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2021

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
SANTA CRUZ

A THEORY OF PRACTICE OF SECT IDENTITIES:
A CASE STUDY OF THE SYRIAN WAR

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
SOCIOLOGY

with an emphasis in HISTORY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

by
Toni Rouhana
December 2021

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Peter Biehl
Vice Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies

Table of Contents

List of Figures

List of Tables

Abstract

A Theory of Practice of Sect Identities: A Case Study of the Syrian War
Toni Rouhana

Based on eighteen months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2016 and 2019 and a massive data collection of social media entries and online comments on news article pages I have collected since 2011, this dissertation takes a bottom up approach to study how sect-identities impacted the ongoing conflict in Syria. I ask how are sect identities produced, reproduced over time, and lived at the popular level, online and offline? How do these identities evolve over time, and why do they sometimes, but only sometimes, become divisive and violent? What aspects of ordinary Syrians' daily-life interactions have translated online, on social network sites, and what aspects have not? I propose sect habitus as an analytical tool to theorize the daily workings of sect identities, in order to understand the conditions under which sect identities become sectarian and in turn violent at the popular level.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to ordinary Syrians who paid the highest price throughout the war

Acknowledgments

I am grateful for all the support, encouragement, comments, and feedback that carried the project to this stage through a collective effort. This dissertation would not have been possible without the support of so many people, whom I would like to acknowledge here.

First, I am grateful to my committee members who were always encouraging and shaped this project in different ways.

I am thankful to Debbie Gould, who served as dissertation chair, and who has been a mentor, a generous advisor, and, above all, a dear friend from the start of this endeavor. Throughout the years, Debbie has pushed me to become a better scholar and has supported me during my best and worst times in the PhD program. She has also shared her experience, writing process, and teaching pedagogy which became an important part of my own scholarship. I cannot describe how thankful I am for everything she has taught me.

I am thankful to Bob Meister for his reading, engagement, comments, and feedback throughout the many drafts of this dissertation, and I am also thankful for the long discussions we've had over the years, where he constantly challenged me to better theorize my work and connect my research in exciting new ways. Thank you!

I am also thankful to Nathaniel Deutsch who supported this work in its early stages and helped me formulate my ideas through our many meetings and conversations about the project. I am also thankful for the countless readings and comments I received on the many drafts that he read throughout the process. Our conversations

Introduction

Three main questions guide this dissertation: 1) In their everyday lives, how do people make sense of their sect identities and how are these identities made, remade and unmade under specific social, political, economic, and historical conditions?[1] 2) When, if at all, do sect identities mobilize people towards fundamentalism and subsequently violence?[2] 3) What is the significance of everyday online presence and interactions to studying sect-identities in Syria's ongoing war and what aspects of ordinary Syrians' daily-life interactions have translated online, on social network sites, and what aspects have not?

To answer these questions, I build on recent developments in the literature on sectarianism, mainly the constructivist developments that deal with sectarian identities as socially constructed and fluid.[3] To explain the workings of these identities at the popular level, I develop a *theory of practice of sect identities* in the next chapter, with the concept of *sect habitus* as an analytical tool to theorize and analyze the daily workings of sect identities, in order to understand the conditions under which sect identities become sectarian and in turn violent at the popular level.

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[1] How are sect identities produced, reproduced over time, and lived at the popular level, online and offline?

[2] How do these identities evolve over time, and why do they sometimes, but only sometimes, become divisive and violent?

[3] Paul Dixon, *Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East?: Comparative Perspectives on Group Conflict*, *Beyond Sunni and Shia* (Oxford University Press), accessed May 8, 2020, https://www.oxfordscholarship.com/view/10.1093/oso/9780190876050.001.0001/oso-9780190876050-chapter-002; Lisa Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions: Ideology, Judgment, and Mourning in Syria*, First edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Fanar Haddad, *Understanding "Sectarianism": Sunni-Shi'a Relations in the Modern Arab World* (London: C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2019).

As part of the 2011 "Arab Spring," Syria was one of the states that witnessed massive demonstrations that swept the country. In most regions, Syrians went to the streets to demand economic and political reforms, the lifting of the emergency law in place since 1963, respect for basic human rights, and the reformation of the many police and security services branches that had surveilled, oppressed, and persecuted Syrians, especially those engaged in political opposition, for decades.[4] These demonstrations were met with brutality which, rather than crushing the uprisings and silencing the demonstrations, led to the expansion of the demonstrations. The Syrian government and the Baath ruling party, in addition to attempting to brutally crush the demonstrations, mobilized its supporters in an attempt to show popular support for the president. They held massive rallies in major cities in support of the president's reformative agenda as well as against the "international ongoing conspiracy" against Syria and its leadership, and to preserve Syria's "unity."

By the end of 2011, most news reports and studies described the struggle in sectarian terms such as "sectarianized civil war",[5] " the specter of sectarian war",[6] "Syria's sectarian divide"[7] etc. In this environment, extremist groups such as "Jabhat Nusrat Ahl al Sham" and "Jaish al-Islam" became leading actors in the armed

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[4] Most of these security branches were either set up by the French colonial rule or are offshoots of the system set in place by colonial France.

[5] Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, eds., *The Syrian Uprising*, 1 edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018).

[6] "Syrian Uprising Raises The Specter Of Sectarian War," NPR.org, accessed September 6, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2012/01/04/144626452/syrian-uprising-raises-the-specter-of-sectarian-war.

[7] Hamza Hendawi, "Syria's Sectarian Divide Turns to Fear and Flight," accessed September 6, 2021, http://www.timesofisrael.com/syrias-sectarian-divide-turns-to-fear-and-flight/.

struggle, and, in 2013, the Islamic State of Iraq and Sham ISIS-ISIL started seizing territories in Syria and, in late 2014, controlled half of Syria's territory.

Although sectarianism is but one element of the ongoing struggle, it has become the *sine qua non,* defining the political, social, national, and international dynamics of these conflicts. Despite the wealth of research about these conflicts and the rise of ISIS itself, scholars have paid little attention to the manifestations of sectarianism at the popular level where sect-based practices and discourses become intrinsic to the day-to-day dynamics of ordinary people.

The Sectarian Question

Many Syrians I interviewed shared the same or a similar self-perception regarding their sect identities as the following, expressed by a young professional woman named Umaya: "We [Syrians] are not sectarian. We were never sectarian. This [sectarianism] is foreign to our society." Surprisingly, this conviction was shared by people I interviewed across diverse religious/non-religious backgrounds and across supporters of most of the warring and divided political factions.

The Baath ruling party had been mobilizing a "secularist" ideology since 1964, before the takeover of president Hafiz al-Assad in 1971. On the one hand, this long-term secularist narrative helped the regime and its supporters to mobilize a discourse of an external conspiracy targeting Syrian unity. On the other hand, since the beginning of the uprisings, opposition activists denied the existence of sectarianism by underscoring the diverse sects of the demonstrators and organizers.

For example, during the Hamidia Souk mobilization of March 15th 2011, the person

who recorded one of the first videos uploaded to YouTube, announced that Sunnis

and Alawites together were going to bring down the regime, speaking in the name of

all Alawites.[8] Some of my interlocutors who are opposition activists relayed similar

tactics that they used throughout these demonstrations, which I detail in the following

chapters. This discourse highlights people's ambivalence about their sect identities

and in turn sectarianism since the start of the uprisings.

Since the beginning of the crisis in Syria, commentators, scholars, and heads

of states, used sectarianism to describe the conflict. On the one hand, Fabrice

Balanche, argues that "sectarianism is both a cause and consequence of the initial

revolt—and its subsequent failures."[9] While most studies cite other contributing

factors such as the legacy of authoritarianism and police-state brutality,[10] the

neoliberal policies that the 'young' president implemented as part of his reform

agenda beginning in 2000 when he took his late father's place,[11] and the diffusion

effects of the Arab Spring— all agree on the critical role of sectarianism and sect

identities in causing and maintaining the conflict. Some proposed partitioning Syria

based on the sectarian cleavages to solve the conflict.[12] Others take sectarianism for

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[8] syriaobas, ثورة سوريا 15 اذار مظاهرات الحميدية *Syrian Revolution Syria*, accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75Ng0J6DdH0.

[9] Fabrice Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*, 2018, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/sectarianism-in-syrias-civil-war. (XI)

[10] Balanche.

[11] Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al- ʿAqd al- akhir fi tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud wa al-Islah* (Beirut: al- Markaz al- ʿArabi lil- Abhath wa Dirasat al- Siyasat, 2015).

[12] "Is Partitioning Syria a Solution? | Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung | Lebanon - Beirut," Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung, accessed September 6, 2021, https://lb.boell.org/en/2016/10/28/partitioning-

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granted in a plural society such as Syria's and analyze the role of political elites on all sides in manipulating these sectarian divisions.[13] In this dissertation, rather than ask why sectarian violence is occurring now or who is responsible for it, I provide an account of how ordinary[14] people live, make meaning of, feel, affect, and are affected by their sect identities in an unfolding war that is brutally destroying their lives. Recent studies provide a constructivist approach to studying sectarianism during the Syrian war and advance nuanced arguments that skip the determinism of the mainstream instrumentalist approach in the literature on sectarianism.[15] For example, Lisa Wedeen uses a constructivist framework that explains how sectarian identifications take hold in times of uncertainty.[16] She argues that sectarian identities are not fixed. In the case of Syria, under conditions of uncertainty and exacerbated by rumors, Syrians were hailed as sectarian subjects that justified their silent position during the initial period of the uprisings and gradually turned into a more complete identification with the regime. My project takes a similar constructivist approach that is premised on sect identities being dynamic. Even though I agree with Wedeen's important move away from the instrumentalists' reasons for sectarianism's uptake, I depart from the assumption that sectarianism is one of many residual forms of

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syria-solution; James Stavridis, "It's Time to Seriously Consider Partitioning Syria," *Foreign Policy* (blog), accessed September 6, 2021, https://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/09/its-time-to-seriously-consider-partitioning-syria/.

[13] Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*.

[14] Following Creamer's definition, ordinary people are people who do not belong to the political elite. In the case of Syria these people are not part of the military and security system and people who do not enjoy high positions in the public sector.

[15] Chapter 1 provides a detailed literature review on sectarianism.

[16] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

sociality that emerged as a contrast to the regime's secularist discourse. I in fact only use sectarianism as a descriptor of sect identities turning divisive and violent. I follow Haddad's call to stop using sectarianism as an analytical tool and focus on the workings of "sectarian identities." But rather than using his model that analyzes the workings of "sectarian identities" along four dimensions: "on the level of religious doctrine and religious truths; on a local, subnational level; on the level of the nation-state, nationalism and national identity; and finally on the level of transnational politics,"[17] my premise is that sect identities are in fact not necessarily sectarian and I show how the relationship between these identities and social, economic, political, and historical structures produce the conditions that promote or discourage sectarianism. In chapter one I propose and develop a theory of practice of sect identities to study and explain the different manifestations of these identities in Syria and elsewhere.

In what follows, I will step back next to cover relevant contexts that preceded the uprisings in 2011. I will describe the religious and ethnic diversity of the Syrian society in order to understand the workings of these identities in periods of peace and violence. Then I lay out a short historical account of the rise of the Ba'ath party and the al-Assads, the neoliberal reforms, and the geopolitical landscape at play in Syria. I then explain the role of social network sites (SNS) in the mobilizations that took place in the Arab world, including in Syria. Then, I layout the methodological approach that I employ in this research where I combine novel, big data, ML approaches—based on

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[17]Haddad, Understanding "Sectarianism."(p-47)

data collected from Facebook, Twitter, discussion forums, and news outlets between 2011 and 2018—with multi-sited eighteen months ethnographies conducted between 2016-2019 in both war-torn Syria and neighboring Lebanon, where more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees were housed in informal settlements. Finally, I finish with a chapter outline that provides a quick overview of each chapter.

SUMMARY BACKGROUND LEADING TO THE 2011 UPRISINGS

Syria's Demographics

In 2010 Syria's total population estimates amounted to 21,362,529.[18] Due to the war death toll, the forced migration, and decrease in fertility rate, today's Syrian population decreased to 17,070,135. Prior to the uprisings then war, Syria had a religiously and ethnically diverse society. The religious distribution is estimated to be as follows: Muslim 87% (official; includes Sunni 74% and Alawi, Ismaili, and Shia 13%), Christian 10% (includes Orthodox, Uniate, and Nestorian), Druze 3%, Jewish (few remaining in Damascus and Aleppo).[19] The ethnic distribution is as follows Arab 50%, Alawite 15%, Kurd 10%, Levantine 10%, other 15% (includes Druze, Ismaili, Imami, Nusairi, Assyrian, Turkoman, Armenian).[20] This diversity had played a significant role in shaping the social relations between Syrians prior to, and

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[18] "Syrian Arab Republic | Data," accessed November 2, 2020, https://data.worldbank.org/country/syrian-arab-republic.
[19] "Middle East :: Syria — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency," accessed November 2, 2020, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html.
[20] "Middle East :: Syria — The World Factbook - Central Intelligence Agency."

throughout, the war. During the war years, Syrians searched for safety within the confines of tribes, sects, ethnicities, and other group identities that John Brown Childs describes as rooted affiliations that people seek in times of crises.[21] These rooted affiliations had been alive and well in the Syrian society even before the 2011 crisis, but took on new meanings and structures during the uprisings then war.[22] For long periods of time Syrians bragged about the plurality of their society, the 'secular state' under the Baath regime and how Syrians live together regardless of their religious affiliation.[23]

The Rise of the Ba'ath Party and the al-Assads

Syria had been part of the Ottoman Empire until the dissolution of the latter in 1918, when Syria, Lebanon, and North Iraq became French colonies and Palestine, Jordan, and South Iraq became British colonies, which became known as the French and British mandates respectively. The French mandate over Syria ended in 1944, when Syria became an independent republic.[24] During the post-independence period,

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[21] John Brown Childs is writing about the global economic development and crises produced under global neoliberal capital. But his conceptions are very useful in the case of religiously plural societies such as in Syria.John Brown Childs and Inc ebrary, *Transcommunality: From the Politics of Conversion to the Ethics of Respect* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2003).

[22] For multiple reasons these rooted affiliations especially sect affiliations developed in the ways they did. This dissertation addresses some of these reasons and shows how these developments took place and why.

[23] Kamāl Dīb, *Azmah fī Sūrīyah : infijār al-dākhil wa-ʿawdat al-ṣirāʿ al-dawlī, 2011-2013*, al-Ṭabʿah al-ūlá. (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Nahār, 2013).

[24] Kamāl Dīb, *al-Ḥarb al-Sūrīyah : Tārīkh Sūrīyah al-muʿāṣir (1970-2015)*, al-Ṭabʿah al-ūlá. (Bayrūt: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr, 2015); Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1991).

Syria did not see prolonged periods of stability, until 1971, the political scene was characterized by military coups and ousting of governments until the rise of the Baath party to power in 1963 and then the last coup was led by Hafiz Al-Assad who took power and became president in 1971 until his death in 2000 when his son Bashar Al-Assad, the current president, took over the presidency.[25] The 'young' president back then, came with an ambitious 'reformist' agenda that swiftly shifted an already transitioning 'socialist' economy to a neoliberal one.

The Neoliberal Reforms of President Bashar Al-Assad

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Syria, many scholars, commentators, and observers have argued that the uprisings resulted from the stark inequality of the neoliberal transformation set in motion in the early 2000s with President Bashar Al-Assad's vision of reforms.[26] These reforms shifted the economy from a statist-based economy to a market economy, which included lifting many direct state controls, regulations, and subsidies. These shifts benefited the big cities—mainly Damascus and Aleppo—and increased pressure on rural Syria. These neoliberal reforms,

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[25] Van Dam provides a very accessible and important history of that period and gives a very interesting view on the conscious and unconscious outcomes of the Baath and al-assad politics in shaping what is going on in Syria today (regarding the sectarian view I disagree in most of the deterministic views that the author assumes).Nikolaos van Dam, *Destroying a Nation: The Civil War in Syria* (London ; New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2017).

[26] Many argue that these policies have been set in motion during Hafiz al Assad's era.Fred H. Lawson, "From Neo-Ba'th Nouveau: Hafiz al-Asad's Second Decade," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 14, no. 2 (Winter 1990), https://search.proquest.com/docview/1311895444/citation/E53EB5EE1AC44F44PQ/1; Linda Matar, *The Political Economy of Investment in Syria*, Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137397720.

coupled with years of drought (2006-2011), choked the farming regions in Syria with little attention from the center. Most of the political economy-based studies saw these uprisings in terms of haves and have-nots—the center of these uprisings being the rural have-nots whereas the cities did not rise because they benefited from these reforms.[27]

The idea that neoliberal reforms and the government's decreased interest in rural areas are the cause of the uprising and military insurrections in rural Syria fails to explain the many exceptions to the assumption that the uprising is a rural one, which overlooks the large cities of Homs, Hama, and also the smaller city of Deraa, where the mobilizations started.[28] Wedeen provides a complex understanding of the working of these neoliberal reforms. She explains how the combination of neoliberalism and authoritarianism produced a neoliberal autocratic ideology that secured support for President Assad and foreclosed the space for most Syrians who see themselves as "ramadyun" (neutral) to join the uprisings. The neoliberal autocratic ideology gave a sense of possibility for social mobility, that is

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[27] Shamel Azmeh, "The Uprising of the Marginalised: A Socio-Economic Perspective of the Syrian Uprising," Monograph (London, UK: Middle East Centre, LSE, November 2014), http://www.lse.ac.uk/middleEastCentre/home.aspx; Francesca De Châtel, "The Role of Drought and Climate Change in the Syrian Uprising: Untangling the Triggers of the Revolution," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (July 4, 2014): 521–35, https://doi.org/10.1080/00263206.2013.850076; Joseph Daher, "Syria: The Social Origins of the Uprising," accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.rosalux.de/en/publication/id/39149/syria-the-social-origins-of-the-uprising; Samer Abboud, "The Economics of War and Peace in Syria," The Century Foundation, January 31, 2017, https://tcf.org/content/report/economics-war-peace-syria/; Majid Rafizadeh, "In Syria, Follow the Money To Find the Roots of the Revolt," *The Daily Beast*, April 8, 2013, sec. world, https://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/04/08/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt.
[28] Barout explains the regional peculiarities and urban developments in Syria.

unforeseeable in turmoil which kept the 'ramadyun' from joining the quest for regime

change. According to Wedeen, social mobility and modernity became exemplified by

the first family, who became the emblem of the 'good life' that these neoliberal

reforms would bring to the people of Syria. Wedeen explains the influence of the

neoliberal ideology on not only regime supporters and neutral Syrians but also on the

activism and cultural production of the moderate oppositions.[29]

The Geopolitics of the Region

From the time of its independence from France and during its post-colonial

period, Syria had witnessed multiple military coups that continued until that of

President Hafiz al-Assad in 1970.[30] Geographically, modern Syria is situated at the

heart of an ever-unstable Middle East. Since the founding of Israel in 1948, and the

subsequent ongoing Arab-Israeli conflicts and wars, Syria has been at the forefront of

this strife and lost the Golan Heights during the six-day war of 1967. Syria also

intervened militarily in Lebanon in 1976, a few months after the start of the Lebanese

civil war in April 1975. The Syrian military, and its security services occupied

Lebanon until 2005, when they withdrew under growing Lebanese and international

pressure after the assasination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafik Hariri (a prominent

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[29] This neoliberal autocratic ideology was prevalent in my interviews not only with the youth supporters of the president, but also with the youth opposition activists I interviewed. For example Hisham, Ahmed and Omaya's vision of future Syria does not fall outside the neoliberal model already in place.

[30] Dīb, *Azmah fī Sūrīyah*; David W. Lesch, *Syria: A Modern History.*, 1 online resource (120 pages) vols. (Newark: Polity Press, 2019), https://rbdigital.rbdigital.com; John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2015).

Sunni figure) on February 14 of that year.[31] Under President Hafiz al-Assad and the

Syrian Baath rule, Syria

had also had a long history of conflict and competition with President Saddam

Hussein and the Iraqi Baath rule in Iraq.[32] The hallmark of this competition occurred

in 1991, when President Assad supported the US-led war on Iraq to liberate Kuwait;

this became known as the Gulf War and led to the defeat of the Iraqi army and their

expulsion from neighboring Kuwait.[33] The support of the US-led coalition is linked to

the end of the Lebanese civil war and the international legitimization of the Syrian

occupation of Lebanon until 2005. Syria also joined a union with Egypt from 1958-

1961 that became known as the United Arab Republic, an attempt at a pan-Arab

unification under the leadership of Egyptian president, Jamal Abdel Nasser. This

union survived for only three years.[34]

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[31] I will address the implications of that period in the politics of victimhood and argue that this assassination increased the sense of Sunni victimhood in Lebanon, Syria and Iraq.
[32] Ahmad S. Moussalli, "The Geopolitics of Syrian-Iraqi Relations," *Middle East Policy* 7, no. 4 (2000): 100–109, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2000.tb00181.x.
[33] Andrew Glass, "George H.W. Bush Creates Coalition to Liberate Kuwait, Aug. 7, 1990," POLITICO, accessed November 15, 2020, https://www.politico.com/story/2015/08/president-george-hw-bush-created-a-coalition-to-liberate-kuwait-aug-7-1990-121102; Alan Cowell and Special To the New York Times, "WAR IN THE GULF: Syria; 'Absolute Truths' Collide in Arabs' War of Words (Published 1991)," *The New York Times*, February 16, 1991, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/02/16/world/war-in-the-gulf-syria-absolute-truths-collide-in-arabs-war-of-words.html; Thomas L. Friedman and Special To the New York Times, "CONFRONTATION IN THE GULF; Assad Urges 'Brother' to Quit Kuwait (Published 1991)," *The New York Times*, January 13, 1991, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/1991/01/13/world/confrontation-in-the-gulf-assad-urges-brother-to-quit-kuwait.html.
[34] James P. Jankowski, *Nasser's Egypt, Arab Nationalism, and the United Arab Republic* (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2001); Monte Palmer, "The United Arab Republic: An Assessment of Its Failure," accessed November 15, 2020, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4323954?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents; J. S. F. Parker, "The United Arab Republic," *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)* 38, no. 1 (1962): 15–28, https://doi.org/10.2307/2611377.

While at the forefront of pan-Arab nationalism and the Arab-Israeli conflict, Syria had also had a strategic alliance with the Soviet Union since 1956 and kept close ties with Russia after the fall of the USSR. The Russian intervention in the Syrian war in 2015 is based on a long history of military cooperation and training that included opening the Tartus Naval Base, which has been in use by the Russian military since the beginning of the Assad rule in 1971. This base has also been expanded in subsequent years,[35] and is the only Russian military base left on the Mediterranean Sea.

In recent years, Syria has been a critical part of the "Axis of Resistance"[36] which includes Iran, Hezbollah, and Hamas,[37] an alliance to confront the "Western imperialist project"[38] exemplified by the United States and Israel. As part of this alliance, Syria refused the United States- and British-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and played a major role in opening its borders for Islamist militants to battle the US-British forces and support the Iraqi resistance.[39] These militants included Al-Qaeda fighters who set up what became known as the Islamic State of Iraq, the organization of origin of the Nusra Front (Al-Qaeda) and ISIS in Syria. These organizations took over the moderate opposition in Syria, and in 2014-2015 controlled more areas than

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[35] George W. Breslauer, ed., *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, 1st edition (London England; New York, New York: Routledge, 2015). (p-311)

[36] Payam Mohseni and Hussein Kalout, "Iran's Axis of Resistance Rises," August 14, 2019, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2017-01-24/irans-axis-resistance-rises.

[37] Hamas Broke with the coalition in during the Syrian uprisings and the ascendance of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Turkey and Qatar until lately.

[38] النص الكامل لخطاب السيد حسن نصر الله في مهرجان عيد المقاومة والتحرير في بنت جبيل- أرشيف موقع قناة "" المنار," n.d., http://archive.almanar.com.lb/article.php?id=851211.

[39] For an outstanding history of the roots and development of these organizations see: Sami Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag: At the Frontier of the New Jihad* (I.B.Tauris, 2015).

the Syrian government did.[40] As part of this conflict, regional and international

players including Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the United States sought a Syrian

government change as an attempt to decommission a vital player of the "Axis of

Resistance," which would cut the supply lines from Iran to Hezbollah in Lebanon and

Hamas in Gaza. This prompted Iran and Hezbollah to support Syria's government and

send troops there to fight. The Saudi, UAE, Qatar, and Turkish governments each

supported specific opposition groups in the fight to remove Al-Assad.

Even though it is important to understand the geopolitical conditions in Syria

prior to the "Arab Spring," the focus on these conditions as the causes of war, writes

out the role that ordinary people play in these wars and at best portrays those people

who are taking part in the conflict, as dupes, or just trying to survive the war,

stripping them of any agency. While these approaches are important in understanding

the politics and international relations side of the conflict, they tend to dismiss

unexpected developments that take place on the ground by deeming them sectarian,

thereby exaggerating and distorting the power of sectarianism by proposing it as a

blanket explanation.[41] For example, geopolitics alone does not explain why ISIS and

the Al-Nusra Front returned to fight Al-Assad, who supported them in their quests in

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[40] Seth G. Jones et al., "Rolling Back the Islamic State," Product Page, 2017,
https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1912.html.
[41] For example commentators, economists, and journalists blame sectarianism for the
financial collapse in Lebanon. They also blame sectarianism for the misinformation
circulating around COVID19 and the vaccines. Ruth Sherlock, "COVID-19 Vaccine
Misinformation Has Been Catching On In Lebanon," *NPR*, April 5, 2021, sec. Middle East,
https://www.npr.org/2021/04/05/984528000/covid-19-vaccine-misinformation-has-been-
catching-on-in-lebanon.

Iraq. More importantly, it does not explain why support for ISIS came mostly from Jihadist migration looking for jihad in Syria while support from the Al-Nusra Front came primarily from Syrians. These approaches neither explain why Sunnis in Damascus and Aleppo did not rise against the regime, nor why the Syrian army did not experience the substantive desertions that Libya did, for example.

While I do not in this dissertation deny the complexity and importance of international and regional interventions in the ongoing war in Syria, I do highlight the influence of these dynamics on the meanings ordinary Syrians make from unfolding events. In particular, I show how these dynamics, along with many others, impact the making, remaking, and unmaking of sect identities.

The Politics of Victimhood

To challenge Iran's (majority Shi'a and a leading Shi'a religious authority) more aggressive stance on the conflict with Israel, and its support for the Palestinian resistance and Hezbollah in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia (majority Suni and a leading Sunni religious authority) and its allies had deployed a discourse of victimization of the Sunni sect in Syria, circulating, broadcasting, maintaining, and manipulating this discourse.[42] This politics of victimhood played a major role in producing supportive environments among ordinary people to defend Sunni Islam in Syria and elsewhere in

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[42] Thomas Pierret, "Syria's 'Sunni Question' Is Here to Stay," accessed September 5, 2021, https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/syria-s-sunni-question-is-here-to-stay.

the region.[43] While these supportive environments were not necessarily loyal to the Saudis, the politics of victimhood produced a sense of Sunni unity and shared suffering at the hands of what became deemed the "other," in this case the Shi'a sect supposedly headed by Iran. Limited anti-Iran and Hezbollah chants were recorded since the beginning of the uprisings.

This politics of victimhood was not only resonant in Syria. For example, the toppling of Saddam Hussein by the US-British-led coalition produced a sense of Sunni victimization for Iraqi Sunnis, especially in its presupposition that Iraqi Shi'a supported the invasion and celebrated the fall of Hussein.[44] Similarly, given Lebanon's highly sectarian state governance, the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, a prominent Sunni figure who enjoyed international and regional influence, set the tone for a sense of Sunni victimhood, especially since the Syrian government was initially accused of the assassination and then later Hezbollah. In other words, the discourse around the assassination took on sect-based meanings—namely, first that it was the Alawite regime in Syria that killed the prominent Sunni leader, and then later that it was the Shi'a Hezbollah that killed him. Regardless of who had actually committed the assassination, the narrative of Sunni victimhood, of Sunni humiliation, produced a supportive environment in many places

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[43] Raymond Hinnebusch et al., *Syria from Reform to Revolt: Volume 1: Political Economy and International Relations* (Syracuse, UNITED STATES: Syracuse University Press, 2015), http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ucsc/detail.action?docID=4649072. (p166)
[44] Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Fanar Haddad, "Sectarian Relations in Arab Iraq: Contextualising the Civil War of 2006–2007.," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 40, no. 2 (2013).

throughout the Arab world. Significantly, in Syria, it was adopted by the Islamist opposition groups that used the narrative of a Sunni majority ruled by an Alawite minority as the proof of this victimization. (I analyze in a later chapter the majority/minority discourse that was also adopted by scholars, policy makers, and commentators in the West.).

My research shows that while this discourse of victimhood resonated in some places in Syria, and for some people, for other Sunni opposition members, the fight was for rights, freedom, and democratic rule. And for Sunnis supporting the Syrian government, it is about preserving their own version of Sunni Islam that does not overlap with any of the fundamentalist versions that have emerged since 2011.

A Syrian History of Uprisings

The legacy of Syria's centuries-long history of invasions, resistance, uprisings, and revolutions has been felt at most critical political junctures facing Syrians in the 20th century, including the multiple revolts against the Ottoman rule, then resisting the French mandate, and later joining the Arab troops in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Some invoke this history even as far back as the "historical" fight against Holagu Khan and the Mongol's attempt to invade Damascus and their failure to enter "the Umayyads Capital." However, while these historical narratives of Syrian resistance, resilience, stubbornness, and victory have also played out in the recent years of war, these supposedly unifying historical moments of Syrian glory have

taken on different meanings during the uprisings-turned-war. This is in large part due to the influence of the media.

My research shows how these ambivalent histories have played out in new ways under the unimaginable destructive conditions of an ongoing war constantly covered by information and communication technologies and social network sites (SNSs), as well as by traditional mainstream media, and citizen journalism. Even international players have tapped into that ambivalent history to appeal to Syrians and to legitimize any intervention in the war. For example, in 2014 Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, stated that he would "recite al-Fatiha (the opening chapter of the Quran) by the tomb of Salah Eldin Al Ayoubi; pray in the courtyards of the Umayyad mosque; visit the grave of the Prophet's companion, Bilal El-ibn Rabah, the tomb of Imam Ibn Al-Arabi, the Sulaymaniyah College, and the al-Hijaz station; and thank Allah side-by-side with our Syrian brothers." With all the historical, Islamic, and victorious connotations that these places hold in the consciousness of Sunni Muslims in general and Syrians in particular, these messages allude to the Sunni origin of these histories, clearly intending to highlight the sectarian divide in Syria and portray the fight as one between Sunni Islam and the Syrian regime that is de-facto Alawite. Similarly, the Russian Church overtly supported the Russian military intervention in 2015 on the grounds of historical relations between the Russian Church and Christian minorities in the Middle East, citing the Byzantine empire's history in the region.

These narratives, based directly or indirectly on historical events, have divided

Syrians along religious lines, lines that were parts of everyday Syrian society but have

taken on antagonistic meanings during the war. The sectarianization of these

historical moments, as well as many other aspects of Syrians' social dynamics,

increased throughout the war. This increase begs for an approach that accounts for the

dynamism of sectarianism, which is why I propose and develop a *theory of practice*

of sect identities that deploys the concept of *sect habitus* to explain how sect identities

are made, unmade, and remade by accounting for the social, political, historical,

economic conditions that impact the formation and shifts of Syrians' identities, not as

fixed and static but as dynamic and ever changing.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE "ARAB SPRING"

From the advent of the "Arab Spring," researchers took an interest in the role

that social network sites and online technologies played in the revolutions. In the

immediate aftermath of the uprisings, scholarly research, popular media, and even

participants looked at social media as the driver and enabler of these revolutions. Of

course, debates on the role of the Internet in shaping people's social and political

lives are not recent,[45] but much scholarly work has flourished since the SNSs

appearance and immediate popularity. Most importantly, since 2010, research has

focused on the roles that SNSs have played in the organizing, mobilization, and

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[45] Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

outreach of social movements,[46] with a special interest in the "Arab Spring" and the

diffusion of the uprisings across nations with long-standing authoritarian regimes

throughout the Arab world. Initially, scholars were debating whether SNSs played a

new and critical role in these uprisings or whether these uprisings could have

happened regardless of the use of SNSs.[47] Howard et. al., described three major roles

played by social media in the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings. First, the authors

found that social media played a critical role in shaping political debates in the "Arab

Spring." Second, they found a massive increase in what they call "online

revolutionary conversations" that preceded events taking place offline. Last, they

found that social media diffused democratic ideas across national borders.[48]

Studies of Social Media Use during the "Arab Spring"

The role of social media in social movements, political polarization, and

organizing is no longer questioned.[49] In the case of the "Arab Spring" in general and

Syria in particular, most studies –whether large scale or not– use a social network

classification of users' accounts online to draw connections between users.

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[46] Occupy, #BlackLivesMatter, #MeToo

[47] Nabil Dajani NASBOOK argue against the Facebook revolution Nabil Dajani, "Technology Cannot a Revolution Make: Nas-Book Not Facebook," Arab Media & Society, accessed September 4, 2018, https://www.arabmediasociety.com/technology-cannot-a-revolution-make-nas-book-not-facebook/.

[48] Philip N Howard et al., "Opening Closed Regimes: What Was the Role of Social Media During the Arab Spring?," *SSRN Journal SSRN Electronic Journal*, 2011.

[49] Howard et al.; ARMANDO SALVATORE, "BEFORE (AND AFTER) THE 'ARAB SPRING': FROM CONNECTEDNESS TO MOBILIZATION IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE," *Oriente Moderno* 91, no. 1 (2011): 5–12.

O'Callaghan et. al. propose a new approach to studying two major social media platforms (Twitter and YouTube) around the Syrian case study.[50] They propose an exploratory small-scale[51] study that is not based on predetermined assumptions and hypotheses (which is usually the case in studying online political polarization) in order to capture the complexity of the Syrian situation. In addition, their study aims to move beyond the pro-regime/opposition classification which obscures the multiplicity of factions within the opposition. They classify their users into four major clusters: pro-Assad, Kurdish, Secular/Moderate, and Jihadist. They also use a subgraph that represents the differences within the anti-Assad cluster, which shows three different communities that can be considered as opposed to each other, revealing the nuances of the category of "opposition to Syrian regime."

Lynch et al. dubbed the Syrian conflict as the most socially mediated in history.[52] Using a Twitter data set that spans over 28 months, beginning on January 1st, 2011 and ending on April 30, 2013, they first compare the discourses in English and Arabic tweets, arguing that English tweets focus on different topics than Arabic tweets.[53] Then they explore the changes in influence between English and Arabic tweets based on the number of retweets. They show that English tweets were

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[50] Derek O'Callaghan et al., "Online Social Media in the Syria Conflict: Encompassing the Extremes and the In-Betweens," *ArXiv:1401.7535 [Physics]*, January 29, 2014, http://arxiv.org/abs/1401.7535.

[51] The social network analysis included a final set of 652 Twitter accounts and 295 unique YouTube channels.

[52] Marc Lynch et al., *Blogs and Bullets III: Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War*, 2014, http://purl.fdlp.gov/GPO/gpo64084. (p-5)

[53] Lynch et al. (p-18)

dominant in the top 250 tweets during 2011 and the Arabic tweets concerned with

Syria started to take over. Lastly, they show how Twitter accounts became clustered

in more insular groups with time: "The cluster analysis demonstrated the shift from a

fairly decentralized Syrian Twittersphere tightly embedded in the broader Arab

Spring narrative into the consolidation of multiple, increasingly insular competing

networks."[54] This finding overlaps with previous research that SNSs bring like-

minded users together and produce "filter bubble"[55] and "echo chambers."[56]

In the case of Syria's uprising and civil war, few studies focused on the role of

Facebook in the preparation, organization and mobilization of the uprisings with the

exception of Al-Mustafa's, *Virtual Public Sphere of the Syrian Revolution:*

Characteristics - Trends - Mechanisms of Shaping Public Opinion, where the author

conducts a content analysis of the three main Facebook pages[57] that were directly

linked to the Syrian revolution and that supported Syrian activists in 2011 and early

2012.[58] Al-Mustafa argues that these Facebook pages took over the role of traditional

mainstream media[59] as the source of information in the public sphere. He claims that

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[54] Lynch et al. (p-24)

[55] Eli Pariser, *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think*, Reprint edition (London: Penguin Books, 2012).

[56] Cass Sunstein, *Echo Chambers* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

[57] "The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar Al-Assad 2011", "Shaam News Network" news, and "UgaritNews"

[58] Ḥamzah Muṣṭafá Muṣṭafá, *al-Majāl al-ʿāmm al-iftirāḍī fī al-thawrah al-Sūrīyah : al-khaṣāʾiṣ - al-ittijāhāt - ālīyāt ṣunʿ al-raʾy al-ʿāmm* (Bayrūt: al-Markaz al-ʿArabī lil-Abḥāth wa-Dirāsat al-Siyāsāt, 2012).

[59] Many conditions enabled this takeover especially the regime's crackdown on foreign media and the absence of any media outlets that do not belong to the regime or private outlets that are supporters of the Baath party.

these pages shaped the revolutionary political discourse. In some cases, he argues that

some of the conversations that took place on these pages led to the downturns and

splits that took place on the ground.[60] This book provides an invaluable study of the

different approaches each of these Facebook pages implemented, in order to show the

extent to which they influenced public opinion, helped organize the revolution and

mobilized people as well as created divisions within the opposition itself. Al-Mustafa,

analysed the pages, posts, and comments throughout 2011 and shows how the

narrative shifted from comments focused on freedom, democracy and reform to a

narrative centered on sectarian divisions and hate towards the end of 2011 when the

uprising started to develop into a civil war.

Other studies mostly give general analysis of the role of Facebook based on

researchers' observations and in the context of either a comparison with other "Arab

Spring" revolutions,[61] or as part of analyzing the opposing visual propaganda tactics

between the regime and opposition supporters.[62] Shehabat, studied the media cyber-

war between Syrian Electronic Army (SEA) and the Syrian Free Army (SFA) on

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[60] These conclusions are questionable because the author does not provide sufficient evidence for the causal relationship between online discussions and the deviations that took place on the ground. But this does not reduce the importance of the study.

[61] Sahar Khamis, Paul B. Gold, and Katherine Vaughn, "Beyond Egypt's 'Facebook Revolution' and Syria's 'YouTube Uprising:' Comparing Political Contexts, Actors and Communication Strategiesf," *Arab Media & Society*, no. 15 (Spring 2012), https://www.arabmediasociety.com/beyond-egypts-facebook-revolution-and-syrias-youtube-uprising-comparing-political-contexts-actors-and-communication-strategies/.

[62] Hyunjin Seo and Husain Ebrahim, "Visual Propaganda on Facebook: A Comparative Analysis of Syrian Conflicts," *Media, War & Conflict Media, War & Conflict* 9, no. 3 (2016): 227–51.

different online platforms and included a section on the tactics that SEA used in order to shut down opposition Facebook pages and sometimes hack users' accounts.[63]

Studies From the Field

Most research around the Syrian civil war is based on news reports and activist accounts of the war in addition to photographs and video footage uploaded online.[64] There are many important journalistic accounts that documented the ongoing struggle in military active regions most notably, Rania Abouzeid's *No Turning Back,*[65] that documents six years of struggle in regions under the Syrian opposition control and under attack from the Syrian Army. The book also focuses on life trajectories of opposition activists and documents their experiences throughout the war.[66] Jonathan Littell's *Syrian Notebooks,* which documents the journalist's experience during the two week Syrian army's assault on the city of Homs, Revolt in Syria. The book provides vivid descriptions of the unimaginable conditions that

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[63] Ahmad Shehabat, "The Social Media Cyber-War: The Unfolding Events in the Syrian Revolution 2011," *Global Media Journal: Australian Edition* 6, no. 2 (2012), https://www.hca.westernsydney.edu.au/gmjau/archive/v6_2012_2/ahmad_shehabat%20_RA.html.

