam Yousif, "The Political Economy of Sectarianism in Iraq," *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, 4:3 (2010): 357-367.

nutrition levels and health saw a steep decline. In 1999, a UNICEF report documented a 75% reduction in Iraq's GDP, doubled child mortality rate, increased malnutrition and mental illness.[88] Citizens suddenly found the state inept and unable to provide services and support that people had grown accustomed to; the days of the state's prominent role from birth to death was a thing of the past. While the state had previously employed nearly forty percent of the workforce, it could no longer afford to sustain such policies.[89] Middle class state workers' salaries decreased by nearly 80 percent from1991 to 1996. The state took a step back from its paternalistic role and it subjects were left to find a new way to function in a deprived society in which social development was clearly crumbling.[90] Where did the Iraqi people have to turn?

Echoing back to the British mandate period, the role of the tribe was revived as a result of the harsh reality that the state would no longer be able to support its citizens. Prior to the nineties, the tribe had been viewed as something backward for the latter half of the twentieth century.[91] The Baath party found tribes to be a hindrance to social progress and reform. This is clear from the state's attempt at decreasing the salience of tribal identities. In 1976, the party forbade tribal titles from being used. Perhaps this was to hide the fact that the party itself had a clearly tribal bias, with most of its members from the Tikrtis tribe. As Hanna Batatu says, "[The Tikrtis] role continues to be so critical that it would not be going too far to say that the Tikritis rule through the Ba'ath party, rather than the Ba'ath party through the Tikritis."[92] Regardless of the reason for the shift, the party's policies were not encouraging of such tribal identities.

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[88]Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 2.

[89] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq,* 94.

[90] Ibid., 89.

[91] Ibid., 93-95.

[92] Ibid.

However, with the realization that the party could no longer offer social solutions as it once had, policies shifted to support tribal allegiances. The state more explicitly dealt with tribes. Tribal recruitment became standard and glaringly apparent, especially in the area of security. Tribes were used to fill the vacuum of the state and became celebrated for their productive role in society. Once again, as in the time of the British, the shaikh became the focal point of contact between state personnel and the people, especially in the south and the countryside. The state even sponsored tribal shows of support, to further bolster its legitimacy in the eyes of the people and the illegitimacy of the uprisings in 1991. Saddam went so far as to say that the party had been mistaken in "inciting the people against feudalism." And according to Saddam, the Baath was "the tribe encompassing all tribes." It became official policy that progression in state positions was based on familial and tribal roots. For the first time since the seventies, tribal titles and backgrounds of party members were published in the nineties. Tribal justice became permissible by law and the regime went about coopting tribal leaders to join its ranks.

Furthermore, the state embraced Sunni tribes while only a few Shia ones enjoyed new government support. Regardless, Shia tribes were marginalized, especially those in the south.[93] The 1991 rebellion had put a mark on the southern tribes, which were heavily Shia. Fanar Haddad claims that perhaps it was regionalism that actually led to this imbalance, with the tribes from Western Iraq and Tikrit as those closest to the regime and the others falling behind. However, considering the state's explicit aggression towards Shias, it would be difficult to assume that religion didn't have a role to play. As one tribal leader from the Babel governorate claims:

> All the water is with them. Here we have a drought, there's barely any water for our lands; but go to Tharthar [lake in north western Iraq] and the water is bursting..... I was

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[93] Ibid., 100.

once in a gathering of sheikhs from the western region – Tikritis and all sorts. One of them – in my presence mind you – reprimanded another: 'we hear that you gave your daughter [in marriage] to someone from Qurna [near Basra].' The man assured everyone – and am there with them – that the groom was a good man and from a good family. Then he was asked: 'next thing you'll be giving your daughters to Najafis!' to which he replied, 'I would sooner give her to a dog from Tikrit.[94]

Such regionalism and tribalism no doubt had sectarian undertones which supported reinforcing feelings of victimhood, especially given the other acts by the state. Islam became an official part of the discourse, specifically with the "Faith Campaign" launched in 1994.[95] This encouraged stricter adherence to Islamic principles, including the encouragement of women to wear the veil. The regime banned alcohol from all public spaces in the same year. Ancient Islamic punishments including amputation became legal. The person to mosque ratio rose substantially from 1:37,000 in the 1950s to 1:3,500 in the 1990s. The most critical aspect of these Faith Campaigns to our analysis is the Sunni beliefs from which they were derived. The official discourse began to outright condemn the Shia, including in a series of articles in the Al-Thawra Daily newspaper. Pointing to the Shia rituals of Ashura, which had been banned since 1977, the below expert explicitly questions Shia traditions.

> When we criticize in order to evaluate an aspect of our errors… we will not be driven to self-flagellation or self harm like the self harm and lashing of bodies and selves in Ashura in the manner exported to us by foreigners. We thank God that we repudiated this before now and we hope to repudiate other alien norms and adoptions which are harmful.[96]

Intermestics Reinforce Sectarian Divides

The preceding details were necessary before delving into a deeper analysis of how intermestics worked to support the construction of sectarianism. The events described fully

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[94] Ibid., 102-103.

[95] Ibid., 107.

[96] Ibid., 120-123.

portray the complexity of the relationship between international and domestic elements in changing the dynamics of a society and bringing greater salience to sectarian tensions. The uprising of 1991 is analytically intriguing because it shows how sectarian tensions in Iraq in 1991 were impacted by not only the domestic but the international situation.

The 1991 uprising came in the midst of a greater systemic battle for the identity of the region after the Iranian Revolution. Regimes across the region took measures to quell domestic dissent.[97] The Iranian Revolution presented a threat to status-quo regimes in the Middle East, who feared similar events within their own borders. Had there not been such an imminent threat perceived at the time, perhaps the reaction would not have been so quick to target Shias specifically and forge policies that fueled sectarian sentiments.

The humiliation Iraqis felt could further be echoed in the international arena, as the UN condemned the invasion of Kuwait. Iraqis felt that humiliation as the soldiers came home from the battlefield, distraught and having failed the mission which they had been promised would bring glory. Iraqis were encouraged to revolt by both international and domestic forces – explicitly by President George H.W. Bush. The nature of the uprisings was further manipulated by the Saddam regime to make it appear less attractive to Sunni citizens. By shedding light on the religious tones of the rebellion, Saddam ensured the isolation of the movement and brought greater salience to the religious aspect. From then on, his policies further agitated Shia sentiments of victimhood since they were at the center of the regime's attacks and their fellow Sunnis had greater privileges post-1991.

International pressure from the United Nations sanctions agitated domestic occurrences even further. While the Iraqi economy had been suffering, and surely would have suffered

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[97] Maryam Panah, *Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution,* London: Pluto Press, 2007, 81.

further due to its failed invasion of Kuwait, the literature is in consensus about the severity of the sanctions on the social fabric of Iraqi society. Annihilating the state's ability to fulfill its role in supporting the people through its services forced the state to rely on the tribal system to take up its mantle.[98] Consequently, this brought greater salience to sectarian identities, since the tribal system has clear religious divisions as well. Not only was there a heighted sense of religious identity due to the divisive rhetoric of the regime but society was now organized around sectarian lines.

The American Invasion: Re-Constituting Iraqi Identity from the Outside

> In every age there have been people who considered that an individual had one overriding affiliation so much important in every circumstance to all others that it might legitimately be called his 'identity.' For some it was the nation, for others, religion or class. But one only has to look at the various conflicts being fought out all over the world today to realize that no one allegiance has absolute supremacy. When people feel their faith is threatened, it is their religious affiliation that seems to reflect their whole identity. But if their mother tongue or their ethnic group is in danger, then they will fight ferociously against their own co-religionists.[99]

The above passage by Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf is pertinent to our Constructivist analysis of Iraqi sectarian conflict. Earlier periods assessed, including the British mandate and the Baathist regime in the late twentieth century, are foundational to the proceeding discussion. Without the understanding of previous instances that fueled religious conflict, one cannot understand the eruption of tensions in our modern period. No singular event created such divisions. The complex interplay in both the international and domestic arena, which was supported by certain perceptions from different players, essentially constructed our current

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[98] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq,* 100.

[99] Imranali Panjwani and Charles Tripp, *The Shi'a of Samarra: The Heritage and Politics of a Community in Iraq*, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2012, 145.

moment. There was no inevitability in the violence we have recently seen in Iraq. It was the power and fear of ideas (such as Khomeinism) and the emphasis of identity politics that led to what the world continues to witness today. The following section aims to assess the role of the U.S. invasion and American policies as well as Iraqi actions and reactions in fueling sectarianism in Iraq in the twenty-first century.

In 2002, just a year before the U.S. invasion of Iraq, exiled Shias abroad came together to write a manifesto based on what they perceived as the unique Shia experience which had been built by decades – if not centuries – of resentment. The group called for a new Iraq based on democracy, federalism and the respect of the human rights of all citizens. "The Iraqi Shia problem is now a globally recognized fault line and is no longer restricted to the confines of Iraq's territory," *the Declaration of the Shia of Iraq* begins.[100] Very clearly they claim that, "Iraq's political crisis had nothing to do with either social discrimination or a latent Shia sense of inferiority towards the Sunnis, or vice versa. It is entirely due to the conduct of an overtly sectarian authority determined to pursue a policy of discrimination solely for its own interests of control." The declaration dismissed the idea of Iraqi Shia creating their own state separate from Sunnis, but it advocated for a federal system that would be fair to all sects within society. Other exiled Iraqis came to support the declaration. What would come of these ideas after the Baathist regime fell?

On October 16, 2003, the United Nations Security Council unanimously approved UNSC Resolution 1511, effectively bringing about the US mandate of Iraq.[101] Thus came yet another opportunity to reshape Iraqi political society from the outside. The British had already had their

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[100] Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 313.

[101] Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael, *The Iraqi Predicament: People in the Quagmire of Power Politics*, (London: Pluto Press, 2004), 8.

chance. The Iraqis had formed several governments, including that of Saddam's most recent Baathist party. The potential for Iraqi society to fall apart completely was high. Two National Intelligence Council classified reports for President Bush indicated that an invasion of Iraq would likely mount support for political Islamic parties and further the sectarian divide in Iraqi society.[102]What would the Americans do? How would they impact Iraqi history?

As time has already shown, the impact of U.S. influence has been no more successful in ameliorating sectarian divides. While the sectarian legacy of history shares part of the responsibility for the events that have transpired during the new millennium, the impact of U.S. policy cannot be underestimated. The new government formed by the U.S. further enforced previous divisions and played an instrumental role in exacerbating sectarian tensions, resulting in a bloody civil war and general unrest in Iraqi society.

Creating an Inept Council Divided by Sectarian Ties

The U.S. attempted to form yet another governing system in 2003, one which shares many similarities to previous ones analyzed. The plan from the start aimed to create an Iraqi Interim Authority which would be comprised of Iraqi nationals who would administer the country under the authority of the occupying forces.[103] Through an ambiguous process, U.S. Chief Administrator to Iraq Paul Bremer established a new Iraqi governing council. Bremer set up a quota system that would be used to select council members. Based on the ratio of communal identities, it was determined that the council would be made up of thirteen Shia Arabs, five Sunni

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[102] Raymond Taras, "The (Il)logic of Intervention in Iraq: Sectarianism, Civil War, and the U.S. Game Plan," *International Journal on World Peace* 23: 4 (2006): 33-60.

[103] Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael, *The Iraqi Predicament*, 80-85.

Arabs, five Kurds, one Turkoman and one Christian.[104] Leadership of the council was set up to rotate between members, but any power they were given remained under the Coalition Provisional Authority of the US and Great Britain.[105]

The council lacked democratic legitimacy and essentially divided Iraqi society based on ethnicity and religion. The occupying forces chose the council in a non-transparent process and gave Iraqis no voice in the new system, a system which had promised to bring about democracy. Iraqi national and Professor Wisal al-Azzawi, Dean of the College of Political Sciences of Nehrein University, points to one of the deep flaws behind the council.

> Why didn't they ask our opinion? 'What role has been given to scientists, technocrats, intellectuals, businessmen, unions? Because of the way it was secretly appointed, the Council appears very much an American creation imposed on the Iraqi people... The democratic process does not happen in a day or two, and should not be connected to a handful of people who collaborated with the occupation.[106]

Not only did the new system bolster domestic pre-existing sectarian identities but it added a new element to the conflict – a division between exiled Iraqis, mainly Shia, and those who had remained in the country. The parallel cannot be overlooked. Similar to the British who had chosen to give power to tribal systems, as they were afraid of the educated class that had been nurtured under Ottoman rule, the U.S. chose to empower Iraqi exiles, more specifically Shia Iraqis who had been disenfranchised during the Saddam years, rather than risk placing potential Saddam-sympathizers to the helm of power.

The system appears to have been set up for failure from the start – or without much concern for its success. According to an interview with a political science professor who had

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[104] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 130.

[105]Tareq Ismael and Jacqueline Ismael, *The Iraqi Predicament*, 80-85.

[106] Ibid., 83.

been part of the government formation process, members chosen in the council were selected based on their support of the occupation.[107] Furthermore, according to this source, the long political process for choosing these members was actually simply designed to see who would be the most supportive of US policies in Iraq. Thus, sectarian identity and loyalty to U.S. occupying forces became the main criterion for choosing the new leaders of the country. This same anonymous source also revealed other sordid details. Bremer personally dismissed the importance of the Council, viewing them as insignificant parts of the political scene. The interview with the same source notes that members of the Council feared Bremer's power over them, as he could easily dismiss any contentious debate by pointing to the illegitimacy of the council itself since it wasn't chosen through any democratic or representative process.

> Interviews with Iraqis reveal that in the public perception, Bremer is essentially re-creating the oppressive conditions that existed under Saddam: unilateral decisions to isolate Iraqis, reneging on promises, parades and heavy security, twisted truths about improving living conditions, insensitivity to the daily suffering of the people, the disappearance of Iraqi civilians and press censorship.[108]

There seemed to be no effort by the new international occupier to create a cohesive society, and the blunders of the Americans only served to reignite sectarian strife through policies and actions which brought even greater salience to sectarian identity. The Coalition Provisional Authority de-Baathification program succeeded in pushing the Sunnis to the margins of society. Since the Sunnis occupied a disproportionate majority of Baathist state bureaucratic and security positions, they felt the greatest impact of the government overhaul which cleansed out former state employees. According to estimates, anywhere from 30,000 to 120,000 Iraqis

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[107] Ibid., 85.