[64] Aslam Farouk-Alli, "Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 34, no. 3 (July 3, 2014): 207–26, https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2014.946761; Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (February 1, 2015): 357–76, https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1015788; Uzi Rabi and Brandon Friedman, "Weaponizing Sectarianism in Iraq and Syria," *ORBIS Orbis* 61, no. 3 (2017): 423–38; Joana Westphal, "Violence in the Name of God? A Framing Processes Approach to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria," *Social Movement Studies* 0, no. 0 (October 4, 2017): 1–16, https://doi.org/10.1080/14742837.2017.1381594.

[65] Rania Abouzeid, *No Turning Back: Life, Loss, and Hope in Wartime Syria*, 1 edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019).

[66] Abouzeid.

opposition fighters and people living in the Baba 'Amro neighborhood during the army's assault.[67] Stephen Starr's *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising* provides an account of journalist observations in Damascus and most notably the author's observation of the "neutral" population that did not yet choose a side. This account provided a counter narrative of what was going on in the mainstream international media about the Sunni-Alawite divide.[68]

There have also been invaluable autobiographies of Syrians fleeing the atrocities of the war, that provide particular experiences that no field observations and media analysis can describe. These experiences, if read against the grain, can provide valuable insights into the struggle in Syria and the complexity of Syrian society.[69]

In this research, I offer firsthand experience and a close-up engagement with the everyday lives of Syrian refugees either living in the camps or renting apartments in Lebanon, as well as of Syrians who are still living in Syria and are navigating life amid war.

PROPOSING A MIXED METHODS APPROACH

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[67] Jonathan Littell, *Syrian Notebooks: Inside the Homs Uprising*, trans. Charlotte Mandell, 1st UK edition (London: Verso, 2015).

[68] Stephen Starr, *Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising*, 2nd edition (London: Hurst, 2015).

[69] Samar Yazbek, *A Woman in the Crossfire: Diaries of the Syrian Revolution*, trans. Max Weiss (London: Haus Publishing, 2012); Samar Yazbek, *Diaries of an Unfinished Revolution: Voices from Tunis to Damascus*, ed. Layla Al-Zubaidi and Matthew Cassel, trans. Robin Moger and Georgina Collins, 1st Edition (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2013); Samar Yazbek and Christina Lamb, *The Crossing: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria*, trans. Nashwa Gowanlock and Ruth Ahmedzai Kemp, Reprint edition (Ebury Press, 2016).

This dissertation proposes a different approach to studying the Syrian war dynamics online and offline, by proposing a novel methodology that combines ML approaches with ethnographic fieldwork, what I call *Ethnographically Informed Machine Learning Techniques*.

At a moment when critics have rightly challenged Machine Learning (ML) as essentialist, discriminatory, and in fact racist, my research brings to bear sociological theories and perspectives to ML's algorithmic standards thus shaping the code according to sociological conceptual frameworks rather than either fully adopting, or fully rejecting ML's assumptions. I propose a mixed methods approach that combines ethnographic methods and content discourse analysis with machine learning techniques that I call ethnographically informed machine learning.

Collecting online data since 2010

Since the beginning of the uprisings in Egypt and the important coverage of arrest of Wael Ghonim, the founder of one of the most influential Facebook pages during the Egyptian revolution, I started collecting data from Facebook, Twitter, and Aljazeera Arabic comments, and when commentators started anticipating that Syria is next, I started collecting data about Syria where I have collected 5,177,001 unique comments from Facebook public pages engaged with the war events until May 2018[70] and their respective posts, hundreds of millions of tweets,[71] and 218,394 comments

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[70] Facebook limited the access to the data after the Cambridge Analytica scandal
[71] Collection is still ongoing

and 26,273 replies to comments from Aljazeera Arabic.[72] Even though, many

scholarly research, reports, and commentaries drew conclusions based on the

dynamics of online interactions on SNSs, I felt that an approach that focused only on

online data from SNSs would miss a lot of the aspects and conditions that are at play

in this situation. I hypothesized that online data alone is not enough to analyze and

draw conclusions about Syria's situation, especially that I focus on ordinary people's

daily lives. First, there are critical limitations to online data that SNSs impose based

on their platform structures and the many ways that they limit the information flow

users receive as well as the limits that users put for themselves. I felt the need for

other sources of data. Second, based on the dire economic, and social situations that

refugees face in neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan where

the majority of Syrian refugees reside in refugee camps[73] or informal settlements[74]

surviving on aid, I hypothesized that these people will have limited access to the

internet as they survive on NGOs aid in mostly rural areas in these countries so it was

critical for me to capture that sizable population that comes from low-income

backgrounds and fled from warring areas in Syria. Third, my initial online analysis of

tweets and Facebook comments showed interesting results but at some points

conflicting views between the different platforms, between SNSs and mainstream

media as well as conflicting with my conversations with Syrian friends across Syria.

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[72] Aljazeera took down its comments section in August 2017
[73] In Turkey and Jordan
[74] Lebanon

In order to address these issues I decided to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in Lebanon and Syria.

Eighteen Months in the Field

I conducted four phases of ethnographic fieldwork starting with a twelve months long phase one conducted in Lebanon and Syria starting in August 2016 until September 2017 then for 2 months in November 2017 and then in January 2018 of one month each, then for four months between November and February 2019.

In the field, I collected eighty-one semi-structured interviews along with hundreds of informal conversations and participant observations. I observed multiple action planning, emergency response meetings with many INGOs, including the UNHCR in Lebanon. I attended many support and development workshops, and focus groups including peacebuilding, promoting social cohesion by reducing tensions and stereotypes, coexistence between refugees and host communities, and other peacebuilding workshops. I also lived in Syria, mainly in Damascus, with visits to other regions including Aleppo, Tartous, Latakia, Maaloula, Homs, Souaida. Based on this ethnographic work, I offer firsthand experience and a close-up engagement with the everyday lives of Syrian refugees either living in the camps or renting apartments in Lebanon, as well as of Syrian non-refugees who are still living in Syria and are navigating life amid war. During the 2016 period in Syria even Damascus where I spent most of my time had still been a military active place where it became habitual to hear the constant sound of military airplanes in the skies of Damascus. At

that time many regions of Damascus were still under the opposition's control including the Jobar neighborhood, East and West Ghouta.

Damascenes got used to the sounds of military airplanes and background explosions as well as car and suicide bombs every now and then. But since then the Syrian Army, backed by its allies, started taking over Jobar in May 2017, West Ghouta in December 2017, and then East Ghouta in April 2018. After all these military gains it became less and less likely to hear military airplanes or explosions in Damascus. I remember in 2016 it was a risk to go to the old Damascus area where the beautiful old houses had been turned into cafes, pubs, restaurants, and hotels. Many Damascenes took that risk, when I was invited for lunch one day by a lifelong friend of my parents, I was wondering if what I knew about the situation there was false but then when they parked the car and we started walking they started pointing out the places that were recently hit by mortar which were shot mainly from Jobar. "We would have invited you here, but unfortunately it got hit last Saturday," pointing at a door I assumed was for a restaurant then showing me the ruins at the top of the building where the mortar exploded. "Thank god no one got killed" then we kept walking and every few steps there is a story, "look here is another mortar that exploded on the street, few cars were damaged... Here is another cafe that just reopened after fixing the roof where the mortar fell… Here is one of the older pharmacies; they are fixing it and will reopen soon. Syrians are resilient."[75] Then,

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[75] I do not address the resiliency narrative in this dissertation but will be a major part of future work.

their voice subsided from being proud of the resiliency of Syrians in this place to a feeling of sadness showing me where two teenage girls died a few days prior when a mortar exploded their car while they were driving back home. "What is their fault? Those were innocent kids." It is important to note that the war produced a sense of victimhood that did not translate to other communities. There is a sense that the victims killed on one side deserve compassion while the victims on the other side deserve what they are getting. For example, when asked about the other side's victims Munir, said "they are getting what they have been asking for."

Later, in 2017, 2018, and 2019 Damascus seemed more relaxed in terms of army checkpoints and military activity. On the other hand Aleppo, even in 2019, when most of the city was under the control of the Syrian army, the sound of rockets, airplanes, and bombing was still audible even in my hotel room in the center of Aleppo city. When I was walking around the old souk it was easily noticeable to hear the sounds of explosions in the background.[76]

I learned many important facts from being in Syria and visiting and talking to Syrians from many towns, cities, and regions. First, that the uprising then war experiences were not the same across these different regions. Second, the gravity of the military actions was not felt the same in these regions. Even though Syrians from all over Syria died in this war, either by the fact that their regions were warring grounds or by them joining one of the many armed opposition groups or by fighting with the Syrian army as regular armed personnel or through the mandatory military

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[76] old market

conscription, which includes the calling for army reserves, these towns have differing experiences of the war. Third, that these cities and towns have a whole set of social rules, regulations, animosities, cooperation, and systems that govern their interactions including stereotypes that are at play and influence social interactions before even sect identities are considered.

CONCLUSION

The High Costs of the War

The ten years of war had devastating effects. At the time of this writing, the death toll estimate is between 350,000 and 500,000 deaths (NY Times, Human Rights Watch). The United Nations stopped counting in 2016, due to the impossibility of verifying and documenting deaths in the ongoing war conditions. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the war also caused 5.6 million refugees to flee to neighboring countries and 6.6 million were internally displaced. The UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) estimated the economic damage of the war to 388 billion dollars in 2018.

It is misleading to treat the Syrian conflict as only a socioeconomic uprising, or a war of others on Syrian land, a sect majority revolt against a sect minority rule, or even a sectarian war as well as all of the above. Rather this research shows the complex relationality between *economic development, regional animosities, historical stereotypes, religious beliefs and practices, sect identities, ideological differences, class differences, and political elites struggles* in the making of the

Syrian conflict and manifestations of the war. I show how the local sets of hierarchies, traditions, beliefs, and histories make it critical to analyse the situation as a set of unfoldings rather than as a grand theory that explains what is going on in Syria.

This dissertation is challenging the binaristic thinking about Syria and the civil war that seems to prevail both among scholars, commentators, and among key actors on the ground: that either Syria was not sectarian (Assad's claim) or that it is sectarian and that is essentially what caused the war (Balanche). This dissertation challenges Assad's claim, but also the claim of scholars who render (Syrian) sectarianism in a manner where it is always already present and ripe for violent conflagration. This project intervenes in this debate, not by choosing one side or the other but by illuminating how sectarianism works in practice. In other words, instead of asking why now, or who is responsible for the sectarian violence, in this dissertation I provide an account of how ordinary people live, make meaning, feel, affect and are affected by their sect identities in an unfolding war that is mainly impacting their livelihoods.

Shortcomings of this Research

I have done most of my ethnographic research between Damascus and Lebanon with the occasional visits to other cities and towns including Aleppo, Homs, Tartous, Jable, Latakis, and Souaida. Even though I had interviewed many opposition

activists and supporters both in Lebanon and in government controlled regions, this research misses observing life in opposition controlled regions.

CHAPTERS OUTLINE

The first chapter, *Sect Habitus: Theorizing Sect Identities in Syria*, explores how individuals' and groups' ongoing experiences shape and reshape people's self-perception of their sect identities. Challenging standard accounts of sectarianism, I develop the concept of sect habitus to show how sect identities are dynamic, changing with social, economic, political, and historical conditions, and only sometimes becoming sectarian. It is critical to study ordinary people in their everyday practices because it is through their ordinary practices, even amid large-scale events, that sect identities are made, unmade, and remade. People live with, make meaning of, feel, and subtly tweak these identities on a daily basis, but not under conditions of their own choosing. On the ground evidence reveals that sect identities can take significantly different meanings at different times, when conditions have changed. Rather than starting with sectarianism as an explanatory and analytical concept, as most scholars do, I explore how sect identities continuously come into being and how the different practices that make them create the possibility for violent sectarianism, but also for peaceful and co-existing sect-identities.

The second chapter, *Sect Habitus and the Politics of "Security and Safety,"* shows that ordinary people before and throughout the war lived their sect identities through a sense of "security and safety," and changes therein resulted in a shift in

ordinary Syrians' *sect habitus.* For example, when military operations overtook the opposition's peaceful demonstrations, the sense of "security and safety" led some opposition activists and demonstrators to retreat and try to go back to "normal," and led others to join the Syrian army after sectarian clashes emerged in various places, and even led others who identify as secularist atheists to accept living under Al-Qaeda territories. Different experiences of security and safety in different regions and for different groups and individuals gave new meanings to sect identities. Attention to these dynamics allows us to see how sect identities take on new meanings.

The third chapter, ***Sect Habitus and the Evolution of Human Rights Discourse,*** shows how a human rights discourse became part of daily narratives of Syrians beginning in 2011. I ask how ordinary Syrians made sense of the human rights discourse before and during the revolution, and then throughout the war, in order to analyze how most warring and non-warring parties adopted some aspects of the human rights "field" to justify their positions. I show how, under the war conditions, sect habitus transformed based on an ambiguous human rights discourse which in turn got sectarianized and hardened sect identities into sectarian divisions.

My fourth chapter, ***Sect Habitus Online***, ***Sect Habitus on Al Jazeera Arabic***, uses a dataset of Al Jazeera's coverage of Syria since 2011 and the corresponding comments on each of these articles. My findings show that discourses of safety and security and the Human Rights Discourse are almost nonexistent. I developed a multilayered Content Discourse Analysis guided Topic Modeling method that includes context within the analysis of topics from both Aljazeera published articles

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and users' comments. This chapter shows that discourses online differ from the offline, more specifically Aljazeera as a "field" is shaping to some extent which discourses are mobilized by commenters. On the one hand, commenters are engaging with the content that the editorial team is publishing on the website, and on the other hand, they are engaging with other commentators. Both are defining the rules of the field. Then the reality of violence and the coverage of violent events is also dictating the commenters' engagement which in this case I show that coverage of violent events is leading to sectarian comments. Lastly, it is possible that the international community's bleak response to the violence and human rights atrocities led to a disappointment that Aljazeera comments is not the space to voice.

Chapter 1 - A Theory of Practice of Sect Identities

In this chapter, I lay out the theoretical framework of the dissertation and the general interventions it proposes. An overarching question guides this chapter: What are the scholarly merits of using the concept of sectarianism to study the ongoing struggles in the Middle East? Specifically, what does the concept add to and what does it subtract from the analysis? I then show how sectarianism as a concept, regardless of the school that implements it (primordialism, constructivism, ethnosymbolism), locks the focus on one major issue—"the roots of sectarianism"—and leads to a single outcome, the need for a strong state with an equally strong sense of nationalism to overcome sectarian divisions. This chapter shifts the attention from the roots of sectarianism to theorize the daily workings of sect identities, whose importance I highlight in order to understand the conditions under which sect identities become sectarian at the popular level.

The chapter will proceed as follows: First, I start with how the literature deals with sectarianism as a concept, then turn to the issues that are inherent in such use of sectarianism. Second, I review the three mainstream schools that present former and current debates on the subject of sectarianism. Third, I make the case for the importance of asking new questions by proposing an approach that focuses on ordinary people. Based on the work of Bourdieu, I offer a theory of practice of sect-identity by developing the concept of "sect habitus" as an analytical tool to study sect-identities in times of peace and war. Lastly, I show what is to be gained by deploying the sect habitus concept, and argue that starting the analysis with sect

identities rather than sectarianism is critical to explaining episodes of sect-related violence, peace, and anything in-between. I apply sect habitus to the case of the Syrian uprising-turned-war and show the value of what Bourdieu calls "third-order knowledge" to explain sectarian and nonsectarian manifestations of sect identities.

This chapter lays the groundwork for subsequent chapters to show the role of sect habitus in the making, remaking, and unmaking of sect-identities in relation to changing conditions throughout the Syrian uprising-turned-war.

Sectarianism

Sectarianism as a concept is used in the literature on sectarianism to describe violence, sect-based discrimination, or segregation based on religious identities that have taken or are still taking place in religiously plural societies. Cammette (2014) defines sectarianism, and many other scholars use it as a self-defined concept as follows: "At its core, sectarianism refers to processes of constructing and maintaining boundaries of a religious community, demarcating who belongs and who is excluded."[77] This definition explains the "othering" process that is taken for granted in pluralistic societies.[78]

Literature on sectarianism in the Middle East historically focused on Lebanon as the hallmark example of religious pluralism, with eighteen religious sect minorities

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[77] Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014).
[78] Geneive Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 1 edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

and no clear unified religious majority. Lebanon was also the site of sectarian

violence as early as 1840, continuing in 1860, 1958, and most importantly in its

fifteen-year civil war that began in 1975, and during which unthinkable violence was

committed by the "fighting sects" in the name of their self-preservation. In the 19th

century, sectarianism in Lebanon was represented by a Maronite-Druze sectarian

divide that turned into violent conflicts that led to a European and an Ottoman armed

intervention to stop them.[79] In the 20th century, sectarianism manifested as a Muslim-

Christian divide.[80]

    With the post-1979 Islamic revolution in Iran and the rise of the Islamic

Republic of Iran as an anti-imperial, pro-Palestinian, Islamic power in the region, the

literature started focusing more and more on the Sunni-Shi'a sectarian divide

exemplified by the rivalry between Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shi'a).[81] The

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[79] Ussama Samir Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2000); Ussama Makdisi, "Reconstructing the Nation-State: The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon," *Middle East Report*, no. 200 (July 1996): 23, https://doi.org/10.2307/3013264; Ussama Makdisi, "The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon Reconstructing the Nation-State," *Middle East Report, No. 200, Minorities in the Middle East: Power and the Politics of Difference* 26 (1996), http://www.merip.org/mer/mer200/modernity-sectarianism-lebanon?ip_login_no_cache=553884612bc4009e81bf3782a5ee6102; Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*.

[80] This is not to generalize that all Christians and all Muslims fit the sectarian divide.

[81] Hashemi, "The key regional development that deeply shaped the rise of sectarianism was the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran. Western-backed dictatorships in the Middle East, particularly Saudi Arabia, felt vulnerable. They feared that the spread of revolutionary Islam could cross the Persian Gulf and sweep them from power in the same way the Pahlavi monarchy had been toppled. In response, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Sunni world, invested significant resources in undermining the power and ideals of the Iranian revolution by seeking to portray it as a distinctly Shi'i/Persian phenomenon based on a corruption of the Islamic tradition "(70). Nader Hashemi, "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East: The Salience of Authoritarianism over Theology," *Journal of Islamic and Muslim Studies* 1, no. 1 (2016): 65, https://doi.org/10.2979/jims.1.1.05.

literature on sectarianism in the Middle East centered on the Sunni-Shi'a divide, even in Lebanon, where the government and public sectors are institutionalized based on equal distributions between Muslims and Christians. But even this Christian/Muslim divide took a back seat to the Sunni-Shi'a divide in Lebanon.[82]

Literature on Sectarianism

To make sense of sectarian divisions, literature on sectarianism has mostly drawn from the literature on ethnic violence. This literature comprises three major schools, primordialism, modernism, and ethnosymbolism, which focus on the roots of sectarianism.[83] Most scholars use sectarianism to account for divisions, animosities, and violence between different religious communities in the Middle East.[84] In these accounts, sectarianism is both cause and consequence of divisions that turn violent between different religious communities.[85]

Primordialism

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[82] "Beirut Bombing Widens Lebanon's Shiite-Sunni Divide," Crisis Group, November 13, 2015, https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/beirut-bombing-widens-lebanon-s-shiite-sunni-divide; Gareth Smyth, "Lebanon Awaits Winner in Regional War: Shias or Sunnis? Iran, Saudi Arabia or Isis?," *The Guardian*, January 8, 2016, sec. World news, https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2016/jan/08/lebanon-precipice-proxy-war-shias-sunnis-iran-saudi-arabia-isis.
[83] With few exceptions such as: Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*, 2014; Joanne Randa Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon: Infrastructures, Public Services, and Power*, Reprint edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016).
[84] Pakistan is also a site of study. Vali R. Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization: Sectarianism in Pakistan, 1979-1998," *Comparative Politics* 32, no. 2 (2000): 171–90, https://doi.org/10.2307/422396.
[85] Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*.

Primordialists assume that sectarian identities are rooted in historical religious feuds which continue to this day. In the case of the Middle East, primordialists would trace the Sunni-Shia divide to the seventh-century Muslim split regarding the rightful heir to the prophet. Sunnis believed that Prophet Muhammad's closest companion, Abu Bakr As Siddiq, was the rightful successor, while the Shia believed that the prophet's son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, was the rightful successor to lead Muslims.[86] Primordialists assume that the ancient Sunni-Shia split defines political boundaries, social interactions, and cultural differences, as well as the relevance of other conditions in shaping politics in the Middle East.[87] This approach presumes that the ancient religious feuds and differences are the core of these groups' identities even today and will continue as such in the future. Primordialists also assume that these differences become biological and psychological traits of the members of these groups.[88] In other words, people are born with these identities, which makes it impossible for them to change.

According to this view, plural societies are doomed to violence. Because these sectarian identities are understood to be "natural," and because the presumption is that they will eventually become violent, the proponents of this view usually propose solutions based on the necessity of a homogeneous society in order to achieve or

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[86] In Europe the root would be the split between Catholicism and Protestantism.
[87] Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization."
[88] Robert D Kaplan, *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History* (New York: Picador : Distributed by Holtzbrinck Publishers, 2005).

maintain peace.[89] Solutions tend to fall into two categories: either one group

eliminates the other(s) and rules over its own sect, which brings about peace,[90] or

some kind of partition is proposed in order to separate these groups from each other

and secure peace that way. For example, Galbraith advocates for a three-region

partition of Iraq in order to ensure peace: a Kurdish north, a Shia center, and a Sunni

south in the wake of the U.S. toppling of Saddam Hussein.[91]

In this way, the primordialist tradition is similar to Samuel Huntington's

clash-of-civilization thesis that states that religious differences lead to inevitable

conflicts.[92] Based on their presumptive fixed, unchanging identities—identity as

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[89] سكاي نيوز عربية, "'الفيدرالية هي الحل'.. دعوات تظهر من جديد في لبنان," سكاي نيوز عربية, accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1434316-
%D8%AD%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AB-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%81%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D9%8A%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF-
%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%B7%D8%AD-
%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%87%D9%84-
%D8%AA%D9%86%D8%AC%D8%AD%D8%9F. Propositions to implement a federal, or confederal model, or even partition Lebanon based on its sectarian cleavages are reemerging at the time of this writing.

[90] Van Dam suggests that the ongoing internal migration and the ethnic cleansing taking place in Syria could an unintended solution for the ongoing war. "In the theoretical case that the Alawis were to flee in great numbers to the 'Alawi Mountains', this would be as part of large-scale ethnic cleansing operations and migration movements, not just of Alawis, but of other communities as well, drastically changing the distribution of the Syrian population. In my view the internal migration of people from all over Syria has taken place on such a large scale and over such a long period of time that it cannot be fully undone, and therefore has reached a point of no return.51 Moreover, large-scale ethnic cleansing operations and forced migration movements would bring a solution to the conflict further from reach than ever" (39%).

[91] Peter W. Galbraith, *The End of Iraq: How American Incompetence Created a War Without End* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006). He acknowledges that this would not be a solution for the capital Baghdad because of its mixed communities

[92] Samuel P Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993): 22–49; Samuel P Huntington and Rogers D. Spotswood Collection, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

essence—these religious groups are perceived to have irreconcilable differences that are likely to flare into violent conflict.[93] This approach characterizes sectarianism as an ancient cultural trait that is impeding modern state developments.[94] Salamey et al. argue that in Syria and Iraq, rather than building governments that fostered a sense of citizenship, the longstanding regimes have suppressed internal sectarian and ethnic conflicts at the expense of human rights, power sharing, and economic and social development. Similarly to Salamey et al., primordialists assume that a strong state and a robust sense of national identity suppress the influence of sectarian identities but do not eliminate them.[95]

The primordialist account has been widely challenged, mainly because of its inability to explain periods of peace and coexistence between "rival communities." This account is also criticized because of its inability to analyze the conditions that lead to the eruption of violence and because of its essentialist view.[96] Critics argue that religions and religious identities are not fixed, but rather are social constructs. More specifically, modernists argue that sectarian identities are modern constructs.[97]

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[93] Makdisi, "The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon Reconstructing the Nation-State."
[94] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*.
[95] Imad Salamey, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Elie Abouaoun, "Comparative Post-Conflict Power Sharing Models for Syria," in *Post-Conflict Power-Sharing Agreements*, ed. Imad Salamey, Mohammed Abu-Nimer, and Elie Abouaoun (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018), 1–22, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60104-5_1.
[96] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, First Ed. edition (New York: Vintage, 1979).
[97] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*; Makdisi, "Reconstructing the Nation-State"; Makdisi, "The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon Reconstructing the Nation-State"; Salamey, Abu-Nimer, and Abouaoun, "Comparative Post-Conflict Power Sharing Models for Syria."

Modernism

Usama Makdisi's work on the 1860's war in Mount Lebanon, advanced a non-primordialist argument about sectarianism. He first shows that sectarianism rather than being an ancient divide it is a modern social construct produced by the Ottoman modernizing reforms and the European intervention in the Empire in general and Mount Lebanon specifically. These reforms in a context of European involvement led to a different understanding of the relationship between the people of Mount Lebanon and the state. He then argues that political elites understood these reforms through a sect-based lens. "Maronite and Druze elites each strove to present a unified front to the Ottoman state and the European powers, effectively ignoring a long history of nonsectarian leadership."[98]

The Modernist approach has become the mainstream and it includes instrumentalism and constructivism. Modernists[99] criticize primordialism, on the grounds that sectarian identities are modern constructs rather than everlasting religious divides.[100] The notion that sectarianism has ancient roots has been heavily

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[98] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*. (p-77)

[99] Modernists are mainly instrumentalists and constructivists; they argue that sectarian identities are modern social constructions that date to the emergence of the nation-states. In the case of the Middle East it dates to the European colonial project within the Ottoman Empire's borders. The leading school is instrumentalism which I address below. Makdisi; Georges. Corm, *Le Liban contemporain: histoire et société* (Paris: La Découverte, 2003); Corm, Georges, *Naẓrah badīlah ilá mushkilāt Lubnān al-siyāsīyah wa-al-iqtiṣādīyah* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Farābī, 2013); Sharārah, Waḍḍāḥ., *Fī uṣūl Lubnān al-ṭā'ifī : khaṭṭ al-yamīn al-jamāhīrī* (Bayrūt: Jadāwil, 2012).

[100] Makdisi, "The Modernity of Sectarianism in Lebanon Reconstructing the Nation-State"; Makdisi, "Reconstructing the Nation-State"; Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*; Bassel F Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*, 2015, http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=3440445.

criticized by modernists who—following the constructivist theory of ethnicity—

contend that sectarian identities that carry political value are modern constructs used

by state and political elites.[101] The modernist approach assumes that sectarianism as a

political identity can be traced to the emergence of the nation-state. Modernists refuse

the primordialist claims of ahistorical, essential, durable sectarian identities. They

argue that sectarian identities and sectarianism itself emerge only as part of the

process of modern colonial and post-colonial nation-state building in the Middle

East.[102]

Instrumentalism

Instrumentalists argue that sectarianism is socially constructed and a modern

formation, sectarianism is a tool that political elites use, exploit, and manage in their

struggle for power over each other. For instrumentalists, both primordialism and

ethnosymbolism lack a political and power struggle analysis of sectarian violence.

Instrumentalists criticize the claim of naturalization of sectarian identities maintained

by the previous approaches. In *The Origins of Sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile

Crescent* (2017), Hazran argues that religious pluralism in the fertile crescent

develops into sectarianism and sectarian violence because of the political elite's

competition for power. He argues that sectarianism "takes the form of the

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[101] Toby Dodge, *Inventing Iraq: The Failure of Nation-Building and a History Denied* (London: Hurst, 2003); Sami Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions," *The Middle East Journal* 68, no. 2 (May 15, 2014): 318–22; Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*.
[102] Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, "Politics of Sectarianism: Rethinking Religion and Politics in the Middle East," *Middle East Law and Governance* 7, no. 1 (2015): 61–75; Salloukh et al., *Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*.

instrumental employment and exploitation of a religious or communal identity or framework in order to enable political organization, the gaining of political legitimacy, the promotion of political change or the preservation of the control held by interest groups."[103] He then concludes that the politics of political elites in the Middle East fuel sectarianism. Hashimi argues similarly that authoritarian regimes knowingly exploit sectarian identities in order to preserve their regimes by orienting people's attention away from demands for political change.[104] This view overlaps with the Syrian opposition's discourse about the sectarianization of the Syrian uprising, which I will address in a later section. The instrumentalist view implies that ordinary people are pawns that political elites use and manipulate in order to advance their agendas. The instrumentalist view is the most popular among studies of Lebanese sectarianism.[105]

Constructivism

The constructivist view considers sectarian identities to be similar to any other socially constructed identities Scholars of this perspective assume that these identities are not fixed, but rather are the expressions of social processes that bring them into being and give them power (Dixon 2018). Like instrumentalists, consructivists

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[103] Yusri Hazran, "The Origins of Sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 0, no. 0 (September 13, 2017): 1–21, https://doi.org/10.1080/13530194.2017.1370998. (p-4)

[104] Nader Hashemi, "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East."

[105] Sharārah, Waḍḍāḥ., في أصول لبنان الطائفي : خط اليمين الجماهيري Fawwāz. Ṭarābulsī, *A History of Modern Lebanon* (London; [Ann Arbor, MI]: Pluto, 2007); Hazran, "The Origins of Sectarianism in Egypt and the Fertile Crescent"; Lynch et al., *Blogs and Bullets III*; Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*, Reprint edition (Place of publication not identified: Columbia University Press, 2016); Zubaida, "Sectarian Dimensions."

criticize the naturalization of sectarian identities and reject the argument that plural

religious societies are naturally prone to conflict. They stress that these identities

could be reconstructed to get a different outcome (Dixon 29). Constructivists argue

that ethnosymbolism cannot account for the flexibility of culture and cultural change

which impact identity formation and evolution. Constructivist approaches

acknowledge that sectarian identities could be "fluid and malleable or they may be

sticky and hard to change, depending on the context."[106] Contrary to instrumentalists,

constructivists do not assume that political elites are in full control and can

manipulate these identities at will. They argue instead that political elites are affected

by these identities and cannot steer too far away from their constituents' inclinations

and feelings. This approach does not deny the role of political elites in manipulating

and aggravating sectarian differences, but recognizes that sectarian identities are lived

and practiced by these social groups in tandem with other identities and social

conditions. In this project I develop a constructivist framework that builds on the

fluidity and dynamism of sect identities, and limited instrumentalization of these

identities by elites, and provides an analytical tool that explains the manifestations of

sect identities, before, during, and after the occurrence of violence. In other words,

this project does not start with sectarianism and violence and post-facto explains sect

identities.

Ethnosymbolism

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[106] Dixon, *Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East?* (31)

For the ethnosymbolists, identity is a cultural trait, a claim which, in their view, denaturalizes sectarianism. That is what distinguishes them from the primordialists; however, it does not do away with the formulation that these sectarian identities are rooted in ancient histories and lineages. While for the primordialists it is impossible to change these identities, for the ethnosymbolists change is very difficult, but not impossible. Based on Anthony Smith's ethnosymbolic method for studying ethnic violence, Fanar Haddad (2011) offers an "ethnosymbolic" approach to analyzing sectarianism in Iraq. Haddad argues that sectarian identities have existed for a long time and been passed on from generation to generation through myth-symbol complexes which are reinvented and modified.[107] These myths and symbols demarcate group boundaries which lead to the production of an excluded and antagonized "other" based on sectarian identities. He argues that these problematic myths are ever ready to be (re)awakened and revised to fit the needs of future political crises. This approach, like that of primordialism, ends up promoting some kind of separation or a consociationalist system of government similar to the Lebanese model in order to preserve peace based on a sectarian power-sharing structuring of the government.[108] Like primordialists, ethnosymbolists assume that a

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[107] Haddad formulates these myth-symbols are supposed to be eternal truths that groups build their sectarian relations based on "perceptions of self and other and the construction of competing myth-symbol complexes that are often divorced from historical reality." Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011. (p-52)

[108] Simon Haddad, "Lebanon: From Consociationalism to Conciliation," *Nationalism and Ethnic Politics* 15, no. 3–4 (December 17, 2009): 398–416, https://doi.org/10.1080/13537110903346684; Samir Makdisi and Marcus Marktanner, "Trapped by Consociationalism: The Case of Lebanon," 2009, http://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1118&context=meea; Kamīl Ḥabīb, *Consociationalism and the Continuous Crisis in the Lebanese System* (Majd, 2009); Samir

strong nation-state and government can preserve peace between competing

constituencies and that, once the state institutions are weakened, there is no escape

from inter-communal strife.[109] These accounts have been criticized for their inability

to explain the constellation of multiple political identities (ethnic, sect, class) in the

cases of Syria and Iraq. Dixon (2018) bases his criticism on the inadequacy of this

account to explain the Kurdish question within a Sunni-Shia divide, as Kurds are

mainly Sunnis.[110] This account also cannot explain the rural-urban differences within

the same sects either. In his recent work, Haddad criticize these approaches including

ethnosymbolism and argues that sectarianism as a concept is of little analytical value.

He adds that scholars should study sectarian identities rather than sectarianism.[111]

Most scholars argue that what they are studying by way of the religious,

cultural and historical differences of these groups is political sectarianism rather than

sect differences. By which I mean the day-to-day manifestations of sect identities in

the everyday lives of ordinary people. I argue, however, that this separation sets the

premise for a limited analysis of the roles of political elites and government

institutions in producing sectarianism, and consequently renders ordinary people at

best pawns positioned for manipulation by elites for political gains. That is why I

Makdisi and El-Khalil Yusu, "Lebanon: The Legacy of Sectarian Consociationalism and the Transition to a Fully-Fledged Democracy" Vol. no.1 (2013).

[109] "Intractable identity claims kept boiling which were occasionally suppressed with extreme state violence."Elizabeth Picard, "Conclusion: Nation-Building and Minority Rights in the Middle East, Elizabeth Picard," n.d., 27. (p-7)

[110] Dixon, *Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East?* (p-22)

[111] Haddad, *Understanding "Sectarianism."*

argue somewhat provocatively that the difference between the schools becomes obsolete when we study sect identities at the popular level:

I argue that it is critical to study ordinary people as individuals and groups that are engaging in a continual practice of meaning-making with regard to their sect identities. In other words, ordinary people and their practices are the sites for the making, unmaking, and remaking of sect identities. Because these people live with, make meaning of, and feel these identities on a daily basis, sect identities can take completely different meanings at different times, under different conditions. That is why the experience of the people on the ground must be the starting point of scholarly research.

A Bourdieusian Approach to Studying Sectarianism

Toby Dodge and Kevin Mazur propose a Bourdieusian approach to studying sectarianism. They account for how political elites who struggle in the political field, aim at defining the social world through principles of vision of divisions and impose this vision on the people. For Dodge, peoples' habitus is imposed by politicians that forces a common sense that divides the population across communal identities. My approach rejects the assumptions that political elites control the population's habitus and impose their views through competition in the political field, even though I do not deny the role that political elites play in the making of sect identities.[112] Similarly,

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[112] Dodge, *Inventing Iraq*; Toby Dodge, "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War," *INSS* (blog), accessed September 6, 2021, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/beyond-sectarianism-geopolitics-fragmentation-and-the-syrian-civil-war/; Toby Dodge, "Pierre Bourdieu and Explanations of Sectarian Mobilisation in Iraq and the Wider Middle East," *Middle East Centre* (blog), September 12, 2018,

to Dodge, Mazur argues that political actors impose a vision of divisions based on ethnic and sectarian boundaries on other people in society. This assumes that a vision of divisions is imposed from the outside as an externality.[113]

Changing the questions

The Iranian-Saudi competition for power in the Middle East in the wake of the Arab Spring, with both states intervening in the wars in Syria, Libya, Bahrain, and Yemen, saw unprecedented Sunni-Shi'a divisive discourse.[114] Scholars, commentators, and policymakers used this macro Sunni-Shi'a divide (Saudi-Iran) as the center of their analyses of geopolitical dynamics in the region.[115] Scholars and

https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/12/pierre-bourdieu-and-explanations-of-sectarian-mobilisation-in-iraq-and-the-wider-middle-east/; Toby Dodge, "Tracing the Rise of Sectarianism in Iraq after 2003," *Middle East Centre* (blog), September 13, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/13/tracing-the-rise-of-sectarianism-in-iraq-after-2003/; Toby Dodge, "Seeking to Explain Sectarian Mobilisation in the Middle East," *Middle East Centre* (blog), September 11, 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2018/09/11/seeking-to-explain-sectarian-mobilisation-in-the-middle-east/.

[113] Kevin Mazur, *Revolution in Syria: Identity, Networks, and Repression* (Cambridge, United Kingdom ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

[114] Christopher Phillips, "Rivalry Amid Systemic Change: Iranian and Saudi Competition in the Post-American Middle East," *Project on Middle East Political Science* (blog), March 26, 2020, https://pomeps.org/rivalry-amid-systemic-change-iranian-and-saudi-competition-in-the-post-american-middle-east; Max Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East - The New York Times," accessed August 2, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/20/world/middleeast/iran-saudi-proxy-war.html.

[115] Max Fisher, "How the Iranian-Saudi Proxy Struggle Tore Apart the Middle East - The New York Times"; Jonathan Marcus, "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Bitter Rivals," *BBC News*, September 16, 2019, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42008809; Creede Newton, "Saudi-Iran Proxy Wars: In Pursuit of Regional Hegemony," accessed September 6, 2021, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/11/14/saudi-iran-proxy-wars-in-pursuit-of-regional-hegemony; Muharrem Ekşi, "Regional Hegemony Quests in the Middle East from the Balance of Power System to the Balance of Proxy Wars: Turkey as Balancing Power for the Iran - Saudi Rivalry," *Gazi Akademik Bakış* 11, no. 21 (2017): 133–56; "Beyond Sectarianism: Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War," *INSS* (blog), accessed September 6, 2021, https://www.inss.org.il/publication/beyond-sectarianism-geopolitics-fragmentation-and-the-syrian-civil-war/; "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War: Survival: Vol 56, No 6," n.d.,

commentators more generally have taken this regional geopolitical divide for granted and have suggested that a coherent and hegemonic sectarian discourse is supposedly circulating and producing opposing ideologies for ordinary people.[116] These scholars and commentators put ordinary people into two supposedly clearly demarcated categories—Sunnis on one side and Shi'a on the other. In other words, following the definition of sectarianism cited above, whereby "boundaries of a religious community, demarcating who belongs and who is excluded is at play in Syria," scholars presume people who are Alawites follow Iran, Sunnis follow Saudi Arabia, while other religious communities are excluded from the discussion.[117] To take for granted that the Sunni/Shi'a divisive discourse is salient,—either because people "are born sectarian," as described by the primordialists, or are duped by the political elites, who are "rational actors" seeking to maximize their political power, as described by the instrumentalists—is to overlook the countless complex manifestations of sect-identities that in fact unfold in the complex everyday lives of ordinary people. The main approaches to sectarianism fail to capture and account for everyday practices of sect identity-making in their analyses. Even in the few studies

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https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2014.985438?casa_token=SWPxVQAlBV0AAAAA:cAp13kZnvgWW1yJ3Wp2Y96xA5vGDI_rzRBS_t3C99bIgyF4TbGHXRYxxlwIvwsCG1S5TbkitCFKlBA.

[116] Frederic Wehrey et al., "Sectarianism and Ideology in the Saudi-Iranian Relationship," in *Saudi-Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam*, 1st ed., Rivalry, Cooperation, and Implications for U.S. Policy (RAND Corporation, 2009), 11–44, https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7249/mg840srf.8; Marcus, "Why Saudi Arabia and Iran Are Bitter Rivals."

[117] This is a generalization but on the side of the Sunnis the Turks and the Saudi's are competing. The Qatari's (brotherhood)tried to take on the Saudi role for a while but did not succeed.

in which scholars do not dismiss the agency of ordinary people, they presume them to be sectarian,[118] or at best ready to become sectarian at the will of political elites.[119]

Scholarly research on sectarianism focus mostly on the realm of government institutions and power-sharing between political elites of different sects.[120] Scholars conceptualize the sect relations of ordinary people as being in constant competition with other sects for a larger power share within governments (clientelism).[121] But in fact, in daily practice, sect identities are produced and reproduced beyond the narrow relationship between the state and its institutions. This is not to say that this relationship does not influence sect relations, but only to say that it is not the exclusive causal variable.