[108] Ibid., 85.

were left jobless due to de-Baathification.[109] The U.S. even disbanded the Iraqi army, putting 400,000 trained young solider out of work with scant job options.[110] This large group of skilled soldiers provided a strong base for the sectarian militias that later formed. These changes not only built resentment towards the occupying forces and the new system but they also gave Sunnis reason to be suspicious of the cooperating Shias.

"Othering" Shia Iraqis - from Persian Snake to Western Agent

The discourse of Sunni insurgent groups can shed light on the sentiment of Iraqi Sunnis about the U.S. occupation and the cooperative Shias. A 2004 interview with a Jaish Muhammad spokesperson by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting reveals the new Sunni Iraqi perception of the indistinguishable character of the Shia in power and the occupying forces. When asked about the group's position on the Iraqi Governing Council, most of whom were Shia, the spokesman stated:

> Our position is clear – they are all spies, traitors, and agents for the Americans. First, they do not represent the people of Iraq because they are not elected. They are appointed by their masters, the Americans. Second, the appointed Governing Council members were [in exile during the Saddam regime]. They do not understand Iraqis suffering and Arab traditions. [They] were distorted by the Western life they lived.[111]

This reveals an interesting new development in the "othering" of the Shia. Since many members of the new government had been exiles, the Sunnis perceived them as "westernized." Thus, while at one historical moment the condemnatory characteristic of the Shia "otherness" was in connection to Persia, the new means of ostracizing the group and further segregating the

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[109] Yousif, "The Political Economy of Sectarianism in Iraq," 363.

[110] Ibid., 364.

[111] Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 250.

identities of the Shias and Sunnis now became the link between the Shia and the Western occupier. To be Shia became synonymous with traitor by association.

This new condemning connection between the Shia and occupiers had real implications. The armed insurgency initially began by targeting foreign troops, but soon turned towards Shia targets as well. Sunni extremist groups, such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al-Qaeda in Iraq, began to attack Shias that supported the Americans.[112] According to al-Zarqawi, "[The Shia are] the insurmountable obstacle, the lurking snake, the crafty and malicious scorpion, the spying enemy and the penetrating venom."[113]

These revived tensions were clearly a consequence of complex intermestic dynamics that had taken shape over years and decades. Shias, who had been marginalized and persecuted during the Saddam era and even previously, found their fortunes had finally changed for the better. The Americans were willing to empower them – even if it was partially a ruse and under the occupying authority. On the other hand, the Sunnis, who had grown accustomed to privileges under the Baathist regime, were feeling the bitter sting of the shifting tides, as they saw their role in society diminish and their security vanish. The "other" to the Sunni Iraqi had transformed from the suspicious "Persian Shia" to the enemy "Westernized Shia" who was willing to cooperate with the powers that had stripped the Sunnis of their previous privileges.

These patterns of "othering" continued throughout the next several years until the eruption of the Iraqi civil war. Violent sectarian attacks went back and forth between Sunnis and Shias, with the United States switching sides later in the conflict. After the 2005 parliamentary elections made the sectarian divide even clearer – with a generally strongly religious body

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[112] Taras, "The (Il)logic of Intervention in Iraq," 45.

[113] Ehrenberg et al, *The Iraq Papers,* 252.

dominated by Shias – the U.S. became hesitate of its Shia-empowerment strategy. Instead of continuing its support of the Shia, the occupiers reached out to Sunnis to take junior roles in the new state and toned down their full support of Shias, targeting Shia militias and taking back some of the powers that the group had gained after the occupation.[114] The U.S. had effectively supported the radicalization of Sunni militants, helped the Shia take power and Iraq had become a breeding ground of jihadists and a magnet for extremist Islamic groups. As one report summarizes:

> The U.S. occupation of Iraq further deepened sectarian tensions. As the U.S. searched for Iraqi political collaborators to establish a pro-occupation government, it marginalized the secular political forces, seen as too nationalist, in favor of more compliant religious parties and groupings.... The U.S. promoted (and the mass media accepted) an ethnic/religious conception of Iraqi politics that did not acknowledge the long supremacy of secular nationalism and did not reflect the complex ethnic mix and the diversity of many Iraqi cities and regions, such as Mosul, Basrah and especially multi-ethnic Baghdad.[115]

Conclusion

The sectarianism that ignited in Iraq in 2007 cannot be explained or understood by an isolated event or occurrence. The complex interplay of intermestics in the Iraqi arena throughout the course of history resulted in the civil war that continues to threaten the country and region today. Iraqi society had already been deeply divided prior to the U.S. invasion. We can see this from the disproportionate representation of Sunnis in power during the Baathist regime. The active engagement of sectarian discourse by Saddam Hussein against the Shias only further fueled divisions. The ostentatious repression of the Shia population after the 1991 rebellion and the sectarian slogans that the regime raised all helped create a tension that was on the verge of

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[114] Taras, "The (Il)logic of Intervention in Iraq," 47.

[115] Ibid., 53.

ignition. While these components are mainly domestic, one cannot ignore the important role played by the existential threat of the Iranian Revolution, which gave the Iraqi regime much to fear. Prior to the modern period, the foundation of sectarian society had already been instilled through Orientalist policies enacted under the British, who had divided society along sectarian lines and favored Sunni tribes over Shia counterparts.

The American invasion and its consequential influence on Iraqi society threw the match that lit the final flame. There is no doubt that dividing the new governing council by communal identities and no other apparent qualifications helped bring greater salience to sectarian identities. Perhaps it was the American perception of the sectarian nature of Iraqi society that led to such a system. The de-Baathification of Iraq predominantly impacted Sunnis who suddenly found themselves at the fringes of society, without work or access to power. Finally, disbanding the Iraqi Army left hundreds of thousands of trained and disenfranchised men without any reason to support the new regime. The history of Shia-Sunni tensions, which has been described and analyzed at length at least from the period of the British mandate, gave a solid foundation for the conflict between the two groups. Sunnis had a history of fearing "the lurking snake" that was symbolized by the Shia, who had once been accused of harboring loyalty to Iran and who now became representative of another enemy that threatened and disturbed their Sunni brothers – the Americans.[116]

Chapter 3 – Constructing Sectarianism in Syria

Introduction

> a citizen afraid to pray –
> What if the State Police stake out the prayer line?
> They might say I tried to contact the Merciful on High

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[116] Ehrenberg et al., *The Iraq Papers,* 252.

Worse, they might accuse me
of perpetrating faith
- God, what a place[117]

The above was written by the prolific Syrian writer Nizar Kabbani in 1984. Religion is invoked in fear. "A citizen afraid to pray," he writes. The narrator worries that he will be accused of "perpetrating faith," as though faith is a crime to be punished. Of which faith does he speak? The author alludes to a reality within his society in Syria, two short years after a massacre by state security in the predominantly Sunni city of Hama. Kabbani wrote this poignant poem describing the fear of the state and revealing the salience of sectarian tensions nearly three decades prior to the Syrian civil war in 2011. The construction of sectarian identities and divisions must thus be traced further back to understand its roots.

This chapter aims to assess the construction of sectarianism in Syria through a historic analysis of three periods. The chapter begins with an assessment of the French Mandate in Syria in the early twentieth century, as this is the period which first brought forth the idea of the Syrian state and made it a reality. Given the tumultuous nature of the period of coups before the Baathist regime successfully established itself, this period is skipped over. Instead, this thesis goes through an analysis of the state under Hafiz al-Assad, followed by an assessment of the regime under his son in the new millennium. The aim of this historic analysis will be to analyze the key components that led to the construction of Syria as a sectarian state by looking at the underlying agent and system roots.

The French Mandate: Orientalist Thought & the Early Divisive Vision of a Syrian State

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[117] Kahf, Mohja. "The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature." *World Literature Today* 75:2 (2001): 233.

After the fall of the so-called 'Sick man of Europe,' it was the British who first supported the creation of a new state in the area now demarcated as Syria.[118] With the support of the British, between 1918 and 1920, the Hashemite Amir Faysal ruled over an Arab government in Damascus. Though his control was limited, his supporters claimed sovereignty over geographic Syria and in March 1920 proclaimed him King of Syria. By July 1920, the French had successfully kicked out Faysal from Damascus and established their own rule in the various areas that would later become Syria, all with the legitimacy of the mandate under the newly-established League of Nations. The French ruled over a fragmented land, with separate states in Damascus and Aleppo as well as autonomous rule for the Druze and Alawi. Damascus and Aleppo would eventually merge in January 1925 and the Alawi and Druze areas would remain separate until 1936.

The French inherited a diverse land in the Levant in general and in the soon-to-be Syrian lands specifically. In 2011, the composition of Syria was incredibly diverse religiously and marginally diverse ethnically. The estimated population composition by 2011 was: 64 percent Sunni Arabs, 10 percent Kurds, another 10 percent Alawi, 9 percent Christians, 3 percent Druze and 1 percent Shia.[119] The Alawi minority is of particular interest to this thesis, as this small minority would play an important role in Syria's modern history. Though the religious identity of the Alawi has been contested, since the 1920s at the time of the mandate they have continued to constitute their religious identity as part of Shia Islam, meaning they are part of the religious

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[118] Itamar Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus: State, Political Community and Foreign Relations in Twentieth-Century Syria* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2008), 97.

[119] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 350-358.

minorities of Syria.[120] During the mandate period, the French would have to navigate this diverse environment, which also included ethnic minorities like the Armenians and the Circassians.

Orientalist Ideas Re-Constitute Identities around Religious Divisions

It is well-documented throughout the literature that French officials adopted divisive communitarian politics, politics based on religious sectarian identities.[121] According to Benjamin White's elaborate study on the concept of minorities during the mandate period, the very concepts of "minority" and "majority" gained coinage and value during French mandated Syria. Such ideas are powerful constructs that give salience to sectarian identities, especially given the fact that the terms emerged around religious notions.

According to White, French officials strengthened the former millet system of the Ottoman Empire and actually further built the millet system's divisive nature.[122] Through the millet system, the Ottomans categorized different non-Muslim groups according to religion - Greek Orthodox Christians, Armenian Christians, Jews, etc. The millet system gave each community political autonomy and handed authority to either the patriarch, as in the case with the Christian denominations, or the chief rabbi, in the case of the Jewish communities.

Like the British during their reign over the Iraqi mandate, due to the dominant Orientalist discourse the French perceived the Ottoman system as static and thus interpreted the millet system as completely divisive, with little to no interaction between the different groups within it. According to the High Commissioner of the French Republic in Beirut, who was also in charge of the Syrian areas, "each community is a little people, jealous of its personality, which has its

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[120] Aslam Farouk-Alli, "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34:3 (2014), 212-213.

[121] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East*, 40-45.

[122] Ibid., 47.

chief, national and religion at the same time; they are so many nations, and in effect they carry that name."[123] This powerful idea re-constituted the system and thus the identities within Syria into a more divisive society than had been the case under Ottoman rule.

The French thus segregated Syrian areas and people by religious segments. The French Personal Status Law legally created "Syrians" for the first time, and religious identity became the central element that would determine the policies and laws that applied to certain groups.[124] Similarly, the census categorized people by religion.[125] Unprecedented administrative actions divided society along religious lines. The French distributed seats to representative bodies on religious communal grounds and gave legal autonomy in matters of personal status to communities which had not been autonomous prior to the mandate. Article 6 of the mandate charter further reinforced this emphasis on religious affiliation. The article stated that "Respect for the personal status of the various peoples and their religious interests shall be fully granted."[126] Furthermore, the French granted territorial autonomy to certain religiously defined groups. According to White, the Ottoman Empire had actually begun diminishing the legal distinctions between Muslims and non-Muslims under the millet system since the mid-nineteenth century, though they retained the personal status law in general. Thus, the powerful Orientalist French ideas pushed forth policies based on a reality that no longer existed. According to Syrian expert Eyal Zisser:

> Indeed, immediately after taking control of the entire Levant in 1920, the French acted to fragment the area…The French intention was to ensure their future control over this

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[123] Ibid., 49.

[124] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 364.

[125] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 49.

[126] Ibid., 50.

territory, once it had fallen into their hands. Even when they set up the Syrian state at the end of the 1920s, they hampered the establishment and operation of its governmental institutions. Rather they continued to strengthen and entrench the forces of disunity and divisiveness in Syrian society, including sectarian and regional rivalries and the gulf between the urban and rural populations. The legacy of French Mandatory rule would later prove a handicap for the post-independence Syrian regime.[127]

France's divisive policy allowed for the burgeoning of several autonomous regions which would later be incorporated into the Syrian state. Small state-lets were created in the Latakia region, with its Alawi majority, and the Jabal al-Druze with its Druze majority.[128] While the Ottomans had let these areas rule autonomously informally, partially due to their remote locations, the mandate formally gave these groups independence. Under High Commissioner Damien de Martel, a religious decree was issued on 13 March 1936 which further embedded religious divisions into law.[129] Communities – defined by the Personal Status Law by religion – would be required to submit to their own communal laws, which would be based on their religious texts and traditions. Sunnis rose up in opposition to such a policy at the time but they were only successful in delaying the enactment of the law, which the French pushed forth regardless of popular opinion. While the Ottoman Empire recognized no distinct sects among Muslims, the French expanded the millet system by including different Muslim groups as distinct groups, including the Druze and Alawis. The French enforced this new frame on even the smallest of populations, like the Isma'ilis who had no official religious authority to consult.

The deliberate construction of the new Syrian society around religious lines was quite apparent by France's refusal to acknowledge ethnolinguistic minorities, regardless of their push

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[127] Farouk-Alli, "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion," 214.

[128] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 4.

[129] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 50-52.

for communal rights.[130] Kurdish and Circassian demands and pleas would continue to be ignored during the French mandate. Circassians requested recognition of political rights as a minority in 1928 and were refused by the French. The High Commissioner claimed:

> Under the name 'communities' are generally designated groupings of individuals of the same religion and the same rite… This definition of communities evidently excludes any other groups whose individuals are united by links other than confessional links (community of religion and of rite). The Tcherkess [Circassians] are of Sunni Muslim religion and cannot, from the confessional point of view, form a distinct community.

Empowering the Minority: Disenfranchising the Sunnis & the Fear of Nationalism

Since the Sunni Muslims were perceived as the most 'nationalistic,' the French feared the threat they could present if the law recognized the group's communal rights. Kurds, who are also predominantly Sunni Muslims, presented a similar problem to the French mandate. France thus focused its efforts on minorities who were perceived as harmless and supportive of French rule and also as an application of the principle of "divide and rule."

A combination of factors also led to a clear religious bias in the Syrian army during the mandate period. The French recruited predominantly from outside of the central capital, which meant a disproportionate amount of minorities joined the military.[131] The result of such policies led to an over-representation of the Alawi and Druze, who only made up approximately 13 percent of the population at the time.[132] By 1944, the Alawis were clearly over-represented among soldiers, though they still had poor representation in the officer corps and within politics.[133]

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[130] Ibid., 50-52.

[131] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 26-27.

[132] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 104.

[133] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syri*a, 26-27.

Economic and political factors also reinforced this recruitment strategy. Wealthy Sunni Arab landowners and businessmen – who were the main leaders of the Arab nationalist movement – refused to send their children to military training. Not only did nationalism play a role in their disengagement with the army, but society perceived military service as a low-class career.[134] On the other hand, the army attracted those who hoped to move up the social ladder, those like the marginalized religious minorities from rural regions. The Alawi and Druze were among the minorities who flocked to join the army, with the enthusiastic encouragement of the French. Furthermore, after recruiting these mainly minority soldiers into the mandate's army, the men were used as part of special forces to suppress rebellions, which were predominantly led by Arab Sunnis.[135] Given these factors, it is not surprising to see the clear frustration of the majority Sunni population. According to one High Commissioner:

> The Muslim community in general complains of having lost, since the occupation, and without compensation, the major part of its privileges. Above all it complains of being subjected to a regime of exception, which places it in a state of manifest inferiority vis-à-vis the other communities.[136]

Silencing Visions of Unity

The previous international politics-from-above events can be contrasted with the domestic sentiment within Syria, which paints a different picture of the Syria that the people imagined and hoped to constitute. In an editorial written during the early years of the mandate, a Christian newspaper editor, Yusuf al-'ssa, proposed the Prophet's birthday as a national holiday

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[134] Farouk-Alli, "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria, 216-218.

[135] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 4.

[136] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 165.

to rally 'all the Arabophone communities.'[137] According to al-'ssa, "our country contains only one, Arab, stock."

Alawi scholar Abd al-Rahman al-Khayr also played a central role in combatting the divisive constructs of the French.[138] Al-Khayr brought the Alawi into the Shia identity, as they had previously been pushed to the peripheries and not recognized as Muslims by most scholars and Sunni Muslims. In 1937, Al-Khayr wrote:

> The Nusayris, as they were once called, and the Alawis as they are called now in the period of the [French] occupation, are one of the Muslim sects … They are imamate Muslims and pure Arabs. For many reasons—mainly the pressure of some tyrannical rulers in the Islamic period—they took refuge in the mountains of this country.

Perhaps what is most interesting about this drive is the importance of the Alawi "genuine Muslim" concept. Al-Khayr brought forth a renewed and more Shia-orthodox ideology into the Alawi doctrine and continued to advocate for Alawis to be considered "genuine Muslims" until he died in 1986. Why would the originality of the religion be of central importance to scholars if the identity of "Muslim" wasn't central to the identity of the Syrian? The existence of this argument among scholars shows that there was a strong conception of Alawi exceptionalism – their "otherness." If this were undisputed, if sentiment of Alawis inclusivity into the general communal (Syrian) identity were real then there would be no need for such elaboration and decades of work. In order to be accepted as part of the general Syrian identity, an Islamic heritage seemed to be a central element, even according to Christians like al-'ssa. Thus, there needed to be an acceptance of the Alawis as part of the overall Muslim identity of the country, and it was central to the Alawis to be perceived within and outside of the community as "imamate Muslims and pure Arabs."

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[137] Ibid., 52.

[138] Farouk-Alli, "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion," 216.

Yusuf al-'ssa's editorial also aimed to unify the divisive identity that was being constituted by French policies and discourse. By pushing for the prophet's birthday as a unifying symbolic day, al-'ssa also pushed forth the inclusion of the Christian community into a common identity with others. Additionally, High Commissioner Damien de Martel's claim in a *New York Times* interview that France was in Syria to protect the country's Christian minorities led to protests among Christian nationalists in Aleppo.[139]

On the other hand, in treaty negotiations in 1936, a plea was sent by Alawi and Christian members of the representative council stating that "the populations of this government belong to different Communities, each one having its beliefs, traditions and distinct customs. Relative to Syria as a whole, they constitute minorities that cannot and do not wish to be incorporated into Syrian Unity in any way."[140]

Understanding National Identity and the Concept of Minorities

These complex matters point to a central issue from the beginning of the creation of the Syrian state – national identity. The state system originally put forth by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648, which had only applied to Europeans, was pushed onto non-European groups in the early twentieth century.[141] American President Woodrow Wilson's project to universalize the sovereign state beyond European powers brought forth with it the mandate-system, which aimed to eventually create states. Arguments for a unified Syrian state, like those of al-'ssa and others, reinforced the state system by giving it priority. Those for Syrian unification supported in constituting Wilson's state-system vision. Those opposed to unification that sought their own

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[139] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 54.

[140] Ibid., 56.

[141] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 1.

small state sovereignty, like parts of the Alawi community, who negotiated for their independence in 1936, also legitimized the state-system by reinforcing its validity and claiming the importance of their own sovereignty.

After the formation of the League of Nations, the nation-state became the only internationally legitimate form of independent state.[142] This legitimacy within the international community was granted only by the League. The mandate charter encouraged the divisive politics pursued by the French. In Article 1 of the mandate charter, it required that the mandatory state – France in this case – to privilege local autonomies. Article 6 guaranteed the personal status and religious interests of peoples, which has already been assessed. According to White, during the early mandate period, there was no constituted identity of "minority" because it was not yet a term of relevance. However, looking at these same facts, one can point to the basic foundation of sectarianism laid out by our earlier analysis. The terms of the mandate and the policies enacted upon the people produced a sectarian divide by increasing the representation of smaller religious groups over the larger Sunni majority. Thus, it is important to note that the interaction between France and the mandated territory through these early years created a basis for future tensions. It is equally important to understand the weight of the state system as it brought into focus the concepts of minorities and majorities, concepts which only served to aggravate sectarian tensions.

According to White's assessment of the concept of minority, prior to the mandate Syrian society rarely used the term "minority" or any related words. By the 1930s, White claims that Syrian and French officials were regularly using the term.[143] For this thesis, the importance of

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[142] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 131.

[143] Ibid., 134.

the term "minority" is that the concept is intimately linked to sectarianism. If a state perceives its identity as split between minorities and a majority and this is the predominantly salient form of identification, then the state identity is sectarian in nature. This is unlike states that hold these concepts of minorities and majorities within their state identities but have an overriding identity that forms a unified communal state identity. Members of the community who sought minority protection under the French not only gave credence to the mandate system, but also supported re-constituting the mandate system under the League of Nations. Thus, we will briefly assess White's findings and analyze the implication for sectarianism in Syria during the mandate period.

In 1936, Syria was partially successful in gaining independence and being recognized by the League of Nations.[144] However, under the agreement, France still had the right to intervene on behalf of minorities, which was possible due to the minority treaties within the international law of states. This law gave minorities the power to call on a higher authority than the Syrian government. According to White, this reconstituted groups based on minority-majority ideas. White's survey of *l'Asie Francaise*, a bulletin edited by the High Commissioner Robert de Caix, shows that articles discussing the Levant using the term minority from 1915 to 1932 are approximately 70 pages, which is considered infrequent given the length of the articles and the approximately 17 year period. However, in a much shorter period of six years, from 1933 to 1939, the mention of minorities also runs to 70 pages.[145] This shows the increased use of the term and thus the increased salience of the minority-majority identification.

Constructing Sectarianism during the Mandate

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[144] Ibid., 132.

[145] Ibid., 139.

I now aim to synthesize the Syrian-mandate period through a Constructivist analysis, first through a unit-level interaction analysis and then zooming outward to assess the system in which these sectarian notions came to life. There is one essential question that must be asked first: why did the French perceive Syrian nationalism as a threat? This powerful idea, of the danger of Syrian nationalism to French interests, essentially led the French to support the growth of a sectarian system within Syria, which thus reinforced sectarian identities. This idea was due in part to France's desire to sustain influence in the country – and the region generally. Thus, France came to perceive its interests as opposed to the interests of nationalists. As Wendt so rightly stated "amity or enmity is a function of shared understandings."[146] Since Sunni Muslims were the most likely to hold nationalistic sentiments, they were therefore perceived as an adversary and France enacted policies in favor of other religious groups, mainly Alawis and Druze who were viewed as less likely to pose a threat.

The Syrian role in helping constitute this identity is also essential. France's initial divisive vision of Syrian society would simply be a meaningless notion if it were not for the Syrians constituting themselves within this frame as well. How can we tell that Syrians did perceive these same ideas of sectarian religious divisions? Syrians who accepted the French mandate and actually sought the support of the French in protecting their "minority rights" gave credence to the very notion of "minority" while simultaneously supporting in constituting the role of the League of Nations and France as arbitrators in Syrian affairs. Those who sought to create a religiously inclusive notion of the Syrian identity – like Yusuf al-'ssa – also show that sectarian identities were powerful enough that they needed to be combatted with unifying visions of what it means to be "Syrian."

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[146] Wendt, "Constructing International Politics," 71-81.

Expanding outward to view the system as a whole, we can see that these powerful ideas were accepted within the international system as a whole. The League of Nations sanctioned the mandate and thus supported in constituting the role of the French as an authority over Syria and other regions. Without the acceptance of the system itself, France's perception of its identity as the keeper of Syria would simply be a fantasy. However, its own self-identification as well as the systemic acceptance of this role allowed France's power to grow and burgeon in Syria.

Still, one cannot take the systemic acceptance of France as an authority over its Arab neighbors for granted. This acceptance has its own roots in a culture of Orientalism, like the British-Iraqi situation in chapter two. The dominant Orientalist notion of the West's power over the East and its rightful role as the civilizer of backward societies gave credence to France's interests in the region. The systemic Orientalist culture thus helped constitute France's identity and its actions in Syria, which pushed forth a religious-sectarian identity on the new state once it was formed.

Thus, we can see that the French mandate period supported creating the first visions of sectarian Syria. Within a supportive systemic environment, France possessed the legitimacy it needed to pursue its interests in Syria. The fear of nationalists gave France an interest in courting religious minorities, who were perceived as more likely allies. This policy created a sense of disenfranchisement by the majority who then felt a greater sense of religious identity due to the discriminatory policies that enabled certain sects to thrive while others were neglected. By the end of the mandate period, the Alawis found themselves in a strategically powerful position that would come to shape the remaining modern history of Syria.

The First Lion: Minority Domination & Intermestics Reinforce Sectarianism

The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. Any differences existing among its sons are accidental and unimportant. They will disappear with the awakening of the Arab consciousness… The national bond will be the only bond existing in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among the citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation, and combats all other forms of factional solidarity such as religious, sectarian, tribal, racial and regional factionalism.[147]

The passage above comes from the Constitution of the Arab Baath Socialist Party and puts forth an ideal image of Syria in the mid-twentieth century, less than twenty years after Syria officially became the Syrian Republic and escaped French mandate rule.[148] After gaining independence in 1946, Syria experienced several political shifts, including the military coup of 1946, executed by three Sunni leaders, as well as the short-lived United Arab Republic that briefly unified Egypt and Syria. In 1963, the Baath party successfully staged another coup that would shape the remaining modern history of Syria prior to the Syrian civil war.

Due to the centrality of the Baath party in Syria's modern history, the original composition of the party needs to be briefly reviewed. The party originally recruited members from rural migrants that came to Damascus to study.[149] Founded by Christian Michel Aflaq and Sunni Muslim Salah al-Din al-Bitar, the two recruited through traditional social channels. Aflaq's personal ties to the Druze region led him to spread the party among that population. The party's socialist ideals appealed to rural students who attended university and joined the party then spread its ideology back in their own hometowns. According to an early member of the Baath, Sami al-Jundi, "The social conditions in rural areas were favorable to the growth and spread of the party. It expanded there and remained weak in the cities…especially in Damascus. In the course of time, therefore, it became a big body with a small head." Since most rural areas

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[147] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 10.

[148] Ibid., 31.

[149] Ibid., 15-20.

were dominated by Arab-speaking religious minorities, the Baath became a reflection of this group.

At its core, the Baath party didn't seem to present a sectarian threat to Syria. The Baath – or Renaissance – ideology combined European socialism with Arab nationalism.[150] The party aimed to return to the virtues of the Jahiliyya, the period of time before Islam before the Turks and Persians tainted the honorable character and purity of the Arab identity. Its slogan was "Unity, Freedom and Socialism." In a speech in 1957, Aflaq emphasized the centrality of the Arab identity in uniting Syrians:

> Our movement sees colonialism more as a result than as a cause, a result of whatever defects and distortions adulterate our society… The atmosphere created by previous movements… was a false atmosphere which concealed from the people the reality of the problem. They did not understand or deem it right that our problem, in all Arab regions, was one problem, that the unification of the struggle was necessary, that the separation which had been imposed on our land was artificial and obstructive, and that in the hearts of the people was a guarantee that the rust would be cleared, that the falseness (of the separation) would disappear and that the fact that our nation was one nation would become apparent.[151]

Despite such noble speech, the practical implications of the party's rise to power led to clear sectarian divisions. After the Baathist coup, the new ruling party set up the National Council of the Revolutionary Command and immediately purged of Nasserist officers, or sympathizers of the United Arab Republic who were mainly Sunnis.[152] Pro-Nasser newspaper editors were imprisoned and non-Baath publications were banned. Predominantly Sunni Kurds also faced similar suppression. Kurds weren't allowed to join the Baath party due to their "un-

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[150] Robert Olson, *The Baath and Syria: From the French Mandate to the Era of Hafiz Al-Asad* (Princeton: The Kingston Press, 1982), 1-5.