These studies dismiss the everyday practices of ordinary people living their lives, but it is in and through those practices where these identities get constructed, take on meaning, interact, relate, and are expressed in different ways. For example, when I asked my "informants" if they knew of a mixed marriage in their community before the war, seventy-nine out of eighty-one said yes, seventy said they knew of multiple mixed marriages, nine out of the seventy-nine could identify only one couple, one knew only about a mixed marriage in a neighboring town, and only one

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[118] Dixon, *Beyond Sectarianism in the Middle East?*

[119] Fanar Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2011), http://site.ebrary.com/id/10480399.

[120] with few exceptions: Melani Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism: Welfare and Sectarianism in Lebanon* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon.*

[121] Political groups and parties compete for the representation of their constituencies' sects with the goal of becoming the only link between these constituencies and government institutions.

hadn't heard of a mixed marriage at all. They recounted that the popular reactions to such marriages were either that people and family members did not care, especially in urban settings such as Damascus and Aleppo, if the families were upper middle class, or that the family of one member of the couple, usually the woman, renounced her.[122] In instances of renunciation, while most lasted for a period of time, some were shorter when well-respected clergy or tribal leaders got involved and set up some kind of reconciliation between the couple and their families. When the couple had children, which usually took a long time, only one family still renounced their daughter. None of my interviewees had heard that a mixed marriage escalated to violent incidents between families, tribes, or towns.

By contrast, when asked about mixed marriages after 2011, only two of my informants had witnessed any. The first informant witnessed his brother's marriage, who celebrated a marriage without any problems. Both families, from different sects, were happy about the marriage; even though my informant mentioned discussions about recent developments regarding sect relations in Syria, and what reactions a mixed marriage might provoke for the extended families, they decided to move ahead with it and invite everyone they wanted to. The other informant witnessed a mixed marriage of a friend of his who got married in Germany. Eighty-one interviewees is a small sample, and because they hailed from many different social classes and lived in diverse regions, from urban to rural, more studies would need to be carried out prior to making any general claims, but it is significant that seventy-nine informants

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[122] Only one said the man's family renounced him

witnessed mixed marriages prior to the war while only two have witnessed such marriages since 2011. As I will flesh out in greater detail in chapter x, those data reveal that sect-identities affect and are affected by social, economic, political, cultural, and historical that lead to different manifestations between different regions throughout the unfolding events of the war. I will flesh out the significance of that finding later, but for now I simply wish to note that local and more macro conditions shape sect-related identity-making, something that the literature ignores at its peril.

Because the logic of the concept of sectarianism presupposes divisions based on religious identities, it obscures what I will show are important variabilities in sect understanding and identity practices between different communities of the same sect, such as the urban Sunni bourgeoisie and the rural Sunni farmers. (Even this generalization obscures important differences, because in fact the Sunni bourgeoisie of urban Damascus is at odds with the Sunni bourgeoisie of urban Aleppo. The Sunni bourgeoisie of Aleppo and of Damascus do not form a unified group bound by their Sunni identity). It is easy for commentators and scholars to think of Sunnis in Damascus and Aleppo not joining the revolution because they were the beneficiaries of the economic neoliberal "reforms" that were implemented under the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, or even being under the control of the security forces, or lacking a collective consciousness. Wedeen, provides a more complex argument that moves beyond the economic causality based on rational actor theory. She argues that the combination of neoliberalism and authoritarianism produced a neoliberal autocratic ideology that secured support for President Assad. and foreclosed the

space for most Syrians who see themselves as "ramadyun " (neutral) to join the uprisings. The neoliberal autocratic ideology gave a sense of possibility for social mobility, that is unforeseeable in turmoil which kept the 'ramadyun' from joining the quest for regime change.

My exploration of how sect identities work at the popular level allows me to critically analyze the successes and failures of the political elite discourses as well as to carve a space for assessing a counter discourse that comes from below. This analysis does not end with a recommendation for a strong sense of nationalism, for democratic governments, protection of human rights, and/or economic distributions in order to trump sectarianism. I argue for the possibility of living across sect differences without having to trump sect identities with a national identity, as many scholars would usually propose.

Also, rather than inquiring about the roots of sectarianism, as is the province of the literature on sectarianism, I follow recent attempts to change the question.[123] In order to understand the conditions under which sect identities become sectarian, I start by asking how such identities are lived in plural societies. As my discussion and the next chapters will show, sect identities are locally specific. Furthermore, to group people into all-encompassing sect categories—e.g., Sunnis, Sh'a, Druze, Christians—misleads and fails analytically, especially when studying ordinary people.

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[123] Cammett, *Compassionate Communalism*, 2014; Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*.

My purpose in developing the concept of sect habitus is first to show that sect-identities are dynamic and change with social, economic, political, and historical conditions. Second, sect identities only sometimes become sectarian. I use Syria as my case study to highlight these changes and give examples of how sect identities relate to each other and to other fields of social interactions that affect the meaning of these sect identities. Lastly, contrary to most of the literature, I argue that religion and religious practices are at the core of these sect identities and play a bigger role than the borders that demarcate belonging to the group.[124] Rather than starting with sectarianism as an explanatory and analytical concept, I start with the ordinary practices that make, remake, and sometimes unmake sect identities, arguing that these practices significantly shape the possibilities for peaceful, and violent, cross-sect relations.

Theory of Practice of Sect Identities

As I show in the literature section above, the different approaches to sectarianism typically conceptualize sect identities as inherently divisive and violent, and thus negative. While I agree that it is important to illuminate the divisive aspects of sectarianism, I argue that the focus on sectarianism and its divisiveness, to the exclusion of any concrete exploration of sect identity formation, leads to overlooking the peaceful manifestations of sect-identities, which in turn obscures the question of

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[124] I do not account for religion in a primordialist way rather in terms of religion as a field in a broudieusian sense that sect habitus affect and is affected by religion as a field similar to any other field including the media, human rights discourse and security and safety.

their transformation, *only sometimes*, to violence. Because studies start with the premise of sectarianism as divisive, these approaches view sect identities,[125] whether intentionally or not, through a Schmidtian perception of the political as a we/them, friend/enemy division that is always antagonistic in plural societies. These binaries can easily lead scholars to assume that sect-identities in plural societies automatically and invariably lead to a divisive sectarianism.

Even the version of the political that Chantal Mouffe formulates as agonistic rather than antagonistic is premised on a well-defined split between we/they binary.[126] For both Schmitt and Mouffe, the we/they binary is always at play in the political even if their perspectives differ: while the we/they relation is always a friend/enemy relation for Schmitt, for Mouffe there is always the possibility for an agonistic rather than antagonistic we/they binary.[127] My research on sect identities challenges the

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[125] With the exception of: Max Weiss, *In the Shadow of Sectarianism: Law, Shi'ism, and the Making of Modern Lebanon* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2010).

[126] "In the realm of politics, this presupposes that the "other" is no longer seen as an enemy to be destroyed, but as an "adversary," i.e., somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question."CHANTAL MOUFFE, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?," *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 745–58. (p-755)
 It is also important to highlight that they are basing these conceptions in democratic liberal societies

[127] "In the field of collective identities, we are always dealing with the creation of a 'we' which can exist only by the demarcation of a 'they'. This does not mean of course that such a relation is necessarily one of friend/enemy, i.e. an antagonistic one. But we should acknowledge that, in certain conditions, there is always the possibility that this we/they relation can *become* antagonistic, i.e. that it can turn into a relation of friend/enemy. This happens when the 'they' is perceived as putting into question the identity of the 'we' and as threatening its existence (15-16)."
"What is at stake in the agonistic struggle, on the contrary, is the very configuration of power relations around which a given society is structured: it is a struggle between opposing hegemonic projects which can never be reconciled rationally. The antagonistic dimension is always present, it is a real confrontation but one which is played out under conditions regulated by a set of democratic procedures accepted by the adversaries (21)."

presumption in the sectarianism literature that sects stand in a we/they relation to one

another. First, sect differences, and hence the we/they binary, is not always well-

defined. Second, while the concept of sectarianism suggests that different sects

confront one another as "opposing hegemonic projects" that Mouffe argues can never

be reconciled (Right/Left in her formulation),[128] that confrontation actually is not

omnipresent. In order to really understand sectarianism as such, sect identities must

be understood at different temporalities: when and under what conditions do these

identities emerge and take form as a we/they binary and when do they become a

friend/enemy relationship? When are they expressed peacefully, discriminatory,

compassionately, clientelisticly, violently,… ?

Bourdieu's theory of practice is helpful in studying sect identities, including

the point at which these identities become sectarian. Applying Bourdieu's study of

practical knowledge, a theory of practice can transcend the objectivist/subjectivist,

primordialist/instrumentalist as well as the we/they binaries. To this end, I use the

theory of practice of sect identities in order to spotlight the role that ordinary people

play in the making and unmaking of sect identities. Their practices and experiences,

and sometimes even the people themselves, are dismissed or taken for granted in most

studies of sectarianism.[129] The "third-order" knowledge—that is produced at the

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[128] Mouffe argues that "as far as domestic politics is concerned, I have shown how the belief in the end of an adversarial form of politics and the overcoming of the left/right divide, instead of facilitating the establishment of a pacified society, has created the terrain for the rise of right-wing populist movements. Chantal Mouffe, *On the Political*, Thinking in Action (London ; Routledge, 2005). (p-119)
[129] With few exceptions: Nucho, *Everyday Sectarianism in Urban Lebanon*; Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011.

popular level is produced out of the relation between the subjective meaning, objective structures, and practices that give people a margin of agency. When positioned in a field sect practices and experiences transcend both the primordialist naturalization of sect identities and extends the limited focus that the instrumentalists put on political elites' agency which takes ordinary people's actions, reactions, and practices for granted. A theory of practice of sect-identities allows for an expanded analysis of the sites of power that significantly shape specific practices, under specific conditions, at specific moments. This theory also allows for an analysis beyond the simplistic assumption of ordinary people being duped into sectarian violence at the will of the political elite. And more importantly, a theory of practice of sect identities requires an analysis of the discrete actions and reactions that usually go unnoticed but are critical in the making, unmaking, and remaking of sect identities.

Most importantly, however, a theory of practice of sect identities introduces time into the analysis of the practices of sect identities, which allows the analyst to identify, analyze, and explain periods of peace and war and those in-between. For most analysts of sectarianism, time does not count. Because these analysts arrive at the analysis *post festum,* they "cannot be in any uncertainty as to what may happen."[130] This also affords them the opportunity to totalize and overcome the effects of time. For Bourdieu, ignoring time is an issue of scientific practice in general and it is intrinsic to policy-change studies. "Because science is possible only

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[130] Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1990). (p-9)

in relation to time which is opposed to that of practice, it tends to ignore time and, in doing so, to reify practices (9)." Using a Bourdieusian approach restores time to the analysis and allows for an understanding of sect identities and sectarianism before, during, and after wars take place.

Previous studies of sectarianism that are concerned with the roots of sectarianism (whether primordialist, ethnosymbolyst, or instrumentalist) deal with sect-identities as always already divisive and ever ready to explode into violence. This conclusion establishes a sense of timelessness regardless of when sectarianism comes into being, whether ancient or modern. Yet, sect identities can carry completely different meanings for different societies (Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, Kuwait, etc.) at different moments in time (sectarianism in Lebanon from 1840 to 1860 is different from that from 1975 to 1990, which is different from that from 1990 to the present), and even for the same societies (it differs between urban and rural regions). As Bourdieu shows, the gift exchange "mechanism" can have completely different meanings if the exchange takes place at the "wrong time," i.e:returning the gift earlier, or late. It can also have opposing meanings coming from people who hold different statuses in society— "the social meaning of actors (6-7)".[131] Similarly, analyzing these types of sect practices can illuminate the relationality of these identities to the social, economic, political, and other structures

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[131] Actors give social meaning to specific actions. And in turn, actions give social meaning to actors.

[fields for Bourdieu], including but not limited to the fields of power, culture, media, journalism, and religion.

While a theory of practice of sect identities does not offer a universal model that understands sect identities and sectarianism as conceptualized in the literature, it does force the researcher to look at the local conditions that allow infinite accounts of manifestations of sect-identities in relation to specific fields. Researchers need to conduct thorough analyses of the invisible structures [fields] and the relationships between these fields and the sect habitus of individuals, sects, and even nations. A theory of practice of sect identities escapes structural determinism while accounting for structures. Sectarianism as a concept, theory, and analytical tool depicting divisiveness and violence suggests a friend/enemy divide is present at all times when sect identities are in the mix. The "othering"[132] that scholars of sectarianism refer to is Schmitt's' we/they antagonistic relationship of "the political." I do not deny the possibility of the we/they antagonistic relationship of sect-identities but do want to account for other possibilities that do not manifest in this binary that begets only the solution of a national versus sectarian binary. Using a theory of practice and sect habitus enables me to add the temporality of sect identities, which in turn enables me to analyze dynamic sect identities and account for the conditions by which they might become sectarian.

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[132] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011; Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*.(p-5)

Instrumentalist scholars deal with sectarianism as a political identity that gets manipulated by political elites in order to secure political gains in the name of the sect usually. Based on these premises, sectarianism becomes the cause and consequence of intolerance, divisions, and ultimately violence. That approach results in two conclusions. The first is that sectarianism is essentially divisive and violent and the second is that the only viable solution to eradicate sectarianism is the strong national state with a strong national identity.

Many issues arise from these conclusions, first, yes, sectarianism is divisive, but it does not start that way and does not end that way, which is why it is critical to start any analysis with sect identities rather than sectarianism and study the conditions under which sect identities become sectarian. Starting with sectarianism reconfigures the periods of peace, coexistence, tolerance, and endurance of the other merely as thresholds to a new round of violence or, at best, periods of inability to fight. Second, these approaches after the occurrence of violence deduce that the cause of violence is sectarianism which is also caused by a weak sense of nationalism or a corrupt nation-state that needs to be more transparent, just, and respectful of its citizens' human rights.[133]

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[133] Others suggest the separation of religion from the state and the importance of a secular constitution and legal institutions and democratic representation Fanar Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 7, 2016, http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/01/07/shia-centric-state-building-and-sunni-rejection-in-post-2003-iraq/is5w?mkt_tok=3RkMMJWWfF9wsRouvKXLZKXonjHpfsX66%2BspXqKzlMI%2F0E R3fOvrPUfGjI4JSctqI%2BSLDwEYGJlv6SgFSrnAMbBwzLgFWhI%3D; Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*.

Rather than questioning the root of sectarianism, I propose to study the conditions that make it possible for sectarianism to take place—while still crediting the periods of peace, coexistence, tolerance, and endurance as more than the   set-ups for a new round of violence as described in the literature. This approach might also help identify solutions to prevent the shift from sect identity to sectarianism without eradicating these identities.

For clarity then, from this point on, when I use the term *sectarianism* in this dissertation, I will be using it the same way as in the literature—to denote divisiveness, intolerance, and violence. I will observe Makdisi's definition of sectarianism as being a practice and a discourse that denotes other sects as being the Other.[134] By contrast, I will define sect habitus as the socially constructed dispositions of sect identities that are practiced in a specific community as well as the normative ways of feeling and expressing these identities at the individual as well as the group/sect levels.

Sect habitus

The concept of "habitus" developed by Pierre Bourdieu (1970) is key to my work in studying people's "dispositions," as it accounts for personal experiences, group culture, and social and economic structures while maintaining the role of

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[134] In the case of Makdisi he was defining sectarianism in the context of 19th century mount Lebanon where Druze and Maronite sects committed sectarian violence in 1840 and 1860 under the supervision and influence of European colonial powers and under an Ottoman rule that was attempting to modernize the empire.

agency. Habitus is the system of dispositions that produces practices which follow the rules of the objective conditions under which these practices are produced and reproduced. "It follows that these practices cannot be directly deduced either from the objective conditions, defined as the instantaneous sum of the stimuli which may appear to have directly triggered them, or from the conditions which produced the durable principle of their production." Bourdieu's habitus relates the objective conditions under which it operates to the conjunction that represents the state of the structure at a specific historical moment.[135]

During my fieldwork in Lebanon in 2016, tensions between the locals of Majdil 'Anjar[136] and its refugees exploded in a series of confrontations and protests. At one winter demonstrations in front of the municipality that year, I conducted participant observations and then interviews with Majdil 'Anjar locals. Mohamed, who worked as a plumber, was protesting the municipality's inaction in cracking down on "Syrian refugees who are taking our jobs." He explained that the refugees were not only taking local jobs but also that "their culture and traditions are foreign to us! We cannot live with them. Five families share a one-bedroom apartment. They steal electricity and they also get paid by the UN. That is why they can lower the prices. But for us [Lebanese], it does not work. We are not used to these practices. We cannot even think of selling our daughters [reference to arranged marriage];

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[135] Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. (p-62)
[136] Majdil 'Anjar is one of the major hubs of the Salafi Da'wa in Lebanon and prides itself of being supportive of the "revolution in Syria" as Mohammed put it "against the Alawi apostates but it doesn't mean they [refugees who are Sunnis] come and take our jobs and ruin our lives."

they[Syrian refugees] do." Mohammed's reference to the "foreign culture," "or 'adat ghariba," that was incompatible with that of Majdil 'Anjar's was mentioned by no fewer than ten demonstrators I talked to. The point here is that even though Majdil 'Anjar and the refugees shared the same Sunni sect, and marriage institutions for both communities were directly imposed by the sects' religious authorities, the Lebanese locals found the arranged marriages of the "Other" to be unacceptable cultural differences, even though arranged marriage was not a foreign tradition in Majdil 'Anjar even if, according to Mohammed, "Not like them! It doesn't happen just for money."

This is an example of how sect identities loose traction and sect habitus illuminates how the economic structural conditions in relation to a set of sect based dispositions produced the "Other" from members of the same sect, in Majdil 'Anjar when the locals had to compete with the refugees of the same sect.[137] Paradoxically, Majdil 'Anjar had welcomed the refugees and supported the Syrian revolution based on a discourse of Sunni victimhood that they "share[d] with the refugees"—in part that Majdil 'Anjar "lost the prominent Sunni leader prime minister Rafik Hariri,"[138] who was assassinated in a car explosion in 2005, that the Syrian government was one of the suspects, and that the refugees who fled to Majdil 'Anjar were Sunnis.

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[137] "Given that it is unlikely that two contradictory applications of the same schemes will be brought face to face in what we must call a universe of practice (rather than a universe of discourse), the same thing may, in different universes of practice, have different things as its complement and may, therefore, receive different, even opposed, properties, according to the universe." Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*. (p-110)

[138] "مجدل عنجر، لبنان," Strong Cities Network, accessed April 28, 2020, https://strongcitiesnetwork.org/ar/city/مجدل-عنجر-لبنان/.

This informs my view of sect habitus. In order to highlight the roles of personal experiences, group culture, and social and economic structures in the making, unmaking, and remaking of sect-identities, I include in the definition of sect habitus the set of dispositions and characteristics that organize practices and representations of a social group based on religious identity, and more generally, the common sense of the group. These sect-based dispositions and characteristics operate at both conscious and non-conscious levels. In other words, sect habitus is the set of socially constructed meanings, practices, and normative ways of feeling and expressing one's sectarian identity at the individual and group levels. Members of a given sect are inclined towards certain economic, political, social, and cultural behaviors that operate in relation to social settings, or fields, in Bourdieu's parlance. Each field follows its own set of rules, regularities, and structures. Once operating in a field, a member uses a set of practices that are known to work given the position that member occupies within the field. More importantly, habitus explains peoples' actions as the product of the history of their relationships to each other and to their own history,[139] rather than as "an instantaneous reaction to immediate stimuli."[140] Finally, habitus is "an open system of the dispositions that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable but not eternal!"[141] Daily practices and

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[139] Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).
[140] Bourdieu and Wacquant, 124.
[141] Bourdieu and Wacquant, 133.

experiences either reinforce or modify the sectarian structures by means of subjecting the set of sect-based dispositions to these daily practices. Sect differences are not always the basis for conflict sometimes they provide basis for solidarity, and these same differences become divisive [sectarian] and expressed through violent practices in times of war, though only in some instances and not in others.

A sect habitus is durable, and that gives sectarianism a sense of naturalness—as if sectarianism has historically been an intrinsic part of the social structures of these religious communities—but sect habitus is also susceptible to change. The concept of sect habitus thus helps explain the seemingly unchangeable nature of sectarian divides. It also explains why some people who might not be religious are in some instances highly sectarian, displaying high levels of intolerance and claiming the protection of their respective religion. Sect habitus also explains why we see different sect relations at the individual, group, national, and international levels, both during periods of peace, tolerance, and coexistence, as well as during times of war. Even with a focus on the popular level, this concept accounts for the micro, meso, and macro structures. Sect habitus can also account for the formation and reformation of sect identities during historical conjunctions that lead to the making and remaking of sect identities at a specific historical moment. It also provides a way to rethink the starting point of most research that sees sect relations, whether inherently or socially constructed, as carrying the seed of division and violence. By accounting for the role of the local disposition of an individual' and a group, a sect habitus analysis brings together the political, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the dynamic of making

and remaking sectarian identities through the humblest practices of everyday life, while accounting for the many different formations of sect-identities depending on the cultural, historical, and other specificities dictated by the local.[142] Even though I base these dispositions on the local, this does not negate the national, regional, and international influences on the meaning-making of these identities.

My overarching argument in this dissertation is that sect identities are made, remade, and unmade at the local levels of social interactions and through individual and group experiences (i.e urban vs rural experiences). These identities may be demarcated by religious denominational differences but operate in relation to economic, political, religious, historical, and social structures. These identities are lived, felt, practiced, and expressed through daily experiences. My argument is that sect identities are not inherently violent, but become violent under specific conditions. These sect-based dispositions are expressed in countless peaceful practices across recognized differences for long periods of time. When violence erupts, these differences are reflected upon as being divisive all along. In an article on Awan Media, Rami Koussa, who is a Christian from Homs, the Wa'er neighborhood of Homs, recollects childhood memories of his neighbors' kids disgracing the Christian cross and the Christian faith as part of a children's feud. Then he jumps forward to 2012 Homs, when some "bearded men" made it clear that Christians are the reason the revolution will not win the fight. Koussa suggests that those kids who attacked his faith as children became those bearded men who assume that Christians

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[142] Bourdieu and Wacquant, 121.

are infidels. He argues that controlling those people by force the way the government's, police, and security services did for forty years does not negate the fact that there is a big portion of the population in Syria that, like those kids, are ready to observe islamic fundamentalist thought.

On the other hand, A'mer (Sunni) and his friend Mishel (Christian) recalled the first time Mishel performed ablution before the morning prayers of Eid when he decided that it was time to go pray with his friends rather than just go for the morning celebratory breakfast. A'mer explained: "Mishel was so nervous that he washed so carefully like no one in the Mosque did. I am sure! Then in later years he got used to it so he became like us!" This story is one of many examples recounted by ordinary Syrians as evidence that they are not sectarian while acknowledging their sect differences. These two examples show a mismatch in how differences in sect identities manifested differently in each situation. Sect habitus accounts for the mismatches in individual and group dispositions which lead them to act, rationalize, and react [non-consciously] to situations taking place according to prior dispositions under different social conditions.

> In short, the habitus, the product of history, produces individual and collective practices, and hence history, in accordance with the schemes engendered by history. The system of dispositions —a past which survives in the present and tends to perpetuate itself into the future by making itself present in practices structured according to its principles, an internal law relaying the continuous exercise of the law of external necessities (irreducible to immediate

conjunctural constraints) —is the principle of the continuity and regularity

which objectivism discerns in the social world without being able to give them

a rational basis.[143]

 That is how a person or a group of people can be sectarian and not religious,

but it does not follow that sectarianism is political and not religious, as is assumed in

most of the literature—and, furthermore, means that sect identities are not primordial

as they are not based in the ancient past that is being reawakened.[144]

Because studies of sectarianism are *post festum,* they deduce that divisions

and violent practices are the direct outcome of the enemy/friend structure of

sectarianism whether it is conceptualized according to primordialism,

ethnosymbolism, or constructivism/instrumentalism . How come these identities did

not manifest similarly in Damascus and Homs for example? Or between the Sunnis of

Majdil 'Anjar in relation to the Sunni refugees? That is why, for example, Sunnis,

Christians, and Shi'a as groups lose their meaning in the study of sectarianism

because, while Sunnis may share some characteristics, they also have their own

peculiar ones depending on the person's or group's habitus. According to Bourdieu

the objective conditions produce both a universalizing and a particularizing effect,

because of the impossibility of homogenizing all the agents that these objective

structures determine to be a group, in my case using the category of "the Sunnis" for

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[143] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Reprint edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977). (p-82)

[144] That is how the ethnosymbolist depict sectarianism

example, makes them indistinguishable from "Sunnis" produced in different conditions and simultaneously highly distinguished from other sects (79,216). This produces an artificial divisiveness and homogeneity based on the sect.

Fields

Fields, as Bourdieu defines them, are arbitrary social constructs in which agents occupy different positions. These fields are not completely autonomous from each other and are structured by their relations to other fields, particularly the field of power. The positions occupied by the agents in a field are determined by habitus and doxa. Fields are semi-autonomous spheres of action that are governed by and relate to each other through relations of power. Further, fields structure human actions as a "rational" social relation that situates people in relation to their differences vis-a-vis others in an ongoing mostly nonconscious process that does not have a strategic aim to maximize self interest rationally at all times.

> A field is a field of forces within which the agents occupy positions that
> statistically determine the positions they will take with respect to the field,
> these position-taking being aimed either at conserving or transforming the
> structure of relations of forces that is constitutive of the field.[145]

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[145] *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, 1 edition (Cambridge ; Malden, MA: Polity, 2005). (p-30)

A field is the arena where social actors come with a specific set of dispositions they acquired through experiences with the social fields. These social agents construct, perceive, act, and react in relation to the field's forces and structures and to other agents occupying positions in the field. Even though these structures dictate the rules for these agents, agents always enjoy a margin of freedom.

When an agent with a sect habitus enters a field such as the economic, social, political, and religious fields, that person comes with a set of dispositions that are acquired through prior experiences, practices, and knowledge that dictate how the person acts and reacts in relation to other social agents in the field. Sect habitus is then shaped by the relation to a specific field as well as the relation to other agents in the field. Fields have the function of allowing researchers to escape the primordialist/instrumentalist binary that governs the conception of sectarianism and that writes out "a social universe" that relates sects to society in general. In other words, rather than considering sects in themselves (as do the primordialists) versus sects for themselves (instrumentalists), fields analyze sect identities in relation to society in general. That is why, using the field of religion in relation to sect habitus, can bring to the analysis the role of religious practices without having to take on a primordialist account. Simultaneously, this approach allows the researcher to also make sense of people who are not religious but are highly sectarian. Similarly, when bringing in power sharing structures it does not write out ordinary people's agency.

Doxa

Doxa are the rules that govern the field and that lay out acceptable actions of each position. In other words, doxa is the set of beliefs and assumptions that are commonly held in a field which organizes it. Doxa naturalizes a social order, including the naturalization of the possible actions and reactions that a social agent takes in relation to a situation.[146] For example, doxa makes asking about one's sect the primary relevant information when one is introduced to a new person in Lebanon, while in Syria asking about someone's sect is still, after years of war, a taboo.

Doxa allow us to understand the seeming naturalization of sect-identities and the formulation of sects as unified groups portrayed as self-evident in most of the literature. In his *Introduction to the Critique of the Sectarian Thought* (1985), 'Amel criticizes Chiha's ahistorical conception of Lebanon as a nation and of sects within Lebanon as absolute truths. According to 'Amel, this ahistorical conception produces a strong self-evident unquestionable naturalized discourse about sectarianism. Similarly, there are infinite examples of the use of "self-evident truths" by scholars, commentators, and, most importantly, ordinary people. For example, the use of a phrasing such as "the Christians of Syria, Sunnis of Syria, Kurds, etc.," as if they are a unified group is used as self-evident by many journalistic and scholarly accounts.[147]

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[146] *Outline of a Theory of Practice.*165

[147] "Don't Be Fooled: Assad Is No Friend of Syria's Christian Minorities | TheHill," accessed April 30, 2020, https://thehill.com/blogs/pundits-blog/religion/332938-dont-be-fooled-assad-is-no-friend-of-syrias-christian-minorities; "Syria's Christians Side with Assad Out of Fear – by Bastian Berbner," *Souria Houria - Syrie Liberté - سوريا حرية*(blog), November 30, 2011, https://souriahouria.com/syrias-christians-side-with-assad-out-of-fear-by-bastian-berbner/; "New Allegations That Assad Is behind Attacks on Christians Undercuts 'protector' Narrative," Washington Examiner, September 30, 2019, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/new-allegations-that-assad-is-behind-attacks-on-christians-undercuts-protector-narrative.

This self-evidence translates into a self-evident construction of the "other," especially under shifting social conditions such as the neoliberal reforms of 2005[148] or the uprising-turned-war in 2011 in Syria. This self-evidence is portrayed in sayings such as "rej'o la 'aslon" ("the Alawites returned to their true nature"), , or "fakarna tghayaro bas toul 'omroun heik w ma byetghayarou" ("we thought they changed but they have always been like that"), or "al Druze ma byet'amanloun" ("the Druze cannot be trusted"), or "al'alwye moujrimin" ("the Alawites are murderous"), all of which are examples of self-evident totalizing discourse that circulate as natural truths at different historical moments. Bourdieu explains that "The self-evidence of the world is reduplicated by the instituted discourses about the world in which the whole group's adherence to that self-evidence is affirmed. The specific potency of the explicit statement that brings subjective experiences into the reassuring unanimity of a socially approved and collectively attested sense imposes itself with the authority and necessity of a collective position adopted on data intrinsically amenable to many other structurations."[149] These self-evident discourses become the most important traits used to construct the group's identity in relation to the self-evident discourse about the "other." In conditions of war, statements such as the ones above are reaffirmed by many groups and circulated as eternal truths in some places in Syria but did not hold in other places. And that is why using categories of Sunnis and Shi'a fail to capture the conditions that allow exceptions to take place.

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[148] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.
[149] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (p-167)

We Are Not Sectarian, We Were Never Sectarian: Sect habitus in the Case of Syria and Second Nature of Habitus

All my interviewees insisted that they were not sectarian and that sectarianism was foreign to the Syrian people. They all shared stories of not knowing their friends' sects for years because it did not matter at the time. Even with the rise of fundamentalist organizations, and the salience at the time of my interviews of the accusation against religious minorities that they were supporting the regime, my interviewees still insisted that sects did not matter in Syria. Raghad, a Sunni regime supporter from Damascus, showed me a rosary bracelet with an "orthodox cross" in her left wrist, the 'Ali Bin Abi Taleb Zulfikar sword symbol bracelet on her right wrist, and pendants of the star and the crescent along with a Catholic Cross to prove that she was not sectarian and that "Syrians in general are not sectarian, ISIS and al-Nusra are foreign phenomena that played on peoples' economic need and fears." While one may easily assume that Raghad's move is a sectarian one or even applaud her tolerance of other sects, that those people really believe they are not sectarian (according to the mainstream definition of sectarianism as divisive, intolerant…) cannot be accounted for by any of the approaches used to study sectarianism. Sect habitus, is the product of history and because of its nonconscious second nature is felt at the bodily level in a way that roots out the history that produces it while simultaneously giving it an everlasting feeling. That is why people truly believe they are not sectarian, because, for example, they have friends from multiple sects. "That

part of practices which remains obscure in the eyes of their own producers is the aspect by which they are objectively adjusted to other practices and to the structures of which the principle of their production is itself the product."

Citing Durkheim, Bourdieu explains the second nature of habitus as :

The "unconscious" is never anything other than the forgetting of history which history itself produces by incorporating the objective structures it produces in the second natures of habitus: " ... in each of us, in varying proportions, there is part of yesterday's man; it is yesterday's man who inevitably predominates in us, since the present amounts to little compared with the long past in the course of which we were formed and from which we result. Yet we do not sense this man of the past, because he is inveterate in us; he makes up the unconscious part of ourselves. Consequently, we are led to take no account of him, any more than we take account of his legitimate demands. Conversely, we are very much aware of the most recent attainments of civilization, because, being recent, they have not yet had time to settle into our unconscious.[150]

In the case of Syria, this forgetting the history of the practice of not asking someone's sect is a partial product of the Baath crackdown on public expression of sect identities. But this does not negate the fact that most people unconsciously knew the sect affiliations of members at least of their immediate networks, regardless of

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[150] *Outline of a Theory of Practice.* (p-21)

public expression. In many instances, people would know other peoples' sects because of religious celebrations and because of mosque and church attendance, but their relationships were established despite these differences not because of their erasure.

Habitus produces a "commonsense world" doxa that is established by a consensus on the meaning of practices, which renders such consensus an objective structure.[151] The repeated claim I heard—"We are not sectarian! We were never sectarian!"—is commonsense even during a devastating war that witnessed sectarian and ethnic cleansing in some regions of Syria. This commonsense world produces a homogenized habitus for the agents or social groups who share that habitus and enables practices to be expected and taken for granted.[152] In Syria, acting "as if" one did not know one's friends' sects just because one did not ask is not usually a rational or intentional scheme to prove one is not sectarian; it is everyday practices that became common sense and are expected to mean what they mean. That is not the case in Lebanon, because the commonsense practice is to figure out the other person's sect as the initial move in an introductory situation.

Conclusion

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[151] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. 80

[152] "The homogeneity of habitus is what - within the limits of the group of agents possessing the schemes (of production and interpretation) implied in their production - causes practices and works to be immediately intelligible and foreseeable, and hence taken for granted." *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. (p-80)

By showing how sect identities and sectarianism get created, reproduced, and changed through daily practices, my project uses the literature about sectarianism to shift its focus from the roots of sectarianism towards analyzing sect social relations. In this chapter, I propose a theory of practice of sect identities that wields sect habitus to carve a space for ordinary people in the study of sectarianism. I argue that sectarianism as a concept has little analytical merit in studying sect relations in religiously plural societies. Similarly to Haddad 2011, I argue that using categories such as Sunni and Shi'a becomes misleading when studying sect-identities. I also argue that sect habitus can account for at times opposing dispositions between groups of the same sect, without rendering them dupes, as the instrumentalists would depict them, or as born sectarian, as would the primordialists. In the chapters ahead, I use this theory to show how sect habitus relates to specific fields and subfields and how these relations change the meanings of sect-identities for the different communities in Syria

In chapter two, I show how a sect habitus evolved in relation to security and safety prior to and throughout the Syrian uprisings and war. I show how the meaning of sect identities changed based on people's conceptions of security and safety. I also show that these changes are nowhere generalizable throughout Syria.

In chapter three, I show how the human rights discourse was interpreted through the different warring and non-warring factions' dispositions of locally contingent sect habitus.

In chapter four, I show how social media platforms and media in general as a field currently play and have played a major role in defining sect habitus throughout the revolution-turned-war. I also argue that sect habitus changed the journalistic field in the context of Syria.

Chapter 2 - Sectarianism and the Politics of "Security and Safety": How Ordinary Syrians Make and Remake their Sect Identities through "Security and Safety"

> **Isobel Yeung:** So, do you think that Assad symbolizes security and safety for the average civilian?
> **Interviewee:** Yes, and symbolizes more importantly secularism: we are a secular state against fundamentalism, against Islamic jihadists, against terrorism.[153]
> *This Is What Life Is Like Inside Assad's Syria |VICE on HBO*

Most academic research, news reports, and social media citizen journalism have covered the role of sectarianism, during many periods of the Syrian uprising-turned-war.[154] While many researchers, journalists, and ordinary people assume that sectarianism is the reason for both the uprising and the ongoing war in Syria,[155] others argue that the uprising initially was caused by economic and political grievances but that these grievances were sectarianized through the "embedded sectarianism in social relations" caused by the regime's ruling practices.[156] For example, Christopher Phillips proposed an approach that combines both the economic and sectarian

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[153] "This Is What Life Is Like Inside Assad's Syria | VICE on HBO - YouTube," accessed August 16, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ESWCzPy7SgQ.

[154] I am not using civil war here because of the regional and international interventions in the war. This discussion is not within the scope of this dissertation.

[155] Hamrah Satgin, "A Brief Glimpse into Syria's Sectarian Violence and Proxy War," *Mediterranean Affairs* (blog), May 26, 2014, http://mediterraneanaffairs.com/a-brief-glimpse-into-syria-s-sectarian-violence-and-proxy-war/; Heiko Wimmen, "Syria's Path From Civic Uprising to Civil War," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, accessed August 11, 2019, https://carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/22/syria-s-path-from-civic-uprising-to-civil-war-pub-66171.

[156] Wimmen, "Syria's Path From Civic Uprising to Civil War."

dimensions, arguing that the conflict is semi-sectarian and that the simultaneous

convergence of economic, political, and sectarian grievances caused the conflict.[157]

Yet others focus on the sectarianization of the uprising, the Islamization and

militarization of the "revolution," and the role of the regime in inflaming sectarian

fears and manipulating religious minorities fears of the Sunni[158] majority

population.[159] But, problematically, none of these accounts ever define what they

mean by sect identities and sectarianism.[160] Consequently, sectarianism seems to

mean everything and thus nothing. Indeed, sectarianism is used to describe a diverse

range of phenomena: religiously plural societies, their conflicts, their peaceful

moments, as well as their different systems of political power sharing.[161] The concept

of sectarianism is also used as an analytical tool to interpret conflicts taking place in

these religiously plural societies. In all of these perspectives, sectarianism, whether

political or not, becomes synonymous with violence. The fact that these analyses

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[157] Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria."

[158] Sunni is the largest branch in Islam around the world they recognize the first four caliphs as the rightful successors of the prophet. The Shi'a is the second larger branch in Islam but still a minority if compared to Sunni Islam. Shi'a followers believe that Ali was the rightful caliph right after the death of the prophet."Sunni | Definition, Beliefs, & Practices," Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed August 11, 2019, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Sunni.

[159] Azmi Bishara, *Syria : A Path to Freedom from Suffering : An Attempt in Contemporary History March 2011 - March 2013* (Ad Dawhah - Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2015); Ola Rifai, "Sunni/Alawi Identity Clashes during the Syrian Uprising: A Continuous Reproduction," in *The Syrian Urising: Domestic Origins and Early Trajectory* (Routledge, 2018); Radwan Murtada, *Hakadhā arkhat al-thawrah al-Sūrīyah liḥyatuhā* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fārābī, 2018); Balanche, *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War*.

[160] With the exception of Ussama Makdisi, Fredrick Wehery et al., Melanie Cammette, Fanar Haddad

[161] For example, the Lebanese government is sectarian and the Syrian government is sectarian even though they have different forms of governance, and power distributions. But when we say both of them are sectarian it seems as if sectarian can accurately describe what is going on.

nearly always take place after violence in fact occurs enables and even encourages this mistaken conflation.

I argue that retroactively situating violence and divisiveness as cause and consequence of sectarianism will eventually lead to conceptualizing sectarianism as a predeterminer of violence. In this chapter, as in my dissertation as a whole, I refrain from using the concept of sectarianism as commonly defined in the literature: as a descriptor of violence and divisiveness that excludes from the analysis the very people who actively and agentically make meaning of their sect identities. In this chapter, as throughout the dissertation, I study sect identities from the popular level,[162] as manifested among ordinary people, as Katherine J. Cramer defines them: people who do not belong to the political elite.[163] In the case of Syria, these people are not part of the military and security-services system, do not enjoy prestigious or prominent positions in the public sector, and do not occupy decision-making ranks in the many Syrian opposition formations. When I use the term "ta'ifya," or "sectarianism," it is in its connotation of divisiveness, animosity, and sometimes violence, the same way it is used in the literature. But to me there is a crucial distinction between sectarianism and sect identities. To conflate the two is to obscure a vitally important question: the conditions under which sect identities become

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[162] Traditionally the studies of sectarianism in the Middle East are usually focused on the political elites, the state and its institutions and sectarian organizations with the exceptions of Haddad 2011 who studies Iraq, Nucho 2016 and Joseph 2008 on Sectarianism in Lebanon.
[163] Katherine J. Cramer, *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*, Chicago Studies in American Politics (Chicago ; University of Chicago Press, 2016).

sectarian in the sense described above, divisive and possibly even violent. Ordinary people in Syria have a long history of living peacefully together across sect lines, indicating that sect identities do not automatically or inevitably lead to violence. To this end, in this chapter I use the concept of sect habitus developed in chapter one of the dissertation to study how sect identities manifest and are reproduced in daily life, with the goal of illuminating those complex processes while also exploring what prompts sect identities to be mobilized towards violence and to become sectarian for some at specific historical junctures and under specific conditions.