[151] Ibid., 9.

[152] Ibid., 9-22.

Arab" character and many were expelled to Turkey, an act justified by claiming that Kurds were actually "mountain Turks." Thousands of Sunni Kurds were stripped of their citizenship and thus deemed foreigners even if they possessed valid Syrian IDs. Corrupt elections for the Regional Congress in 1963 brought Baathists to all eight seats of the Regional Command. The active disenfranchisement of Nasserist, Kurds and other predominantly Sunni groups became interpreted as an active attack against Sunnis in Syria.

Baathist Recruitment & Alawi Domination

Despite the party opening membership to all Syrians, including non-Arabs, the party's original membership composition determined its future identity. At the time of the coup, the party had only secured 600 civilian members among its ranks. Due to this limited size, it took major steps to bolster its support base.[153] The party promoted all current members to "active members," which gave them new rights to nominate members to the party as well as participate in party elections. The party more than quintupled within one year as a result of this change. "Active membership" was also given more freely to new recruits, regardless of any original criteria such as level of education. The party became more and more homogenous, with members recruiting those of their religious or tribal background regardless of support for the Baathist ideology. An organization report published in 1965 states: "[There is a] presence of personal relationships rather than party relationships…The result of all this is that the party is threatened by the infiltration into its midst of the disorders of bourgeois, feudal, tribal and sectarian realities."[154]

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[153] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 23-24.

[154] Ibid.

Five of the fourteen members of the Baathist Military Committee were Alawi, with the highest leadership posts in the hands of three Alawi – Muhammad 'Umran, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad.[155] Religious minorities made up the majority of party members. The party purged Nasserist and Independent Unionist members in the army. This disproportionately affected Sunni Muslims, who made up the bulk of Nasserists and Independent Unionists. During the Nasserist rebellion in July 18, 1963, the minority-dominated (specifically Alawi dominated) army cracked down on dissidents. Anti-Baathist publications started to appear claiming a sectarian character of the Syrian Baathist regime. One opposition leader, Muta Safadi, wrote: "Dismissals by the hundreds were all aimed at officers originating from the bigger cities, and especially the Sunnis." In 1966, coup-leaders purged Sunni officer factions. According to secretary-general of the National Command of the Baath party in 1965 and 1966 Dr. Munif al-Razzaz:

> The smells of deliberate sectarian bloc formation started to emanate. At first it was whispered about, but later the voices became louder, as it appeared that there were real indications that the accusations [stating that in their struggle for power, the military had exploited sectarian ties in such a way as to have specifically negative results from the Sunnis] were well-founded.[156]

The situation continued to lean in favor of religious minorities with the second-phase of the Baath regime in 1966 when Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad successfully defeated their rivals to take control of the party.[157] Leading officers were Alawi, Druze and Isma'ili, members of the smallest religious groups in Syria. With growing conflict between different party factions, the Isma'ilis were eventually eliminated from the party and Assad was able to solidify his hold in the 1970s.

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[155] Ibid., 30-34.

[156] Ibid., 35.

[157] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 118-119.

Sectarian divisions were clearly apparent during the Assad regime. Prior to the Baath coup, from 1942 until 1963, Sunnis, urbanites and the upper class held the highest government posts, with approximately 95 percent Sunni representation in the Regional Congress during the Syrian-Egyptian union.[158] From 1958 until 1961, no Christians were represented at all in the Regional Congress. After 1963, there was a clear shift, with a domination of the main power institutions by those from poor rural areas, who predominantly held unorthodox Islamic ideologies like the Alawi, Druze and Isma'ili. From 1966 until 1970, major cities like Damascus and Aleppo, predominantly Sunni strongholds, remained completely unrepresented in the regime's power structures. Thirty percent of the Regional Congress came from Latakia, a predominantly Alawi stronghold, another twenty percent came from Hawran and fifteen percent came from Dayr al-Zur. Alawis held the strongest representation at nearly twenty-five percent, a group that only made up eleven percent of the Syrian population as a whole. One of the founding members of the Baath and the Minister of Information in the cabinet after the Baathist coup, Sami al-Jundi, narrated the following:

> Three days after my entering the Ministry, the [party] comrades came to ask me for an extensive purge operation… the measure of a minister's success [was determined by] the lists of dismissals, since party members as well as their relatives and the members of their tribes [came to] demand their campaign and kinship rights. From the time the party appeared on the stage, caravans of villagers started to leave the villages of the plains and mountains for Damascus.[159]

Despite Assad's attempts to co-opt the Sunnis in the 1970s by increasing their representation among Regional Command members, the divisive nature of the regime had shown its true colors. In the late 1970s, several political assassinations targeted mostly Alawis.[160] An

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[158] Ibid., 76.

[159] Ibid., 77-78.

[160] Ibid., 80-90.

extremist Sunni group took credit for the actions in the newsletter *al-Nadhir.* In it, the group explicitly mentions the sectarian motives behind the attacks.

> The first bullet, however, was the result of long and persistent suffering from oppression and terror. The prisons of Syria were packed with [Sunni] Muslim prisoners… The ordeal reached its climax, however, when oppression became concentrated against the [Sunni] Muslims and against the Islamic religion in particular: mosques were destroyed; religious scholars arrested; educational programmes were banned….the country was handed piece by piece to the Jews; the [Alawi] sectarian party militia were allowed to take the place of the regular armed forces.[161]

The above shows the powerful constitution of competing Syrian religious identities. The newsletter puts the "sectarian party militia" at odds with the "Muslim prisoners." This clearly pitted the Sunnis against the Alawis, who are associated with "the Jews," a traditional sectarian nemesis of Muslims. This kind of discourse attempted to frame Alawis as outside of the Muslim tradition. Thus, the biased nature of the Baathist regime and its sectarian attacks against the Sunnis gave extremist Sunnis the ammo needed to create a sectarian discourse that pitted the Alawis and Sunnis against each other.

Sectarian occurrences became more frequent in Syria. In June 1979, thirty-two cadets from the Syrian military were murdered, led by a Sunni member from within the Baath party.[162] Again, the attack was viewed as a direct assault on Alawis, despite the fact that others were victims. Reports showed that the commando unit which executed the attack forcefully separated Sunni and Alawi cadet officers before carrying out the attack.[163] The regime blamed the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood for the massacre and took measures to retaliate against Muslim Brotherhood members.

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[161] Ibid., 90.

[162] Ibid., 90.

[163] Raphael Lefevre, "The Syrian Brotherhood's Armed Struggle," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,* December 14, 2012, accessed March 13, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/2012/12/14/syrian-brotherhood-s-armed-struggle.

Intermestics Reinforce Sectarian Divides

In parallel with these domestic occurrences, the international community played its part in aggravating tensions. Power and identity politics were at play between Syria and Egypt since the fall of the United Arab Republic, as proven by various records from the 1960s.[164] A series of correspondence records from the British Embassy describes discussions about the political animosity between the Baathist party and Egyptian President Nasser, as highlighted by a series of anti-Baath articles written by the popular Egyptian journalist Mohammed Hassanein Heikal in the sixties. More than a decade later, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat turned the discourse from attacks on the Baathist as a whole to sectarian attacks against the Alawis specifically. In a speech in 1979, Sadat fueled sectarianism as he declared, "Let these dirty Alawis speak for it. These are people who have lost all life's meaning."[165] Furthermore, discourse on Radio Cairo, which was widely listened to in the Arab world, further fueled sectarianism by attacking the identity of the Syrian regime. In Cairo's *al-Akhar* newspaper, an editorial narrates the occurrences of the attack on the Alawis and the retaliation as follows:

> If news of this massacre came as a surprise to some people and aroused fear and consternation, it was no surprise to those who are conversant with the facts of the situation in Syria and the atrocities which Alawi Baathist rule is committing against the Syrian people. This massacre was only one link in a long chain of crimes and assassinations and of other acts of suppression and coercion to which the Alawi Baath Party resorts in order to humiliate the Syrian people and to guarantee its own rule. The Syrian people were bound to rise against such humiliation and to defend themselves… The massacre [of Alawi cadets] took place ten days ago but was kept secret, so that henchmen of the Alawi regime could go on a murder rampage among non-Alawis or Sunnis. News agencies have said that most of those recently killed were Sunnis and that killing in revenge for the massacre of Alawis in Aleppo is continuing. As a result, Syria is

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[164] Jane Priestland and Patrick Seale, *Records of Syria: 1918-1973,* vol. 14 (London: Archive Editions Limited, 2005), 609.

[165] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 93.

in danger of becoming the victim of inter-communal strife and civil war, similar to the Lebanese civil war.[166]

The Baath party, which was specifically identified by its Alawi nature, is clearly juxtaposed with the "Syrian people." The Alawi are placed as the "other" within Syrian society, much like the Sunni extremist discourse within Syria. This can be seen by the way the author of the editorial describes how "the Alawi Baath Party" acted "to humiliate the Syrian people." This implies that the Alawis are not a part of the "Syrian people" as the religious group as a whole is contrasted with Syrian citizens. This is the same method used by President Sadat when he made no differentiation between the leaders of the Baath party and the "dirty Alawis." Similarly, Hussein of Jordan highlighted the Alawi nature of the regime.[167]

There was an internal and external battle for the identity of Syria. In 1979, Assad gave a speech in which he said "the concept of 'homeland' loses its meaning if its citizens are not equal. This equality is an integral part of Islam… [I] lead it [Syria]… not in the name of a religion or of a religious community, despite the fact that Islam is the religion of the majority."[168] Assad claimed that sectarian tensions were the result of "a conspiracy against our country" and blamed the Muslim Brotherhood in both his speech and state propaganda. Anti-Brotherhood propaganda labeled the group "traitors, renegades and heretics." In another speech in the opening of the Seventh Syrian Regional Congress session, on December 22, 1979, Assad states "May God curse them and their Islam. We shall not have one Islam with them. They are murderers of Islam and Muslims. They are traitors of Islam and Muslims." A deeper systemic and unit-level analysis of the construction of the Syrian identity is essential to our understanding of sectarianism.

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[166] Ibid., 93-95.

[167] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 362-363.

[168] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 95.

Systemically, several factors are at play in regards to the battle over the identity of both the regime and Syria. The Egyptian and Jordanian attempts to define Assad's regime by its "Alawi" nature is part of a greater battle over the region's general identity. Tensions between Egypt and Syria had grown since the break-up of the union in the sixties.[169] Not only did the Baath regime take control of the country but they also purged the Sunnis in power institutions upon ascending to power. This posed a threat to the general Sunni Arab vision of the region, even if unity under such an ideal was no longer possible. At the same time as these events were happening, the region faced the Shia Islamic threat of the Iranian Revolution. The Alawi-Sunni conflict in Syria can thus be situated within a larger battle for the identity of the region as Sunni Arab, which explains Jordan and Egypt's reaction towards the new Syrian regime and their strong condemnation of the "Alawi Baath."

Domestically, the actions of the regime allowed the growth of sectarian religious discourse and sentiment. The regime supported the earlier constitution of sectarian divisions inherited from the French by allowing sectarianism to flourish within its ranks. The purging of Sunnis from power structures and the deliberate attacks on Sunnis allowed for sectarian religious identities to become more salient. Further aggravating these sentiments was the Alawi and minority domination of power structures despite their small representation among the Syrian population as a whole. While Assad may have brought forth a unified Arab image from his discourse upon his ascent to power, his actions conveyed a different message altogether. The concerns about the minority-status of most of the members of the Baath leadership and power structures fueled Baathist interest in eliminating the ideological threat that the party believed the Sunnis posed. Therefore, this idea of the importance of the religious identity of leaders created

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[169] Jane Priestland and Patrick Seale, *Records of Syria: 1918-1973,* vol. 14 (London: Archive Editions Limited, 2005), 609.

sectarian interests that led to actions which further fueled sectarian sentiments within the country and abroad, within the systemic environment previously analyzed.

The Hama Massacre & Its Sectarian Legacy

The situation reached its peak with the Hama Massacre. An attempted assassination of Hafiz al-Assad in 1980 led the regime to execute several attacks against the Brotherhood, and more generally Sunnis.[170] Two units led by President Assad's brother Rif'at were ordered to kill all Muslim Brotherhood members who were held in the Palmyra prison. The operation led to the death of 550 Muslim Brotherhood prisoners who were gunned down while trapped in their prison cells. The bloodiest attacks came nearly two years later in February in the city of Hama, a predominantly Sunni city. The showdown between the Alawi Baath units and the Brotherhood escalated to unprecedented levels of violence, killing anywhere from an estimated 5000 to 25000 victims.[171] Nearly ten percent of the city's population was decimated. What matters for this thesis is not the details of who the victims were but the perception at the time and afterwards of whether or not the regime-led attacks were sectarian in nature.

Looking at newspaper reports from the time of the massacre can shed light on the discourse around the attacks. Due to Assad's extreme censorship, it is difficult to find information about the events, even in terms of literary works.[172] I will thus rely partially on reporting from outside of Syria. An editorial in the *Guardian* on February 24 narrates a dark image of the events that transpired:

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[170] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 105-111.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Kahf, Mohja. "The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature." *World Literature Today* 75:2 (2001), 224-225.

There has been little eye-witness stuff from the city of Hama, but the reports of escaping travelers and the Intelligence assessments of Western embassies combine to provide a picture of merciless carnage carried out by the Government's private Alawite security force in which certainly hundreds, probably thousands, have been killed and in which parts of the city have been reduced to rubble.[173]

The massacre is associated primarily with the Assad regime but is still identified with the Alawi community due to the make-up of the security forces who executed the orders, which are described as part of the "Government's private Alawite security force." A year after the massacre, *Guardian* reporter David Hirst interviewed Hama citizens about the destruction of the city's mosques, a telling sign that the regime targeted not only the people of Hama but their faith. In the article, one Hama resident recalled the following: "when President Assad first came here in 1971, the people slaughtered sheep and camels in his honor."[174] He, as well as others, felt disillusioned by what had transpired.

In contemporary Syrian literature, there is little in regards to the Hama massacre, though there is plenty of information about other occurrences, such as conflicts with the Turks and the British. In one authors' literary analysis, this "silence on Hama is notable, given the sophisticated levels of political consciousness present among Syrian writers."[175] This is partially explained as a result of state patronage to writers, who thus relied on the state for their livelihoods and could not freely criticize state affairs. However, the analysis points to several literary works which indirectly refer to the incident. In a poem referenced at the beginning of this chapter, prolific Syrian writer Nizar Kabbani writes:

> a citizen afraid to pray –

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[173] Jason Rodrigues, "1982: Syria's President Hafez al-Assad crushes rebellion in Hama," *The Guardian,* August 1, 2011, accessed March 13, 2016, http://www.theguardian.com/theguardian/from-the-archive-blog/2011/aug/01/hama-syria-massacre-1982-archive.

[174] Ibid.

[175] Mohja, "The Silences of Contemporary Syrian Literature," 226.

What if the State Police stake out the prayer line?
They might say I tried to contact the Merciful on High
Worse, they might accuse me
of perpetrating faith
- God, what a place[176]

The author alludes to the reality and fear of certain groups in Syria, as a result of the Hama rebellion. Given the sectarian nature of the attacks executed by the regime and the overall sectarian policies enacted by the Baath, it is logical to conclude that this fear was most strongly felt by Sunnis who had the greatest reason to fear the regime and its repressive nature. In a memoir written during the Syrian civil war, one woman described the sentiment around political repression after the crackdown on the Brotherhood in Hama nearly three decades prior to the civil war: "We used to call Syria the 'Kingdom of Silence' and it deserved the name. The 1980s were full of pain, a decade that saw the most widespread campaign of political oppression."[177]

Part of the legacy of Hafiz would be the massacre in Hama, but could the tide turn? After Hafiz's death, there seemed to be hope that perhaps Syria had entered a new era. Bashar represented new hope, with his Western education and anti-corruption stance. Would he overturn decades of inherited sectarian strife or would he continue to fuel the flame?

An Inconsistent Leader: the Bashar al-Assad Regime Plays with Sectarian Fire

Today and tomorrow we are in desperate need to creative minds in order to push the development process forward…We are also in desperate need to constructive criticism

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[176] Ibid., 233.

[177] Dunia, Khawla. "And the Demonstrations Go on: Diary of an Unfinished Revolution (Syria)." In *Writing Revolutions: The Voices from Tunis to Damascus,* edited by Layla Al-Zubaidi and Mathew Cassel, 179-208. New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2013.

which is the exact opposite of destructive criticism that often colors most discussions and proposals for various reasons whether they are personal or otherwise.[178]

After his father's death, Bashar al-Assad's rise to power initially brought a welcome ray of hope for Syrians. The young Assad took control of a Syria that was largely isolated from the rest of the world, with no internet access and a ban on satellite TV.[179] Bashar gave way for the legalization of satellite TV and brought improvements in technology by supporting the growth of mobile phone networks and the internet. Bashar's cosmopolitan Sunni wife Asma also brought a welcome indication that perhaps the new regime wouldn't be marred by the old sectarian leniencies. It appeared that Syria might have a new progressive leader that could perhaps bring forward a new political agenda that might bring prosperity to the people and support national unity.

The so-called "Damascus Spring" further supported the new hopes for Syria. During the Damascus Spring in 2001, the regime implemented more liberal policies and political opposition briefly thrived. The short Damascus Spring led the way for the burgeoning of political groups and even witnessed the release of hundreds of political prisoners.[180] Civil society seemed to suddenly flourish, with a number of debating clubs forming during that time. The Civil Society Movement was one of the many groups that briefly experienced this moment of hope. As a secular network of intellectuals, journalists, actors, doctors, professors and other professionals,

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[178] Al-Bab, "Speech delivered by Bashar al-Assad on his inauguration as President of Syria in 2000," August 3, 2015, http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm.

[179] Carsten Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances: Repression and Revolution from Damascus Spring to Arab Spring,* Seattle: Cune Press, 2012, 96-100.

[180] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 366.

the group sought to slowly transition Syria into a more progressive state by pursuing incremental changes and avoiding violent methods.[181]

During the Damascus Spring, Syrian opposition groups and people of all ideologies joined forces to write the "Manifesto of 99," which presented a number of the desires and demands of the people, mostly related to increasing freedoms.[182] The "Manifesto of the 1000" soon followed but presented more threatening demands, including political party plurality.

The new freedoms came as fast as they disappeared, only a year after it began. Debating clubs that formed were soon banned and Syria's prisons filled back up with opposition members. According to philosopher and Civil Society Movement member Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, "His [Bashar's] original sin was not to offer national reconciliation. Many even said that he would be ready to reconcile with Israel but not with his own people."[183]

Assad reshuffled the administration continuously throughout his years in power. In the first two years alone, he replaced more than 75 percent of the leading officials in politics, including in the military and administration.[184] In place of the former heads, technocrats were placed in key positions. Top officials seemed to have relatively clean records. However, while Assad promised to limit Baathist power and confine the party to the ideological domain, his promises went unfulfilled. Baathist members in his new cabinet were in eighteen of the positions, as opposed to the former fifteen members under his father.[185] By 2004, the regime began to take steps to consolidate Bashar's power by purging those opposed to the new president. There were

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[181] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances,* 148.

[182] Ibid., 100.

[183] Ibid., 47.

[184] Ibid., 111.

[185] Ibid., 109.

more Alawis in power during Bashar's time than during the reign of his father.[186] Bashar dismissed two of the regime's oldest Sunni loyalists, Khaddam and Tlass, in favor of members of his extended family, who were Alawis.[187] And as author Carsten Wieland wrote, during 2011 "with rising stakes in the conflict and increasing brutality it was above all Alawis (and to a lesser extent Christians, Druze and Ismailis) who were exposed to existential fear of retaliation, although some Alawi figures counted among important representatives of the opposition." For our purposes, it is perhaps not so important if the Alawis were all supportive of Bashar or not, but that there was a sentiment among the people that Alawis were the people of Bashar and were his supporters based on their religious ties.

Bashar's regime would continue to be marred by inconsistent statements and policies until the 2011 revolution. The regime oscillated between moving towards and against certain oppositional groups. The following sections will aim to assess the regime's relations with the secularists, Islamists, moderates and Christians. These assessments will allow for a more thorough understanding of the construction of sectarianism in Syria today.

Silencing Secularist Visions of Reconciliation

Bashar's regime had an inconsistent relationship with secularists in society, despite the Baath's professed secular nature. After the war in Iraq, the government seemed to attempt to ameliorate its relation with secularists by voicing approval of the opposition.[188] In May 2004, the Lebanese newspaper *al-Safir,* Bahjat Suleiman, a powerful leader of the Syrian intelligence service, wrote, "In Syria, the regime does not have enemies but 'opponents' whose demands do

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[186] Ibid., 66-71.

[187] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 366.

[188] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances*, 107-108.

not go beyond certain political and economic reforms such as the end of the state of emergency."
The commentary seemed to praise the secular opposition's aims and framed the opposition as
critical but not adversaries.

Michel Kilo, a leader of the Civil Society Movement, was allowed for the first time to
publish a piece critical of the regime in March 2004.[189] He was even allowed to speak on Syrian
television, also for the first time. During the interview, Kilo referred to the 1963 Baathist coup
when he said "Syria needs a different beginning than that of March 8."

Many of the occurrences in the following period show that the Syrian people began to re-
constitute themselves along a more unified front, which disregarded the barriers of sectarian
identities. New alliances were formed in 2005 when twelve unlicensed parties and groups created
a committee for the "national coordination of the defense of basic and human rights." The group
included Kurdish activists, Civil Society Movement members and communists.[190] Oppositional
groups abroad also joined forces and gathered in Brussels in June 2004. Kilo explained the
regime's sudden leniency as follows: "Because of it [oppositional activities abroad] our voice
has become much louder and bolder. The regime will have to give us more leeway since they're
afraid we'll join up with supporters abroad. We have threatened to do so. We have to become
even more aggressive."

More steps were taken by the people towards what seemed to be national reconciliation.
The Damascus Declaration of 16 October 2005 unified even more groups, including the secular
Civil Society Movement, the Kurds, moderate Muslims and the banned Muslim Brotherhood that

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[189] Ibid., 148.

[190] Ibid.

was now based out in London. The Declaration was a broad appeal for democratic change that would shun "totalitarian thought" and sever "all plans for exclusion."[191] It called for:

> [a] new social contract… [with a] modern democratic constitution that makes citizenship the criterion of affiliation, and adopts pluralism, the peaceful transfer of power, and the rule of law in a state all of whose citizens enjoy the same rights and have the same duties, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sect, or clan and prevents the return of tyranny in new forms.

It further adopted an inclusive appeal to the Muslim Brothers and other Islamic affiliates by proclaiming that "Islam – which is the religion and ideology of the majority, with its lofty intentions, higher values, and tolerant canon law – is the most prominent cultural component in the life of the nation and the people."[192] The document was very explicit in its mention of religion and its aim for unification and equality. To emphasize this point further, it states that the new society should be "free of fanaticism, violence and exclusion, while having great concern for the respect of the beliefs, culture, and special characteristics of others, whatever their religious, confessional and intellectual affiliations and openness to new and contemporary cultures."

This declaration is intriguing analytically for a variety of reasons. First, its explicit mention of the need to shun "totalitarian thought" and adopt pluralism validates our previous analysis about the exclusivity in Syrian politics. The sectarian nature of that exclusivity is also shown by the frequent mention of religion and the need for equal rights and power distribution that would apply "regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sect, or clan." The other interesting component of this declaration is the attempt to constitute a new identity, one that could perhaps use Islam as a cultural identity to unify the people, unlike Hafiz al-Assad who had used Arabism

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[191] Ibid., 149

[192] Ibid., 150.

as the unifying commonality amongst Syrians. The various groups involved in this declaration are thus not passively accepting the rule of the state and its outcomes, but are actively seeking to create a new identity for Syrians that would unify them in a new and more equal society.

The group went beyond simple words and formed the National Council for Democratic Change in January 2007.[193] Alawis, Christians and Sunnis once again joined forces to actualize their interests. More than 150 people came to the first meeting, which lasted for more than twelve hours. The group was a mix of females and males, with its president a female doctor named Fida al-Howrani and included a variety of ideologically and politically diverse members. Secularists and moderate Islamists were working together to formulate a new platform to modernize Syria. This diverse group shows that the opposition against the regime refused to constitute Syrian identity along sectarian lines. Instead of allowing the regime to define Syria alone, the group aimed to reconstitute the Syrian identity along unifying principles.

However, the hope that came from the spirited words of the Declaration and the aspirations of those who had been able to overcome numerous obstacles to form a unified front were quickly extinguished by another crackdown by the regime. Within a month of the initial meeting, the main leaders of the group were arrested.[194] Riad Seif, an independent parliamentarian and entrepreneur who participated in writing the Declaration, was the last of twelve leaders of the group to be arrested in 2007. The regime enforced travel bans and strict surveillance on those suspected of membership in this or other oppositional groups. In 2010, the regime canceled a secular conference organized at the University of Damascus.[195]

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[193] Ibid., 153.

[194] Ibid., 153-157.

[195] Ibid., 177.

By 2010, the opposition seemed to have lost the hope that it once felt at the beginning of the new millennium. According to Michel Kilo, "The political opposition are at loggerheads with one another. They jointly signed the Damascus Declaration, and now one suspects the other of being an American agent."[196] When talking of the Civil Society Movement, Kilo remained proud of the work done, "we were the driving force, not the political parties… The intellectuals delivered the proof that the Syrian street was not dead, and that the middle class was vibrant and full of ideas. But the intellectuals who moved things became the main targets of the regime." According to Seif, the unified message of the Declaration and its member groups was one that appealed to a diverse array of Syrians. "If people were not afraid of punishment, the support would be unlimited… We are liberals, nationalists, Islamists, Kurds, Arabs, communists, etc. We are a team that represents Syria as it is. Our commonness was democracy."

Increasing Religious Discourse & Encouraging Radical Islam

The Muslim Brotherhood's history in Syria prior to the Bashar regime was marred by the history of the Hama massacre. From the 1980s, membership in the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood organization was not only prohibited but punishable by death. The regime exiled leaders of the movement to London.[197] The Muslim Brotherhood in Syria, however, was unique among its neighboring affiliated groups due to its relations with non-Islamist opposition movements. In fact, there was regular contact between the secular Civil Society Movement and the Brotherhood. Moreover, as we have seen, the Muslim Brotherhood has been a participating agent in the active attempts to form a national coalition opposition. The focus of the Syrian Muslim Brothers on democracy, freedom of speech and other popular issues allowed them to easily collaborate with

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[196] Ibid., 155-160.

[197] Ibid., 160.

other opposition groups. According to Kilo, a Christian and a leader of the Civil Society Movement:

> I believe they [the Muslim Brotherhood] are a moderate force with a strong democratic tendency… Therefore we won't give the regime the chance to play us off against each other… If my opinion is the expression of a civil and secular democracy and theirs is an Islamic one, this is all right as long as we have democracy as a common denominator. We will accept the Muslims coming to power through elections, provided that they accept the democratic system… We have no problems with Islamic groups and organizations. I mean when the Islamists become democrats, they won't frighten us anymore.