My account shifts the conversation from explaining the roots of sectarianism to questioning the particular ways in which sect relations and sect identities develop at different historical conjunctures. In this chapter I show how a discourse of "security and safety," as well as the experience of (in)security and (un)safety, can explain changes in the meanings of sect identities at the popular level, sometimes leading to an embrace of sectarianism and at other times leading to its rejection entirely. These changes in the sect habitus dispositions, are affected by a sense of security and safety experienced differently, and in turn these dispositions are also affecting this sense of security and safety.

Ethnography and the Emergence of "Security and Safety"

In order to show how deeply embedded the discourses and experiences of security and safety are in the daily life of Syrians, and the role those discourses and experiences play in the formation of and shifts in their sect identities, I will start with

an example from an interaction I had in an Informal Settlement (IS) in Lebanon,[164]

where the theme of security and safety first emerged in my research. Each IS is

formed of tents ranging from a couple to a few hundred, depending on the size of the

area where the IS is set up. A Shawish (representative) is the head of the camp and

works as a liaison between the refugees on the one hand and the NGOs as well as the

different factions of the Lebanese security services on the other. As the appointed

ruler of the camp, the Shawish makes it difficult for any outsider to gain access to the

people inside the camp unless he[165] permits it. In some cases, the Shawish feeds the

security services false information in order to hurt or make an example of someone

who does not abide by the rules that the Shawish imposes, a recreation of the situation

Syrians are used to with the security services and the legal system.

Abou Khaled, a "Shawish" of an IS in the Beqaa Valley in Lebanon,

discussed with me the safety concerns and fears he had had when we initially met.

"You know we are refugees; any mistake here costs us a lot. We cannot take risks and

talk, because we don't know what we are dealing with. Here [in Lebanon], it is worse

than there [Syria] [pointing to the eastern Lebanese mountains that border Syria.] We

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[164] The majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in informal tented settlements set up in camp like settlements but without setting up formal camps based on the Lebanese government refusal of setting up formal camps in a "preemptive move" to not have to deal with a situation similar to the Palestinian refugees crisis since 1948.

[165] It is always a male Shawish appointed. But the gender dynamics tell a whole different story about the role of the Shawish's wife(ves) in the power relations and decision-making processes in the ISs. Similarly, the gender dynamics did not emerge through the bigdata analysis and it is important to highlight what I discovered through my ethnographic work especially that these societies are supposedly highly patriarchal (gender dynamics will be the focus of a different article).

thought that in Syria the walls have ears, but apparently here in Lebanon the walls [pointing at the sides of the tents] have more ears! At the end of the day I am the one who has to ensure the safety of the camp along with my own safety."

For Abou Khaled, safety is about keeping the IS and its inhabitants out of trouble with the Lebanese security forces, which means making sure that none of the inhabitants get involved with the militant fundamentalist groups, that camp inhabitants do not engage in illegal activities including smuggling, and that inhabitants do not voice their opinions because "the walls have ears" and someone from the camp, including him, will be reporting to the Lebanese security forces.[166] Even though refugees in Lebanon are legally free to move around the country and leave their camps, practically, it is very difficult and unsafe to leave their IS. Refugees in the ISs are required to report their movements to their Shawish, who in turn reports to a branch or many branches of the Lebanese security forces-- this acts as a deterrent to refugee attempts at movement outside the IS. Moreover, the Lebanese security services use similar tactics to the ones used by the Syrian security forces in making each refugee a potential informer. Consequently, the fact of living constantly under surveillance in Syria and in Lebanon determines the sense of lack of safety experienced by Abou Khaled and most refugees.

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[166] What makes it more complicated for the refugees is that Lebanese society is divided between supporters of the Syrian regime and supporters of the revolution and this is also reflected in the Lebanese security forces. Refugees have to navigate these politics in order to avoid being harassed by these competing security forces.

Originally, I thought that this safety discourse used by Abou Khaled and others like him was related to the dire living conditions in the camps as well as to the crackdown described above that the Lebanese security forces were implementing at the time in 2015. This assumption was grounded in my initial online data analysis, which formed the initial basis for my questions prior to the start of my ethnographic field work. The theme of security and safety had not emerged in my online "big data" analysis of social media entries on Facebook, Twitter, and in the comments section of *Aljazeera Arabic*.[167] But when listening to Syrian refugees living in apartments in Lebanon and later to Syrians living in Damascus and in Aleppo, I realized that the question of security and safety matter tremendously to ordinary Syrians and forms a discourse and experience that travels across class, region, the urban/rural divide, and, above all (as I will show in later sections), across the different sects that make up Syrian society.

The Field Changes Everything

The first time I consulted my notes in the field was maybe three months after starting my ethnographic fieldwork, in September of 2015. I had been frustrated with the unanticipated difficulty of not being able to talk to people in the Informal Settlements in the Beqaa Valley. Haitham, a Shawish of one of the well-maintained

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[167] A discussion of the online data and the importance of the combination of ethnography with big data analysis is the focus of chapters 5 and 6. But it is worth mentioning that out of 5,177,001 Facebook comments, only 10,191 mentioned safety, 4,273 security, and 1,529 the combination of both.

and regulated camps, welcomed me by asking, "Who do you represent? And what are you offering?" I introduced myself as what I was, a researcher from the University of California Santa Cruz, and made sure to clarify: "I am not offering anything; I am here to ask questions." This was enough to end the meeting and for Haitham to send a message to the representative from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) who had put me in touch with him: "They [people in the camp] don't have time for nonsense talks while they are constantly struggling to figure out how to make ends meet." Others, such as Abou Khaled, did not receive an introductory call from anyone; the above-mentioned conversation I had with him occurred after I decided to just move door to door between ISs with the hope that someone would talk to me, which was when he attempted to make sense of who I was and insisted that I must represent one of the competing security forces, especially when I told him that I was not offering any aid. Because he was certain that I was a member of the security forces merely posing as a researcher, he made sure to politely evade any discussion with me, as shown above.

It wasn't until I was able to prove that I could be an efficient liaison between the camps and the UNHCR headquarters in the Beqaa Valley and could make refugee voices heard there, that I gained the trust of both the Shawishes and the refugees. Later, when I told Abou Khaled I can act on their behalf with the UNHCR, he tested my claim by asking me to call and report that one of the local contractors was not providing water regularly; Abou Khaled could not report the problem to the UNHCR because the person who was supposed to monitor water supply had not been showing

up for a while, but calling the hotline was not an option because it entailed hours of costly wait-time, as Abou Khaled used a prepaid phone, which is expensive in Lebanon. I called my contacts at the UNHCR and they sent a team the next day, an event which was my entrée to the camps: through word of mouth, it became known that I could voice the concerns of IS inhabitants.

A few weeks in the field had already made me realize that I needed to build a solid relationship with the people that I hoped to interview. But I also now realized that I would not be able to observe unmediated interactions because of what I was coming to see as the politics of security and safety at play. Unless I became familiar to the occupants of the camps, they would not be acting freely in my presence. My first few months in the field (December 2015 to February 2016) were dedicated to building trust. During that period, I also visited Damascus many times for a few days each time. The first time in Damascus I spent a few days with my contacts (whom I hadn't seen since the summer of 2013 when we met each other in Lebanon) but trying not to discuss anything related to my research or to their being potential research subjects because I was trying to stick to my obligation as a researcher to be neutral and influence the study settings as little as possible. I thought I would just touch base given that I had been away for some time; my goal was to get updated on their life conditions. But of course, politics and the war occupied most of the discussion. I tried to engage as little as possible, even though people knew that my research was about the Syrian uprising and war. But trying to be neutral did not work in these conditions and for this type of study. Afterwards, I realized that my neutrality had scared them,

had made them fear that I was affiliated with the CIA or an equivalent. Fadi, a good friend of mine, commented directly, "You know what? I do not believe that you are CIA, but after what we lived through, anything is possible; people are scared of their shadows. So, tell me what is going on with you." I explained to him about the importance for my research of my maintaining a neutral stance. He expressed relief, but it was not until he read my proposal that I felt he truly believed me. I realized then that neutrality was not sustainable if I was to face the same issues with every informal discussion. So, I decided to engage with the conversations.

Although I had started conducting interviews with Syrians living outside the IS's, I had also been spending time with Syrian friends who live in Lebanon. It was then that I observed the appearance of the term "safety," or the combination of "security and safety," on almost every page of my field notes. I got intrigued, so I listened to the few interviews I had already recorded and quickly realized that the concept of safety is critical in how Syrians make meaning of war events as they unfold, as well as of pre-war life conditions in general. Out of eighty-one interviews I conducted with Syrians across the political spectrum, eighty included safety as an integral theme. [168]

Sectarianism in Syria in the Literature

For the remainder of this chapter, I will be revisiting, in their own words,

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[168] In this chapter I include parts of the interviews I conducted during my eighteen months fieldwork in Syria and Lebanon. All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of my interviewees.

variations on the theme of security and safety provided by people I interviewed, in an effort to bring into focus a view of sect identities not previously explored by the literature. The sense of security and safety is an example of how social, cultural, economic, political, and historical experiences impact the meaning of sect identities through sect habitus. This example show how individuals and groups are agents in this meaning making, unmaking, and remaking of sect identities where a reflection of meanings and experiences from the individual to the group level takes place and vice versa. This reflection can potentially make a whole sect evil based on an individual experience. As an example of such a case, I will begin by considering the perspective of Houda,[169] who, prior to the war, lived in a majority Sunni conservative neighborhood where she was raising her two children. A Christian, single mother from Damascus who had left her abusive husband in the early nineties, Houda had rented a house in that Sunni neighborhood where, in her words, she lived "safely." "The neighbors …became my family, they even defended me when my abusive husband tried to harass me and the kids one time. I always felt safe in that neighborhood; I was able to set up close social relationships with my neighbors. We used to visit each other. I invite[d] them, they invite[d] us. For twenty years I was never afraid, even when I drove back home at 3:00 in the morning returning from a party." But all of this changed after 2011 when one neighbor told her that members of the opposition to the Syrian regime who lived in her neighborhood were looking for her eighteen-year-old son whom they claimed supported the regime. Houda swore to

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[169] I interviewed Houda multiple times during her visits to Lebanon, and in Syria

me that neither she nor her kids had anything to do with politics, but she was sure that they were persecuted only because they were Christians. "In that moment, I realized we [Houda and her family] had to pack and leave, it was not safe to live there anymore."

When I asked her to elaborate about what she felt, Houda invoked her idea of "safety" in her reply: "I can't describe what I felt. When you lose the sense of safety, you lose your mind. I just needed to leave and make sure that my family was safe— that was it." Each one of them packed a bag of clothes, grabbed whatever valuables could easily be carried, and left. "At that moment," she said, "I knew that everything inside that house would be gone. Material losses can be regained. I thank God every day that my family and I are safe, and nothing else matters." She also said that she felt betrayed by people close to her, who she enjoyed 'ishrit 'omr" with, which literally translates to "lifetime relationship" but in this context people use this expression to describe a feeling of unexpected betrayal by people who shared life experiences for long periods of time. "I thought we had a lifetime of neighboring relations, and never thought that people so close to me would threaten my kids' and my family's safety. May God forgive them." In Houda's experience, sectarianism blinded people and led them to lose perspective and commit unthinkable crimes. For her, therefore, sect differences evolved into sectarian divides and in turn became the antithesis of safety. In talking with me, she kept asserting that "we [Syrians] are not sectarian, we never discriminated against each other, it is not in our nature." But when I asked her if she would ever live in a Sunni neighborhood after the war, she

said, "I don't think I would ever feel safe after what happened." This shift in perspective is vital to parsing the causes and effects of current views of sectarianism among those living it on the ground, as well as the perceived and lived connection between sectarianism and security and safety. This example shows that people can live with sect differences, and they can even feel safe living side by side, but once violence organized along sectarian lines emerges, people who might previously have felt safe even across sect lines can suddenly come to feel unsafe and thus fear those differences.

A shifting of sect habitus for Houda under the conditions of war understood through a security and safety has rendered living in a Sunni conservative neighborhood unsafe while for twenty years this neighborhood was the source of safety for her and her family.

Literature on sectarianism, which includes the three major schools, the primordialist,[170] the instrumentalist,[171] and the ethno-symbolist,[172] fails to explain this transformation in how Houda makes meaning of her sect identity. Primordialist

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[170] Abdo, *The New Sectarianism*; Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization."

[171] Rifai, "Sunni/Alawi Identity Clashes during the Syrian Uprising: A Continuous Reproduction"; Frederic Wehrey, *Sectarian Politics in the Gulf: From the Iraq War to the Arab Uprisings*, Reprint edition (Place of publication not identified: Columbia University Press, 2016); F. Gregory Gause, "Beyond Sectarianism: The New Middle East Cold War," *Brookings* (blog), July 22, 2014, https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-sectarianism-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/; Azmi BIshara, سورية: درب الآلام نحو الحرية: محاولة في التاريخ الراهن (2013 آذار/مارس 2011- آذار/مارس), accessed August 20, 2019,; Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization"; David A. Lake and Donald S. Rothchild, *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict: Fear, Diffusion, and Escalation* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1998).

[172] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011.

92

accounts of sectarianism, with their assumption of unchanging primordial sect identities, cannot explain the changes in Houda's sect identity over time based on her personal experiences prior to and during the Syrian war; primordialists are unable to account for any change over time. Instrumentalist accounts similarly cannot account for Houda's shift from having a sect identity but one that allowed her to live among and not feel threatened by another sect to a much more sectarian disposition. That shift did not occur as a result of direct manipulation of sect identities by political elites; Houda did not become sectarian because a political leader claimed that her sect was under attack and she felt it was time to defend it. Even an ethno-symbolist approach would fail to explain changes in Houda's sect identity, as these changes were not based on ancient myth-symbols that were awakened during the war and assumed a divisive meaning for her, in particular, and for Christians in Syria, in general. Houda asserts that prior to the threat on her son's life, she never would have considered moving from her [Sunni] neighborhood. Houda's case is but one example of how, by starting from the premise that sect differences are violent and divisive in their very nature, and only a unifying identity such as nationalism can trump these differences, these schools of thought fall short in explaining when, how, and why previously harmonious sect identities among ordinary people give way to sectarian dispositions and subsequently divisive and violent sectarianism.

For the remainder of this chapter, I will examine other such firsthand accounts, first analyzing how, through their own shifting definitions of security and safety, ordinary Syrians shape and reshape sect habitus and in turn the meanings of

their sect identities. To this end, I define security and safety in the Syrian context, and

argue that the 2011 uprising and the subsequent unfolding of events at the local and

national levels impacted the individual and group[173] sense of security and safety.

These shifts in the sense of security and safety have played a critical role in the

making, unmaking, and remaking of sect identities in post-2011 Syria. Second, I

argue that Syrians' sect identities are partly made and remade through a framework of

security and safety. Third, I argue that a politics of security and safety has become

necessary for ordinary Syrians in order to determine their political positions in

circumstances of heightened economic, political, and social uncertainty. These

uncertainties are governed, on the one hand, by cruel neoliberal policies that have

widened economic inequality, amplified corruption, and eroded state economic

subsidies which have historically provided a safety net for the majority of the

population, and, on the other hand, by a brutal coercive police state.[174]

By understanding the politics of security and safety, we can also explain the

discrepancy in political positions between urban and rural Syrians The Neoliberal

reforms that the Assad government implemented had a dreadful impact on the rural

regions of Syria but "benefited" the urban centers.[175] Furthermore, we can explain

sectarian political positioning among Syrians beyond the "minority alliance" in

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[173] By group I mean a group of people that belong to the same religious denomination and
came to identify as part of a religious sect

[174] Lisa Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times: Notes from Syria," *Critical Inquiry*
39, no. 4 (2013): 841–73, https://doi.org/10.1086/671358; Wedeen, *Authoritarian
Apprehensions*.

[175] Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times"; Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

Syria[176]; in this case, religious minorities in Syria align behind the regime to resist the

Sunni majority opposition.[177] Finally, I show how armed major political players use

the politics of safety in order to capture the sectarian imaginations of ordinary Syrians

to harness popular support.

Definitions and Meanings of Security and safety

        The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) defines safety as "the condition of

being protected from or unlikely to cause danger, risk, or injury."[178] Security is

defined as "the safety of a state or organization against criminal activity such as

terrorism, theft, or espionage" and/or "the state of feeling safe, stable, and free from

fear or anxiety."[179] In Syria, the subtle and shifting differences in meaning of these

terms, the lived complexity of these definitions, is of paramount importance. For

ordinary Syrians, the experience and therefore the definitions of security and safety

assume complex meanings that differ drastically depending on the person's social

position within the state structure, social class, individual and family connections to

the state security-services apparatus, whether or not she/he is a beneficiary of the

neoliberal reforms, resides in the large cities, lives in a religiously mixed

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[176] Due to their minority status, many assume that religious minorities bind together in the face of a larger majority. Andrew Tabler, "How Syria Came to This," The Atlantic, April 15, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/syria-chemical-weapons/558065/.
[177] I address the minority/majority dynamics in a later chapter on the Human Rights Discourse
[178] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/safety
[179] https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/security

neighborhood, actively practices religion (and with which religious school, denomination, theological convictions), comes from a coastal town or inland, and whether she/he supports the regime or the opposition. It is worth noting that these conditions are not fixed; they might even change for the same person depending on her/his experiences—as in Houda's case, and as I show in the description and analysis to come.

The multiple and differing potential configurations of experiences of security and safety reveal how a sense of security and safety influences peoples' sect dispositions based on personal as well as group circumstances and practices. Even though ordinary people usually use the terms A'mn, "security" and A'man, "safety" interchangeably—which shows their interconnectedness as terms—they carry different meanings. While safety is more personal and operates at the bodily level—it is a feeling—security is directly linked to the state and its military and police apparatus (including security branches). A'man, or safety, for these people takes on the second OED meaning of security—"the state of feeling safe, stable, and free from fear or anxiety." By contrast, security connotes violent-crime prevention to preserve social order and, after the war, the freedom of religious practices. Security also connotes a main difference between opposition and regime supporters. In this situation, security aligns with the first meaning of the first OED definition of the term: "The safety of a state or organization against criminal activity such as terrorism, theft, or espionage." For the opposition, the regime and its brutal security forces are actually the cause of "insecurity" and "unsafety." But, for the regime supporters, the

96

regime and its brutal security forces have provided what they defend as "security" for long periods of time.

Let's hear from a few ordinary Syrians how complicated it can get. Haitham,[180] a devoted Sunni and a regime supporter, explained why he thinks that the regime's job is to provide "security" by whatever means possible.[181] "We all know that the security forces are brutal. But sometimes you need that to send a message that security is above all else. We used to live with our doors open, we never worried about thieves or all these recent criminal activities that are spreading in the camps here. These activities are foreign to our Syrian culture. Syrians are good-hearted people, but this is what happens when no one is enforcing security." For Haitham, the security-forces brutality is needed in order to provide security. This narrative overlaps with the Syrian government's rationale for the need for brutality, whereby the government forces on the people an impossible choice between security-forces brutality, and security, on the one hand or chaos on the other. What Haitham and the government did not factor in is the possibility of sectarianizing the sense of security and safety. Hassan, also a devoted Sunni, a third-year law student at the time when he left Syria in one of the Syrian universities, joined some student protests at the beginning of the uprising, and told me that he "never felt secure all [his] life until [he]

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[180] Shawish in one of the camps in the Bekaa
[181] This is also the case in the Vice/HBO documentary I cite at the beginning of the chapter where Yeung interviews three men outside a pub at night in Damascus and one of them voiced a similar opinion. "None of us is an Angel. We all make mistakes. But he [Assad] did not step outside of that threshold." In terms of the brutal killings. Here the interviewee is partly confirming that the regime's actions are ethically justified.

reached the refugee camp in the Beqaa valley." Hassan explained that his father was

captured and executed in the 1980s because the regime had claimed that he was

involved with the "Fighting Vanguards of the Muslim Brotherhood."[182] He explained

that he was always worried that he would meet the same fate as his father. "Whenever

I saw Shabiha[183] making a scene, I felt they were coming for me. Whenever I saw a

Peugeot,[184] I felt they were coming for me. With all the shit here [the bad living

conditions in the camps], I feel better than back home." Hassan's story shows how a

sense of security and safety provides the basis for people's life choices and meaning

making. This sense of security and safety is not only the product of the unfolding

events of the war, but also has a long history of societal and governmental structures

and experiences--which explains how the seemingly fixed and naturalized practices at

the popular level shifted during the uprising and ongoing war and caused a shift in the

sect habitus.

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[182] One of the best historical accounts on the rise of ISIS and its historical roots within the Muslim Brotherhood in Syria is Moubayed's *Under the Black Flag.* Moubayed explains the history of the Vanguards and their military involvements in anti-Baathist uprising since the 70s and through the early 80s

[183] Are a paramilitary state-sponsored group of people (thugs) who enjoyed special immunity from state institutions and are used to crack down, intimidate and coerce people in the name of the regime. Though, most journalistic and scholarly accounts identified the Shabiha to be majority Alawite my data shows that they are from all sects and they are strategically deployed by the regime."Syria Unrest: Who Are the Shabiha? - BBC News," accessed August 11, 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-14482968.

[184] The security forces used white Peugeot cars with dark windows to intimidate people and 'arrest' (more like kidnap) someone. Most of the times they would throw that person in the trunk of the car and drive them to some interrogation place or prison that no one knows where. It would take days or even weeks with lots of bribes to be able to know the place of that person. (they used the same methods when they were occupying Lebanon. There was a say in Lebanon that "no matter what you should avoid the peugeot trunk at any cost or you disappear.")

Even these two brief examples show how differently Syrians perceive the threats to their security. Magnify this by a whole population and you can see how, as soon as people connected the concepts of security and safety to sectarianism, the changes in their sense of security and safety under the volatile economic, political, and social conditions prior to and during the war caused a shift in sect habitus for individuals and groups identifying with particular religious denominations (sects) in Syria. For some, this shift in sect habitus produced a sense of "safety" within the confines of one's own sect, and for others, produced a sense of "unsafety" within the confines of one's sect. Rasha,[185] for example, a practicing Sunni woman from Damascus, resisted sect identification when I asked her what sect she belonged to. In her opinion, sectarianism is what caused all the chaos in the country. "We used to live in harmony, we never thought to ask about someone's religion—this is how the true Sunnis think. Who cares about other people's religion? We [Syrians] used to enjoy security and safety: look at us now." Here, Rasha is on the one hand connecting sectarianism to the lack of security and safety which Syrians enjoyed prior to the war. On the other hand, she is affirming that she and many other Sunnis do not share the same beliefs, attitudes, and practices as the fundamentalist groups that include ISIS and Al-Qaeda. For her, "true" Sunnis do not care about other peoples' religions, and feel that "false" Sunnis promoted sectarian divides and caused sectarian violence, which in turn deprived Syrians of their secure and safe lives.

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[185] Rasha, interviewed in Damascus in 2016, is in her late twenties lives and works in Damascus.

Security and safety are two of many other conditions that ordinary people are using as reference points to understand and explain the war and make sense of their political affiliation, sect identities, and the urban/rural divide.[186] Ahmed, an organizer of some of the early opposition demonstrations in Damascus, talked about how hard it was to mobilize people in an organized way. "People [Westerners and Syrians in exile] think that it was simple, that Facebook [was] taking care of the organizing process. No, it wasn't the case especially for us [in Damascus]. We couldn't just say 'follow me let's go demonstrate.' We needed to make sure that the person that we were going with was trustworthy and the process took time. And it happened like a snowball, but slowly. You know, because of safety reasons it couldn't happen except this way."[187] Ahmed explained that new recruits needed someone from within the group to vouch for them in order to gain entry and were then subjected to a trust-building process before they were let in on all the details, and mainly details that would lead to prison and maybe death if the security forces found out about them.

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[186] Urban and Rural Syrians from all sects showed regional animosities that separated them based on Rural/Urban lines. The Urban bourgeoisie looked at the rural internal migrants even prior to the war as the "backwards" who are still stuck in their old traditional customs, ancient values, and beliefs. Samar an upper middle class Sunni housewife from Damascus who does not support the regime but does not see the possibility of an alternative. She claims that the regime's mistake was to allow "those people" (migrants who settled at the outskirts of Damascus) to settle here from the beginning. "They (regime officials) should have known that those people will bring chaos. What were they expecting from people who never got to modernize"? This statement exemplifies the Urban/Rural divide and the class differences that the neoliberal policies magnified to unprecedented levels.

[187] Ahmed's comment about Facebook is critical for the methodological comparisons of offline and online data. His comment reflects on the one hand, the attention that popular media, and news outlets gave for the role of social media in the uprising. And on the other, the different organizing conditions on the streets versus online. I am not implying that one is more important than the other, I am highlighting these differences in order to think about a research methodology that can capture both environments and their respective conditions.

"We broke the fear," Ahmed explained, "and it was an ecstatic experience; you cannot go back to being silent afterwards,[188] but you need to ensure some type of safety, if not for yourself for the group. You cannot just go out and tell the regime come 'pick me up [meaning get captured/arrested by the regime]' this would be stupid." For Ahmed, this safety process was one of the major problems that prevented large demonstrations from taking place in Damascus.

On the other hand, Oula, who was covering the pro-regime demonstrations in Damascus for one of the local television stations, talked about a similar ecstatic experience when she reached Umayad Square and "saw endless heads [thousands] of people had come down in support of the president." I asked her whether she thought that the security forces had forced those people to join the demonstrations, and she said there was no need. "We knew that our security and safety were at stake. We had seen Iraq and Afghanistan,[189] and we started seeing places in Syria heading towards chaos. No one wants chaos." As with Ahmed's, Oula's statements reflect the importance of the politics of safety in the consciousness of both the opposition supporters and that of the regime supporters. They also show how different experiences of security and safety lead to opposing political support and different sect

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[188] This is also reflective in Abu Zeid's account about Suleiman Farzat Tlass who was an upper middle class young person, who described his feelings when he saw the initial demonstrations on TV and felt an urge to mobilize even though he was not directly or indirectly affected by the regime's authoritarianism or neoliberal policies. I will address the role of feelings, affect and emotions in a later chapter

[189] The narrative of the high costs paid in Iraq, and Afghanistan post US lead occupation of these countries is always present in the pro-regime discourse as well as some opposition members [mainly leftists and anti-militarization of the struggle].

identities. For Ahmed, in contrast to Oula, the sense of insecurity and unsafety is caused by the security forces. When the sense of security and safety becomes sectarianized (i.e: the fact that the security forces are attacking the Sunni majority and protecting the Alawite minority), then sectarianism becomes necessity if Sunnis are to protect themselves. For the supporters of the regime, the sectarian practices of the opposition become a source of violence, which in turn lends legitimacy to the brutality of the regime.

The constantly shifting sense of security and safety works on both the conscious and non-conscious levels, which explains how these concepts shape sect identities at the individual and group levels. These shifts can produce opposing conceptions of sect identities for the same individual or group at different moments in time. While these opposing conceptions can lead Hisham a secular atheist to seek refuge within the confines of his sect, and led Houda to claim that Syrians are not sectarian but that she does not see herself living in a Sunni neighborhood in the future. These opposing conceptions emerge even among people who share most regional, social, economic, and political conditions but who have experienced a different sense of security and safety in relation to the regime and/or the opposition, before and during the war. Traditional conceptions of sectarianism and sect identities cannot account for these changes and connections but instead assume a simple binary: either people are sectarian or not. That is how the concept of sect habitus provides a means of analyzing the ways people make and remake their sect identities: in this case, through the sense of security and safety, and in general, by accounting for

everyday practices, human meaning-making, behavioral tendencies, common sense, social and religious traditions, and shifts (big, and small) at the individual and group level within the historical, social, economic, and political conditions at play at any given moment in time.

For most regime supporters in non-warring regions of Syria,[190] the opposition stripped them of the sense of security and safety that they had enjoyed prior to the war. "They wanted reforms?" said Hassan, a handicraftsman in his mid-forties who owns a shop in one of the large cities. "Is that how you get reforms? We used to enjoy life; we didn't have to do much to be happy. Now, whatever you need to do you have to pay for it, and you can't even enjoy it. I always feel unsafe. What if we [the people of the region he lives in] are next? I don't want to leave Syria, it is all I know. I lived here my whole life and I am not leaving my shop. But this feeling of unsafety is hitting me hard. Those terrorists [the opposition] are not going to let anyone be happy." When I asked him whether he distinguishes between the many factions of the opposition, he said, "They are all the same." For Hassan, the regime is less important than the quality of life; it is about how people choose to live, and he really wants the good old days back when he felt both secure/protected and safe/invulnerable and enjoyed a happy life. When I asked Hassan whether the war is sectarian, he replied, "No the war is not sectarian, they [the opposition] are sectarian." Hassan's view of

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[190] It is important to note that not all supporters are similar, but for the sake of the study I use supporters in a more general sense, and the same for the opposition supporters even though there are hundreds of opposition groups in Syria since 2011.

sectarianism overlaps with the regime's narrative of sectarianism as chaos and legitimizes the regime's actions in order to preserve Syrians' security and safety while delegitimizing the opposition as sowing chaos and being sectarian.

The Politics of Safety

Two main categories help me to characterize how the dynamic formation and reformation of sect identities is influenced by people's perceptions and experiences of security and safety. The first one I think of as "sectarianism *is* safety," by which I mean that ordinary people find security and safety within the boundaries of their religious sects and perceive in other sects the sources of threat. The second category I think of as "sectarianism *or* safety," and this category describes the perception that the existence of and participation in sectarian divisions and discrimination are the main threat to security and safety. These general categories encompass multiple variations that I will address below, as I show that these categories are not mutually exclusive nor timeless. In other words, a person or a group of people can be part of the first category at one moment in time and then shift to a different category under different circumstances. These variations strip sectarianism from its analytical merit; sectarianism as a concept cannot account for the changes in meaning and practices at the popular level.

Sectarianism Is Safety

"I fled and went home.…Home is where I know that my people will not give me up to the [Syrian] regime and its thugs," explained Hisham,[191] a young Syrian opposition member who does not consider the war in Syria to be sectarian, who identifies as a secular atheist, and who felt forced to leave his place of residence in Damascus where he had lived, studied, and worked for more than fifteen years. He was discussing the reasons why he opted to leave his wife and child behind in Damascus to go to another region (his birthplace), where he no longer belonged socially: he was scared that the Syrian security forces were going to come after him for his outspoken opposition to "the authoritarian murderous regime."

What was important about Hisham's characterization of "home" as the place he preferred to depart for is that it was a region which was still under the regime's control, and yet he anticipated finding refuge there with his "people," by which he meant the people of the same religious sect that he was born into, and who make up the majority demographically in that region. This secular atheist opposition member, in other words, felt he could find refuge with people of his same religious sect despite their remaining supportive to and under the control of the Syrian regime. For Hisham, "it was about my family and my safety. I couldn't stay in Damascus; I didn't feel safe anymore." Hisham's loss of sense of safety overcame his long-term leftist and atheist ideologies for the period of time when he thought that living in the enclaves of his sect of birth would provide security and safety even under the regime's rule. That was

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[191] Interview with Hisham in Beirut after leaving his birthplace area. Because according to him "they [people in that region] supported the regime instead of revolting

not the case, he lasted for fifteen months and then paid a smuggler for transport to Lebanon.

In the context of feeling safer in a Christian neighborhood in Homs, even though he had lived all his life in a mixed neighborhood, Amer, a middle-class professional from Homs, [192] used the saying "I'lli bietla' men tyabou bye'ra" which roughly translates to: "the person who leaves their clothes behind becomes naked." A person is thought of as becoming naked (socially and financially vulnerable) when they leave their own families, or "their clothes." He said that all the Christians (neighbors) that stayed after he left the mixed neighborhood were not safe when the armed opposition took control of the neighborhood and expelled or killed the Christians there. In this context, the sect replaces the nuclear family and living outside of the confines of one's sect is like leaving one's family and, effectively, becoming "naked." In this example, the non-security and unsafety produced by the war created a reference point from which to analyze prior behaviors such as living in a mixed neighborhood as if it should have been clear that this type of behavior was wrong. I asked Amer why, if the situation was clear for him, the rest of the Christians did not leave. He answered that "some people really believed that their neighbors

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[192] Homs is known for its strict religious communities it has few religiously-mixed neighborhoods and witnessed massive destruction and internal displacement. It also witnessed many sectarian massacres that include Sunnis, Christians, and Alawites. Baba Amr and Alwa'r neighborhoods enjoyed a lot of media attention during the uprising and subsequent military operations. Fabrice Balanche, 2018, describes Homs: "Homs has long been internally divided into neighborhoods with strong sect identities, and the bloody confrontations seen during the initial phase of the uprising unfolded right on the boundaries between the Alawite and Sunni districts."(9) These mixed neighborhoods include the new alwa'r region that includes subsidized apartment buildings that encouraged and housed mixed religious communities to live together.

would not harm them. They had been living together for generations. Others did not want to leave their houses." I asked him if many people left before the attacks on the neighborhood started. "No, a few of us did not trust the Muslims [Sunnis] and we were right. At the end of the day, Christians, including myself, who bought houses in that neighborhood were idiots. We should have known better. They [Muslims] are not to be trusted, especially when your safety is at stake." Here Amer defended sectarianism as providing security and safety, even though it was the Syrian army, which consists of a multi-sectarian demographic, that defended the Christian neighborhood he moved to in Homs rather than the Christian sect itself providing such security and safety.

Sectarianism or Safety

Going back to Hisham, he described his fifteen-month return to his birth town as being alienated from his social surroundings. "Yes, I was born in that region, but I didn't know anyone [there] [meaning not having friends and a social environment that he fit in]. I felt lonely at the beginning and then, when the Shabiha realized that I was wanted in Damascus, the sense of safety that I thought I had was gone. They started harassing and shaming my parents, and one time they followed me to the market and started shaming me in public. This was my sign to get out. You never know what will happen after the harassment, I might have been dead now if I had stayed longer—no

one knows." I asked him if the Shabiha were Alawites?[193] He laughed. "No, there are no Alawites there [his town of birth]. The regime is smarter than to send Alawite Shabiha and create sectarian problems. Shabiha are like whores—they come from all sects, and the regime uses Shabiha from the same sect of the groups or individuals they want to harass to give their actions a national image rather than a sectarian one. The regime makes it seem like it is a national versus a foreign agent issue."[194] When I asked Hisham why he thought the Shabiha harassed him rather than kill him, he replied, "I don't know. I think they were scared because at that moment in the revolution they couldn't do all their heinous crimes as bluntly as before. Or it could be just because I come from a known family in the religious community and they were worried. At the end of the day, they pray in the same place as my family. I don't know. I just know that I wasn't safe anymore and left. I don't pray, and I was forcing myself to stay silent but didn't know if I could do it anymore. I had to hide my political beliefs while the regime was killing people all over the place. I couldn't stay anymore, at least here [Beirut] I can voice my opposition to the regime."

Here, as in the case of Amer above, Hisham exemplified how his sense of safety, or lack thereof, created a connection between the nuclear family and its origins, with sect identities, and how a sense of safety can alter sect identities. Safety

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[193] Are known to be an offshoot of the Shi'a branch in Islam. "Alawis - Oxford Islamic Studies Online," accessed August 11, 2019, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t125/e106.

[194] Though the Shabiha were thought to be Alawites. Most of my opposition interviewees had similar answers to Hisham that the regime usually uses shabiha from the same sect. Sometimes from different regions with tribal or other animosities but usually from the same sect. This subject is worth more research but it is not within the scope of this dissertation.

both made him seek refuge in his sect and also made him reject the sect's politics and resume his anti-regime secular activism. This is also mirrored in the story of Houda, who, prior to the war, felt safe in a majority Muslim neighborhood but, during the war, found safety ensured by living in a majority Christian neighborhood. These are examples of the making, unmaking, and remaking of sect identity that takes place in ordinary people's lives, whereby sect habitus shifts with the changes of peoples life conditions. These examples provide a different story of ambivalent sect identities that does not reflect the essentialist tendency to violence, such as in the primordialist accounts, or the political manipulation of the instrumentalist accounts. This ambivalence is crucial to both the understanding of the workings of sect identities, and their impact on the structural conditions in this case the conditions of safety and security and vice versa.

For some regime supporters and leftist-party members within the opposition who opposed the armed struggle, sectarianism, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and the atrocities committed by ISIS and Al-Qaeda are living proof of the ways in which sectarianism produces chaos. Tania, a practicing Sunni who met me at a coffee shop in Damascus wearing Ali's dagger bracelet on one hand and a cross on the other hand, told me that she was wearing the Christian and Shi'a symbols to become an infidel in the eyes of "those fanatics" (ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the other Islamic legions). "This is what they want? Sectarianism? That is what sectarianism does. If you do not look and act like them, you are not safe even if you belong to the same sect." Tania was convinced that sectarianism is a threat to people from the same sect (she also

referred to Iraq and Lebanon as examples of the threats that sectarianism pose to one's own security and safety).[195]

Opposition supporters who opposed the militarization of the revolution and wanted to maintain a peaceful resistance and uprising as a strategy for the movement did not feel safe on either side. Tamim and Maher, who were active in two different regions and who, were organizing with the peaceful opposition before the uprising and during the early stages of the uprising, had similar thoughts during separate interviews, "They [anti-militarization opposition] received life threats from both the regime and the armed opposition because of their advocacy for peaceful solutions." In their eyes, "both the regime and the armed opposition are sectarian. No one is safe when sectarianism is the rule. We need a real democratic and secular state." Even though both claimed that they knew of secular armed opposition groups, both Tamim and Maher conceptualize sectarianism from a vantage point of safety, where their own safety was threatened by both the opposition and the regime's sectarianism.

Anas,[196] who at the beginning of the uprising supported the revolution and took part in one of the early demonstrations in Damascus, told me that "we all supported the revolution. We all felt and imagined the taste of freedom by watching the Egyptian revolution and sensed that change is possible. Let me tell you that we [he and friends who supported the revolution at the beginning] didn't want the president to step down. We knew he was a good person but his entourage should have

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[195] *Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*; was the fourth caliph in Islam but was considered by some followers (Shi'a sect) to be the rightful immediate successor of the prophet.
[196] Interviewed in Lebanon in 2017

been dealt with.[197] But then, when things became sectarian after the Jisr al-Shugur

massacre,[198] this is when we realized that our security and safety were at stake and we

needed to take the regime's claims of an international conspiracy seriously, especially

since we started seeing Sunni fundamentalism on the rise." At this point in the

interview, he realized that I did not know his religious sect. "Don't take me wrong,"

he clarified. "I am a practicing Sunni. I pray the five daily prayers and go to the

Friday prayer too. I do not drink alcohol, but I don't mind sitting with people who are

drinking. My brother doesn't pray and drinks alcohol, and according to those [Islamic

fundamentalist factions of the opposition] I am a sinner. This [fundamentalist Islam]

is not the true Islam; they do not represent Islam they just want to sow chaos. Their

intolerance towards our Syrian brothers from the other sects is foreign to the Syrian

culture. We [Syrians] enjoy life, and you need to feel safe in order to enjoy life…

Sectarianism leads to bloodshed, and we do not want that."

    Anas is a regime supporter now and does not object to what the regime and

the Syrian army do. He said, "it is war, and in war people die. We just want to live in

security and safety, the way we used to live before all this happened." For Anas, it

has been clear since the beginning that sectarianism leads to chaos, and his political

choices are clearly based on an understanding of sectarianism through a security and

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[197] For a detailed study about the young president's image in public see:Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times"; Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*.

[198] Anas is referring to the attack on the security forces in the town of Jisr al-Shughur in Idlib province where protestors attacked the security forces positions and killed many. Anas is referring to the reports and videos of bodies of Alawite security services personnel being mutilated and thrown into a river."مجزرة جسر الشغور 5/6/2011 (33) - YouTube," accessed August 11, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDWM1Bq9BxM.

safety lens. He also made it clear that, in comparing the regime and the opposition, "at least the regime did not stop anyone from practicing their religion, regardless of their sect." According to him, this is the nature of Syrian society. "We [all sects] lived together since before Islam and we will live together after the war is over. This is our nature." In this example, as in previous examples, sect identities assume new meanings and otherwise change based on experiences, practices, and discourses taking place and circulating on a daily basis; for Tamim and Maher, their sect identity was based on their sense of their personal safety.

Instrumentalizing Security and Safety

Instrumentalist scholars who have studied Syrian sectarianism agree that the Syrian regime and state institutions have failed to overcome sectarian divisions and instill a strong national identity aimed at suppressing these sectarian divisions.[199] Azmi Bishara argues that the authoritarian regime failed to build a national state that integrates plural sect and ethnic groups under a unified national identity.[200] According to him, this failure is caused by the regime's strategy of power-sharing with tribal and sectarian leaders as well as with clergy from all sects instead of dealing with Syrians as citizens with equal rights. Similarly, Ola Rifai argues that sectarianism is a modern phenomenon and that the post WWII setup of Syria (comprised of a heterogeneously

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[199] Rifai, "Sunni/Alawi Identity Clashes during the Syrian Uprising: A Continuous Reproduction"; Bishara, *Azmi*; Burhan Ghalioun, *Sectarianism and the Problem of Minorities* (Ad Dawhah - Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012).
[200] Bishara, سورية (p-273)

sectarian and ethnic society) as a nation-state by colonial powers failed to produce a strong national identity. Sect identities were buried until the clash of 2011.[201] The lack of a strong national identity leads sectarian groups to seek empowerment within the state.[202]

Instrumentalists premise their analysis on well-demarcated sect identities that are clearly defined by religious affiliations, whose sectarian cleavages political elites can manipulate. But as I showed above, these sect identities are being constantly made and remade—in this case through a sense of security and safety—and, as I will show below, the sense of security and safety was used as an instrument by the regime rather than sectarian divisions, in order to rally people across sectarian lines, especially in large cities. The Syrian regime dealt brutally with the uprising to convince its population that security and safety were at stake and should be prioritized over anything else. Since the beginning of the uprisings, the regime has insisted on the narrative of an external conspiracy attacking Syria's national unity and of protesters as agents of or unknowing participants in this conspiracy.

In his address to the parliament on March 30, 2011, President Assad started his speech by stating:

> I speak to you at this exceptional moment when events and developments pose a great test to our unity and self-denial. It is a test which is repeated every now and then because of the continued conspiracy against this country. Thanks to

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[201] Raymond Hinnebusch and Omar Imady, eds., *The Syrian Uprising*, 1 edition (London ; New York, NY: Routledge, 2018), 242.
[202] Hinnebusch and Imady, 244.

our will, solidarity, and the will of God that we succeed in facing it every time

in a manner which enhances our strength and pride. The Syrian people are

entitled to hold their heads high. I talk to you from the heart with feelings of

pride for belonging to this great people, with gratitude for their love; yet I

speak with feelings of sadness and sorrow for the events which claimed the

lives of our brothers and children. My responsibility remains that I should

protect the security of this country and ensure its stability. This remains the

ever-dominant feeling in my heart and mind (translated by Joshua Landis).[203]

President Assad foregrounded his responsibility to be the security of the country in

part to assign the measures taken by the state a non-sectarian intention and to remind

Syrians that the all-important issues of security and safety were at stake. President

Assad is following through with a longstanding narrative that the regime is in

constant battle with a conspiracy by Western states and Israel, a narrative which

legitimizes the regime's brutal measures to fight it. He is also giving ordinary Syrians

a seeming choice between the security and safety that his regime assures, or chaos.

According to opposition supporters, the Syrian regime historically plays the

security and safety card in order to silence its population and prevent them from

demanding change. Mansour, a bank employee who opposes the regime but also

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[203] "Speech to the Syrian Parliament by President Bashar Al-Assad: Wednesday, March 30, 2011.," *Syria Comment* (blog), March 31, 2011, https://www.joshualandis.com/blog/speech-to-the-syrian-parliament-by-president-bashar-al-assad-wednesday-march-30-2011/.

opposes the armed revolution,[204] argues that the regime has succeeded by now in

proving true that its long-term combination of "security and safety" versus "liberty

and chaos" are the only options in states like Syria. "We [secular opposition] failed to

prove otherwise, for whatever reasons as soon as the opposition picked up arms, the

regime was proven right." Mansour explains that the regime equated democracy,

freedom, liberty, and plurality with sectarianism, chaos, treason, and instability. Sect

habitus can both capture the processes of instrumentalization that political elites use

in order to accomplish their aim of manipulate sect identities and illuminate where

these processes succeed and where they fail. The instrumentalist accounts primarily

analyze the reasoning behind and goals of the political elite's manipulation without

considering the possibility of failing, which renders ordinary people sectarian by

nature, in accordance with primordialist accounts.

Mansour's analysis is further reflected in Abdul Halim Khaddam's[205] meeting

on February 18, 2001, with the faculty senate at Damascus University. This meeting

was held in order to discuss the subjects and problems that had been discussed by the

Syrian intellectuals who started what became known as the "Damascus Spring"[206]

right after the death of President Hafiz Al-Assad in June 2000, and the inauguration

of his son president Bashar Al-Assad, who, during his address, vowed to ensure

democratic, economic, and social reforms during his term. An analysis of Khaddam's

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[204] Interview in Beirut 2016. Mansour opposes the regime but he also opposes the armed revolution he thinks that if the revolution had stayed peaceful they would have fallen.
[205] Previous vice-president in Syria between (1984-2005).
[206] "The Damascus Spring," Carnegie Middle East Center, accessed November 3, 2019, https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48516?lang=en.

discussion during that meeting reflected the regime's opinion and response to the calls for reforms: this discussion shows how the regime uses security and safety as a shield to deflect and discredit its "opposition." During the meeting, Khaddam asked questions that had been addressed were addressed by the statements of the Syrian intellectuals. Referring to their call for democratic change, the lifting of the emergency law, the release of political prisoners, justice and liberty, he queried: "Is it true that one of the most important periods in the history of Syria only includes injustice, confiscation of freedom, corruption, persecution and murder?" Khaddam continued with more questions, without addressing the initial question. He stated that the Syrian intellectuals' analysis was flawed because it did not address the progress completed during that period: "Millions of children have now the opportunity for school and university education. Did that come from a vacuum? This infrastructure of hospitals, clinics, water, electricity, and roads came from a vacuum?" He went on to list the state's free education as well as its universal health-care system and infrastructure developments as being the hallmarks of that period of time under Hafiz Al-Assad's rule (1971-2000). He posited the social safety net that the state provided in opposition to the state's/regime's "injustice, confiscation of freedom, corruption, persecution and murder" as if injustice, confiscation of freedom, corruption, persecution, and murder, as well as the social and economic safety net, were mutually exclusive. During the same meeting, he minimized "mistakes" and "malfunctions" committed by the state and its institutions and trivialized them in comparison with the total outcomes of that period.

Khaddam then cited and answered three issues addressed by the intellectuals in their statements—"freedom, democracy and civil society"—stating that "the most important issue on the mind of every child, elder, woman and man in Syria is the Arab-Israeli conflict. And here the intellectuals are talking about it as if Syria is at regional and international peace. Under these conditions it is as if the only thing that is missing is to issue a statement or not." Repeating his earlier pattern, Khaddam effectively minimized the importance of freedom, democracy, and civil society under the conditions of the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to trivialize the demands of the intellectuals. According to his formulation, one can conclude that national security is at stake when people forget about "the most important issue" and start thinking about such trivial demands as freedom, democracy, and civil society.

He then delved into more details about his analysis of freedom, democracy, and civil society. Regarding democracy, he stated that it is not "a ready-made suit" that is bought, put on, and is automatically a good fit. He gave examples of "failed democratic practices during the 1990s" in order to claim that Syria's "social, economic, cultural evolutions are the premises for democracy" and that Syria was not yet there. Using the language of the intellectuals he was opposing in order to frame them as sectarians who were going to divide the country,[207] he made it clear that freedom is the antithesis of national unity, asking rhetorically, "Is it freedom to state slogans and ideas that lead to dismantling the national unity? Is this freedom? When

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[207] It is important to note that all the signers of the statements are non-Islamist and non-sectarian
alhayat newspaper

117

some [the intellectuals behind the aforementioned statement] said that Syria is a beautiful mosaic of religions, races, and immigrants, and every class of these must have its own freedom and culture, and cooperation among them should be balanced— what does that mean? France failed to do so. Where are the members of this group going? Is it reasonable to divide Syria into sects and ethnicities and each sect has its own freedoms and culture? What is left of Syria?" Finally, he suggested that there was no need for civil society in Syria because society was already civil, because people were not fighting each other. "Or do they [intellectuals] want people to fight? So, you refuse as intellectuals this society—what is your alternative society? Is it the Algerian society and what happened in Algeria? What happened in Yugoslavia? What happened in Somalia?"[208] Here again, he paralleled the demands for an active civil society with the causes for civil wars. During the uprising of 2011, the regime used the same logic and succeeded in limiting the choices for its population in choosing between sectarianism and safety. Since the beginning of the uprising, in fact, the regime has kept repeating that what is at issue is not domestic uprising and protests but rather a "foreign conspiracy" that wants to topple the regime that stands against Israel, in order to ease the Israeli-American plans regarding the "Palestinian cause." This same discourse is reflected in Khaddam's discussion in 2000, in which he attested that"Syria stands to confront the West and Israel and that is why the West is always conspiring on Syria." The regime's description of what was happening goes

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[208] Here he is alluding to the Algeria's, Yugoslavia's and Somalia's civil wars

on to describe it as a "Mou'amara", or "conspiracy" that is targeting national unity in order to sow chaos and rend the Syrian social fabric.

Moussa, a Sunni from a middle-class family in Damascus who initially supported the uprising, said that "we were all [he and his friends] with the uprising at the beginning. We all know the regime's lies so we didn't believe that it was a conspiracy, but now it is proven that it was. We were taken by the media and that is the biggest mistake." He is now a solid supporter of the regime. For him, ISIS and Al-Nusra and the "corrupt oppositions" are living proof of what the regime had been stating since the beginning of the uprising: "We thought that they [Free Syrian Army] would set a better example than the regime, but as soon as they came to power in the areas they took over, they forgot that they were fighting the regime and started fighting each other." What most annoys Moussa is that he does not care for freedom, democracy, and "all the Western bullshit" [the opposition's demands]. He wants his sense of security and safety and that of his family back. "We were [before 2011] happy. You didn't need much money to enjoy life in Damascus. Everything was available. But they [the opposition] chose sectarianism instead of safety and that was their [the opposition's] plan since the beginning." Moussa's older brother Ghassan, who doesn't support anyone anymore but initially supported the uprising, argues that the opposition fell into the regime's trap of divisive sectarianism and chaos. "The regime knows how to play on security and safety and scare people with that. And what is better than sectarianism and war to threaten people's sense of security and safety?" Ghassan asks with sorrow, imagining that if the opposition had just not fallen

119

into the sectarian trap everything would have been different. "How long would it take for people to realize that it is also safe on the other side [opposition's side]?" Ghassan asked, talking not about safety from war, but about safety from sectarianism and sectarian divide. "They [the opposition] couldn't just wait for people to realize that they had been corrupted by the regime and by power," he said, alluding to the intra fighting that took place almost as soon as the opposition started to seize territories.[209] From the perspective of the supporters of the opposition, the regime rallied sectarian division and played on the fears of religious minorities, which made it clear that they should not feel safe in mixed sects regions. Wael, who was a vocal supporter of the uprising in Homs, argued that, "since the beginning, the others [other sects] sided with the regime, which made it clear for us [the opposition] that only your [own] people protect you. At that moment, I started seeing myself as a Sunni who needs to protect and support his fellow brethren [Sunnis]." For Wael, safety was provided by the sect that he was born into and identified with, even though he insisted that Syrians are not sectarian, were never sectarian, and never will be sectarian, and that only the regime is sectarian and created these divisions.[210] This shows that sect identities are

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[209] The reasons for the opposition's intra-fighting are not within the scope of this dissertation. For detailed accounts of different jihadi factions. Murtada, *Hakadhā arkhat al-thawrah al-Sūrīyah liḥyatuhā*. Gives some details about the different jihadis factions and their intra-fighting. Naming the Fridays started differing between Facebook pages which highlights organizational problems taking place online according to Almustafa 2012. المصطفى ، حمزة. *Virtual* = مصطفى, المجال العام الافتراضي في الثورة السورية: الخصائص ، الاتجاهات ، آليات صنع الرأي العام *Public Sphere of the Syrian Revolution : Characteristics , Trends , Mechanisms of Shaping Public Opinion"* (Ad Dawhah - Qatar: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, 2012).
[210] For a discussion of sectarian ambiguities see chapter 1. The focus here is about the meaning making of sect identities and the politics of safety.

made, unmade, and remade based on ongoing experiences and practices constantly affecting people's lives. The concept of sect habitus illuminates the workings of these experiences and practices as part of the process of making meaning of sect identities.

Conclusion

While I do not focus on economic aspects in the chapter, security and safety also refer to the eroding welfare state, especially in post-2000 Syria, with the implementation of neoliberal reforms. The neoliberal policies discrepantly affected the urban and rural regions,[211] a discrepancy which has produced opposing experiences of security and safety. Amira, who lived in one of the large cities, was not affected directly by the war is an example. "We used to sleep with the doors open, we didn't need much money to buy stuff, we had 24/7 electricity, and most importantly we lived at peace with each other [different sects]." Even people who were directly affected by the war were concerned more about these issues. Samir, a doctor from Homs —an urban area with a rural culture— who lost everything and is now a refugee working in a restaurant in Europe, was talking about these same issues even though he lost his clinic and home. Their sense of security and safety is related to their financial well-being which they enjoyed by being the urban beneficiaries of the neoliberal reforms. In this chapter, I have analyzed the entangled changes in the meaning of sect identities for ordinary Syrians and the politics of safety in a wide

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[211] Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark Times"; Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*; Hinnebusch and Imady, *The Syrian Uprising*; Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al- ʿAqd al- akhir fi tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud wa al- Islah*; Kamāl Dīb, *al-Ḥarb al-Sūrīyah*.

range of circumstances and under many conditions. I based my analysis on my field observations, countless informal discussions, and my formal in-depth interviews, as well as on news articles and social media entries. I also showed how ordinary people make and remake their sect identities based on their sense of safety. One could argue, and I would agree, that safety becomes a rare privilege during times of war. But I am interested in analyzing why the perception of safety provides sectarianism so many opposing meanings in the case of Syria. I am not claiming to analyze the social psychology of the sense of safety in Syria, but rather to analyze how a sense of safety has been critical to both sides in mobilizing support for the warring parties, producing both divisive sectarianism in some cases and sect solidarity in others. In this chapter I also showed how political elites use individuals' sense of safety to advance their political agendas.

When the sense of security and safety becomes sectarian, individuals' experiences translate to the group level and shape the group's sect identity, this sectarian transformation of security and safety, provides a way to analyze the conditions that lead to the specific changes in sect habitus. Rather than assuming that people are sectarian, and that sectarianism is primordial, the concept of sect habitus enables researchers to discern a process of sectarianization that takes place at a moment in history. While this process may be based on difference, it is not always divisive.

How does the combination of security and safety produce a sect habitus that is both divisive and cohesive? This chapter shows how ordinary Syrians make sense of

sectarianism in a way that centralizes their personal, family, and group safety. I also show how local relationships and traditions play an important role in whether or not a person feels safe keeping in mind rural, urban, social, and economic differences in mind when analyzing sectarianism in Syria. Finally, how did the political elites use the politics of safety in order to frame sectarian relations at the popular level?[212] In the next chapter I show how the Human Rights Discourse affected the meaning making of Syrians sect identities and contributed to the shifting of sect habitus.

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[212] This is not to say that they always succeeded. In what conditions did it succeed, is worth its own investigation

Chapter 3 - Sect Habitus and the Evolution of Human Rights Discourse

"There was nothing called politics to speak of [...] The rules were clear in Assad's Syria: bread instead of democracy, subservience from state subsidies and a measure of stability and security."[213]

"We don't want freedom anymore we want national unity."[214]

Having argued that sect habitus operates both consciously and non-consciously among ordinary Syrians, I will show in this chapter how these people make, unmake, and remake sect habitus through daily practices, interpreting a supposedly universal human rights discourse in order to make meaning of their situations under the volatile conditions of the uprising turned war. It is my view that, throughout the war in Syria, human rights discourse developed, evolved, and influenced people's political aspirations, the conditions of possibility for change, and their meaning-making of sect identities. I show that in Syria since 2011, a rights-based discourse at the popular level will reify sect-based distinctions and produce the conditions of possibility for conflict that have not existed before.

Throughout the uprisings, the rights represented in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR) formed the basis of the demonstrators' demands for dignity, democracy, rights, and freedom from authoritarian, repressive

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[213] Abouzeid's interlocutor Suleiman Tlass recounting March 2011 events in Homs Abouzeid, *No Turning Back*. 6.

[214] Kafr Batna in the Eastern Ghouta district Where people who fought against the Syrian Army for many years took to the streets to end a massive siege and intra-opposition fighting "(20+) Watch | Facebook," accessed May 14, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=581746198851688.

regimes[215] in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria. While research in different academic fields[216] focus on the role of the concerned states in protecting the rights of their own citizens, and when they fail, which they are, the focus becomes on the role of the international community (UN security council, NATO, EU) in intervening for protecting the concerned populations' human rights.[217] Though researchers and policy makers usually debate the level of intervention, whether through political, economic, or military operations depending on the scale and gravity of the atrocities being committed, in this chapter I highlight the relationality between the supposedly universal human rights discourse with the sect habitus of ordinary Syrians throughout the uprising turned war. I describe how human rights discourse both differently shapes people's political aspirations, emotional states, imaginations, and worldviews on all sides of the conflict, and how is itself shaped by sect and religious identities. I argue that there is a dialectical relationship between human rights discourse and religious sect-identities at the popular level. This dialectical relationship produces infinite understandings for both ordinary Syrians and political elites of both the scope and limitations of international interventions. These

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[215] Mostly supported by the West for most of their governing periods. I will address the importance of that in regard to the popular views of the West and the effects of the human rights discourse on peoples' different perceptions of their fight.
[216] International relations, international law and political science history of human rights
[217] Thomas G. Weiss, "RtoP Alive and Well after Libya," *Ethics & International Affairs* 25, no. 3 (ed 2011): 287–92, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0892679411000220.

understandings led many to inflate the role of international public opinion in influencing the geopolitical arena and lead to interventions.[218]

I show how sect habitus has influenced the meaning making of human rights discourse and been influenced by this discourse on the side of both the regime and the opposition. This dialectical relationship has led to the demise of any viable moderate opposition and to the increased attractiveness to supporting the fundamentalist oppositions or even the regime. After years of fighting and the rise and demise of ISIS, the secular opposition that is supposed to be worthy of the human rights project has been demoted to a marginal player.[219]

Abdul Baset al-Sarout as an Example of the Development and Evolution of a Sectarianized Human Rights Discourse in Syria

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[218] For example, Mohammed Khatib started a blog and a Facebook page that shows Free Syrian Army fighters caring for kittens in opposition held areas to show the compassionate and human side of these fighters in comparison with the regime's forces. This is supposed to affect the international public opinion in order to pressure their governments to intervene. "We're trying to speak out in every possible way that would get interest in the US but it just hasn't yielded results. I guess if orphans aren't going to do it, you try kittens, and if kittens aren't going to do it, we'll try something else." These interpretations and understandings are part of promises of universality that the human rights discourse claims to champion which infer interpretations that lead to many misunderstandings. Mohammed expresses feelings of disappointment with the US not stepping in to help Syrians. "Me and other opposition activists feel helpless."
https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/8gdkqx/syria-fsa-cats-mahmoud-khatib-oscar-rickett-471

[219] You still hear some of the المعارضة السورية الخارجية based outside of Syria repeating the same narrative of Human Rights and the responsibility of the international community to protect Syrians.

"The language of international human rights is a powerful instrument to prevent and punish crimes against humanity such as the ones of ISIS."[220]

Abdel Baset al-Sarout was the goalkeeper of the Al-Karama soccer team in the city of Homs before the 2011 revolution. At the beginning of the uprisings, he joined the peaceful demonstrations, where he became known as the "the singer of the revolution" due to his chants that went viral on YouTube, and other social media sites and got the attention of Arab and international mainstream media.[221] Soon after, he picked up arms against the Syrian Army, who besieged the Khalidiya neighborhood where al-Sarout and other armed opposition members fought back for months.

Al-Sarout started with a reformist democratic all-inclusive discourse,[222] but with the unfolding of events and the rise of fundamentalist groups along with the demise of the moderate opposition, he later pledged allegiance to ISIS. After the

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[220] Yuri Mantilla, "ISIS'S Crimes Against Humanity And The Assyrian People: Religious Totalitarianism And The Protection Of Fundamental Human Rights," *ILSA Journal of International & Comparative Law* 23, no. 1 (January 1, 2016), https://nsuworks.nova.edu/ilsajournal/vol23/iss1/2. (p-97)

[221] "Syria: Tanks Storm Homs amid Fears of Ground Invasion," February 10, 2012, sec. World, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9073682/Syria-tanks-storm-Homs-amid-fears-of-ground-invasion.html; Service photo, "Armes à feu artisanales en Syrie," Le Figaro.fr, February 22, 2013, https://www.lefigaro.fr/photos/2013/02/22/01013-20130222DIMFIG00474-armes-a-feu-artisanale-en-syrie.php; "Die Arte-Doku 'Homs - Ein Zerstörter Traum' Über Baset al-Sarout - DER SPIEGEL," accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.spiegel.de/fotostrecke/die-arte-doku-homs-ein-zerstoerter-traum-ueber-baset-al-sarout-fotostrecke-111805.html; "« Homs, chronique d'une révolte »," *Le Monde.fr*, March 4, 2014, https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2014/03/04/homs-chronique-d-une-revolte_4375677_3246.html; العربية نت, "حكاية 'حمص الحزينة' والـ90 شاباً الذين قتلهم النظام," العربية نت, January 11, 2014, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2014/01/12/-حكاية-حمص الحزينة-والـ90-شاب-الذين-قتلهم-النظام.html.

[222] عزيزي الساروت، من فمك ندينك, accessed March 23, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fJcrohcywvo.

consecutive losses of ISIS in recent years, he joined an Islamic but less fundamentalist group than ISIS ("Army of Glory") and was killed in the conflict in June 2019. al-Sarout, like many other ordinary Syrians, mobilized in early 2011 with unifying slogans such as "one, one, one, the Syrian people are one," before shifting to "we are all jihadis, we will exterminate the Alawis,"[223] and then pledging to fight against the Christians and the Shi'a Muslims.[224] In early 2012, in a video message uploaded to YouTube, al-Sarout addressed the leaders of ISIS and Al-Nusra, and rebuked their sectarian ideology: "We do not accept sectarianism, our religion [Sunni Islam] does not allow us to be sectarian. Our religion does not allow us to kill Alawite or Christian or Kurdish or Druze or Sunni kids, because everyone knows that our revolution is not sectarian, it is not against any sect. Our revolution is against a gang, the gang of the criminal Assad, the gang of Bashar al Assad, this gang that is ruling and looting the country, the gang of criminals. The regime is sowing this sectarian divide, and let me tell you, many Alawites, a lot of our Alawite brothers, Christian brothers, Druze, and Sunnis are going to the demonstrations with us. How are you [ISIS, Al-Nusra and other fundamentalist groups] asking us to kill them as soon as the revolution is over?"[225] al-Sarout continued, adding that the security forces are stationed in the Alawite and Christian towns but are not discriminating when they kidnap and torture opposition activists. He ended with the assurance that "the regime

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[223] الثورة السورية: بدنا نبيد العلوية, accessed March 23, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t268vvFWsOo.
[224] كلمة لعبد الباسط ساروت قبل خروجه من حمص المحاصرة, accessed March 23, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dY5Wv-YLlx4.
[225] عزيزي الساروت، من فمك ندينك.

128

is making this [sectarian divide] up to show the foreign countries that we have sectarianism, and this is not true."

This discourse of regime conspiracy to heighten sectarian divide and portray the revolution as sectarian became salient at least through the first year of the revolution. That the regime is targeting religious minorities and claiming that it was the opposition, had been the focus of the discussions of most opposition groups since the beginning of violence. Some opposition groups even tried to highlight the Alawite, and Christian activism within their ranks and ask non-Sunni activists to take the stage and even lead some demonstrations to prove and highlight the "national, non-sectarian" nature of their uprising. In one of our many interviews in Beirut, Ahmed voiced a similar concern. His opposition group tried to promote both an Alawite and a Christian activist in their ranks as their group representatives to prove they were not sectarian. "One time," Ahmed recalled, "we went to Zabadani to support the uprising there. As a Local Coordination Committee, we were from all the sects in Syria; we even had a Kurdish person with us.[226] We insisted that our Alawi friend, who was a woman, was going to take the stage and address the demonstrators, and we insisted on her explicitly declaring her sect. And what was also unconventional was that she was a woman. This way, we hit two birds with one stone. First, she was Alawite and with the revolution, and second, she was a woman not a man. And this is a big deal in a patriarchal society. The best part is that the Zabadani

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[226] Many Syrian, scholars of Syria and commentators use Kurdish as a sect even though the majority of the Kurdish people are Sunni Muslims. The same way Ahmed classified his Kurdish friend.

local coordination committee representatives were concerned that this move might

trigger a reaction from the crowds, but it was the opposite, people followed her lead

and applauded her statements—she was able to successfully engage and mobilize

people. We used these actions to show that there is no sectarianism in the revolution."

For Ahmed, this is a proud moment of real social change. As is clear from his

statement, it is unconventional for a woman to lead a demonstration in a highly

patriarchal society.[227]

What I am highlighting here is that many, if not most, opposition activists

joined the uprisings with the end goal of human rights reforms and were also actively

trying to fight the sectarian taboo in ways that might at times have been sectarian

[sect based divisive]. The sect habitus of ordinary Syrians started operating in relation

to the human rights discourse as soon as the uprisings became about freedom,

democracy, and human rights. In a later section I show how the human rights

discourse became sectarianized and contributed to shifts in sect habitus of ordinary

Syrians.

To return for a moment back to al-Sarout, a few months later he picked up

arms and fought the Syrian army laying siege to his town, shifting the narrative in

chants where he stated: "We are all jihadis, we will exterminate the Alawis."[228] After

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[227] But whether declaring her sect to be sectarian or not is the focus of Chapter one, where I conceptualize sect habitus in order to distinguish sect identity differences from sectarian divisiveness, and whether or not these tactics worked is the subject of Chapter five where I describe the current situation in Syria and what were the prices paid and how the government has the upper hand now and the moderate opposition is now out of the decision making arena.
[228] في حمص ينكشف القناع , حمص آخدت القرار بدنا نبيد العلوية, accessed May 18, 2020,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HxQyt4kCTo.

losing the battle, and just before fleeing his home town of Homs, al-Sarout again addressed ISIS and Al-Nusra leaders in a YouTube video in which this time he voiced his disappointment at their not helping him and his fellow opposition groups in the fight against the government forces in Homs. But, more importantly, his disappointment arose from what he called the mutual beliefs he thought he shared with the two groups, mutual beliefs that he felt should have been enough reason for ISIS and Al-Nusra not to let him and his group down. In his words:

I am disappointed at them specifically because I thought ISIS and Al-Nusra are not politicized like the Syrian National Coalition. I also thought that we share the same goals and, like us, they are working for God almighty. And I thought those are people who care about Islam and Muslims… And hopefully, as soon as we flee Homs, we will work and bind together with them... Everything we did and we will do is for God almighty… The Alawites are going to take over our lands and live in our homes, the Christians and Shi'a, the Lebanese and Iraqis, Hezbollah are coming to live in our lands… I want to tell Baghdadi, Joulani, and Sheikh Zawahiri that our goals are the same: to implement Shari'a on the Land. We [the Sunnis of Syria] have been living in humiliation, sin, and immorality for forty years (since Hafiz al-Assad became the president of Syria). Do not expect us to become true believers overnight; we need your help, we need people like you to call us and guide us towards the right religion, not force us…

Here, then, is evidence of a shift—from a democracy, freedom, anti-sectarian, all inclusive, and human rights discourse to an exclusionist divisive, sect based violent discourse—taking place in al-Sarout's sect habitus, and this time it was a more basic move towards rejecting other sects and towards a rapprochement with more fundamentalist groups who thought of him and his group as apostates and not true Muslims. Ultimately, al-Sarout pledged allegiance to ISIS and, in an interview with *Al Jazeera*, al-Sarout announced that he joined ISIS because everyone else let him down.

      The developments of this one story are not particular to al-Sarout, but neither are they generalizable to all moderate opposition activists. Many followed al-Sarout's path, starting with a human rights-based fight to later shift to an exclusionist, divisive sectarian fight, but not everyone. Others, like Amer,[229] for example, just gave up the fight when they realized that the revolution had become "sectarian" and "a war of others on Syrian soil," views Amer expressed after realizing that it "is a conspiracy that goes beyond freedom, change, and the other stuff that we thought are the demands of all Syrians. The violent reality proved otherwise." In light of similar sentiments about human rights for all Syrians versus the sectarian fighting that emerged throughout the war in many regions in Syria, Amer and many others returned to their daily lives. Even others, such as Houssam, Ahmed, and Hisham left

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[229] A young professional who turned activist in 2011 then retreated few months later

Syria when they realized that "violence has the upper hand," while others joined

forces with the Syrian Army to "fight terrorism."

For the purposes of this chapter, I see al-Sarout's story as a roadmap that

shows the public emergence of the human rights discourse in 2011 in Syria, and its

development and evolution in opposite directions for ordinary Syrians who were

experiencing and living through the unfolding conditions of war. Thus, in the next

section I will give an overview of the human rights discourse, with a focus on the

assumed universality of its values and the ways in which humanitarian actors dealt

with the situation in Syria.

Human Rights Discourse

Since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the

language of human rights has increasingly been used in academic settings and policy

decision-making environments.[230] And, since the end of the Cold War, this discourse

has increasingly been used by ordinary people who are formulating demands to their

own governments, or mobilizing for a cause they deem a necessary human right (for

example, Bernie Sanders and the health care system in the United States, Greta

Thunberg and the climate right for children).[231]The origin of human rights is still

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[230] "Mark Hannam - Reviews," accessed May 18, 2020,
http://www.markhannam.com/reviews/reviews1a.htm.
[231] https://earthjustice.org/blog/2019-september/greta-thunberg-young-people-petition-UN-human-rights-climate-change
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TI2tBAtQZhI
http://healthcareisahumanright.org/resources/bernie-sanders-healthcare-is-a-right-not-a-privilege/

debated. Some argue that it goes back to the rights of man and the French

revolution.[232] Others argue that it is a recent phenomenon that dates to the 1970s and

is different in nature than the rights of the 1940s.[233] Still others date it to the UDHR in

1948, mainly as linked to international developments with the UN in the aftermath of

the discovery of the Nazi death camps of WWII. That said, because I am concerned in

this chapter with analyzing the human rights discourse, I am not going to engage with

the human rights origins' debates.[234] I will start with a definition of human rights

discourse, combining both Higgins'[235] definition of Human Rights Discourse with

Meister's[236] critique of other such definitions. This combination allows for a critical

interpretation of ordinary Syrians' changing understanding and meaning-making of

Human Rights. Higgins defines human rights discourse as follows:

> It is important at a national level and at a global level, but that discourse is
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> itself a space of contestation with such questions as to how we are to source
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> such rights, how universality might be achieved, the importance of the

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[232] Kenneth Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States," *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1, 1999): 1231–50, https://doi.org/10.2307/2568613; Kenneth Cmiel, "The Recent History of Human Rights," *AMERICAN HISTORICAL REVIEW*, 2004, 19.

[233] Samuel Moyn, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*, Reprint edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 2012).

[234] For such debates, see Cmeil, *The Recent History of Human Rights*; Moyn 2010, *The Last Utopia: Human Rights in History*; Moyn 2014, *Human Rights and the Uses of History.*

[235] "IHRC 6th Annual Lecture by President of Ireland, Michael D Higgins 10 December 2012," *The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission* (blog), accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.ihrec.ie/documents/ihrc-6th-annual-lecture-by-president-of-ireland-michael-d-higgins-10-december-2012/.

[236] Robert Meister, *After Evil: A Politics of Human Rights* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

inclusivity and the indivisibility of human rights, the contradictions that arise

if culture is to be taken into account but yet in such a way as not to concede

such conditionalities as would strip human rights of their essential protections.

Culture must never become a shield for the denial of fundamental human

rights.

Like most humanitarians, Higgins based this definition on the first article of the

Universal Declaration of Human Rights, that is: "All human beings are born free and

equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should

act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood."[237]

Meister provides an alternative definition that is a critique of mainstream

definitions of human rights discourse and situates such a discourse in the aftermath of

WWII and the Nazi atrocities during that period in relation to the victims and

beneficiaries of such atrocities. He explains: "I use Human Rights Discourse,

capitalized as a proper name, to designate the transformation of Auschwitz-based

reasoning into a new discourse of global power that claims to supersede the cruelties

perpetrated by both revolutionaries and counter revolutionaries during the previous

two centuries."[238] By situating Human Rights Discourse in relation to the

victim/beneficiary logic, Meister questions the very premise of the human rights

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[237] "Universal Declaration of Human Rights," December 10, 1948,
https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/. Article 1.
[238] Meister, *After Evil*. 2-3

discourse and argues that it removed the possibility of historical justice in order to alleviate the anxieties of the beneficiaries of past injustices. He argues that this approach depoliticizes struggles for justice and preserves the status quo by the fact that justice is not the end goal anymore. Meister adds that human rights discourse first releases beneficiaries of past injustices from any responsibility for reparation because by condemning past injustices which depoliticizes historical justice projects and transform the people who suffered from these injustices into resilient subjects if they accept the moral victory and "move on" without restitution, or it turns them into traumatized subjects who are still angry and need psychological support to overcome this trauma.

Having outlined both Higgins' definition and Meister's critique, my next goal is multifold. First, I will show how ordinary Syrians made meaning of the hegemonic discourse of human rights. Second, I will show how this discourse framed their aspirations and expectations. Third, I will show how such discourse fell short of implementing what it preaches in Syria. Fourth, I will show how this discourse took on sect-based meanings and in some instances became sectarianized in the daily life of ordinary Syrians.[239] Finally, and most vitally, I will follow Meister in arguing for justice as an option for ordinary Syrians, especially in light of the failure of the global

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[239] Cmeil describes the accounts of historians who refuse to take the concept of "Human Rights" for granted as " writing local histories of universal claims. Such claims specifically attached to the Human Rights Discourse have become one way that people interact with each other" (36)

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order to prevent "mass atrocities." I argue that this global order has contributed to a

disastrous outcome that left Syrians with one choice between authoritarianism or

fundamentalism.[240]

Proponents and critics agree that the Human Rights Discourse has become a

hegemonic universal discourse since the 1990s.[241] This discourse traveled throughout

the world, permeating different populations and cultures, and infiltrating most

nation-states borders.[242] In 2011 and after the fall of president Bin A'li in Tunisia and

president Mubarak in Egypt, demonstrations started taking place in Algeria, Morocco,

Jordan, Bahrain, Libya, Lebanon, and Syria.[243] Most of these demonstrations could be

described in the universal language of human rights. People were calling for

democratic change,[244] economic and social well-being, reforms, dignity, and freedom.

Social movements scholars and analysts[245] mostly agree[246] that the Arab Spring was a

diffusion phenomenon that swept through the Arab world. Additionally, Harrelson-

Stephens and Callaway argue that this human rights diffusion across the Arab world

represents the major expansion of the human rights regime. Similarly, Elbadawi and

Makdissy argue that "whatever the immediate triggers for the Tunisian and other

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[240] At the time of this writing there are no other viable choices for the crisis in Syria
[241] Meister argues that human rights discourse became global after the fall of communism
[242] Cmeil *The Recent History of Human Rights* provides an important overview of how historians dealt with the HRD
[243] Most of these demonstrations were contained either by governments concessions and reforms such in the cases of Algeria, Morocco and Jordan or by government crackdown such in the case Bahrain or wined down by itself such in the case of Lebanon or developed into wars such in Libya and Syria.
[244] Youtube videos, Arab spring book citations.
[245] Justus Bamert, Fabrizio Gilardi, Fabio Wasserfallen, 2015; Dupont, Passy 2011 ; Saideman, 2012 ; Harrelson-Stephens and Callaway, 2014
[246] Except

uprisings, a gamut of interacting factors, economic, political and others underlying

them, have been building over the years towards a push for democracy in the

region."[247] In this sense, democracy was the premise and end goal for these uprisings.

At the time of this writing, discussions about the "Arab Spring" range between the

optimists that think that the aftereffects are yet to emerge because the outcomes of

revolutions take time to solidify,[248] and the pessimists that describe it as the "Arab

Winter," based on the ongoing failed-state model in Libya, the reinstitution of army

rule in Egypt, and the ongoing wars in Syria and Yemen.[249]

Human Rights Discourse Timeline in Syria

Some scholars and commentators usually start their accounts of the

democratization process in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular with the

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[247] Ibrahim Elbadawi and Samir Makdisi, *Democratic Transitions in the Arab World* (Cambridge University Press, 2017). 2.

[248] Jadaliyya - جدلية and Jadaliyya, "الثورات العربية في سياق الربيع العربي والديمقراطية," Jadaliyya - جدلية, accessed April 16, 2018, http://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/32049/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AB%D9%88%D8%B1 %D8%A7%D8%AA-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%A9- %D9%81%D9%8A-%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D9%82- %D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A%D8%B9- %D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A8%D9%8A- %D9%88%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%85%D9%82%D8%B1%D8%A7% D8%B7%D9%8A%D8%A9.

[249] Daniel L. Byman, "After the Hope of the Arab Spring, the Chill of an Arab Winter," *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD, https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/after-the-hope-of-the-arab-spring-the-chill-of-an-arab-winter/; Hassan Hassan, "The Arab Winter Is Coming," The Atlantic, November 3, 2018, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/11/where-us-middle-east/574747/; "The Arab Winter," *The Economist*, accessed April 8, 2020, https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/01/09/the-arab-winter.

2011 uprisings as if the breakthrough came out of nowhere,[250] but it is important to highlight the ongoing, age-old struggle dating to Syria's declaration of independence from France in 1946, in order not to fall into simplistic yet influential accounts that credit social media with the process of enlightening a population that "lacks the cultural prerequisites for democracy."[251] For left-leaning opposition parties (Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP), Syria's Communist party, Communist Labour Party since mid 70s, and many others before and after the formation of the National Progressive Front of Syria in 1972), the struggle for freedom, democracy, citizenship, and nation-building have been ongoing for decades with the Baath party. This history is critical to the understanding of some fractures within the leftist opposition during the 2011 uprising. Alluding to the intra- opposition competition that led in many instances to the fracturing of the opposition,[252] Jalal[253] described representatives of the opposition outside Syria as "seasonal revolutionaries, not to say foreign agents who dismiss the history of struggle that our comrades are still paying for in jail as political prisoners since before Bashar." I should clarify before going any further that my focus on the 2011 uprisings in this chapter is purely the result of space limitations, and not a dismissal of the important historical struggles that preceded the uprisings.