Despite the cooperation between the secularists and the Muslim Brothers, the Brotherhood's relationship with the Bashar regime was more favorable than the secularists. In 2004, the regime began to reach out to the group, perhaps in an attempt for reconciliation.[198] While the regime continued to refuse to apologize for what happened in Hama, it did extend an olive branch. In April, Bashar met with leading Islamists from the region, Islamists with direct connections to the Syrian branch. Later, he also directly contacted the Muslim Brothers, which was more of a sign of friendship than the regime had shown to secularist groups. The idea of getting rid of the death penalty as a punishment for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood was brought up by a parliamentary member. An even more telling sign of the regime's changed attitude came with the arrest of Nabil Fayyad, an intellectual who had written critically of the growing influence of radical Islamists. The regime seemed to be siding with the Islamists over their secular counterparts. The Hama massacre was even deemed a "tragic event" by Imad Mustafa, a Syrian Ambassador to the US. Former members of the Muslim Brotherhood who had been exiled were allowed to return upon apologizing for what happened in Hama. According to philosopher Tayyeb Tizini, "The regime has sometimes actively supported the Islamists because

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[198] Ibid., 162.

they wanted to keep them as a visible danger to the secular opposition: 'Just look, this is the danger. Either you have us or you get them.'"[199]

Unlike secularists that had no safe space to meet due to the regime's policies, the Muslim Brothers and Islamists in general had countless safe havens including Quranic schools and mosques.[200] While meetings of more than five people were banned in regular public spaces due to active martial law, the policy didn't apply to religious institutions which had no surveillance. According to Saleh, the meeting ban "applies to us in the Civil Society Movement... But nobody forbids people to go to the mosques in crowds and assemble for talks." And according to political scientist Salam Kawkibi in an interview in 2004, "The regime is now doing all it can to survive. This includes approaching the Muslim Brothers. It is trying to curry favor with everyone except the secular Civil Society Movement... Nowadays there are hundreds of mosques in Damascus but not a single meeting hall for secular people. This says everything."

There was a sense that moderate Islam was being stifled while radical variants were left to flourish. In 2010, two moderate Islamic centers were shut down.[201] According to Sheikh Muhammad al-Habash, former director of one of the centers that was closed, "The Ministry is very intolerant. They want to convert everyone to conservative Islam and we as imams should be instruments for this." Another indication of the increasingly conservative rhetoric of the Islam supported by the regime was revealed in 2009 during the drafting of a new Personal Status Law.[202] Sunni Islamists dominated the panel chosen for the task. An outcry from moderates soon followed as a result of the strict interpretations of Islamic jurisprudence used in the new

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[199] Ibid., 164.

[200] Ibid., 165.

[201] Ibid., 174.

[202] Ibid., 177.

document. The new law would strengthen male rights at the expense of women and minority rights were weakened. Restrictions were placed on Christian and other minority clergy, who would have to rely on the state for their own internal religious affairs. The outrage peaked with an online campaign against the change in parallel with online advocacy and lobbying to dismiss the new law. Revisions to the draft produced in 2009 did nothing to ameliorate the opposition that feared the conservative rhetoric within the law, and continued protests eventually led the regime to dismiss the matter.

Furthermore, the regime's opposition to the US was bolstered by the Islamists, who already held anti-American stance. Bashar allowed for the transit of Sunni jihadists from his borders into Iraq.[203] This support of jihadist activities in the neighboring country no doubt had repercussions internally. Assad consistently deemed Iraqi rebels a "legitimate resistance."[204]

Despite these conservative leniencies, by 2010, the tide seemed to turn once again with a number of measures against Islamists.[205] Prayer rooms were shut down in popular restaurants along with public prayer rooms during Ramadan. The *niqab* was banned in schools for both teachers and girls, and curriculum in schools became more secular.

Further adding to the resentment of Sunnis was the economic situation.[206] Bashar's regime had cut subsidies for ordinary citizens and this, along with the drought that was experienced in Syria from 2006 until 2010, led to the further disenfranchisement and impoverishment of mostly Sunni peasants who were hit the worst. The Sunni peasants who had been on the side of Hafiz were now even more frustrated with his son. According to interviews,

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[203] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria,"360-368.

[204] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances,* 205.

[205] Ibid., 180.

[206] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 367.

there was some resentment between religious groups as a result of the perceived empowerment of Alawi migrants over other peasants. Thus, the regime fueled sectarianism by allowing religiosity to grow at the expense of secularists, while at the same time adding to the grievances of Sunnis due to the regime's inconsistent policies.

Flourishing Christian Society & Muslim-Christian Relations

The bulk of research in the area of Syria focuses predominantly on the Alawis and Sunnis, given that one has been in power for the last several decades and the other is part of the majority. The role of Christians in comprehensive works on Syria is often in passing, but is central to our understanding of sectarian construction. This short section aims to give a glimpse into the role of Christians during Bashar's regime and the role they played in constructing some form of national unity.

During Bashar's regime, Christians raised concerns about the growing conservative Sunni movement, like their secular and moderate Muslim counterparts, but they generally seemed to enjoy good relations with the regime.[207] Christians in Syria held equal rights in the law, except for the stipulation in the constitution that the president must be Muslim. Christian churches flourished in Syria and even enjoyed state support, with exemptions from taxes like mosques. The degree to which Syria was a sanctuary for Christians is shown by the large number of Iraqi Christian refugees that flooded the country after the American invasion of Iraq. In the summer months of 2004, more than a quarter of a million Christians were reported to have fled from Iraq into Syria for refuge. By 2005, there were more than 700,000 refugees of all faiths in Syria. Seventy percent of refugees in Syria in 2010 had been in Syria for more than four years, which can either be an indication of refugees' lack of an alternative choice or as a sign of the

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[207] Ibid., 88-90.

relative liberties enjoyed by refugees in Syria. In general, the literature seems to indicate the latter.

The literature also indicates that Christians received ample support during Bashar and Hafiz's respective regimes. One study of Christian charities actually posits that Christians had a better relationship with the regime than their Sunni counterparts since they weren't viewed as a political threat.[208] The regime allowed Christian charities to flourish under its patronage. The Christians played equal part in the relationship, reinforcing the regime's secular and pluralistic image. There is also ample proof of the peaceful coexistence of Muslim and Christian groups, as was indicated by the earlier statements by Michel Kilo. The Christian charities study in the previously mentioned research found that Christian charities were inclusive in regards to their beneficiaries. At one charity, Terre des Hommes Syrie, for example, Muslims made up more than 95 percent of its beneficiaries in 2008. Muslims also participated on the charity's board of directors.

The increased presence of religious institutions and symbols, however, is important in our understanding of sectarianism. Increased presence of religiously-based entities and symbols, especially those of extremist fanatics, meant a general increased salience of sectarian religious identities. Syrians increasingly began seeing religious figures in media discussion and tensions led to a presidential decree to regulate Muslim religious movements in 2008.[209] As one intellectual, Sadiq Jalal al-Azm, explained it: "There is a kind of competition to demonstrate

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[208] Christa Salamandra and Leif Stenberg. *Syria from Reform to Revolt, Volume 2: Culture, Society, and Religion.* New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015, 93-98.

[209] Ibid., 153.

more clearly one's religious identity. The Muslims are building more mosques; the Christians organize more lavish procession and hang bigger crosses round their necks."[210]

Syrian Civil War: A Sectarian Conflict?

As has been seen, Bashar's regime was inconsistent throughout his ten years in power. Some have noted that this is due to the fact that it was no longer a one man show, with conflicting interests between Bashar and the old regime stalwarts.[211] Regardless of the reason, instead of supporting a unified front, such as the one presented by the signatories of the Declaration, the regime seemed to give mixed signals to secularists and toyed with Islamists.

In part, Bashar's fears of the opposition in the middle of the first decade of the 2000s may have also been due to fears of the ongoing war in Iraq. Potential interventions n Syria seemed like a real possibility at the time. Therefore, systemic factors affected internal affairs by creating an environment of fear over the potential overturning of the status quo by supporting any form of opposition. "We don't want to turn into a second Iraq" was a popular sentiment even amongst people.[212]

Bashar thus played with fire while he allowed the threat of the Islamists to dangle in front of the people and the moderate opposition. The regime allowed conservative Islamists to flourish to a certain degree in order to show that the regime was better than an alternative. The fact that the regime allowed this shows that there seemed to be a confidence that such radical conservativism would not be a popular idea among citizens, which does seem to be the case

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[210] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances*, 88.

[211] Ibid., 66.

[212] Ibid., 90.

according to our earlier analysis. However, when Islamist power seemed to grow and pose a threat, the regime once again cracked down on dissidents.

What occurred is problematic in several ways. First, the Bashar regime didn't form a consistent message nor did it foster the growth of a particular national identity. While espousing secularist discourse like the old regime, the regime never took action to support secularists. Secularists were being attacked while the Islamists flourished. However, it is my analysis that to a large degree the sentiment of Syrian sectarianism was limited only to a few groups. Unlike the Iraqi case, there was little evidence in the literature that the people themselves felt bitterness towards one another on the basis of faith. For the most part, Syrians seemed willing and able to create diverse opposition groups that showed that Syrian society was not completely marred by sectarian tendencies despite the fact that the Bashar regime supported policies that could very easily espouse such sentiments.

However, it is very possible that with the start of the civil war, Bashar's conspiratorial and sectarian discourse brought greater salience to sectarian sentiments that had been growing beneath the surface for decades. The regime fed into sectarian interpretations of the conflict by acting upon the notion that the issue was sectarian. After the initial protests, the regime immediately began to make concessions to Sunni Islamists through a number of actions.[213] In April 2011, the regime lifted the ban on the niqab for teachers and students that had been in place for about a year. That same month, Sheikh Ramadan al-Bouti indicated that the regime would allow for the establishment of a religious TV channel, which had previously been demanded by Sunnis. Islamist political prisoners were set free and a casino was shut down. All indications point to an attempt by the regime to reconcile with its Islamist opponents. Further concessions

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[213] Ibid., 30-33.

were made to the Syrian Sunni Kurds, who were finally granted citizenship after decades of denial. When reconciliation failed, the regime changed its tone. During the civil war, the government took measures to cleanse all non-Alawis from its ranks, especially Sunni civil servants.[214] Syria would very soon become a hub for a wider radical Islamic movement that found its enemy in both the rule of autocrats in the region as well as against the West.

The Syrian landscape was complex in 2011 at the start of the civil war. Valiant attempts had been made by diverse political and civil groups to present their own national vision of Syria throughout the early 2000s. Their sense of unity was continuously crushed by Bashar throughout his decade in power. Assad's regime seemed to support Islamists and radicals over their secularist counterparts, which bolstered resentments between groups.

Conclusion

Since the days of the mandate, we have seen a push for a unified Syrian identity by the people while another force from above, both domestically and internationally, attacked this vision. The literature seems to indicate that there was a sense of unity among opposition groups. By the twenty-first century, both moderate Islamists and secularists agreed on the danger posed by radical Islamists and presented a unified vision of Syrian society. These diverse oppositional groups successfully formed a platform for their vision through in 2007 with the formation of the National Council for Democratic Change.[215] However, due to the Assad regime's paranoid fears of all forms of opposition, the group disbanded and many of its leaders were put in jail. Both

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[214] Salamandra and Stenberg, *Syria from Reform to Revolt,* 11.

[215] Ibid., 153.

Bashar and Hafiz attempted to put forth a unifying vision of Syria through their discourse but their actions failed to convert that vision into reality.

Was there a sectarian sentiment in Syria? It seems that the construct of the sectarian nature of the country was more a result of consistent propaganda internally, especially after the war broke out, as well as externally by the Western media's focus on sectarian divisions.[216] Oversimplified images of the war were consistently projected, which presented the groups by single ethno-sectarian agendas. According to Phillips, part of the problem was the confusion of regional wars which may have led to an "Iraq contagion," whereby the Syrian conflict was viewed through the same lens as its neighbor. At the same time, Syrian discourse in the region also served to perpetuate sectarian anger. On a regular slot on a Saudi TV channel, the Syrian Sheikh Adnan al-Arour continued to feed anger towards the Alawis.[217] Similarly, Qatari-owned Al-Jazeera further fueled the flame. In a 2013 newscast, al-Qaradawi stated, "The leader of the party of Satan [Hezbollah] comes to fight the Sunnis...Now we know what the Iranians want…continued massacres to kill Sunnis." This kind of discourse further constituted the Syrian conflict along sectarian divides, and thus also re-constituted the Syrian identity itself along these same lines by defining the people by their Alawi or Sunni identity.

Systemically, it is now apparent that regional conflicts have found their battlefield in Syria. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have all supported various Islamist groups in Syria, groups which have very clearly espoused sectarian sentiments.[218] In 2013, Saudi Arabia approved the formation of the Salafist Islamic Front, which used anti-Alawi discourse openly.

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[216] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 370.

[217] Ibid., 365-370

[218] Ibid.

Regular citizens in the region and around the world were able to funnel funds to different groups and people would soon come from around the world to fight in Syria.

Nihad Nahas, a Sunni communist among the regime's opposition who spent 15 years in prison, said "Syrian society used to be much more liberal and more secular. It was not until after the Alawis strong-armed Assad to power that tribes and religious groups gained importance. The ideological rift between them has deepened."[219] This sentiment is supported by others, including a Syrian intellectual who summed it up with the following: "In the 1950s we were communists, Baathists, Nasserists, or Syrian nationalists. Today we are Sunnis, Alawis, Druze, or Christians again." The days of a unified front in Syria were gone.

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[219] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances,* 90.

Chapter 4 – Patterns in Constructing Sectarianism

Introduction

As has been seen, sectarianism requires a nurturing environment in order to burgeon and grow in societies. This thesis attempted to show that sectarianism is not innate in the peoples or states of Syria and Iraq, nor is it simply innate in Islamic societies. Instead, sectarianism is constructed through intermestic interactions within the international system, reinforced by the ideas and interests of agent states. The burgeoning of sectarian violence in the two states must thus be understood with a nuanced approach that assesses how historic and modern interactions within and between states has impacted the sectarian characteristics of Iraq and Syria.

The previous chapters have provided a Constructivist analysis of the growth of sectarianism in Iraq and Syria from the period of the League of Nations mandates until the twenty-first century. The influence of intermestics through system and agent analyses has been assessed to form a comprehensive understanding of today's sectarian conflicts in the two states. As case studies, these analyses demonstrate the individual circumstances of the states and how sectarianism formed in each. Through a synthetic analysis, we can better understand patterns that may allow for a more thorough understanding of the dangers that sectarianism poses to similar states. What can we derive from the two cases? What patterns can be identified from the previous analyses that can bring clarity to the complexity of today's sectarian civil wars?

This chapter will aim to tease out key patterns of sectarian construction that appear within both the Syrian and Iraqi cases within this thesis. Each case's unique elements have already been extensively assessed through the case-study chapters. However, in order to truly understand the prevalent confusion of our current time, we need to better understand the patterns that have allowed sectarianism to flourish. Through Wendt's Constructivist agenda, which has already

been expanded upon in the first chapter, this concluding chapter will highlight and analyze
several of the key systemic and unit-level interactions that helped construct the sectarian tensions
that exploded into the civil wars in Syria and Iraq.