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[250] As'aad abu Khalil's critique of western views on democratization
And recently Miller et.al. study of democratization in the Arab world where they premised their study on the assumption that "On the eve of the Arab Spring, the Arab world remained the sole zone untouched by global democratization trends."
[251] RAND (5)
This is not to say that social media and media in general did not play a role but this role should not exclude the long history of struggle that might have led to the Arab Spring.
[252] Damascus spring of 2005 is also another example
[253] An intellectual in his mid 60s who had been jailed for years under Haifiz al-Assal's rule. Interviewed in Beirut in 2016, 2018

The human rights discourse of 2011 in Syria is mainly thought of as a continuation of the same discourse as those of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya with overlapping chants such as "ash-sha'b yourid isqat al-nitham" [the people want the fall of the regime] and "huriye, huriye, huriye," ["freedom, freedom, freedom"], in what follows I show that while there are some overlaps, the developments of the human rights discourse was made, unmade and remade multiple times in Syria with the unfolding of the events.

Calling for freedom and dignity, "huriye, huriye, huriye," ["freedom, freedom, freedom"] and alshaab alsoury ma byenzal" ["the Syrian people refuse humiliation"] were two of the major chants resounding at the beginning of the uprising. Most people link the start of the uprisings to the Deraa incident,[254] which became mainstream in the media,[255] but Barout points out that many calls to actions started earlier, mainly online,[256] though were not successful. He points out that on February 16, 2011, an incident in the Harika neighborhood in Damascus sparked an unintentional rally protesting a policeman's insult and slapping of a young man

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[254] The Deraa incident is supposedly the spark of the Syrian revolution where the secret security forces held, and tortured school children who wrote anti regime graffiti on their school walls which escalated exploded into demonstrations throughout Syria
[255] April 26, Global Post CBS News, 2011, and 6:24 Pm. "How Schoolboys Began the Syrian Revolution." Accessed March 30, 2018. https://www.cbsnews.com/news/how-schoolboys-began-the-syrian-revolution/.
CNN, By Joe Sterling. "Daraa: The Spark That Lit the Syrian Flame." CNN. Accessed March 30, 2018.
https://www.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/index.html.
[256] Barout 2015 provides an important analysis of the failure of online organizing at the beginning of the uprising and the regime's response to unblock facebook and unfilter youtube and twitter

whose family owned a store in the neighborhood.[257] People started chanting "the Syrian people refuse humiliation," prompting the government to punish the policeman, thereby containing the incident.

Based on the uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, mainstream regional and international media circulated the Deraa protests as demands for human rights. I would contend that the Harika incident is a clear and perfect fit for the human rights discourse, while the Deraa incident—though I do not deny its importance in sparking and escalating the uprising —fits more as the actions and reactions of tribal traditions rather than as a call for freedom and democracy and rights discourse. I say this because the representative of the government security forces broke tribal norms by disrespecting the leaders of the tribes, which led to an uprising in Deraa and a tribal call for solidarity (الفزعة) in neighboring cities and towns. I point out these two almost simultaneous incidents in two different cities to highlight the complexity of the Syrian social fabric and the different ideological drives of the multiplicity of players within the opposition and the regime. The media and international focus on the human rights aspects of these uprisings shifted the agendas of all the actors, including the regime's, which rallied its supporters in massive demonstrations in Damascus to highlight its popular democratic legitimacy.[258] The regime's historical narrative of a conspiracy

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[257] Souriana4all, *مظاهرة بدمشق - حي الحريقة التجاري 17-2-2011*, accessed April 16, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NykGjfKn3TU.
[258] Dominic Evans, "Tens of Thousands Rally to Support Assad in Damascus," *Reuters*, October 12, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-demonstration/tens-of-thousands-rally-to-support-assad-in-damascus-idUSTRE79B2A620111012; Yara Bayoumy and Dominic Evans, "Syria Mobilizes Thousands for Pro-Assad Marches," *Reuters*, March 29, 2011, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria/syrians-rally-for-assad-president-due-to-

against the Syrian people based on their anti-Israeli and anti-imperialist stance was coupled with a discourse of reforms,[259] and with the Syrian people's sovereignty and freedom to choose their future.[260] Simultaneously, the regime maintained a hardcore nation-state sovereignty realpolitik stance, mainly at the UN, where its current permanent representative to the United Nations Headquarters in New York City[261] is still stating the regime's views.

The different factions of the opposition also mobilized the human rights discourse throughout the unfolding events. I am not denying that the human rights discourse of democracy, dignity, and freedom did not travel to the Syrian uprising. To the contrary, I argue that the human rights discourse has become both a part of the daily lives of Syrian activists, armed opposition members, and regime supporters, as well as a guiding framework for ongoing events.

Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) in Syria

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speak-idUSTRE72N2MC20110329; "Thousands Rally in Support of Syria's Assad," October 12, 2011, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/10/20111012103639234331.html.

[259] I am not here discussing whether the regime was serious about implementing reforms as well as the efficiency and seriousness of these reforms. I am highlighting the language used throughout the war.

[260] مجلس الشعب السوري, "الرئيس الأسد لمحطة ان بي سي الأميركية: الشعب السوري وحده من يحدد رئيسه.. المسؤولون الأميركيون يقولون شيئا ويخفون نواياهم خلف الأقنعة.. السياسة الروسية لا تستند إلى عقد الصفقات بل إلى القيم," مجلس الشعب السوري, accessed April 16, 2018, http://parliament.gov.sy/arabic/index.php?node=554&nid=16595&First=0&Last=1022&CurrentPage=10&mid=&refBack=.

[261] Dr. Bashar Jaafari is also the leader of the Syrian Government negotiation team in the Geneva and Astana talks with the opposition

The RtoP, or Responsibility to Protect, emerged in 2001 as a concept that

escapes the clash at the UN between advocates for "Humanitarian intervention" and

the "right to intervene" on the one hand, and advocates of the preservation of state

sovereignty on the other. By emphasizing prevention of a crisis and the role of states

in this prevention, RtoP claims to have succeeded by getting unanimous approval at

the UN general assembly in 2005.[262] But, even Evans acknowledges the post-2005

emergence of the divide between proponents of state sovereignty and proponents of

intervention that RtoP claims to have avoided.[263] RtoP is supposed to be the

mechanism that will "end mass atrocity crimes once and for all."[264]

The Syrian revolution-turned-war is a textbook case for the humanitarian logic

in general and the Responsibility to Protect (RtoP) in particular. While the Syrian

case engendered the five factors that RtoP uses in order to classify countries at risk,[265]

it also shows the failure of operationalizing RtoP. Further, the Syrian case shows that

most of the issues that RtoP claims to have addressed that previous approaches such

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[262] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect: Ending Mass Atrocity Crimes Once and For All* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2009).

[263] Evans highlights many reasons for this emergence including the Global South skepticism of the intentions of the Global North, as well as the ongoing confusion of RtoP with the "right to intervene." For the argument in this chapter it is not relevant why this divide is still ongoing with RtoP

[264] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*. p. xiv.

[265] First, the history of past atrocities (Syria 1982, long history of human rights abuses and imprisonment of political opposition leaders). Second, whether the past conditions are still at play (the Baath has been in power in Syria since 1963 and the Assad family since 1970). Third, the country's ability to resolve grievances (the country has a single party authoritarian rule and has been under the emergency law since 1963). Fourth, the receptivity of external influence (Syria and its leadership boast about their anti-imperial stance and have been designated a state sponsor of terrorism by the United States since 1979). Fifth, good leadership (according to the RtoP standards the Syrian leadership is nowhere near good leadership, in terms of finding ways of solving problems)

as the right to intervene have not, have failed in Syria. Syria proves that the model-based generalizable approaches fail in the face of cultural and historical peculiarities of each case.[266] The case of Syria also proves that RtoP has failed in the face of realpolitik and state sovereignty.[267] Lastly, the double standards of the global community, the inescapable legacy of Western colonialism, imperialism, and human rights atrocities committed in the name of modernity and modernization/development of the Global South played a major role in the meaning-making of human rights by Syrians and in turn contributed to the outcome of the war.

Evans' five factors that determine countries at risk of mass atrocities are premised on having an "accurate take on what is happening on the ground" in the countries in question. For him, this knowledge is enough for the UN to intervene, while simultaneously dismissing the history of interventions that were based on "informed knowledge" of what was happening on the ground that had led to catastrophes. Most of these catastrophic interventions ended up being misinformed about the peculiarities of each case (Libya is the most recent case). Most, if not all, examples of recent interventions have resulted in catastrophes worse than the international community's supposed prevention: Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Sudan, South Sudan, Mali, etc.

Meister argues that by condemning the wrongs committed in the past and act as if that time has passed, the humanitarians—who theorize concepts such as RtoP or

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[266] In Syria sect identities, Arab Israeli conflict, Soviet influence
[267] Security council vetoes. Syria still has the regime-appointed representative at the UN

the right to intervene—imagine that they are off the hook.[268] He argues that this is the

premise that led to the dismissal of justice as the objective of the human rights

paradigm. Evans' work is a case in point: We can read Evans' attitude towards the

resistance of countries from the Global South as based on the assumption that the past

is now in the past. He questions the reasons behind such skepticism in a post-colonial

and post-imperial time.[269] He follows a logic that assumes that by differentiating RtoP

from the right to intervene, the international power structures and the long history

(old and recent) of interventions simply disappears. This same logic is used to

criticize academics and commentators who still think RtoP is a neo-imperial and

neocolonial project. For him these academics are stuck in a period of history that has

already passed. But ironically, when he addresses the effectiveness of RtoP if applied

on one of the five superpowers, Evans simply announces that RtoP will be impossible

to implement. When mentioning the unilateral intervention in Iraq in 2003, he simply

states that it was wrong. Yet when people voice cynicism about RtoP, he dismisses

them as unable to overcome the past.[270] I argue that this assumption that the past has

passed is the reason for the failure of the human rights discourse in Syria. People did

not just wipe away the past and move on, as the humanitarian project asks victims to

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[268] After Evil 2012

[269] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*.

[270] Evans consciously or unconsciously dismisses Sri Lankan commentator C. Wijeyawickrema, even though he cites him as an example of the cynical. "Just like the past when Columbus in 1492 and Vasco da Gama in 1498 came with the Bible and the sword, the likes of Gareth Evans now come in 2007 with RtoP (4)." He also mentions Mamdani, and de Waal as examples of academics who are not able to differentiate between RtoP and intervention.

do, as I will show in what follows. In my view, as in Meister's, the Human Rights Discourse is based on a logic that preserves the perks beneficiaries enjoy from previous injustices by asking them to denounce such injustices but not to give back what they enjoy as time moves on. In this sense the United States and its European allies who backed up these authoritarian regimes for long periods of time just denounced these regimes in 2011 and moved on without acknowledging any responsibility in these regimes' past evils.

The RtoP paradigm is based on three main consecutive crisis situations where different types of international interventions are proposed. Evans suggests toolboxes for each type of situation: prevention, reaction, and rebuilding.[271] These toolboxes are the model used for every previous, and potential mass atrocity crises in the world. This model naïvely dismisses age-old ongoing debates in the West and elsewhere about the definitions, usefulness, and Eurocentric views of concepts that this model takes for granted such as: tolerance, economic development, good governance, community peacebuilding, promoting human rights, and maximizing local ownership, protecting religious minorities, freedom of religions, etc. These tools start with the premises that states at risk of mass atrocities are the sole responsible for such situations and the international community's benevolence has to be used to redress these situations. This logic dismisses long histories of international interventions imperial, colonial, and postcolonial interventions in these places, it also dismisses the

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[271] Appendix B provides a comparative table that shows the tools proposed to be used in each of the three situations, in Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*.

role of global capital in producing uneven economic development in these places and internationally. Lastly, this logic dismisses the role of the international community in looking the other way for decades in countries such as Evans describes when these situations benefit one or many members of the five superpowers (Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria (anti-Saddam), Saudi Arabia, Mali, Niger are few examples). These are some of the tools proposed in Evans toolboxes for ostensible use in pre-fighting prevention, and reconstruction periods. While they sound fantastic, they do not even address all of the above internal conflicts, and dilemmas which begs some questions: should the global surge of Western racism, xenophobia, and many other discriminatory actions in the Global North against migrants from the Global South be considered as part of not having a real understanding and even a good working model for tolerance? What type of tolerance is being promoted by Evans? And towards whom? Why is it assumed by Evans and proponents of his views that states such as Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon lack tolerance?[272] And how to justify the cherry-picking process that the international community uses to address these issues, as for example the apparent lack of need for any of these measures in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and many other countries that restrict human rights and tolerance to high levels but the international community intervenes in Libya, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, and Syria.

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[272] Ussama Makdisi's work shows the opposite in Lebanon and the Levant under the Ottoman empire's rule. Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism*; Ussama Makdisi, *Age of Coexistence: The Ecumenical Frame and the Making of the Modern Arab World*, First edition (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019); Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al-ʿAqd al-akhir fi tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud wa al- Islah*.

Many human rights advocates praise the universality of the values that human rights discourse promotes. But I must address the double standard in dealing with human rights breaches, which in my opinion makes it difficult to promote the human rights discourse in the Middle East in general and Syria in particular. The depoliticization of struggles that Meister eloquently criticizes makes it harder to convince victims that this is not a neocolonial project. He argues that humanitarians position themselves as if they are stripped of their political feelings towards the "enemy" which grants them innocence in a situation they are involved in. This is clear in Evans' criticism of the resistance of the Global South to the RtoP, in which he positions himself as if he and representatives of the Global North are innocent of past deeds now that decolonization is considered to be accomplished and now in the past without having any present implications now that the colonialists denounce colonialism. This conception also grants the Global North moral grounds from which to defend sanctions that mostly affect ordinary people, in this case living under the rule of the Syrian government.

Humanitarians like Evans, argue in support of the RtoP as if the past has now passed and think of critics of both RtoP and humanitarian intervention as unable to identify the important contributions of such concepts because according to the humanitarians those critics are stuck in the past. Meister argues that the humanitarian logic deals with those critics as "unreconciled victims who were damaged by past events." Evans argues as if the effects of imperialism, colonialism and the legacy of Western exploitation (he dismisses global capital of course) are in the past and

victims of such atrocities should be reconciled now that the humanitarians denounce such practices and vow not to repeat them. So, Evans wants countries, representatives, and people from the Global South to just accept the promises of support by the humanitarians at face value and deal with the countless examples (Afghanistan, Iraq, Mali, Sudan, Niger, Libya) of recent neo-imperialist and neocolonial attempts by the major powers (US, Britain, France, NATO, Russia) as outliers.

Human Rights Discourse in Syria

I will focus next on one aspect of the human rights paradigm in the case of Syria—that is, how ordinary Syrians made sense of the human rights discourse before and during the revolution, and then throughout the war—in order to analyze how most warring and non-warring parties adopted some aspects of the human rights "field" [273] to justify their positions. I will also argue that, under the war conditions when sect habitus entered the human rights "field," human rights discourse got sectarianized and in turn hardened the sectarian divisions of sect identities.

In the following, I analyze the different ways ordinary Syrians made meaning of the human rights discourse in opposing ways since 2011. Based on their respective

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[273] In Bourdieu's conception of fields: a field is the arena where social actors come with a specific set of dispositions they acquired through experiences with the social fields. These social agents construct, perceive, act, and react in relation to the field's forces and structures and to other agents occupying positions in the field. Even though these structures dictate the rules for these agents, agents always enjoy a margin of freedom. (see chapter 1 for a detailed explanation of fields)

positions in relation to the human rights field, which became critical in influencing

discourses and practices throughout the revolution, I have identified five

categories.[274]

The first category includes supporters of the Syrian government at the

beginning of the uprising, those insisting that the mobilizations that took place were a

Western conspiracy targeting the government-held anti-imperialist, anti-Israel, pro-

resistance (Hamas, and Hezbollah) politics. Even President Assad in an interview

with the Wall Street Journal at the end of January 2011 at the height of the uprisings

in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, expressed a conviction that Syria was different from the

rest of the Arab states where the "Arab Spring" took place, because of its anti-

Western anti-Israeli political position that, according to him, mirrored the ideology of

the Syrian people.[275]

Nour, a young professional who benefited from the neoliberal reforms that the

Assad government had implemented during the previous decade and who worked as a

reporter for a TV channel, expressed cynicism shared by many Syrian supporters of

the government or even by the bystanders who did not support the regime at the time

of the uprisings but did not mobilize to support the revolution either, "the so-called

gray people (al-ramadiyyin)."[276] Nour was convinced that what was taking place in

terms of uprisings was a conspiracy:

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[274] As I note elsewhere the human rights discourse did not suddenly emerge in Syria.
[275] "Interview With Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, sec. World News, http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.
[276] Wedeen, *Authoritarian Apprehensions*. p.viii.

I was covering the demonstrations [in support of the president] in Damascus,

and no one forced people to go demonstrate. I remember the conversations

with my friends regarding what to wear and whether there would be people

there or not. You know what? Syrians flooded the square [Umayyad square]

and the streets leading to it. I felt goosebumps when I went to the roof of a

building to take a video shot that covered the whole square. Syrians really

love the president. Especially Syrian youth.[277] Do you really think that

educated Syrians buy into the Western narrative of democracy and Human

Rights? What was that demonstration if not democracy? What does it tell you

to have millions of Syrians in the streets in support of the government? That is

why this is a conspiracy! Is it a democracy when the demonstrations overlap

with western interest, but it is not a democracy and the will of the people

when demonstrations oppose western imperialism and neocolonialism? We

have countless examples of western violence that no one cares about. Start

with Palestine, move to Iraq, and now Libya.

Nour's views confirmed a mainstream suspicion of the international agenda shared by

Syrians across the political aisle. Supporters of the government had been cynical of

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[277] This confirms Wedeen's argument that the combination of neoliberal policies with the
authoritarian rule in Syria produced a vision of the good life that many Syrians, especially
young urban professionals, embodied and consumed in many ways. This vision was
associated with the first family's cosmopolitan living. Wedeen, "Ideology and Humor in Dark
Times."

the Human Rights Discourse, especially since the 2003 invasion of Iraq and its aftermath. They assumed that those people who protested in the streets had been on board with the "conspiracy" against Syria since the beginning and were operating under the guise of human rights values in order to gain western attention. "They wanted an Islamic rule," reported Hanan, a staunch supporter of the Syrian government, especially President Assad and his reform agenda which she maintains has yet to be implemented. "They always dreamt of it and they thought they could implement it. They know nothing about freedom and democracy, they [have] wanted the whip of ISIS since the beginning." This description referred to events that took place in 2011where Hanan suggests that the demonstrations were Islamic and hiding behind a discourse of democracy and freedom. The conspiracy is also shared by Barout, who expressed cynicism when describing the negotiations between the president and the tribal leaders in Deraa (the spark of the uprisings): they had reached an agreement, but before the tribal leaders returned from Damascus to Deraa, an escalation took place even after the government pulled its forces out of the city, as per the agreement. This led Barout to ask whether there were already foreign agents mobilizing in Deraa.[278] Hamad a supporter of the regime who worked as an insurance broker and was a beneficiary of the neoliberal reforms that President Assad implemented as part of his reformist vision which complies with the

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[278] Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al- ʿAqd al- akhir fi tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud wa al-Islah*.

recommendations of the WTO, World Bank, IMF.[279] Cynically asks: "why do western humanitarians only mobilize against anti-imperialist countries? Do they really think we are idiots? Why don't they go to their Saudi friends and check the human rights atrocities there?"

The second category of ordinary Syrians interpreting the human rights discourse in their own way I call true believers, and includes opposition activists that truly believed in human rights and mobilized accordingly. People in this span from university educated middle class youth to the vanguards of revolutionary pan Arab liberation activists of the 20th century, to political dissidents who fought the single party rule for decades. Ammar, an opposition activist, expressed views similar to Hanan's: "If any Syrian believes that the West is coming to rescue us, they are either foreign agents, or plainly stupid." The same cynicism was expressed by leftist opposition groups, and is exemplified by Hisham's[280] comment:

> The whole human rights narrative that western powers and their media are
>
> selling does not have a market here. Syrians know that if they want to live in
>
> dignity they should root out the regime and keep the West outside. We know
>
> that they [western powers] do not care because if they cared they wouldn't

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[279] In Chapter 4, I show how people dealt with the human rights topic online using a guided approach to Topic Modeling with Facebook data, Twitter data, and Aljazeera Arabic comments.

[280] Hisham, who had been jailed by the Syrian security forces with no due process or any legal procedure of any sort, was released after his father bribed the many high-ranking officers in order, to get him released and they did, then he fled to Lebanon.

153

have waited until now [they would have intervened years before]. If they [western powers] cared they wouldn't pick and choose what works for them: in Libya they bomb for the oil, Syria they leave aside, the Gulf monarchies are beacons of democracy, Bahrain is not a visible case of human rights abuses, Yemen has been and is still off the human rights radar. If they [western powers] think that Assad's replacement will sign peace with Israel, they are totally mistaken. Assad is Israel's best bet.

Hisham's cynicism showcases the dilemma that RtoP is trying to bypass and that is, the long history of international indifference to mass atrocities. People in this category who are mostly members of the moderate opposition paid and continue to pay the highest price. They were the ones who fought for human rights values, including freedom and democracy, yet hold the most cynical opinions of the human rights discourse. At the time of this writing they [the true believers] are the most marginalized players in the ongoing turmoil.

Ammar attested to the fact that, in the midst of underground organizing, "We always had hope that freedom, democracy, and human rights would triumph. Now this hope is dead. We thought that justice [would] prevail." He blamed international interference mainly on the international and regional support of Islamist groups, which led to the demise of the more moderate groups such as the one he is active with. Similarly, Ahmed said, "We were naïve. We thought that Tunisia's and Egypt's models of the fall of their regime would take place in Syria. This political naiveté,

154

also led us to believe that the democratic world would not allow these atrocities to take place, even though we never supported a military intervention. But unfortunately, the international community supported the bloodbath of the anti-democracy camp." When asked whom he meant by "the anti-democracy camp," he named both the regime and the fundamentalists.

Hisham stated his reasons for joining the revolution: "We wanted a free democratic state where people live in dignity. And not in a place where a thug [security-service personnel] that you do not want even to spit on rules a city. We do not want to live in fear the whole time." The previous comments show the ambivalence of the true believers in expecting the "democratic world not to accept the atrocities of the Syrian government" but simultaneously not supporting a military intervention and these comments honed in on the problems of the human rights discourse preaching versus the actual practices. Hisham points out the indifference and the double standards of the international community. In citing the example of Bahrain, he asked: "What should we make out of the case of Bahrain? There have been peaceful demonstrations and a brutal crackdown comparable to the one we had at the beginning of the uprising, and look at the imperial powers' response."

Iraq is also mentioned as an example of the indifference of the West to the very values it preaches. Wadi', a leftist opposition activist who fled Syria hours before the Syrian security forces swarmed his house in Damascus, echoed a cynicism similar to that of Ammar, Hisham, and Ahmed, but his example is the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and its aftermath: "Look at the status of democracy and human rights

in Iraq. Look at the atrocities that the West committed there. Wikileaks [Julian Assange] is now on the run rather than being a human rights hero. People are not dumb, we are not dumb, you cannot preach something and do the opposite without even having the decency to hide it." Wadi', like the cynics he represents, believes in the values but does not think the preachers of these values care. Cynics like Wadi' mostly resigned as soon as they realized that there would be no regime change in the foreseeable future. This second category of Syrians I call true believers are the ones who still think that the revolution was about freedom, democracy, and human rights values, regardless of later developments. They still think that, even though the government forces are taking back most of the regions that were once under opposition control, the "seeds of freedom, democracy are about to sprout, and things cannot go back to what they were before."[281]

In his opinion piece in Verso, Deeb captures the views of the portion of the left that had been resisting authoritarianism and working towards human rights values and a democratic government years before 2011, and challenging the tyranny of the regime—a portion of true believers I see as having refused the militarization of the movement.[282] Deeb describes them as having been repressed by the regime for decades and taking part in the uprising as part of a vision.

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[281] Haitham's views overlap with the article in Jadaliyya.
"الثورات العربية في سياق الربيع العربي والديمقراطية" and Jadaliyya, جدلية.
[282] Thaer A. Deeb, "The Left in Syria: From Democratic National Change to Devastation," Versobooks.com, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3864-the-left-in-syria-from-democratic-national-change-to-devastation.

This vision was represented in the movement through the argument that salvation from tyranny could be achieved by a movement that was national and democratic. Given the balance of power, as well as the nature of the regime, this salvation must come through an escalating process that combines peaceful civil resistance and political action, spontaneity and consciousness, the enthusiasm of young people and the experience of the elders, and unfolds in consecutive rounds, which are always open to failure or retreat not only because of the strength of the opponent, but because we need to bypass the dreadful paths Syria was already thrown onto by others, blindly and fiercely.

Deeb also points out that this group knows that "some of those in the opposition were not concerned with freedom and dignity so much as they were invested in altering Syria's regional and international alliances." Even though this description is of the leadership of this portion of the left, it applies to those among ordinary Syrian true believers who participated in the uprisings.

Many true believers now feel that the impact of a "nice idea" such as human rights is meager in the world.[283] After nine years of turmoil and war in Syria, human

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[283] D. Chandler, ed., *Rethinking Human Rights: Critical Approaches to International Politics* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2002), https://doi.org/10.1057/9781403914262; Michael Ignatieff et al., *Human Rights as Politics and Idolatry*, ed. Amy Gutmann, 49509th edition (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); David Chandler, "Rhetoric without Responsibility: The Attraction of 'Ethical' Foreign Policy," *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 5, no. 3 (August 2003): 295–316, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-856X.00108.

rights as an idea has had little to no political impact when competing with geopolitical

questions such as the dismantling of the chemical weapons arsenal in 2013, or with

realpolitik in the United Nations and in the security council.[284]

The third category of ordinary citizens implementing their view of human

rights discourse would be "the liberalized ex-leftists"[285] used to be the vanguards of

the Arab left, and had been challenging the Baath government since its inception, but

used the human rights discourse as an instrument to bring in Western intervention and

did not, according to Deeb, have the vision for the unbearable cost of the armed

struggle. They pushed the victimization narrative in hope of inviting a Western

military intervention, that is supposed to shift the scales and end the Assad era. They

mobilized this narrative regardless of the rise of fundamentalist groups. In the words

of Omar:

Syrians have voiced their ambitions and they want a democratic government

that

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[284] Many people thought they will be helped by the international community, some still believe that if their story is heard things will change. For example, Noor a 12 year old living in sieged and under attack Ghouta district on February 20 2018, expressed in an NPR report the expectations on the part of many Syrians in her situation of the international community. "I'm so, so scared. We're hiding under the stairwell to escape from the bombs. There's no basement. I'm asking the world to put an end to this. We're really suffering." (NPR) Noor and most of the people of Eastern Ghouta evacuated the district by end of March and were bussed to the province of Idlib (Al-Jazeera). "Violence In Syria Escalates," NPR.org, accessed May 8, 2020, https://www.npr.org/2018/02/20/587234569/violence-in-syria-escalates; "Eastern Ghouta Evacuations: Thousands to Be Bused to Idlib | News | Al Jazeera," accessed May 17, 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/03/eastern-ghouta-evacuations-thousands-bused-idlib-180325094113482.html.
[285] Term used by Deeb but has been circulating in leftist anti-war activists

protects their human rights. They want to live in decent economic, social, and political conditions… ISIS, Al-Nusra will be expelled as soon as the regime falls, because what they preach is foreign to the Syrian population in general. All the Western fears of not intervening to topple the regime because they are scared of the Jihadists are unfounded. Syrians want democracy and they will not get that unless the regime falls.

While Omar's views show a conviction that "the International Community" will intervene to topple the authoritarian regime and bring in democratic change—and this view parallels that of many Syrians who believe in the promises of the human rights discourse and set up their fights accordingly—the problem is that these groups lost popular support to either the Islamic fundamentalist groups, to immigration, or to indifference to being ruled by the Baath in order to stop the bloodshed.

The fourth category includes ordinary Syrians who are influenced by Islamic organizations, mainly the Muslim Brotherhood who had been active in Syria since its inception. These Islamists, had strong roots in the Muslim Brotherhood who suffered the most during the 1982 government forces retaliation in Hama and the subsequent crackdown and persecution of its active members.[286] These groups found the moment ripe for a comeback, especially with the regional rise of the Brotherhood mainly in Turkey, post Mubarak Egypt, and post Bin 'Ali Tunisia. These people combined their beliefs that an Islamic rule according to the Quran will bring justice, equality, and

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[286] Moubayed, *Under the Black Flag*.

decent living for the Sunni Muslims, who have long been ruled by a secular apostate Baathist rule. These people also insist that they are not sectarian, that they have been living with other sects for a long time, but that an Islamic rule is their right as a majority even according to Western democracies. The details of this view are still unknown, specifically, where one draws the line of tolerance for others and which Islamic school and teachings to follow. Housam, who supports the Brotherhood, claimed that an Islamic state is not what ISIS is pursuing: "The Islamic State [according to the Brotherhood] is democratic." He points out that the brotherhood's model is best exemplified by the Turkish model of the Justice and Development Party who are democratically elected and rule a secular state where they implement changes by democratic means.

The fifth and last category of ordinary Syrians I wish to categorize in this discussion are the Islamists who are part of the global Islamic Jihad, such as Al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda), and ISIS, whose version of Islam precludes space for others. Major nuances distinguish these groups, such as the different demographics between Al-Nusra and ISIS concerning Arabs and Muhajirin [foreign fighters]. These differences have played critical roles in how these groups implement Shari'a law and whether they have drawn support from ordinary Syrians or implemented their rule through oppression and fear. While the differences in attitudes between the Islamic groups towards showing respect to local traditions and towards corruption schemes taking place at the leadership levels are worth studying, they exceed the scope of this chapter; that said, it is important to mention that the ISIS narrative flipped parts of the

human rights discourse on its head and claimed that their version of Islam better delivers (though they do not say how) the promises of the Western human rights discourse by showing the failures of human rights within global capital.[287]

The five categories discussed above are not mutually exclusive, as al-Sarout's story demonstrates: at different moments throughout the war, ordinary Syrians can be part of any one of these groups. Next, I show how each understanding of the human rights discourse across these categories proved critical in the making, unmaking, and remaking of Syrians sect-identities.

The Majority Minority Narrative

In what follows, I show how a logic of rights including the democratic "majority" and the protection of "minorities" that the "international community" formulated in Syria sectarianized human rights and simultaneously increased sectarian divisions. I also show how people's sect became the defining characteristic of the logic of majority/minority democratic representation, and how the sectarianization of human rights discourse was instrumentalized by all the warring groups, including the Syrian government, moderate opposition, ISIS, and al-Nusra (Al-Qaeda).[288]

The Emergence of the Sect based Majority/Minority Narrative

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[287] The Dark Rise of Banknotes and the Return of the Gold Dinar, *The Dark Rise of Banknotes and the Return of the Gold Dinar*, 1440, http://archive.org/details/TheGoldDinar.
[288] Thaer A. Deeb, "The Left in Syria."

The human rights discourse became sectarianized, and this discourse in turn shifted

the sect habitus in different ways and pushed ordinary Syrians into sharp divisions

that they are still trying to make sense of. These shifts produce the ambivalence

towards the "other" exemplified in many of my interlocutors' insistence that "Syrians

are not sectarian, that is not in their nature" but then singling out one group as

sectarian "The Sunnis are sectarian," "the Alawites are sectarian." Many scholars[289]

have addressed the victimhood attribute around which the Shi'a sect builds its

ideological beliefs, especially the victimization of its early leadership, including the

prophet's grandsons Hasan and Husain. Haddad[290] shows that the Shi'a in Iraq have

in recent years perceived themselves to be continuing what he calls the myth-symbol

complex of this victimhood fate under Saddam Husain's leadership.[291] There has been

a reversal in the perception of victimhood, since the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003

for many Sunnis in Iraq. In Lebanon, the corrupt political elite and the consociational

system of governance provided fertile ground to portray the Sunnis, especially after

the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005, as the victims of Iranian

influence on Lebanon through the arming of Hezbollah,[292] and the supposed Christian

claims for more power in the government.

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[289] Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization"; Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*, Reprint edition (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007); Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011; Haddad, "Shia-Centric State Building and Sunni Rejection in Post-2003 Iraq."

[290] For an outstanding research about the victimization of Shi'a in Iraq see Haddad's ch.6. Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011.

[291] Saddam Husain was Sunni and the Sunni sect is a minority in terms of numbers in Iraq, Haddad details the persecution of Shi'a and Kurds by Husain.

[292] Even though Hezbollah was not in any government until 2005

The Sunni sect has been victimized since the Iranian revolution,[293] heightened

with the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath and mainly with the

subsequent sectarian war in Iraq between Sunnis and Shi'a in 2006.[294] This

victimization also took place in Lebanon after the assassination of a prominent Sunni

leader, PM Rafik Hariri, in 2005, but more importantly it was broadcast on the

countless satellite channels that were funded mainly by the Wahabi religious school

[Saudi], Muslim Brotherhood [Qatar, Turkey] in order to counter the "Iranian

influence" in the Arab world. Religious schools backed by Saudi and Qatari money

have sprouted in Syria under Bashar al-Assad's rule.[295]

In Syria, the narrative of an Alawite minority ruling a Sunni majority is not

new.[296] But since the beginning of the uprisings, this narrative has become the only

political framework used throughout the war by most players, including ordinary

Syrians. Either as a victimization of a Sunni majority brutally ruled by an Alawite

minority, or as evidence of the necessity for minorities to rule in order to protect

themselves from an intolerant majority. By the end of 2011, the debate about

"international intervention" and the rise of the Free Syrian Army had increased both

the divisions between the opposition and the sectarian exclusionary discourse at least

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[293] Nader Hashemi, "Toward a Political Theory of Sectarianism in the Middle East"; Nasr, "International Politics, Domestic Imperatives, and Identity Mobilization"; Nasr, *The Shia Revival*.
[294] Haddad, *Sectarianism in Iraq*, 2011.
[295] Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2013); Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford University Press, 2013).
[296] YVETTE TALHAMY, "The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria," *Middle Eastern Studies* 46, no. 2 (2010): 175–94; Ghalioun, *Sectarianism and the Problem of Minorities*.

on the three major/official Facebook pages of the opposition.[297] Housam, an

opposition activist who fled to Beirut in 2012, argued that the "regime would kill all

Syrians because it knows that under any real democratic system the Sunni majority

will win the elections." On the other side, government supporters insist that the

government would have fallen had it not enjoyed popular majority support. Zouheir

Ramadan a Syrian actor and the head of the artists union in Syria, in an interview

with Hazem Dakel reporter with Al Quds Al Arabi newspaper, asserts that "this

regime would not exist without popular support. Believe me, even the Sunnis—

without them [their support] the regime would have fallen. The Syrian people trust its

regime and we all think that only Bashar al Assad stopped the division of Syria."[298]

Even when making the case for regime legitimacy, the narrative of support is based

on a Sunni majority support of the regime. The Syrian government did not overtly

adopt a sectarian narrative, but did focus on the exclusionary discourse of some

oppositions, and used all possible events to show that it is protecting religious

minorities such as the liberation of Maaloula [Christians] from Al-Nusra in 2014,[299]

and the release of the abducted people of Souaida [Druze] form ISIS in 2018 where

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[297] Ḥamzah Muṣṭafá Muṣṭafá, المجال العام الإفتراضي في الثورة السورية.
[298] "...ز هير رمضان: شاركنا في سوتشي بطلب من الدولة ونمثّل - Hazem Dakel (34)," accessed April 14, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/hazem.dakel/posts/10155560886024332.
[299] Frederik Pleitgen and Paul Armstrong, "Life after Islamist Rule: Christians Rebuild," CNN, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2016/05/16/middleeast/syria-maaloula-christians/index.html.

President Assad welcomed them in his presidential palace as a move to show the

Druze "renewed" support to the regime.[300]

Evil Takes on a Face

Unleashing the Unthinkable (ISIS and the Cinematic Atrocities)

For the Western commentators, scholars, media outlets, and proponents of

universal human rights, President Assad became the total embodiment of evil in Syria

from 2011 until the rise of ISIS in 2014. The idea of delivering justice to the Syrian

people, became equated with the removal of the president, which would then result in

change, even though all examples of such routes (Iraq, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen) did

not lead to that hoped-for outcome. The same model was pursued and the results were

that either the regime structures did not change, as in Egypt, or such removal led to an

imminent fall into civil wars and failed states, as in Yemen and Libya.[301] It was not

until the cinematic killings by ISIS, with the video documentation of their "cub" or

child executioners[302] that evil assumed a different face as yet another example of

something "unthinkable" was perpetrated. ISIS media campaigns, especially the

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[300] "روسيا تفاوض داعش على إطلاق سراح مخطوفين دروز | DW | 03.08.2018," DW.COM, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.dw.com/ar/%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7-%D8%AA%D9%81%D8%A7%D9%88%D8%B6-%D8%AF%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%B4-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%A5%D8%B7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%B3%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%AD-%D9%85%D8%AE%D8%B7%D9%88%D9%81%D9%8A%D9%86-%D8%AF%D8%B1%D9%88%D8%B2/a-44949999.

[301] Samantha Power, *The Education of an Idealist: A Memoir*, Illustrated edition (New York, NY: Dey Street Books, 2019). Power is a great example illustrating this view.

[302] من الأرض | 2019-11-14 | الرقة: أثر داعش - أشبال الخلافة.. قنابل موقوتة أم ضحايا؟ accessed April 12, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CQXfDCugOhk.

documentation of the executions, hit the core values of the human rights culture and produced a dilemma for Western observers. Cmiel[303] highlights the importance of data and imagery in directing the human rights paradigm. While reports and images of the Syrian population suffering massive destruction and unbearable life conditions including unprecedented internal displacement and a global refugee crisis and millions of calls for International humanitarian support and help were being broadcast on international news outlets and widely circulating on social media, ISIS and Al Nusra[304] were broadcasting propaganda videos of executions with high-quality production, which played a dual role. First, it legitimized the intervention of an international coalition—led by the United States—as part of the global war on terror, to preserve some of the legacy of human rights. Second, it also legitimized the intervention of the regime's allies based first, on international law[305] and second, on formal requests from the Syrian government to back up their "Syrian legitimate sovereign government" ally. In this context, Russia, Iran and Hezbollah are also seen to be fighting the terrorist organizations operating in Syria. Repeatedly, Russia, Iran, and the international coalition accuse each other of using terrorist organizations instead of fighting them.[306]

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[303] Cmiel, "The Emergence of Human Rights Politics in the United States."
[304] Now Jabhat Fate'h Al-Sham and Al-Qaeda faction that is still operating mainly in Idlib at the time of this writing.
[305] The Syrian government officially requested the aid of its allies based on treaties signed with Russia and Iran.
[306] "Russia Accuses U.S. of Training Former Islamic State Fighters in Syria," *Reuters*, December 27, 2017, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-russia-usa/russia-accuses-u-s-of-training-former-islamic-state-fighters-in-syria-idUSKBN1EL0KZ; "Russians Strike Targets in Syria, but Not ISIS Areas - The New York Times," accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/01/world/europe/russia-airstrikes-syria.html.

The dilemma of the current humanitarian logic is summarized by the following question: If ISIS becomes the successor of Assad, what would happen to the structures of beliefs that human rights had been building for decades?

Syrians Defining Evil

Ordinary Syrians have had to endure war conditions that have include surviving bombings; military attacks; kidnapping; Western sanctions; government sieges of cities and towns occupied by the opposition; televised and non-televised beheadings by ISIS and Al-Nusra; car bombs; displacement; shortages of food, medical supplies, and gas; torture; and ISIS slave markets. All of the above qualify as human rights atrocities of different scales, and all are condemned because they end up impacting ordinary people (civilians). Naming evil becomes complex, as all of these acts amount to human rights atrocities if we take the UN Declaration of Human Rights at face value. Articles 3, 4, and 5 are clear as to what human rights stand for: "Article 3: Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and the security of person. Article 4: No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article 5: No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment."