Structural Elements of Sectarian Construction

> The structure of any social system will contain three elements: material conditions,
> interests, and ideas… [They are] distinct and play different roles in explanation. The
> significance of material conditions is constituted in part by interest, but they are not the
> same thing…. Similarly, interests are constituted in part by ideas, but they are not the
> same thing… without ideas there are no interests, without interests there are no
> meaningful material conditions, without material conditions there is no reality at all….
> The task of structural theorizing ultimately must be to show how the elements of a system
> fit together into some kind of whole."[220]

The synthesis analysis begins by examining the systemic elements that have shaped
sectarianism in Syria and Iraq, beginning with the mandate period which was an area of focus for
both case studies. Wendt gives us the key to understanding the systemic component. We must
assess three elements: the material conditions, interests and ideas. The interaction between these
creates the system as a whole. We thus begin with the base of the interests and material
conditions – ideas.

Orientalist Foundations of Sectarianism

Western rule over Syria and Iraq in the early twentieth century has had irreversible
consequences on the region, especially in shaping sectarian conflicts. President Woodrow
Wilson brought forth the Westphalian system of states upon non-European peoples in the
nineteen twenties.[221] The new order would be based on "universal" principles of the sovereign

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[220] Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* 139.

[221] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq,* 4.

state which would aim to foster open world markets and politically independent states. However, independence did not come simply through the empowerment of the peoples. Mandates were created under the authority of various Western powers which would rule over Oriental lands. As we have seen, the power of the mandates built sectarian foundations in the societies of both Syria and Iraq.

What allowed for the rule of Western powers in the two states? Materially, the League of Nations was the institution that legitimized the mandates of Iraq and Syria under the British and French respectively. However, this material condition cannot exist without both interests and ideas, as was elaborated on by Wendt. I argue that the powerful systemic culture of Orientalism allowed for the legitimization of the rule of the French and British on Syrian and Iraqi society.

What were the ideas behind the mandates? In 1907, Gertrude Bell wrote "The Oriental is like a very old child… He is not practical in our acceptance of the word, any more than a child is practical, and his utility is not ours."[222] Later, she also wrote that "Arabs are too fickle, weak and uncivilized." In an article in *The Baghdad Times* announcing the new mandate in Iraq – or Mesopotamia as it was then called – on May 3, 1920, a similar sentiment is prevalent:

> It is the duty of the mandate power to act the part of a wise and far-seeing guardian who makes provision for the training of his charge with a view to fitting him to take his place in the world of men. Mesopotamia has suffered under centuries of misrule during which the versatility of her people and the productivity of her lands have been checked, or stayed... And as the guardian rejoices over the growth of his ward into sane and independent manhood, so will the guardian, Power [sic] see with satisfaction the development of political institutions which shall be sound and free.[223]

The above shows several of the key elements that influenced British and French thinking during the mandate period. The article notes that the peoples have "suffered under centuries of

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[222] Ibid., 65.

[223] Priestland and Rush, *Records of Iraq: 1914-1966, vol. 2,* 230.

misrule during which the versatility of her [Mesopotamia's] people and the productivity of her lands have been checked, or stayed." This powerful notion of the static nature of Ottoman rule impacted the way in which the French and British saw their mandates. The British assumed that those educated under the Ottomans were backward and not capable of possessing power and thus placed their hopes on the authority and rule of tribal sheikhs. The French, believing the millet system of the Ottomans to have sustained the complete separation of different religious groups, implemented policies that actually aggravated divisions between different religious groups by viewing them as completely detached from one another.

This type of discourse can be juxtaposed with the critical sentiments of the peoples, which refuted this notion. In a speech by the Acting Civil Commissioner to Arab Deputation in Baghdad in June of 1920, the Commissioner gave an empowered proclamation that dismantled Orientalist claims. The Orient was not what the British envisioned and he called for the people to stand up, noting demonstrations across the region, including in Syria.

> Lloyd George declared to the House of Commons that Mesopotamia should have a Wasi (mandatory) to have charge of the country for its progress etc. but do you know what is meant by a mandate? They are unable to look after themselves or to behave themselves. Did Lloyd George forget that under Turkish rule, Turkey was a Government which depended on Arab officials who were the means of its success... Mesopotamians get up; demand your rights, demand your complete independence, confirm the demands of your representatives; Wake up from your sleep; the result of sleep will be disastrous.[224]

Opposing the Western perspective, here we get a different interpretation of Ottoman rule. The Commissioner specifically notes that "Turkey was a Government which depended on Arab officials who were the means of success." The speech thus contradicts the notion of the backward, static Orient which had not seen progress during the era of the Ottoman Empire. It also dismantles the notion that the Orient needs a guardian to take care of it.

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[224] Ibid., 318-321.

Even when states gained independence, Orientalist discourse and thought continued. In a testimony by the High Commissioner Sir Francis Humphry to argue for the independence of Iraq, he argues that there are two types of states, the "civilized nations of the modern world" and others like Iraq that "may not run quite so smoothly or so efficiently as in some more advanced and highly developed State."[225] In line with Orientalist tradition, the Commissioner views Western powers as civilized while Iraq, and other former Ottoman territories, are contrasted with this vision and viewed as inefficient and implicitly uncivilized.

These powerful notions of the child-like Orient, the uncivilized Arab, led to the demarcation of various Arab and Oriental lands to Western powers. The League of Nations was the platform through which Orientalist ideas were implemented and set forth. Since Arabs were "uncivilized," they needed the support and guidance of the British and the French. It was the manifestation of what was known as the "White Man's Burden" from a famous British poem by Rudyard Kipling:

> Take up the White Man's burden--
> Send forth the best ye breed--
> Go bind your sons to exile
> To serve your captives' need[226]

The powerful imagery, written in 1899, was just as influential during the mandate period and afterwards. "Serve your captives' need" rings with the same sentiment as Bell in her essay about the "The Oriental" which is "like a very old child."[227] It is also the same notion as *The Baghdad Times* article which calls for the guardianship of the Orient.

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[225] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*, 40.

[226] Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden." *McClure's Magazine,* February 12, 1899.

[227] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq,* 15.

The outcome of these powerful Orientalist ideas during the mandate period of both Iraq and Syria, by the British and French, led to the creation of policies based on such Orientalist thought. Believing in the Ottoman Empire's backwardness, the British formed an entirely new system based on tribal and religious affiliations.[228] The French mandate in Syria similarly focused on religious divisions to organize society and strengthened the former Ottoman Empire millet system, which had evolved over the years by decreasing legal distinctions between different religious millets.[229] The French thus built a system based on religious sects that allowed religious minorities to prosper at the expense of the predominantly Sunni Muslim population.

This kind of discourse is not simply reserved for the early twentieth century; Orientalist discourse has continued to play a key role in the constitution of the East by the West. When declaring the invasion of Iraq in 2003, former President George Bush addressed the people in a similar tone to the previously mentioned texts. "My fellow citizens. At this hour, American and coalition forces are in the early stages of military operations to disarm Iraq, to free its people and to defend the world from grave danger."[230] One can almost hear the echoes of "take up the White Man's burden" with Bush's declaration that the Western superpower would "free its [Iraq's] people." The Western savior had once again come to defend the Oriental "old child" that lacked the capacity to care for itself. This same pattern that had been seen in the early twentieth century was experienced by the Iraqis once again after the invasion in Iraq in 2003, when the occupying

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[228] Ibid., 74-77.

[229] White, *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East,* 47-49.

[230] George W. Bush, "Address on the start of the war," (speech, Washington, DC, March 20, 2003), *The Guardian,* http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/mar/20/iraq.georgebush.

force built a new governing council that gave a proportional share of seats based on the ratio of communal identities.[231]

A distinction in the Iraqi 2003 case, however, should be noted. The legitimacy brought forth by the League of Nations in the 1920s was no longer the same. The United Nations, which essentially replaced the role of the League of Nations, didn't approve of the American invasion of Iraq, though no party took measures to actually stop the intervention. However, the UN did put out a resolution that legitimized the US invasion. The UN Security Resolution 1483 states that "The Security council… welcoming [sic] the commitment of all parties concerned to support the creation of an environment in which they [the Iraqi people] may do so [determine their own political future] as soon as possible." It also goes on with the resolve "that the United Nations should play a vital role in… the reconstruction of Iraq, and the restoration and establishment of national and local institutions for representative governance."[232] The language makes it clear that power must be restored to the Iraqi people, however, one cannot help but see the similarity between this and the goal of the mandates, which were to allow for the eventual sovereignty of the people within the mandated territories. The Orientalist culture of the international system still seems present, though it has perhaps evolved into a more cautious discourse.

Thus, in order to understand the sectarian conflicts in Iraq and Syria, one cannot underestimate the power of Orientalism and its resulting material manifestations. The early concepts of the Iraqi and Syrian states were formed by the West, which was given power by the League of Nations to form new states after the fall of the Ottoman Empire. The concept of the backward Orient pushed forth policies that halted any progress made during the Ottoman period.

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[231] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 130.

[232] United Nations Security Council (SC), Resolution 1493, May 22, 2003, http://www.unesco.org/culture/laws/pdf/resolution1483_iraq_en.pdf.

In Syria, the French reversed the progress made in the millet system that allowed for greater equality between religious groups by more strictly adhering to the separate rule of various religious communities, despite popular opinion. In Iraq, the British marginalized the educated class brought up under the Ottomans, believing them to be corrupted by the former empire. Even in modern Iraq, similar notions of the Western civilizer and savior have allowed for the reconstruction of the Iraqi state along religious and ethnic divisions that aggravated sectarian tensions. Powerful Orientalist ideas and discourse allowed for these real material outcomes to burgeon in Iraq and Syria, and ultimately created the foundations of sectarianism with the very foundations of the new states.

The centrality of Orientalism and its ability to shape states through its powerful ideas and concepts is thus an important consideration for the future identities of these – and other regional – states. Given the prominent role of the United States and other Western powers in the formation of a new order in Iraq – and potentially eventually in Syria whenever the currents steady – it is important to recognize the role Orientalism will play. Will Orientalism continue to shape interests and perceptions of the international community around false or romantic notions, leading to material policies that will continue to perpetuate sectarianism? Or will the system recognize the complex nature of the peoples of the region and allow for a more natural order to take place? Only time will tell but the restraint of the United Nations in condoning new interventions outright, as in the case with Iraq in 2003 and later in the case of Syria since its civil war – indicates that perhaps Orientalist notions have dimmed.

The Iranian Revolution & Regional Identity

The Iranian Revolution and its impact on the region is another important systemic factor that reinforced sectarian construction. Important moments which perpetuated sectarianism in

both the cases of Syria and Iraq can be situated in the midst of a conflict over the regional

identity of Middle Eastern countries. The tensions that arose as a result of the Iranian Revolution

were systemically at play in perpetuating sectarianism, especially in the period immediately

following the Revolution. New fears arose over potential upheavals that would destabilize the

status quo, given Iran's stance against regional powers. Revolutionary Iranian discourse depicted

the Sunni governments as tyrannical and illegitimate and thus brought forth a new conflict over

regional identity.[233]

Iraq reacted defensively at the outset of the Iranian Revolution. After the Iranian

Revolution, Iraq executed Shia leader Baqer al-Sadr and deported Iraqis who were accused of

harboring sentiments for Iran; the regime accused deportees of being "Iranian Iraqis."[234] This

very explicit reaction shows the degree to which revolutionary momentum of the Iranian

Revolution was felt in Iraq, which took defensive steps to quell any potential dissident

movements inspired by the revolutionary fervor. Furthermore, Iraq took real steps to contain the

threat posed by Iran by invading the country in 1980 and also by supporting exiled Iranians from

the opposition. The 1991 revolt in Iraq and subsequent extreme reaction of the regime in

repressing the movement can thus be seen through this prism, as part of a larger threat posed by

neighboring Iran.

Like the Saddam regime, the Hafiz regime battled its own internal dissent groups at

home, which can also be understood as part of this greater systemic rebellious movement that

gained momentum through the Iranian Revolution. Within this environment of general rebellion,

the attempted assassination on Hafiz took place, followed by the unprecedented crackdown on

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[233] Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh, "Sectarianism and the prevalence of 'other' in Islamic Thought," 691.

[234] Maryam Panah, *Islamic Republic and the World: Global Dimensions of the Iranian Revolution,* London: Pluto Press, 2007, 81.

Hama in 1982 due to regional fears of instability. Unlike Saddam, Assad was supportive of the new Iranian regime and thus had to also face regional backlash for this support. While the Hafiz regime was at odds with the Muslim Brotherhood domestically, the Jordanians and Egyptians added to the sectarian fire by fueling the concept of the "dirty Alawis."[235] In a speech by former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat:

> Let these dirty Alawis speak for it. These are people who have lost all life's meaning. By God, let them face their people in Syria, because the Syrian people are powerless in this - the attitude of the Alawi is known… [King] Faysal [of Saudi Arabia] told me that Hafiz al-Assad is Alawi and Baathist, and the one is more evil than the other… Faysal also told me: How can you hold hands with the Syrian Baathists? Al-Assad is an Alawi and Baathist; one is more evil than the other.

In the context of the greater conflict between the Shia threat posed by Iran, which was supported by Syria, this behavior can be understood. The harsh language used by the Egyptian President is part of the greater regional battle for the identity of the region as Sunni Arab. The Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Kuwait, stood by the Egyptians and Jordanians in their aim to contain general rebellions as well as protect the Sunni identity of the region.[236] Looking at the two camps, one notes the obvious religious divide. The ruling parties in the Gulf, Iraq, Egypt and Jordan are all Sunni while Syria had no issue siding with the Shia Iran due to its own ruling-party identity. Thus, one can also view the increased sectarian tensions in Iraq and Syria through the two states' position within a regional conflict over the identity of the Middle East.

The role of the regional system as a whole is thus an important consideration in understanding the potential for sectarian tensions to ignite. Regional movements allow groups

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[235] Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 93.

[236] Panah, *Islamic Republic and the World,* 82-86.

with historical grievances – such as sectarian religious groups – to place themselves within a larger frame. This was later seen during the Arab Spring, which saw the uprisings of Syria after similar protest movements in Egypt and Tunisia and across the Middle East. The ways in which regional powers dealt with and continue to deal with protests that continue to echo from the memory of the Arab Spring will play an important role in whether or not sectarian religious tensions will be further intensified.

Agent & Agent-Interaction Elements of Sectarian Construction

The above laid the foundation for understanding the systemic patterns that supported the construction of sectarianism in Iraq and Syria, but to continue with the intermestic approach, attention also needs to be given to agent and agent-interaction elements, which are equally important in this analysis. The agents are the actors that react to the systemic environment, without which one cannot have a nuanced understanding of sectarianism. We now assess the agent elements which supported in the construction of sectarianism in Syria and Iraq. Three patterns are noted here: the insecurity of minority rule, the extreme sectarian reactions by regimes and the burgeoning religious discourse and maneuvers by the regimes.

Insecurity of Minority Rule

One of the main agent-patterns of the two cases is the religious-minority status of the ruling regime. The Baathist regimes in both countries espoused a secular ideology that could have absorbed political movements from all kinds of backgrounds, including Islamists, moderates and others. However, there was a prevalent insecurity of both regimes due to their ruling party's overwhelmingly religious-minority leaders. This led to the interpretation of protest movements as overtly sectarian, against minority rule. Were these sentiments founded on reality?

Both regimes were dominated by the leaders' religious kin. As has been noted earlier in Chapter 2, Saddam favored his own family members and the Tikriti tribe over others – most of whom were Sunni, despite the fact that the majority of the country was Shia.[237] Both Hafiz al-Assad and Bashar al-Assad's regimes placed Alawi's within the main political power structures.[238] Previous analysis has shown attempts by both parties to co-opt the majority population which felt disenfranchised to varying degrees. However, the very nature of the rule of the minority at the expense of the majority is something that clearly had an effect on the constitution of sectarian identities. The regimes' apparent insecurity – as will be shown shortly by an analysis of their reactions to rebellions – supported in framing any rebellion as part of an "us" versus "them." This dichotomy was defined by religious identities. This idea of the fear of a possible uprising by the majority religious sectarian group affected the interests of the regimes in suppressing any political opposition and whole religious groups as opposed to dissents only.

Extreme Sectarian Reactions by Regimes

When rebellions arose in both cases, the dictatorial rulers revealed their insecurities and simultaneously constituted the state's sectarianism identity. The suppression after major rebellions in both Iraq and Syria were not only brutal but also produced clear sectarian reactions. This allowed for the burgeoning of sectarian sentiments in Iraq and Syria.

In Iraq after the failed invasion of Kuwait, protesters took to the streets in all nine of the Shia-dominant governorates.[239] The apparent sectarian nature of the rebellion dissuaded Sunnis from joining. Instead of only reacting to the protesters, the regime took on a new sectarian slogan

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[237] Jerry, *Saddam's War of Words, 61*.

[238] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," 366-368.

[239] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq,* 68.

- "There will be no Shia after today."[240] The regime took unprecedented steps to put Shia clerics under house arrest and destroy Shia religious shrines.

The Iraqi regime had the choice to view the 1991 rebellion as an isolated event. Instead, it perceived the threat along sectarian lines and took measures accordingly. Because of the looming system threat posed by the Iranian Revolution and the regime's own insecurity over its identity as part of the minority religious group, the rebellion became an important point of contention that would further mar Iraqi relations internally. The regime thus fueled sectarian discourse that further exacerbated sectarian divisions by perceiving the rebellion through this prism, instead of viewing the threat as only a political one or one limited to certain individuals as opposed to an entire religious sect. At the same time, the Sunnis who didn't join the protests also allowed for this kind of discourse by delegitimizing the rebellion as a result of its supposedly Shia nature. The people and the regime thus constituted the conflict along sectarian lines.

Similarly, in Syria after an attempted assassination of Hafiz al-Assad, the regime executed a massacre of unprecedented levels in the country.[241] The units led by President Assad's brother Rif'at killed an entire prison full of Muslim Brotherhood members as they sat in their cells. The height of the showdown occurred in the city of Hama when ten percent of its predominantly Sunnis population was decimated by an Alawi Baath unit, killing anywhere from an estimated 5000 to 25000 victims.[242] Hafiz's actions were perhaps less overtly sectarian as he did not justify the massacre along religious lines, but the reaction was just as extreme. Attacking the Muslim Brotherhood just prior to the massacre, Assad had stated "May God curse them and

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[240] Ehrenberg et. al, *The Iraq Papers,* 216-217.

[241] Rabinovich, *The View from Damascus,* 105-111.

[242] Ibid.

their Islam. We shall not have one Islam with them. They are murderers of Islam and Muslims."[243] While not pointing to the type of Islam and perhaps attempting to simply push the Brotherhood out of the Islamic tradition, Assad is still using religious terms and bringing salience to religious identities. The extreme reaction in the Hama Massacre, situated in the general sentiment of Alawi domination and the use of religious discourse, easily allowed for a sectarian interpretation of the catastrophic event.

These extreme reactions against the opposition reveal several things about the regimes. First, as has been noted, the regimes were highly insecure. As they couldn't be certain of who was in the opposition and who was supportive, they chose to target an entire population based on what appeared to be religious faith. Why would this be the reaction? The regimes' own sense of identity as part of a religious minority appears to have played an important role. Targeting an entire religious population shows the "us" versus "them" mentality within the regimes as a result of internal fears about the regimes' minority identity within the country. Their reactions re-constituted the sectarian identities within the states by pitting two groups opposite each other.

Burgeoning Religious Discourse and Maneuvers

Prior to the civil wars in Iraq and Syria, religious discourse and religious institutions burgeoned, while other forms of civil and political organizations suffered. This is integral to our understanding of the growth of sectarianism as parallel to the general decline of most forms of political organization was a greater presence of religious discourse within states, which allowed for an increased sense of religious identity. In the years preceding civil unrest, both regimes had played a dangerous game by evoking religion and allowing extremism to grow unabated.

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[243] Ibid., 95.

In Iraq's case, the UN sanctions in the 1990s and Saddam's war against Iran pushed forth a new sectarian discourse in the country, as has been assessed. The regime allowed tribes to flourish, in place of its own incompetence in supporting the people due to sanctions.[244] Its support for Sunni tribes allowed for sectarian sentiments to burgeon. Due to the religious tones of the Iranians which threatened Saddam's rule, the regime framed the conflict around similar religious notions. On the one hand, Khomeini fueled sectarianism with declarations such as, "You are fighting to protect Islam, and [Saddam] is fighting to destroy Islam."[245] Saddam similarly positioned himself in religious terms as a *mujahid.* State-supported religious discourse grew to new heights, allowing for sectarian religious identities to burgeon and grow. The explicit "Faith Campaign," with its Sunni-basis, supported the growth of religious sentiments by encouraging stricter adherence to Islamic principles. The person to mosque ratio rose substantially from 1:37,000 in the 1950s to 1:3,500 in the 1990s. And the media attacked Shia religious rituals and traditions. As has been previously noted, Jerry Long's analysis shows a significant escalation of the Iraqi state's religious discourse from the sixties to the nineties.[246] Such maneuvers may have seemed tactically sound at the time, by attempting to counteract the catastrophic results of UN sanctions and retaliating to the Iranian religious discourse, but the long-term consequences proved disastrous as radically conservative forms of religious discourse grew and a greater sense of sectarian identity proliferated.

In the twenty-first century the Assad regime in Syria had a similar experience. As has been analyzed, Assad pushed secularists to the fringes of society while he toyed with

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[244] Long, *Saddam's War of Words, 70.*

[245] Ibid., 59.

[246] Ibid., 59.

conservative religious movements. The Bashar regime extended an olive branch to the Muslim Brotherhood, to reconcile what had happened in the Hama Massacre of eighty-two.[247] Secularists that criticized radically conservative Islamic movements, like Nabil Fayyad, were put to jail. While the regime made it impossible for civil society to grow by banning meetings of five or more people, Islamists found a safe haven in Quranic schools and mosques. As political scientist Salam Kawkibi stated, "Nowadays there are hundreds of mosques in Damascus but not a single meeting hall for secular people. This says everything."[248] And according to philosopher Tayyeb Tizini, "The regime has sometimes actively supported the Islamists because they wanted to keep them as a visible danger to the secular opposition: 'Just look, this is the danger. Either you have us or you get them.'" The regime's encouragement of the resistance in Iraq, as part of its strategic opposition to the U.S., allowed for religious fanatics to funnel through Syria in order to fight in Iraq. In the end, the regime got more than it had bargained for by pursuing policies that suppressed all but religiously-motivated organizations.

Thus, prior to their respective civil wars, both states escalated religious tensions through greater religiously provocative discourse and actions. Such maneuvers allowed for the construction of conflicts around religious lines, which brought greater salience to religious identities. Both regimes had attempted to use religion in their favor. Saddam tried to combat Iran's religiously fueled attacks with his own. Bashar attempted to dissuade rebels and oppositionists by allowing a more conservative threat to rise. In the end, the tactical maneuvers by the regimes did nothing to protect the status-quo and allowed for an eventual explosion of sectarian tensions supported by religious fervor.

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[247] Wieland, *Syria – A Decade of Lost Chances,* 164-165.

[248] Ibid., 165.

Conclusion

Thus, we can see that the construction of sectarianism is a complex process that requires both a nurturing systemic environment as well as agent support in building such tensions. One cannot sum up the conflicts in Syria and Iraq as a result of ancient primordial hatreds or, as U.S. President Barack Obama once stated in 2013, that "in that part of the world, there are ancient sectarian differences."[249] That is an overly simplistic and reductionist comment that takes away from a nuanced understanding of the historic and modern ideas, interests and material structures that have cultivated sectarianism through the system and agents. Furthermore, this thesis aimed to highlight the importance of including analyses of the complexities of intermestics in international relations in order to form a nuanced understanding of international issues and topics, including sectarianism.

This thesis aimed to give a comprehensive analysis of the construction of sectarianism in two of the world's most intriguing civil conflicts in Syria and Iraq. Through this research, we have assessed case-by-case analyses of the construction of sectarianism in Iraq and Syria from the early twentieth century when the Syrian and Iraqi states were first formed under Western mandates up until the modern period in the twenty-first century at the outbreak of war. This thesis has brought to light the common structural and agent-level elements that allowed for the burgeoning of sectarian identities within the states. I have highlighted the centrality of Orientalist ideas in conceiving the earliest visions of the Syrian and Iraqi states, which have had an irreversible impact on both cases, allowing for a historical sense of victimhood among certain religiously-defined sectarian groups in both countries. This thesis has also analyzed the impact of

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[249] Obama, "Statement by the President on Syria."

the Iranian Revolution in creating a regional identity conflict which reinforced sectarian discourse and produced sectarian reactions. Three agent-level patterns have been highlighted to better understand the growth of sectarianism, including the insecurity of minority rule, extreme sectarian reactions by regimes under attack by certain opposition groups and the general growth of religious discourse and actions in the two countries as well as the region prior to the outbreak of the civil wars.

This thesis has brought forth a nuanced analysis of modern events. Short-term analyses that only look at modern occurrences become overly simplistic and ignore the important impact of historic sentiments of victimhood and conflicts that fuel sectarianism. Thus, this thesis has brought forth a historic analysis of a period of approximately a century. Looking through the Constructivist lens has allowed for a more complete understanding of sectarianism by focusing on not only material outcomes but also on ideas and interests. I have aimed to assess the construction of sectarianism through an equal focus on structural and agent elements, operationalized by an intermestic approach.

This thesis provides not only an analysis of these two cases but also brings forth new questions. If the Iranian Revolution had such long-term consequences on sectarianism, what impact will the Arab Spring have on the region? The first victim of the Arab Spring, Syria, has fallen. Libya is in a similarly precarious position. What of the remaining neighboring countries? The Gulf countries have similarly large diversity among their religious sects and strong divisions between Shias and Sunnis. Their reactions to protest movements have been as brutal as those of Hafiz al-Assad in the 1982 Hama Massacre and Saddam in the 1990s.[250] Will regional powers learn the dangers of such explicit sectarian reactions to demonstrations? In the case of Bahrain, a

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[250] "Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr: Saudi Arabia executes top Shia cleric," *BBC News,* January 2, 2016, accessed March 24, 2016, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-35213244.

minority rules, as in the cases of Iraq and Syria, with a Shia majority population ruled by a Sunni head.[251] How will intermestics play out in other regional players? The two case studies from this thesis exemplify the importance of including an analysis of intermestics in future research.

One can note almost all of the patterns pointed to in this chapter as still characteristic of many of the Middle East's regional powers. Orientalist discourse remains on the larger systemic scale, as the UN and other international groups continue to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs. The threat posed by the Iranian Revolution remains a prominent issue among Middle Eastern countries with large Shia populations, like Saudi Arabia and Bahrain. Minority rule plagues countries like Bahrain and the "other-ing" of certain religious groups threatens even states with majority rule. Burgeoning religious discourse is at an all-time high with the threat of *Daesh*. Furthermore, Middle Eastern states continue to react to demonstrations with extreme state repression that may bolster a sense of sectarian victimhood across the region and allow for the fueling of sectarian conflict.

Understanding how sectarianism is constructed is essential to learning from the mistakes of the past. This thesis aimed to put forth a Constructivist analysis of sectarianism in Syria and Iraq, followed by a synthetic analysis of important patterns that contributed to the eruption of sectarian violence in both cases. Structurally, Orientalism in the international system and the identity threat of the Iranian Revolution allowed for the burgeoning of sectarian discourse and reactions. On the agent-level, the minority rule of both states and the extreme sectarian reactions of states against dissidents supported the construction of a sectarian sense of victimhood. Furthermore, a general increase in religious discourse in Iraq and Syria, as well as in the region, brought greater salience to religious sectarian identities which would later erupt into sectarian

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[251] "Bahrain country profile," last modified November 24, 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14540571.

civil war. One not only wonders about the future of these states, but also about neighboring countries and their potential to follow in these dangerous footsteps. Will states learn from the mistakes of the past and take heed of the dangers of fueling sectarian fire, or, given just the wrong circumstances, will we witness more sectarian violence in the region?

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