But for ordinary civilians, naming evil becomes the outcome of an individual and group/community experience, as in the case of Mona, a millennial from

Maaloula,[307] who showed me around the town, described the invasion of "the terrorists," and walked me around detailing the long history of some of the town ruins that go back thousands of years. For her, "the terrorists did the unspeakable in Maaloula. They are the symbol of evil.… What is the usefulness of attacking Maaloula other than cleansing Christians from the oldest Christian town in the Middle East? Why would anyone attack this peaceful religious site? We didn't even have a military presence in Maaloula. But thanks to the 'resistance' [the Lebanese Hezbollah] and the Arab Syrian National Army, the terrorists were decimated, and by God's will Maaloula and Syria's heyday will come back under the leadership of the president, Dr. Bashar al-Assad." When asked about the victims of the other side, Mona stated that "they made this choice and they should pay for it." When asked to specify what choice she was referring to, she explained: "Rising up against the government, and sheltering terrorists." In response to the question as to whether all members of the opposition are terrorists, she made a distinction that many supporters of the regime do not make: "No, only those who committed crimes and carried arms against their own people." Then she continued: "Who doesn't want reforms? But this is not how you get reforms, by exterminating everyone around you." She also

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[307] Hamdi Alkhshali and Nic Robertson, "Syria Islamist Rebels Take Control of Christian Town of Maaloula," CNN, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.cnn.com/2013/09/08/world/meast/syria-civil-war/index.html; "Battle Continues in Syria's Maaloula," *BBC News*, September 11, 2013, sec. Middle East, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24051440; Anne Barnard and Hwaida Saad, "Assault on Christian Town in Syria Adds to Fears Over Rebels," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2013, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/middleeast/assault-on-christian-town-complicates-crisis-in-syria.html.

expressed what many other people repeatedly said: "If I have to choose between now and what we had, I would choose what we had a million times over what we are going through now. Even though what we had before is not perfect, at least we used to have a life. What we have now is pure evil and the West is trying to impose their satanic plan to domesticate Syria in order to protect Israel." The high cost, the prolonged years of war, and the economic meltdown had produced a sense of despair for the government and the opposition supporters who share a view similar to Mona's, which is that returning to pre-2011 Would best be relegated to dreams for now.

On the other hand, Marwa, who endured the siege of the Barada Valley[308] and experienced shortages of food, medication, and essential materials, and the constant fear of being killed by barrel bombing, told me that "the dictator [President Assad] is a butcher who is constantly hungry for blood. I still cannot even imagine all the atrocities that he committed." For Marwa, like most ordinary Syrians who support the fall of the regime, evil has a name: Bashar al Assad. Voicing what many opposition supporters have been concerned with since the rise of ISIS and its capture of the global community's and media attention, Marwa also pointed out that "now that

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[308] Louisa Loveluck and Heba Habib, "A Once-Beautiful Valley in Syria Is Now a Microcosm of the Country's War," *Washington Post*, January 4, 2017, sec. Middle East, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/a-once-beautiful-valley-in-syria-is-now-a-microcosm-of-the-countrys-war/2017/01/04/4157e544-d28c-11e6-9cb0-54ab630851e8_story.html; العربية نت, "وادي بردى.. تحت الحصار والنار مجدداً," العربية نت, January 5, 2017, https://www.alarabiya.net/ar/arab-and-world/syria/2017/01/05/-وادي-بردى-تحت-الحصار-والنار-مجدداً.html; "وادي بردى تحت الحصار," Al-Watan, accessed May 18, 2020, http://www.al-watan.com/news-details/id/53638/d/20170120 class= class=/الحصار-تحت-بردى-وادي.

169

everyone is focused on ISIS, the symbol of evil [Assad] is left free to kill everyone

without any censorship."

Evil Takes on a Sect

With the war atrocities being streamed online by both the political players (including

the international and regional players directly involved in the war) and the armed

players in Syria, and with the massive scale of these atrocities (including kidnapping,

rape, theft, etc.), "evil" seemed to manifest everywhere and became represented by

sects. For example, Samir [Christian], a well-to-do self-made professional before the

uprisings, lost his house and office during the clashes in Homs. Forced to flee with

his family and leave all belongings behind, he explained, "Those [Sunnis] are pure

evil. The government should kill them all for the sake of all humanity. People who

breed something like ISIS should be exterminated. Those people do not even deserve

the boot of Bashar on their necks." Pointing out ISIS and Al-Nusra attacks on the

Christian villages and destroying the Christian symbols,[309] he continued: "Look at

what they did to the churches, priests and nuns." On the other hand, referencing the

history of the Alawite community in Syria, which is also the source of much

circulated stereotypes,[310] Marwan reported: "The Alawites are hungry for blood. They

were always hiding in the mountains and they just are hungry for blood. How can any

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[309] They did not only target Christian symbols; they targeted all the ruins and symbols that they deemed pagan, and blasphemous.

[310] Hanan explained that "the Alawites are not even a religion; they are a secretive group that some believe they do not even believe in God."

human being support the barrel bombs? How can they see all the killings on Facebook and support the butcher [Assad]? They must be evil." Based on the unfolding of the war events and their personal experiences of the war, for both Samir and Marwan, evil became embodied in a sect as a whole: the Sunni sect for the former and the Alawite sect for the latter.

Human Rights Discourse and the Shifting of Sect habitus

The Human Rights "Field"

I conceptualize the human rights discourse as a semi-autonomous field that is a site of actions and reactions where agents including members of the UN security council, the International community, state governments in my case Syria, regional governments (Iran, Saudi, Turkey, Israel, Lebanon, Jordan, etc.), regional non-government armed groups, international non-governmental organizations INGOs, media outlets, social media platforms, ordinary Syrians, sects, political elites, occupy specific positions within the field and each comes with a set of dispositions that are shaped by the field as well as other fields that relate to that field. The human rights discourse has supposedly a set of rules that agents abide by, including in times of peace the right to life, liberty, and security of person, anti-slavery, anti-torture and inhumane treatment or punishment, etc. and in times of war the protection of civilians, prevention of mass atrocities, torture prevention, war crimes prevention, etc. This field relates to, influences and is influenced by international relations, international alliances, international law media capabilities in terms of influencing

171

public opinions and international public opinions. The human rights field influenced how ordinary Syrians, opposition activists, neutral Syrians, and supporters of the government, made sense of these rights before, during and after the revolution. Political players also attempted to shift these rules to advance their own agendas.[311]

Next, I will show how almost all warring factions in the Syrian conflict, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, adopted and co-opted some parts of the human rights discourse. The sect habitus of ordinary people shifted when positioned in an ambiguous human rights field, which amplified the sectarian divisions. Sect identities took on new meanings in the new conditions imposed by the war. Subjected to a hegemonic human rights discourse in the media and in international politics, these conditions were sectarianized in order to become weaponized for the struggle. Sect identities became sectarian, as did human rights discourse.

As the following observation by A'laa' shows, democratic values and the Western double standards in applying or helping to implement "universal value" left most ordinary Syrians ambivalent about such values:

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[311] For example, in the case of the Syrian government: by attempting to influence the human rights discourse through international relations and realpolitik and by giving legitimacy for the brutality of the armed operations under the guise of religious freedoms and the protection religious minorities. In the case of some opposition groups, regional and international players by giving the human rights discourse a sectarian meaning as a way to promote a "democratic rule of the Sunni majority." And in the case of some ordinary Syrians, especially opposition activists, by seeking to influence international relations and realpolitik through human rights discourse.

When democracy leads to the Islamic State fanatics who think they will reinstate the rule of the sword, then fuck democracy and the West on top of it. We have been living together for centuries, and here in Syria, unlike other places we had a functioning secular state that none of the other Arab countries have. But now, if this is what is needed, then yes, we [Christians] will stand with the Alawites and other minorities to defend our homes. But let me clarify something here: we are not sectarian; all the moderate Sunnis and some fundamentalists who do not believe in the fanatic Islamic doctrines are on our side… The problem again is that the West does not have a God.[312] They [Western players] just do what works for them.

A'laa' wants to defend secularism even though he is positioning himself along sectarian lines, but also uses these sectarian delimitations to show that, while these sects are not sectarian, they will become so if need be. The key issue here is that A'laa's ambivalence is a projection of the human rights discourse that became sectarianized into a majority-minority sect where the Sunni majority is portrayed as the victim of the authoritarian minority.

Shifting Grounds since 2011

From Demonstrating for Rights to Joining ISIS and Nusra

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[312] "You do not have a God" is a saying in Syria and Lebanon that denotes that the person in question cares only about themselves; it does not have any religious meaning other than that the person in question does not even care about God

At different points during the fight, many opposition activists, especially those who did not have the means to leave the country, who lost loved ones, or who felt betrayed by the promise of Human Rights and by prospects of democratic change, decided to join the fundamentalist groups who became the only opposition players by 2015.[313] Ahmed recounted the story of friends who were active throughout the peaceful revolution but decided to join Nusra as a last resort, because "they think the fight is not over and the regime should fall even if they had to join the devil for that." His friends were willing to stop drinking and abide by a strict Islamic way of life that was not at all like them. "It was a shock to all of us [the opposition group they were part of]," Ahmed explained. "We were naive and we really believed that change is possible and the international community cares about democracy and freedom. Unfortunately, we were wrong."

From Demonstrating for Rights to Joining the Syrian Army

Conversely, the same feeling of betrayal by the human rights discourse developed in opposing ways. Firas, who was serving with the Syrian Army in Aleppo at the time of my interview in 2018, explained: "In 2011, I was demonstrating in Homs. I was stupid enough to believe that people really wanted freedom and democracy and the international community cared about us. I realized that people want sectarianism and terrorism and the Western powers want the fall of Syria for Israel's sake. So, I enlisted in the Syrian Army in 2014." Firas refused to state his sect

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[313]al-Sarout's story is an example of such a development.

174

for the interview, even though, he had a showing rosary bracelet on his wrist, which is a sign that he is Christian. Firas's refusal to voice his sect while wearing a visible symbol that declares his sect is a practice similar to the practice of not asking someone's sect while implicitly deducing their sects (see Chapter 1). These nonconscious practices are products of the sect habitus which mean that voicing one's sect is sectarian while wearing the religious symbol is not. His story is to some extent similar to Amin's story a Christian from Damascus who joined the uprisings "until it became sectarian, and I saw international intervention to increase violence. I had to do what is best for us [Christians], so I joined the draft until I was shot in the foot, and I am now under the disabled category in the army." Both Firas and Amin insisted on showing me photos from the demonstrations to prove that they were there in order to dispel any doubt in their story.[314] These stories show that ordinary Syrians identify with human rights values and made meaning of these values through a set of dispositions and understandings which includes sect-based dispositions in the case of Syria and led to a sectarian understanding of human rights.

From Demonstrating for Rights to Indifference

Many, if not most people who truly believed in human rights transitioned into indifference, whether in Syria or, more commonly, abroad. Most opposition activists

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[314] The government had staged many testimonies of supposed opposition activists, fighters, and even ISIS suicide bombers showing regret and repentance. I interpret their insistence on showing me their photos as an anticipatory defense that I might assume they are part of government propaganda.

who did not carry arms against the government forces did in fact feel betrayed by the international community as well as despair at the outcome of the revolution. From the rise of fundamentalist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Nusra to the take-over of many "liberated" regions by the government forces and their international allies, to the fragile self-rule of the Kurdish north, all the prospects for democratic change and Human Rights have become a "nightmare" for these activists. As Ahmed reported, "We just want to forget what has happened in the last years."[315] And Amer attested to the fact that at different moments during the revolution, activists started to retreat: "We had to think about our [personal] future. So, some of us are still in Syria navigating the situation and trying to make the best out of it for us and our families; others have emigrated to Europe and are starting new lives; and the rest are either in Turkey, or here in Lebanon."[316]

From Demonstrating for Rights to Regret and Despair

Many opposition activists express regret and despair, and feel that the revolution got stolen by the opposition abroad, who militarized the uprising, by the regime's brutality, and by the betrayal of the international community. Hisham began explaining: "We thought that the international community really cared and would not allow this to take place at some point, but we were wrong. We were also betrayed by the traitors of the opposition abroad, and the bloodthirsty regime is never full. Now,

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[315] Interview in 2018
[316] Interview in 2016

we have nothing left—they stole our dreams. All of them." Hisham burst into tears at this point and asked to stop the interview. The human rights discourse promise of change caused the collapse of the hundreds of leftist organizations that did not find it urgent to have a united vision.[317] The promises of human rights discourse and inability to deliver for the many true believers' geopolitical promises, led to a feeling of betrayal.

From Demonstrating for Rights to the Need to Go Back to Normal

"We don't want freedom anymore, we want national unity."[318] These were the chants at a demonstration in Kafr Batna in the Eastern Ghouta district of Damascus, on March 9, 2018, after years of siege, active military operations, bomb strikes by air, and shelling. After seven years of revolting against the Syrian government, these chants could simply be analyzed as the signs of resignation after years of suffering with no end in sight, and as signs of despairing people who have had enough. While this simple explanation makes sense as an end result of the seven years of war, this is also an affirmation that RtoP's promise of "never again"[319] was not fulfilled for these

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[317] "We were five hundred different opposition organization that had things in common but never a unified body" (interview with Ahmed 1:25)
"I was released from prison to be told there is ISIS. I asked, what is ISIS?" (interview with Ahmed 3:12)
"I was involved in the demonstrations in 2011 I used to call that revolution not anymore" (interview with Ahmed)
[318] "(20+) Watch | Facebook."
[319] "From this perspective, the basic case for R2P, and for responding in some productive way when one becomes aware of an actual or imminent mass atrocity crime, rests simply on our common humanity: the impossibility of ignoring the cries of pain and distress of our fellow human beings. To yet again do so, and once again make "never again" a cry that rings totally emptily, is to diminish that common humanity to the point of despair." (Evans, 229)

populations who paid the highest price while the humanitarians where stuck debating whether now is the right time to intervene and how. The case of Syria is a clear example of the RtoP's struggle to define the "right" time and conditions to intervene. "The question of whether it is too early or too late to intervene" has been a dilemma of humanitarians in general and RtoP in particular.

The war in Syria had amounted by many estimates to the loss of more than 500,000 lives and triggered the largest internal displacement of this century, with 6.6 million displaced and around 5.6 million refugees in neighboring countries and around the world.[320] So the critical question is what does "never again" really mean? This discussion needs its own space.

As Meister rightly points out, the Human Rights Discourse challenges the world to advance from being mere bystanders to actively engaging in the rejection of such atrocities.[321] The problem with the Human Rights Discourse, according to Meister, is that it transforms bystanders into compassionate witnesses. Witnessing and rejecting atrocities became the role of the humanitarians while Syrians are enduring sanctions in the government ruled areas, enduring the armed bloodshed in areas outside of government rule, and enduring living under the rule of ISIS, Al-Nusra and other fundamentalist organizations in other regions. While the world forcefully rejected the atrocities (on social media, mainstream media, INGO reports), on the grounds ordinary Syrians from all sides paid the highest prices.

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[320] United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Syria Emergency," UNHCR, accessed May 18, 2020, https://www.unhcr.org/syria-emergency.html.
[321] Meister, *After Evil*. 212

The Regime's Single Discourse Since the Beginning

Since the beginning of the uprisings, the government has maintained a single narrative that combines a foreign conspiracy against the Syrian people with the fight against terrorist groups. It has used the double standards of the Western powers in dealing with the human rights atrocities as they see fit.[322] It has emphasized countless examples of Western atrocities that violate human rights, including in neighboring Iraq since 2003, the NATO bombing of Libya and its aftermath, and of course, the emblematic example of Israel and occupied Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict that was supposed to according to the regime's beliefs, shield Syria from the demonstrations that swept Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya. Because Syria is regarded as spearheading the Arab-Israeli conflict, President Bashar al Asad argued a few days before the uprisings that Syria was different from the rest of these countries because it was still at the heart of Palestinian struggle. On January 31, 2011, in an interview with the *Wall Street Journal*, President Bashar al-Assad was confident that the ongoing uprisings in the region, which were spreading to many states in the Middle East, would not affect Syria. He argued that Syria was different from Egypt and Tunisia on both internal and external levels. Internally, he argued, despite the economic needs of Syrian people and the slow reform process that he had been trying to implement, the Syrian people would not revolt because "it is not only about the needs and not only about the reform. It is about the ideology, the beliefs and the cause

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[322] Meister.

179

that you [Syrians] have."[323] By referencing ideology and beliefs, Assad was situating the economic struggles and the reforms within the Syrian-Israeli conflict that is the major cause of international pressure on the Syrian government and the cause for the issues he mentioned.

What About the Government Supporters?

Government supporters either bought into the narrative of international conspiracy from the beginning, or, as Wedeen rightly described, parts of Syrian society behaved "as if" they were fully obedient and fully supported the government. In this case, it worked well for the government, at least in the urban centers at the beginning of the uprisings. Later, most of these people found no better viable alternative to support. 'Adnan, a taxi driver in Damascus, explained: "They have been used to reciting that they support the president with soul and, blood and at the beginning of the uprising I questioned whether I should join the demonstrations. But thank God I didn't, because now, with ISIS and the terrorists in Ghouta, I am a full supporter of the president and I will give him my blood if he needs it." 'Adnan, like many others, found himself in an easy position to choose fundamentalism or the government, and he chose the government. "This is all bullshit. Human what? No one [the West] cares about this [Human Rights]. They [the West] do what works for them, and if it happens to be human rights then why not give those people human

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[323] "Interview With Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad," *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011, sec. World News,
https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894.

rights?" 'Adnan is pointing out the double standards that the international community follows. Similarly, in his comment about the uprising's call for human rights, freedom(s), democracy, and the dismantling of the police state of which he was a part in Damascus and for which he got arrested and jailed for three months, Housam on the one hand shows his frustration with the empty promises of the West as the protectors, saviors, and vanguards of human rights. On the other hand, he reveals his dissociation with human rights as western made, offered only when the West benefits from offering them, and not because they are a universal right. The human rights discourse became the Trojan horse that dismantled the fight of its true believers [opposition members like Housam] who fought for the ideals of human rights democracy, and freedom.

What about ISIS supporters?

In this section, I analyze ISIS videos because I was not able to interview people living under ISIS control and supporting ISIS. In what follows I analyze three videos produced by ISIS. The videos advance an explicit critique of a liberal enlightenment-based HRD, but in offering that critique they repurpose aspects of a western HRD (i.e: ethnic and racial non-discrimination, and a more equitable society), in the service of Islam. These two moves generate a whole other exclusivist level sect habitus that leaves no space for any Other even belonging to the Sunni whose views do not align with ISIS.

In one of their propaganda videos in Arabic that compares the Caliphate to the "Western corrupt" models, ISIS engages the HRD by stating that rather than being a secular state based on human-made provisions IS is based on the Sunna of God. The voice over begins: "Its army does not fight for the tyrants (Obama and his administration's photo), liars (George W.Bush's photo), adulterers (Bill Clinton's photo), and they never fight for money (with images of the top financial, oil, and other big conglomerates), and never for the freedoms of gays (with a headline of the security council meeting to discuss the LGBTQ persecution under ISIS). […] We are the ones who destroyed Sykes-Picot and removed the remnants of polytheism and nationalism, we do not differentiate between Arab and foreigner, nor between white and black except in piety. That is the strong moral beliefs that unite us." Towards the end of the video, they claim that they are fighting a satanic coalition between the US/West with Iran, Turkey, and Russia bound by their infidelity to fight the rightful people [Sunni Muslims]. Here ISIS is showing that not only Christians are the enemy but also the Shi'a and even Sunnis following other schools of thought.

In another video in French, addressing the double standards of HRD, ISIS engages the Western categorization of themselves as terrorists. In a section titled "our terrorism and their alliance" to expose the Western double standards, ISIS used a televised conversation with French philosopher and public figure Michel Onfrey where he answers the question "why do we have problems with terrorism these days?" He went on to say "The Muslims are not dumb. I mean we are waging wars in their countries, we kill them in tens and hundreds, and we ask them to be kind. They

are not nice, and they have the right to be so, as long as we are at war to triumph secularism on the premise that Islam is not suitable for us." Then they move on to show the destruction that the aerial bombardment left in civilian homes, with a song in the background sung by kids in French stating "you give yourself the right to kill us in the name of your freedom. Your money and way of life are fallible to us. Your blood is going to be shed to pay for your horrible crimes. When your Rafale air jets are bombing us, your elites are watching with no shame, while your mainstream media are hiding these horrors and atrocities. Our dead do not deserve to be mentioned for you." They showed images of injured and dead babies and kids. The video continues to show ISIS killing two people who supposedly worked against the IS.

In a video addressing social equality, titled from Humiliation to Glory, in mixed languages, ISIS shows three Black men introduced as from Mali, Nigeria, and west Africa sending messages to their fellow Muslims in their country encouraging them to migrate to the land of Islam where they can live in honor, respect, and without humiliation from the secular infidel governments and laws in their countries. One of them describes the good life where families are walking around and playing in the public garden. He then invites them to come to fight a war that will give them life a generous life of honor. ISIS argues that Islam does not racially discriminate; rather it provides an honorable life.

In All these videos, on the one hand, ISIS lump-sums everyone who does not follow their version of Islam under the category of "crusaders" which produces a

unified category that basically believes, practices, and is aligned with everything that is anti-Muslim through a critique of HRD. On the other, they show that Islam is the way to stop discrimination, generate a more equitable society, and live better under God's laws.

As al-Sarout's sect habitus evolved with the unfolding events of the war, one can argue that ISIS's maneuver in terms of on the one hand, critiquing HRD and on the other repurposing parts of that discourse in the service of Islam, laid the conditions of possibility for someone like al-Sarout at the time of increased despair to pledge allegiance to ISIS. al-Sarout who, as I show in this chapter, started as an HR Syrian unity activist, to a supporter of ISIS with a sect habitus that evolved with the unfolding events of the war. Time and time again al-Sarout and many activists like him were left hanging when asking for support from the supposed the defenders of HR. What ISIS offered al-Sarout is first the recognition that his fight was worthy, if it becomes in the name of God, and second a space where the regime, its allies, and the people who disappointed him, to be the enemy through a Sunni exclusivist discourse.

Comparison with the Gobal Human Rights Discourse

Since the beginning of the uprisings in 2011, the international media and the opposition-led media have framed the Syrian uprisings, mobilizations, and demonstrations as demands for basic human rights, which in the logic of the human rights discourse are universal regardless of the situation, culture, traditions, and history. For months beginning in March 2011, thousands of Syrians demonstrated in

184

the streets of most cities and towns chanting "huriye," "freedom," which according the human rights discourse rendered them defenders of the human rights paradigm and rendered the Syrian government and its supporters the transgressors on every believer in the human rights values. The problem with that logic is, as Meister argues, that the Human Rights Discourse depoliticizes the fight for justice by recasting the resistor as a victim and itself as the savior/protector. Meister's argument regarding the bystanders, who in this case have been onlookers to Syria's human rights atrocities for forty years, if not more, is that they merely flipped the page to a new chapter that supposedly erases the past and equates them with the victims. For example, at the sixty sixth's general assembly at the UN on February 13 2012, the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights declared that "The government of Syria has manifestly failed its obligation to protect its population; each and every member of the international community must act now to protect [this] population," pointing out the "serious violations" by the government.[324] Most of these violations had been documented since the 70s but the international community turned a blind eye until 2011. By this logic of universalization and a supposedly unified humanity, the whole of humanity became the victim of the Baath government's human rights atrocities.

Most opposition activists during the first few months of uprisings thought that the Baath government would not be able to sustain the international pressure

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[324] "Top UN Human Rights Official Says Member States 'Must Act Now' to Protect Syrian People, as Violent Crackdown Continues, in Briefing to General Assembly | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases," accessed May 9, 2020, https://www.un.org/press/en/2012/ga11206.doc.htm.

expecting a similar case to Mubarak in Egypt and Bin Ali in Tunisia. Libya's revolts were still ongoing when ordinary Syrians in Damascus started protesting Kaddafi even before the Syrian uprising started. Ahmed recalled that the number of security personnel in civilian clothes far exceeded that of the protestors. But he also recalled that the protestors started testing the extent of the security forces nerve, harassing them by shouting: "A traitor is the one who kills his people." "They even attempted to handcuff some of us," Ahmed said, "But we started running, and I remember knocking on a door and asking for water from an old lady to make as if I wasn't part of the demonstration." Ahmed did not recall whether anyone was captured that day but he realized that things [the situation in Syria] had changed already. Even though there had many different expectations and attitudes regarding the international intervention, the international response in Syria was summarized by Amir:

Look, no one cares about what happens to us—the poor people (alsha'eb alm'atar). They [international and regional players] are settling scores using us. They do not care about democracy and freedom and all the bullshit that you hear on the news. We [ordinary Syrians] are worth nothing to them. Look at the beginning of the events [uprisings]. I got excited at the prospect of even dreaming of a democratic transition and expressing my political views, and thank God I was not arrested by the government. I had friends and family who got captured by the security services. Then, when things started going out of control I realized, and for the first time, that the government narrative of an

international conspiracy is true. The president tried to implement reforms, but they [parts of the opposition] did not want to meet him halfway. They thought that they had the international community's support, and that someone would intervene and topple the government.

Similarly, Barout described attempts by the president to reform that were dismantled by either the Baath vanguards or the opposition.[325] For Amir, the irony of the situation was that he was now living in a situation in which he and other ordinary Syrians were paying the price of the international community's sanctions on the Syrian government: "The whole bloody war is now about being able to survive the skyrocketing prices that the international community is making us endure. No one cares about freedom and the other naive ideals we had, we just want to live a normal life—if that is still possible, I doubt it." Amir articulated but one example of the failed policies that humanitarian bureaucrats such as Evans are proud of but that, despite having achieved consensus at the United Nations, do not work for the ordinary people that are supposedly the beneficiaries of such help. In other words, the approach that Evans champions loses sight of the main reason for its implementation.

Hypothetically, the goal of the sanctions was to force the Syrian government to change its behavior, or as Evans put it, to "reinforce other genuine grievances".[326] But it is not working in a situation like Syria, where it is producing results contrary to

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[325] Mohammed Jamal Barout, *Al- ʿAqd al- akhir fi tarikh Suriya: Jadaliyyat al-Jumud wa al-Islah*.
[326] Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect*. 85

187

intention. People are blaming the West for all their economic hardships, and feel betrayed and used by the international community. As Amir added, expressing the despair many Syrians are feeling, "The West wants us to starve in order to go to the streets and remove the government, but we already did that without starving and they [the international community] were indifferent. Now we realized that this [the government] is the best we can have, unfortunately."

"What About the Victims"?

"What about the victims?" Meister asks, in order to theorize the ongoing benefits of beneficiaries from past injustices. He argues that humanitarians treat themselves as saviors who will rescue potential victims of a massacre at the right time,[327] adding that humanitarians also assume themselves to be compassionate witnesses who not only want to rescue victims but also want victims to feel better.[328] I attempt to answer Meister's question from the victims' perspective, I bring the victims back into the human rights discourse discussion that usually sidelines them as passive elements in wait to be rescued. I challenge the RtoP paradigm as not only a failure to achieve its own goals in the case of Syria, but also as a harmful promise that led to the demise of the moderate opposition in the face of fundamentalist organizations such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and to battle fatigue in the fight for freedom, democracy, and human rights.

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[327] Meister, *After Evil*. 4
[328] Meister. 216

Who Counts as a Victim?

For the rescuers, the question of who counts as a victim is still an open one that is best illustrated in Fassin's account of the evolution of the role of humanitarianism and humanitarian aid organizations from being strictly medical aid providers to bearing witnesses of human rights atrocities. This shift took place first with the founding of Médecins Sans Frontières after some doctors previously employed by the Red Cross refused their organization's "secret bargaining for the right to bring aid" during the Biafra war in Nigeria. Fassin also points out Médecins Sans Frontières are still grappling with the difficulty of preserving "neutrality and impartiality," in situations where the organization denounces crimes and their perpetrators. That was also the root of the split within Médecins Sans Frontières which led to the founding of Médecins du Monde refused the imperiality and neutrality of Médecins Sans Frontières and championed the right to interfere. [329] So who counts as a victim? Can the people who side with the supposed perpetrators also be considered victims who deserve treating? Are the civilians living under the rule of the Syrian regime since 2011 victims? Or de facto perpetrators?[330] Or, as Meister puts it, onlookers?

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[329] Didier Fassin and Richard Rechtman, *The Empire of Trauma: An Inquiry into the Condition of Victimhood*, trans. Rachel Gomme, 1 edition (Princeton ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009). 192-197

[330] The fact that people live under the rule of the Syrian government and not participate in the uprisings make them complicit?

Some see themselves as victims of the Western conspiracy that stripped them of everything, they enjoyed prior to 2011. A former manager at a factory that shut down in 2013 who now works as a delivery person for a different factory that delivers goods in the Damascus region, Hamed, like many others, expressed a longing for the old days, indifferent to who wins the war. But under the harsh sanctions that the Western and international community imposed on Syria starting in 2011, he feels that he and people like himself became victims of the West, despite the fact that they were onlookers and did not get involved in supporting either the Syrian government or the opposition: "We are the victims: The prices of goods are constantly skyrocketing. We used to go out every day, now we are lucky to go out once a week. Everything is expensive and many goods are not available anymore. I have to ask a taxi driver who works between the Beqaa and Damascus for diapers for my seven-month-old kid. Is that how democracy and freedom works? If yes, I do not want it then. I prefer to live under the Baath for one hundred more years. At least I never felt hungry. Since the war started, I have been feeling hungry often."

Others believe themselves to be the victims of the international community sanctions and the uprisings. Hanan, who used to live in one of the Palestinian camps in Syria, blames the sanctions for forcing her to flee to Lebanon and enroll as a refugee, and the uprisings for the loss of her house: "We had to come to Lebanon. We couldn't find jobs in Syria and we lost our house. Everything became one hundred times more expensive; we couldn't afford it anymore. At least here [Lebanon], we know that we get paid a tiny amount at the end of the month from the NGOs, which is

better than nothing." Lebanon is still much more expensive than Syria, but some refugees did not have any other choices in order to receive aid. Even others, blame the opposition for the terrorist attacks and the war that have ravaged the country.

On the side of the opposition, some activists who thought the international community would intervene blame their situation on international indifference to their suffering that is caused by the brutality of the Syrian government. Others blame the divisions within the opposition groups. Still others blame the arming of opposition groups.

Conclusion

What is Justice for Ordinary People?

In this chapter, I have shown that ordinary people believed in the promises of protection by the vanguards of human rights by proving to be the perfect fit and worthy of protection. "What else do they [West] need in order to intervene? More people dying, starving, drowning, and butchered?" Hanan, a practicing Sunni, in her early twenties, fled her house in Damascus with her family and became a refugee in Lebanon. They initially supported the revolution until ISIS and other fundamentalist groups took over. For Hanan, it is about the innocent victims who are suffering from the warring situation in general, "it is a genocide that everyone [all warring factions] is taking part of." Then Hanan questions the human rights' paradigm if it allows such atrocities to keep taking place.

A comparison of the international response between Kobane Afrin, Raqqa, and Eastern Ghouta can be leveraged to argue that there are multiple standards for the humanitarian interventions and RtoP is not exempt.[331] Even as Evans tries to prove the concept's breakthroughs in this regard, it could be argued that human rights discourse became a vehicle of the realpolitik field that governs international relations. When everyone can categorize a terrorist organization as they see fit, their foreign politics, interests, and ambitions adapting a human rights discourse in order to legitimize their actions leads to atrocities that the human rights discourse is supposedly fighting under the rubric of "never again." Meister's critique of human rights discourse could be read in this regard as showing the inevitability of such a paradigm to lead to this horrifying outcome in Syria.

My online data show the indifference of global public opinion regarding Raqqa's takeover by ISIS, and the Ghouta siege, in contrast to Kobane's threat by ISIS. In these three cases, realpolitik took priority rather than a unified standard for what is needed to be done. These cases disprove Evans' and the humanitarians' attempts to make the case for RtoP as the universal solution for the prevention of mass atrocities. These cases also show that "indifference" to other peoples' suffering is not enough to change the situations. Meister argues that indifference works on the side of the beneficiary rather than the victims and compassion is the tool used to

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[331] When ISIS reached the borders of Kobane in 2015, there was an international military and armed aid intervention response. Whereas, when ISIS took over Raqqa in 2013 there was international indifference. There was a similar indifference to Eastern Ghouta between 2013 and 2018 with government sieging and bombing the region for years.

make the beneficiary feel better about themselves by the fact that they are not indifferent anymore, but this is where the victim gets marginalized under this logic.

Is it possible to imagine justice for the Syrian people in the foreseeable future? As Meister puts it, would justice be an option for the Syrian people? What I have hopefully conveyed is that if we do not criticize the human rights discourse in Syria and trace its evolution in affecting sectarianism and being affected by sectarianism, we will not get to ask about justice.

Chapter 4 - Sect Habitus on the Aljazeera.net Website

Introduction

Since the beginning of the "Arab Spring" in late 2010, Al Jazeera has played a significant role in covering, reporting, calling for regime changes, and encouraging people to take to the streets in countries where uprisings have taken place, including Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria.[332] Most studies analyze Al Jazeera's role as a satellite television channel that acted as a catalyst in producing a virtual public political sphere, alongside Social Network Sites (SNSs) such as Facebook and Twitter.[333] Even when studies mention the Al Jazeera websites, "aljazeera.com" and "aljazeera.net", they examine them as streaming platforms for the station.[334]

In this chapter, I study the manifestation of sect habitus online, specifically examining aljazeera.net's environment. I examine whether Aljazeera's materials have any impact on Syrians during the uprisings. There are two types of content to analyze: on the one hand, since 2011, Al Jazeera and its editorial team have published news articles --including written reports, opinion pieces, blog posts, live news header

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[332] Nabil Sultan, "Al Jazeera: Reflections on the Arab Spring," *Journal of Arabian Studies* 3, no. 2 (December 1, 2013): 249–64, https://doi.org/10.1080/21534764.2013.863821; Habibul Haque Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring," *Globalizations* 8, no. 5 (October 1, 2011): 675–79, https://doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2011.621287.

[333] Sam Cherribi, *Fridays of Rage: Al Jazeera, the Arab Spring, and Political Islam* (Oxford University Press, 2017); Marc Lynch, "After the Arab Spring: How the Media Trashed the Transitions," *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 4 (2015): 90–99, https://doi.org/10.1353/jod.2015.0070; Miriyam Aouragh and Anne Alexander, "The Arab Spring| The Egyptian Experience: Sense and Nonsense of the Internet Revolution," *International Journal of Communication* 5, no. 0 (September 2, 2011): 15; Khondker, "Role of the New Media in the Arab Spring."

[334] Cherribi, *Fridays of Rage*; Aouragh and Alexander, "The Arab Spring| The Egyptian Experience."

coverage-- about the Syrian uprising-turned-war; and, on the other hand, there are the comments that readers post on these articles.

Using an exploratory method in this chapter, I look for editorial shifts, if any, in Al Jazeera's coverage, and then test whether there is a correlation between the articles and users' comments. First, I use Topic Modeling (TM), an unsupervised Machine Learning (ML) technique used to analyze large datasets of unstructured documents, as the first step in examining the data. Next, I show the limitations of prior applications of TM methods and propose a method by using TM in a Content Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, which I call CDA-guided TM. This method allows me to answer many questions that TM or CDA alone cannot. My findings show that Al Jazeera used sect-based language in its content, and that articles reporting violence receive the most sect-based comments. I use the proposed method in order to analyze how a sect habitus was expressed on aljazeera.net in the users' comments in relation to the published articles where those reside.

Data Collection

With the beginning of the Arab uprisings in 2010, Aljazeera became the major news outlet to support the protests with live broadcasting, news reports, opinion pieces, on the ground coverage, and with citizen journalism when Aljazeera was not able to be on the ground.[335]

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[335] In many places, Aljazeera journalists and offices had been shut down and banned from broadcasting such as in Egypt (on and off), Syria, and in Libya (in 2011 when Gaddafi was

I started collecting data from Aljazeera.net, which is the Arabic version of Aljazeera, in order to measure the impact of Aljazeera's materials on Syrians during the uprisings.[336]

Using the Python programming language, I developed a scraper that extracted data starting with the landing page of Aljazeera.net and that scraped through all the articles that aljazeera.net had from 2010 to 2017. As the scraper collected articles, I analyzed the articles with a word clustering technique and weighed each article's relevance to the Syrian case study using a list of keywords such as Syria, Damascus, Aleppo, etc. (See Appendix A for the complete list). Then, if an article included more than three top-ten weighted words that matched the reference list, I collected the article's text and saved it in an unstructured database using MongoDB and PyMongo, a Python library to communicate with the database. Additionally, I collected all user comments on each of these chosen articles, as well as all the replies to the comments.

Out of the entire 926,936 articles inspected, 44,707 matched the reference list with relevance to the case of Syria, including articles about Iran, Russia, Lebanon, Turkey, UN, USA, Saudi, and many other players involved in the Syrian case. These articles included 218,394 user comments and 26,273 replies to comments (users commenting on each other's comments). The initial scraping took more than eight months to complete.[337] After this initial round of collection, future scraping became

ousted). Citizen journalism played an important role in the Syrian war, however, I do not address this phenomenon in this chapter.

[336] It is important to note that the content on Aljazeera Arabic is very different from Aljazeera English, but this is a different discussion for another time.

[337] I was cautious to not overload the Aljazeera servers and impact their website in any way

196

quicker with only checking for new articles and selecting the articles that were

relevant to the Syrian case study. This scraping process ended when Aljazeera

discontinued their comments section and moved their commentary features to

Facebook in August 2017.[338]

The goal of such a broad collection is to be able to analyze the regional and

international conditions that potentially influenced the war in Syria and users'

comments. For example, another potential study could be how Al Jazeera's coverage

of Syria was impacted by the Iran and P5+1 nuclear agreement in 2015, as well as its

impact on the users' reactions to that agreement in the context of the ongoing war in

Syria, if any. However, in this chapter, I only analyze the articles that explicitly

include Syria. Table 1 shows the total number of these articles and their respective

comments.

Table 1 Total number of articles and corresponding comments and total number of Syria-focused articles and corresponding comments

Articles	Comments	Syria Focused Articles	Syria Focused Comments

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[338] Al Jazeera English, "Why We're Disabling Comments on Aljazeera.Com," Medium, August 30, 2017, https://medium.com/@AJEnglish/why-were-disabling-comments-on-aljazeera-com-a9ffbac61f10; Paul Fletcher, "Aljazeera.Com Discontinues Comments On Its Website," Forbes, accessed December 3, 2020, https://www.forbes.com/sites/paulfletcher/2017/09/02/aljazeera-com-discontinues-comments-on-its-website/.

44,707	218,394	23,457	125,501

Topic Modeling

Why Topic Modeling?

In my dataset of 23,457 articles, it would be non-realistic to manually classify these texts and extract the topics that they cover. Moreover, I am exploring whether there is any correlation between the articles published by Al Jazeera and the users' comments on those articles. These comments, which add up to a total of 125,501, are also non-realistic to classify manually. Topic Modeling (TM) is an unsupervised machine learning technique that is used to identify topics in large volumes of unstructured texts.[339] These techniques use inductive models to extract topics from a collection of distinct texts and subsequently group these collections of texts by topic, itself defined by a list of terms from the texts. Some of these models, such as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA),[340] allow overlapping topics and overlapping terms, which allows for the possibility of documents to contain more than one topic.[341]

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[339] Supervised machine learning techniques use data that has been previously categorized and coded to be used as training data that teach the machine how to similarly classify and predict the labels for similar datasets. Unsupervised machine learning techniques are inductive methods that use pattern recognition of previously unclassified data. The pattern recognition process identifies relationships and group similar data under the same categories. (https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-22475-2_1)

[340] In this chapter I use LDA based on extensive testing with other models and approaches LDA showed best results. I compare these models in an article in preparation that details the process of employing these models and how to choose the model that fits best the data to analyze.

[341] Julia Silge and David Robinson, *Text Mining with R: A Tidy Approach*, 1st edition (Beijing ; Boston: O'Reilly Media, 2017).

Using TM allows me to identify what topics are discussed in each of the articles and in the user comments to these articles.

Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA)

LDA is a topic modeling technique that is used in computational content analysis to extract unknown thematic structures in a cluster of large groups of text documents. LDA is mainly used for exploratory and descriptive analyses.[342] Developed by Blei, Ng, and Jordan in 2003, LDA uses a Bayesian statistical model to generate the latent topics on which the texts in question are based.[343] LDA starts with the assumption that the group of documents to be analyzed form a corpus. This corpus is supposed to represent a number of topics predetermined by the researcher.[344] Each document of the corpus is based on a specific probabilistic distribution of words; this distribution renders the document relevant for one or many topics. By running through the corpus while assuming that the topics are infinitely exchangeable in a document, a probability of a sequence of words and a topic is then

[342] Dag Elgesem, Lubos Steskal, and Nicholas Diakopoulos, "Structure and Content of the Discourse on Climate Change in the Blogosphere: The Big Picture," *Environmental Communication* 9, no. 2 (April 3, 2015): 169–88, https://doi.org/10.1080/17524032.2014.983536; Olessia Koltsova and Andrey Shcherbak, "'LiveJournal Libra!': The Political Blogosphere and Voting Preferences in Russia in 2011–2012," *New Media & Society* 17, no. 10 (November 1, 2015): 1715–32, https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444814531875; Danny Valdez, Andrew C. Pickett, and Patricia Goodson, "Topic Modeling: Latent Semantic Analysis for the Social Sciences," *Social Science Quarterly* 99, no. 5 (2018): 1665–79, https://doi.org/10.1111/ssqu.12528.
[343] David M. Blei, Andrew Y. Ng, and Michael I. Jordan, "Latent Dirichlet Allocation | The Journal of Machine Learning Research," accessed September 6, 2021, https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/944919.944937.
[344] Choosing the number of topics is addressed later.

calculated. Based on this probability, a document is clustered under one or many

topics alongside other documents that probably cover the same topic. These topics are

represented with a sequence of words. That sequence becomes the basis to infer what

this topic is concerned with. For example, the set of words extracted from Topic 10

generated from all Al Jazeera articles from the year 2017, translated here: City,

Raqqa, Syria, Country, Group, Forces, Army, Democratic, Kurdish, Alliance[345],

allows us to infer that the documents pertaining to this topic discuss the US-led,

international alliance's support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (Kurdish forces in

northern Syria) in their successful attempt to take over the city of Raqqa and defeat

ISIS there.

By randomly extracting and manually reading a sample of articles pertaining

to this cluster, I was able to confirm that these articles revolve around the topic

inferred above. Next, I will showcase how TM is usually applied by researchers and

how I propose to use it differently.

LDA on Al Jazeera Corpus Step by Step
Methodological Issues Studying SNSs in Arabic

Computer science and computational social sciences have developed multiple

approaches to conducting text analysis. Depending on the questions asked,

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[345] The original terms in Arabic are: مدينة, رقة, سوريا, دولة, تنظيم, قوات, جيش, ديمقراطية, كردية, تحالف Also, significantly, the literal translation from Arabic to English loses critical meaning while *Tanzim* is translated to organization and *Dawla* to state in Arabic it is clear that these terms are representative of *Tanzim Al Dawla* which is the short name used for ISIS.

researchers might use Topic Modelling approaches to extract topics from text data, such as topics covered in news articles,[346] recommendations of journal articles,[347] or even SNSs analysis.[348] Researchers might also use Sentiment Analysis to classify users' opinions and sentiments,[349] usually sorted or scaled as negative, positive, or neutral. While LDA has evolved over the years since 2003, especially in terms of incorporating Natural Language Processing in the preprocessing step of the text, when it comes to the Arabic language in general, even when dealing with Classical Arabic, all of these approaches continue to face many challenges and often fail at processing text successfully.[350] For example, although there have been many attempts to write sentiment analysis software for the Arabic language,[351] Boudad et al. (2017) note that Arabic is one of the most challenging languages on which to conduct this kind of analysis. They rightly argue that the three main varieties of Arabic—Classical

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[346] David Newman et al., "Analyzing Entities and Topics in News Articles Using Statistical Topic Models," in *Intelligence and Security Informatics*, ed. Sharad Mehrotra et al., Lecture Notes in Computer Science (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2006), 93–104.

[347] Chong Wang and David M. Blei, "Collaborative Topic Modeling for Recommending Scientific Articles," in *Proceedings of the 17th ACM SIGKDD International Conference on Knowledge Discovery and Data Mining*, KDD '11 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2011), 448–56, https://doi.org/10.1145/2020408.2020480.

[348] Liangjie Hong and Brian D. Davison, "Empirical Study of Topic Modeling in Twitter," in *Proceedings of the First Workshop on Social Media Analytics*, SOMA '10 (New York, NY, USA: ACM, 2010), 80–88, https://doi.org/10.1145/1964858.1964870.

[349] Bing Liu, *Sentiment Analysis and Opinion Mining* (Morgan & Claypool Publishers, 2012); Xing Fang and Justin Zhan, "Sentiment Analysis Using Product Review Data," *Journal of Big Data* 2, no. 1 (June 16, 2015): 5, https://doi.org/10.1186/s40537-015-0015-2.

[350] The stemming and lemmatizing libraries developed for Arabic that I have tested have yielded unsatisfactory results.

[351] Naaima Boudad et al., "Sentiment Analysis in Arabic: A Review of the Literature," *ASEJ Ain Shams Engineering Journal*, 2017. have an outstanding literature review of research of sentiment analysis in Arabic. They also detail the complexities of Arabic language for sentiment analysis studies.

Arabic (CA) [352], Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), [353] or Dialectical Arabic (DA)—

create the initial obstacle for such studies of Arabic text online.[354] In previous studies

of Arabic sentiment analysis, three approaches—supervised, unsupervised, and

hybrid—have been used for studying and classifying a wide range of texts such as

tweets, Facebook comments, blogs, book reviews, and product reviews. In my

dataset, the articles are written in MSA and the comments are written with a mixture

of the three types of Arabic text.

Preprocessing Text

Most text-based ML techniques and Natural Language Processing algorithms

employ preprocessing techniques to efficiently analyze and represent the data in

question. This process includes removing stop words which constitute common words

that give little to no value to the text especially when attempting to look for patterns

in order to match a set of texts.[355] These lists have been built into many programming

language libraries but there is not a consensus around a standardized list, not even for

the English language.[356] For Arabic, there are a few lists of stop words developed for

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[352] The language of the Qur'an.
[353] The language used in formal communication.
[354] There are thousands of dialectical Arabic variations. In chapter 5 I detail the obstacles presented by the Arabic language when I propose a supervised machine learning technique to overcome such obstacles.
[355] "Dropping Common Terms: Stop Words," accessed September 6, 2021, https://nlp.stanford.edu/IR-book/html/htmledition/dropping-common-terms-stop-words-1.html.
[356] Most of these libraries are developed for English language especially open source libraries.

MSA. I employ them as part of a customized stop words list I developed for the supervised and unsupervised methods I employ in this research (see Appendix B).

Moreover, the Arabic language combines the definitive article 'the', 'al' 'ال' to the beginning of the words. However, the software will treat a word with the definitive article as different from one without it, which would lead to skewed results with TM. For example, the word 'سوري' which translates to 'Syrian' becomes 'السوري' when used in a sentence with 'the Syrian.' There are some exemptions where specific words such as 'God' 'Allah' which has 'al' as part of the base word 'Allah.'[357] So, before removing the stop words, it is important to remove the 'al' articles while paying attention to exceptions to this rule. Returning to the previous example, if we remove the 'al' articles from the word 'Allah' the word changes meaning and becomes the word 'lah' which translates to 'his' which is a stop word that gets removed before starting the TM analysis. As we will see later the word 'Allah' is the most frequently word used in the comment dataset. Moreover, the CA and the MSA are written with diacritics (ḥarakāt). For example, the word for supplementary diacritics تشكيل can be written with diacritics in the following way تَشْكِيل ; this does not change the meaning of the word but it represents missing vowels and consonant length. The DA language usually does not abide by the linguistic rules

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[357] For the list of these words check Appendix C " بحث عن الأسماء الموصولة في اللغة العربية : تعريف ، إعراب ، أمثلة واضحة," أنا البحر, October 26, 2017, https://analbahr.com/%d8%a8%d8%ad%d8%ab-%d8%b9%d9%86-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%a3%d8%b3%d9%85%d8%a7%d8%a1-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%85%d9%88%d8%b5%d9%88%d9%84%d8%a9-%d9%81%d9%8a-%d8%a7%d9%84%d9%84%d8%ba%d8%a9-%d8%a7%d9%84%d8%b9%d8%b1%d8%a8/.

used in the CA and MSA, but in online texts (depending on the platform, tools, and sometimes the user), all three, DA, CA, and MSA, sometimes include ḥarakāt and sometimes not. The problem is that the software reads the same word with ḥarakāt differently than without ḥarakāt regardless of the meaning, which leads to skewed percentages as they are divided into different topics rather than understood to carry the same meaning. So, an additional layer of cleaning was applied in order to remove all the diacritics (ḥarakāt) that render the same word differently.

Initial Data Visualization

After cleaning the data, an initial exploration of the text is needed. This process differs depending on the data, its metadata, the goal of the study. For example, if the researcher is familiar with the documents in question and the goal is just to explore the topics covered by the data and cluster similar documents together based on these topics, then the exploration process is not needed. Or, if the data is composed of totally unstructured text, with no metadata, a term frequency count would be the initial step in order to get a sense if any of the themes that these documents cover before applying topic modeling. If, however, the data includes metadata and the goal of the research goes beyond clustering of similar texts, then a more in-depth exploration process is needed. In my case, the data I am analyzing includes two sets of data: the articles written by Al Jazeera and the associated comments written by the readers of these articles. These two sets also include

metadata such as the date of publication, author for the articles and number of likes and dislikes, commenter username, and publishing date for the comments.

I start the exploration process with a total word frequency for each dataset visualized in figures 1 and 2:[358]

Figure 1: Word Cloud of the top 500 terms from the articles

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[358] Check Appendix A for the most frequent terms used in the datasets

Figure 2: Word Cloud of the top 500 terms from the comments

In Figure 1, which represents the frequency of the top 500 words of the Al Jazeera articles dataset, the words *Syria* and *Regime* are the most frequent, then the words *forces, united, opposition, Iran, president, Russia, army, city,* and *state* come next. These terms could give us a general idea about the subjects of these documents, that the articles are about Syria and include the army, Russia, United States, Iran, and the opposition which we already know because of the data collection targeting this specific subject. But as a demonstration of how to explore unstructured data, this step is only the first step. As for Figure 2, which represents the frequency of the top 500 words of the comments' dataset, we see that the word *God* is the top one followed by

Syria, People, Regime, revolution, Iran, Killing, War, *Syrian*, *Army*, and *Bashar*.

These terms also give us a general sense of what the comments are concerned with.

But the term frequency is very limited in terms of text analysis and does not lead to

substantive answers beyond a very broad theme, if any.

Extracting Topics

One of the main issues of Topic Modeling is the question of the

predetermined number of topics that the researcher is required to manually set prior to

running the model. There are many suggestions and methods developed to help the

researcher make an educated guess to choose the number of topics, including

calculating the model coherence. In my experience, the best way is by trial and error,

even when the outcome seems good enough, it is important to proceed with multiple

trials. Roberts et al. (2018) propose between 5 to 50 topics for smaller datasets and

between 60 to 100 for larger datasets.[359] In this study, with considerably large

datasets, I found that having 60 or more topics is not useful as the topics became

difficult to differentiate based on the terms associated with the topics. After multiple

trials, I decided to use twenty topics which was also confirmed by the model

coherence value.[360]

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[359] Roberts, Margaret E., Stewart, Brandon M., and Tingley, Dustin, "'Package "Stm."' R Package Version 1.3.6.," 2018, https://cran.r-project.org/web/packages/stm/stm.pdf.
[360] The coherence score for 60 topics in 0.44 while the coherence score for 20 topics is 0.47 and the coherence score for 100 topics was 0.43 and for 10 topics 0.45.

In Figures 3 and 4 (below), I present the topics extracted respectively from the articles dataset and from the comments dataset sorted by the most to the least probable, represented by the top 10 probable terms in each topic.

Top Topics
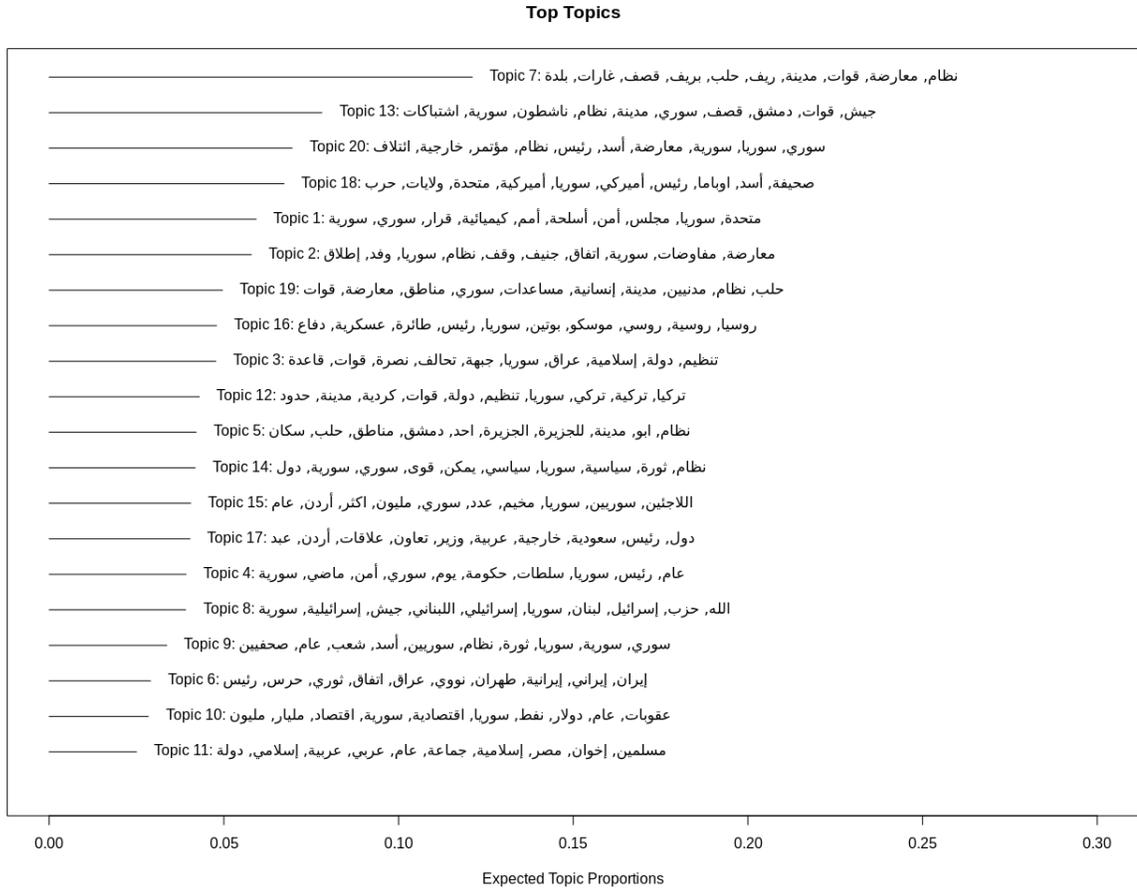
Figure 3: Articles dataset topics distribution with the top 10 probable terms for each topic

Top Topics

الله, اللهم, نصر, مسلمين, والله, شام, سوريا, اهل, شاء, اكبر :Topic 5
جيش, سوري, دمشق, حلب, مدنيين, ثوار, قصف, مدن, مناطق, عصابات :Topic 9
روسيا, امريكا, سوريا, تركيا, روسي, روس, تدخل, حرب, معارضة, صين :Topic 17
شعب, سوري, قتل, بشار, سوريا, اطفال, عالم, يقتل, اسد, مجرم :Topic 6
ايران, دول, امريكا, اسرائيل, خليج, سعودية, عراق, منطقة, سوريا, يمن :Topic 3
نظام, أسد, سوري, بشار, سوريا, معارضة, ثورة, مجرم, سورية, يريد :Topic 15
حزب, عراق, سنة, لبنان, إيران, مقاومة, فلسطين, شيعة, سوريا, اسرائيل :Topic 18
جزيرة, خبر, كذب, حقيقة, اعلام, اخبار, قناة, سورية, شكرا, مقال :Topic 10
عرب, عربية, عربي, شعوب, غرب, دول, حكام, شرق, عالم, مسلمين :Topic 7
يعني, والله, بشار, واحد, ناس, سوريا, طيب, انو, اسد, كلام :Topic 12
نظام, ثورة, نهاية, سقوط, وضع, سوريا, سورية, بداية, عام, وقت :Topic 4
دولة, داعش, اسلامية, نصرة, تنظيم, قاعدة, إسلامية, جبهة, عراق, خلافة :Topic 19
اسد, سوري, سوريه, عملاء, عميل, ثوره, شعب, صهيوني, عربيه, معارضه :Topic 11
شيء, اردن, سوريين, حكومة, بلد, أردن, سوريا, ملك, سورية, اللاجئين :Topic 16
متحدة, مجلس, رئيس, امم, أمن, اوباما, امن, أمم, حقوق, قرار :Topic 2
سورية, عصابة, صهاينة, مسلمين, حلف, اللتي, ثورة, اللذي, ثوار, صليبي :Topic 13
مصر, وكيل, ونعم, اخوان, قال, مسلمين, حسينا, مرسي, مصري, شيخ :Topic 14
لله, ثورة, حمد, وانا, لقد, عالم, وطن, انتا, إليه, اقول :Topic 8
اسلحة, أسلحة, ايدي, صواريخ, تدمر, وعندما, سوريا, إسرائيل, كيماوية, حرب :Topic 1
سوريا, ليبيا, علي, فقط, قذافي, بشار, احد, لماذا, يوم, لان :Topic 20

Expected Topic Proportions

Figure 4: Comments dataset topics distribution with the top 10 probable terms for each topic

Deducing topics

Figure 3 represents the topics extracted from the articles, sorted by the proportion of the topic in relation to the full corpus. For example, Topic 5 in Figure 4 is the most probable topic in the dataset. As mentioned above, LDA allows overlaps between topics so this visualization does not show mutually exclusive topics. This means that documents included in Topic 17 might also be included in other topics (for an interactive visualization, follow this link to explore the topics with the most probable terms and the topic overlaps). At this point in the TM process, the researcher

209

typically deduces the topics based on the most probable sequence of words that the model might include. The researcher sets the number of terms; in this case, ten terms were enough to deduce the topics. For example, Topic 7 in Figure 3, which is the most probable topic out of all 20 topics, is about active military operations in Aleppo and Damascus'suburbs. When visualizing the model using the LDAvis library (Figure 5 is a screenshot of the interactive model accessible via this link), it is noticeable that the topic also includes the terms Idlib and Homs and most probably other regions that witnessed active military operations.
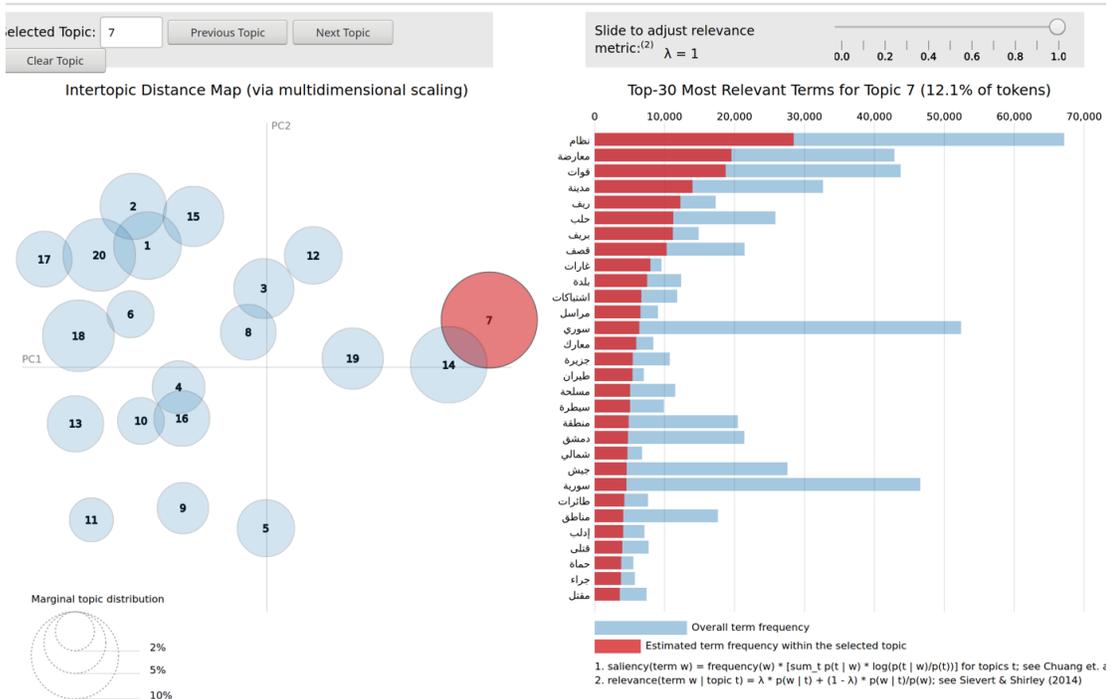
Figure 5: A screenshot of the interactive visualization of the topics

The topics I deduced from the articles are represented in Table 2 and the topics I

deduced from the comments are represented in Table 3.

Table 1: The top 20 topics deduced from the Al Jazeera articles

Topics	Deduced Topic
Topic 1	Chemical weapons attacks and UN security council reactions
Topic 2	The opposition and government negotiations Geneva and Astana
Topic 3	ISIS, Nusra Front
Topic 4	Kidnapping the two Christian Bishops and Syrian security forces
Topic 5	Al Jazeera on the ground coverage
Topic 6	Iran nuclear deal
Topic 7	Opposition and army active military operation in Aleppo
Topic 8	Hezbollah, Israel and Syria
Topic 9	Syrian revolution and regime reactions
Topic 10	Sanctions and economic crisis

Topic 11	Muslim Brotherhood
Topic 12	Turkish and Kurdish armed struggle in northern Syria
Topic 13	Damascus and the Syrian army military operations
Topic 14	The revolution and political developments
Topic 15	Refugee crisis
Topic 16	Russian military operations
Topic 17	Regional Arab players (Jordan and Gulf states)
Topic 18	United States of America's role (including Obama and Trump)
Topic 19	Humanitarian aid, UN, and Madaya, Kefraya, and Faoua
Topic 20	The opposition abroad and Syrian government interactions

Table 2: The top 20 topics deduced from the user comments on the Al Jazeera articles

Topics	Deduced Topic
Topic 1	Chemical weapons and rockets
Topic 2	UN and US and security council

Topic 3	Active International players
Topic 4	The revolution and the close fall of the regime
Topic 5	Assad killing kids and civilians
Topic 6[361]	Hamas and Hezbollah
Topic 7	Islam, Shi'a Arabs
Topic 8	Revolution
Topic 9	Active military operations around Damascus and Aleppo
Topic 10	Al Jazeera and Syrian news agency lies and truth
Topic 11	Assad, opposition as Zionist agents and terrorists
Topic 12	Too general to deduce a clear topic
Topic 13	Sect-based comments (Crusaders, Zionists, Muslims)
Topic 14	Egypt and the Muslim Brotherhood
Topic 15	Assad Baathist Fascist regime
Topic 16	Jordan and Syrian refugees

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[361] Potential criticism of both as Hamas sided with the opposition and Hezbollah with the Syrian government, even though they are both part of the Axis of Resistance.

Topic 17	Russia, China, and Turkey and the war in Syria
Topic 18	Sunni Islam, Shi'a, Iran, Iraq, and Israel
Topic 19	ISIS, Al Nusra Front, the Kurds and Iraq
Topic 20	Libya

Topic 1 is potentially clustering articles that focus on the use of chemical weapons and the UN security council's resolution on Syria's chemical weapons. Topic 3 is potentially clustering articles about ISIS, Nusra Front, the Kurdish forces, and the US-led global alliance against ISIS.

As mentioned above, I have not found any attempts to use topic modeling to correlate two separate corpuses. Technically, the corpuses I am using here are not totally separate and I already know that they revolve around the Syrian situation. Previous studies that use sub-corpora aim at either speeding the processing time of large datasets,[362] or at exploring the model itself.[363]

As for the topics extracted from the comments dataset and listed in Figure 4, Topic 5 is the most probable topic. It includes a combination of the words god, great, victory, sham, Islam, Muslims and potentially reflects comments that include

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[362] Stefano Sbalchiero and Maciej Eder, "Topic Modeling, Long Texts and the Best Number of Topics. Some Problems and Solutions," *Quality & Quantity* 54, no. 4 (August 1, 2020): 1095–1108, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11135-020-00976-w.

[363] Akira Murakami et al., "'What Is This Corpus about?': Using Topic Modelling to Explore a Specialised Corpus," *Corpora* 12, no. 2 (August 1, 2017): 243–77, https://doi.org/10.3366/cor.2017.0118.

religious idioms including "Allah is Greater" that discuss the ongoing war events. But there might be a misdeduction of the topic: the Lebanese political party, Hezbollah, is one of the warring factions that supported the Syrian government, whose leader's name is Hassan Nasrallah, written in Arabic as حسن نصرالله which can be interpreted as three words instead of two, in which case the name translates to Hassan Victory God. In order to investigate the outcome, I randomly selected ten articles that are included in Topic 5 and read them to assess the potential impact of such a coincidence on the topics. I found no mention of Hezbollah's leader and found the use of Quranic verses in them. But, in order to be sure, I also searched for the frequency of the sequence of words Hassan Nasr Allah and found that out of 32,222 comments forming Topic 5, only 33 included Hassan Nasrallah which led me to conclude that this did not have an impact on the topic deduction. Topic 7 represents the comments that include the opposition, the Free Syrian Army and Syrian regime, which Al Jazeera also called, the Assad regime.

Most research usually stops at this point to assess the quality of the topics deduced and draw conclusions about the corpus. In my case, the topic model implemented above does not substantially inform my questions about sect-based discourse and the differences, if any, between the online versus offline sect habitus. Structured Topic Modeling (STM), which I employ in this study, usually adds more nuance to the analysis by including covariates such as changes of topics over time.[364]

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[364] Nathan C. Lindstedt, "Structural Topic Modeling For Social Scientists: A Brief Case Study with Social Movement Studies Literature, 2005–2017," *Social Currents* 6, no. 4 (August 1, 2019): 307–18, https://doi.org/10.1177/2329496519846505.

Implementing STM and testing the topic prevalence by published date gives us a

better understanding of the topic proportion by time. Shown in Figure 6 for the

articles' dataset and Figure 7 for the users' comments dataset, it is possible to infer

the prevalence of the topics at specific moments in time.

I will detail some of the limitations of this method in the next section as even

STM falls short in my case before I propose a Content Discourse Analysis approach

to develop STM further.
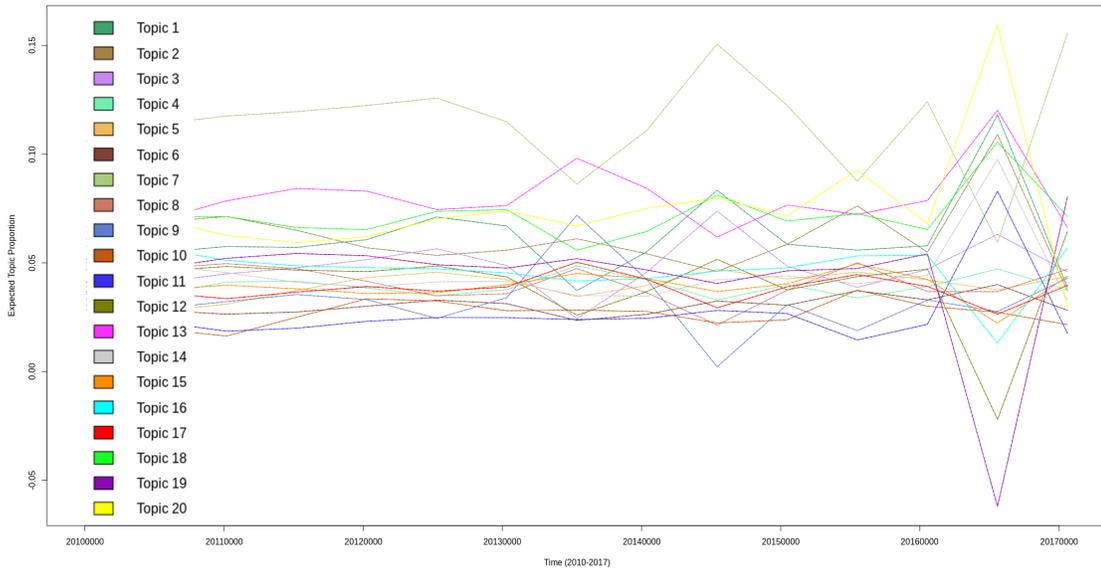
Figure 6: The top 20 topics from the Aljazeera articles dataset displayed over time using Structured Topic Modeling (STM)
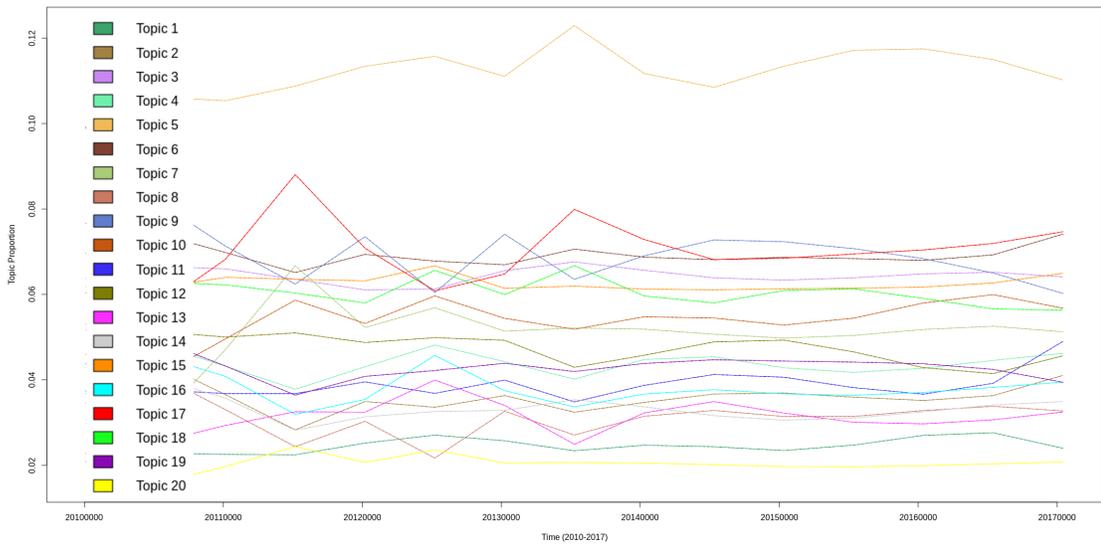
Figure 7: The top 20 topics from the user comments on the Aljazeera articles displayed over time using Structured Topic Modeling (STM)

Limitations of Topic Modeling

As I show above, the TM approach successfully clustered documents relatively well but, when applied to the full datasets, the topics are general for the most part and do not reflect the critical developments that took place between 2011-2017, such as the shifting from revolution to war, the chemical weapons usage on civilians, the rise and fall of ISIS, etc. In order to extract more nuanced topics, I split the articles and their comments by years as separate sub-corporas. Each corpus returned a list of 20 topics from the articles and comments datasets (see Appendix E). The topics extracted are more granular, but not to the extent to make consequential deductions to answer some of the questions I ask. Next, I propose a Content Discourse Analysis-guided Topic Modeling.

Content Discourse Analysis

Why Content Discourse Analysis?

Content Discourse Analysis (CDA) employs a critical linguistic approach to study text. This approach regards "language as social practice,"[365] where the context of language use is important to the analysis.[366] CDA is interested in "the semiotic dimensions of power, injustice, abuse, and political-economic or cultural change in society" regardless of the theories or methods employed to achieve it.

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[365] Fairclough, N. and Wodak, R., "Critical Discourse Analysis," in *Discourse as Social Interaction: Discourse Studies 2 (A Multidisciplinary Introduction)*, ed. T. A. Van Dijk, vol. 2 (London: Sage, 1997), 258–84.
[366] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (SAGE, 2001).

I use CDA because of its unique fit for my case study. CDA focuses on struggles, conflicts, discrimination, and ideology. My case is an example of one of the most violent struggles of the century to be broadcast in the media, and for the most part live. The warring factions in Syria used sect-identities' differences to justify violence, recruit fighters, and deepen the divisions and fears of the "other" from all sides of the conflict. CDA focuses on the "institutional, political, gender, and media discourses (in the broader sense) which testify to more or less overt relations of struggle and conflict."[367] Because Al Jazeera had played a major role in the Arab Spring in general, and Syria in particular, I chose to use the Al Jazeera Arabic website where discourse about Syria took place and the relation between language and power can be studied using the articles published on Al Jazeera and the respective comments on these articles. CDA also fit with my approach of focusing on ordinary people's meaning making of the unfolding events because they are the ones paying the highest price in the ongoing war in Syria.

Additionally, CDA provides a framework to study prevailing social problems and carves a space for "those who suffer the most" with a critical focus on the role of social, economic, cultural, and political structures that influence how ordinary people make meaning of their situations. Then, there is also the fact that CDA "require[s] a theorization and description of both social processes and structures which give rise to the production of a text, and of the social structures and processes within which individuals or groups as social historical subjects, create meanings in their interaction

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[367] Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Studies*, 2016.

with texts."[368] CDA "critically analyzes those in power, those who are responsible, and those who have the means and the opportunity to solve such problems."[369] In my case, what started as calls for social, economic, and human rights reforms escalated into a war that has been ongoing for the past nine years and where ordinary Syrians have been paying the highest price socially, economically, politically, and most terribly, with their lives.

According to Wodack, CDA is particularly interested in the ways language mediates ideology. In my case in Syria since 2011, multiple opposing ideologies circulated both online and offline including: the pan Arab, anti-Israeli, secular, authoritarian Baath ideology of the regime; an extreme leftist ideology of the communist party and many other leftist groups; as well as the ideology of extreme Islamic fundamentalist groups, with ISIS as one of its extremes and circulating as opposition. This is not to say that many parts of these ideologies do not overlap with each other; such as, fighting Israel and the pan-Arab ideology of both the communist and the Baath parties; or, fighting the "imperial West" which overlaps with almost all the factions in Syria with a few exceptions.

In this study, I use CDA to determine how the different symbolic forms circulating on aljazeera.net construct and convey ideological meanings that establish or sustain relations of domination and produce dominant narratives on SNSs.[370]

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[368] Fairclough and Kress 1993 cited here: Wodak and Meyer. (p-3)
[369] Van Dijk (p-4), cited in Ruth Wodak, *Language, Power and Ideology: Studies in Political Discourse* (John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1989).
[370] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, New Ed edition (London: Penguin, 1991).

Why a Guided Approach to Topic Modeling?

This chapter builds on important attempts at using computer assisted

techniques with CDA including primarily the corpus-based approaches and in more

recent years the use of topic modeling with discourse analysis.[371] While imperative to

the advancement of CDA as a field of study, especially with the massive amounts of

text data produced online in need of critical analysis, these research methods

implemented Topic Modeling as a tool to assist in the discourse analysis of a large

corpus.[372] For example, Törnberg and Törnberg (2016) used TM to extract topics

about Muslims and Islam as discussed on one of the leading forums in Sweden. This

outstanding study was the first to use TM and CDA together. It revealed that users

depict Islam and Muslims as a "homogeneous outgroup, embroiled in conflict,

violence and extremism: characteristics that are described as emanating from Islam as

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[371] Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg, "Combining CDA and Topic Modeling: Analyzing Discursive Connections between Islamophobia and Anti-Feminism on an Online Forum," *Discourse & Society* 27, no. 4 (July 1, 2016): 401–22, https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926516634546.Thomas Jacobs and Robin Tschötschel, "Topic Models Meet Discourse Analysis: A Quantitative Tool for a Qualitative Approach," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 22, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 469–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1576317; Fabian Brinkmann, "Topical Discourse Structures: Using Topic Modeling in Discourse Analysis Approaches," *Human IT: Journal for Information Technology Studies as a Human Science* 14, no. 3 (December 20, 2019): 83–114; Anton Törnberg and Petter Törnberg, "Muslims in Social Media Discourse: Combining Topic Modeling and Critical Discourse Analysis," *Discourse, Context & Media* 13 (September 1, 2016): 132–42, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2016.04.003.
[372] Thomas Jacobs and Robin Tschötschel, "Topic Models Meet Discourse Analysis: A Quantitative Tool for a Qualitative Approach," *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 22, no. 5 (September 3, 2019): 469–85, https://doi.org/10.1080/13645579.2019.1576317.

a religion."[373] Then they also analyzed the evolution of the discourse over time which revealed some changes in the importance of specific topics and shifts within topics.[374]

Fabian Brinkmann (2019) presented a very convincing argument for why TM and CDA are technically and theoretically compatible, specifically when analyzing discourse strands or the entanglement of many discourse strands, Brinkmann argues that TM's usefulness in identifying and clustering documents within one or multiple topics is useful in identifying structures of discourse. And because TM and CDA share a similar position about studying discourse as semantic macrostructures, themes and topics, TM can be used to analyze the semantic macrostructures in text. Brinkmann does not offer a case study but an argument that TM can provide a useful complementary tool for CDA in the analysis of large datasets.

Jacobs & Tschötschel (2019) argue that Topic Modeling can help discourse analysis in areas that the latter could not address such as "scaling, repetition and systematization." They make a convincing case for TM in supplementing CDA in their study of hegemony in texts. They argued that rather than just focusing on the ruptures and breakdown instances of hegemony which is what traditional CDA does because of its inability to scale, TM would support the assumption that there was hegemony and the instances chosen to be studied closely are these ruptures. Then they also made the case for TM use with CDA's study of language as TM provides a way to connect the documents as instances of language and the words within the

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[373] Törnberg and Törnberg, "Muslims in Social Media Discourse." (p-133)
[374] Törnberg and Törnberg.

222

documents as instances of languages. This could be achieved because TM not only

assign documents to topics but also assigns words in every document to topics. They

then applied TM to two case studies.

CDA considers discourse as social practice. Moreover, CDA assumes the

existence of a dialectical relationship between discourse and the material conditions

or the situation(s), institution(s), and social structure(s) framing it.[375] These

conditions shape the discourse in question and in turn are shaped by it. And because

CDA does not start with a fixed theoretical and methodological stance, it can first

provide great guidance to TM as an exploratory text analysis technique to extract

more representative topics out of the corpus of text.

I propose to use TM as a CDA method by extending the application of TM at

the technical level and in terms of CDA exploratory process as I detail next. By

starting with a general research topic such as a sect-based discourse around the Syrian

war, I first look for the existence of such discourse in Al Jazeera articles and then in

the comments datasets.

I define sect-based discourse loosely to be able to capture violent,

discriminatory, peaceful, implicit, and explicit discourse. *Sect-based discourse* is any

discourse that uses categories that differentiate between groups of people based on

their religious identities. This discourse could be about intragroup or intergroup

categories of people, for example, difference between Muslim and Christian counts as

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[375] Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*; Teun Van Dijk, *Discourse Studies: A Multidisciplinary Introduction*, 2nd ed. (London, 2011), https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446289068.

intergroup sect-based discourse; versus, Sunni and Shi'a would be intragroup sect-based discourse.

CDA-Guided Topic Modeling

Is there a sect-based discourse on Aljazeera.net?

In what follows, I show two different methods to proceed with the TM. In the first method, I look at the topics extracted from the full datasets and conduct an analysis starting there. To narrow that down to a more granular level, I proceed to identify topics that potentially include sect-based discourse before running a topic modeling only on the documents included in these topics for both the article and comment datasets. The second method starts by assuming that the TM applied on the full datasets will give macro-topics. To capture more specific topics, I run Topic Modeling by year. For example, I run topic modeling on the articles from the year 2010 and their corresponding comments, then 2011, until 2017, in so that each year gets its own topics for the articles and the comments and the analysis would start there.

Method 1: Applying TM on full dataset

Based on the topics extracted from both the articles and comments datasets (shown in Tables 2 and 3), I proceed to identify whether sect-based discourse exists in the articles and then in the comments.

The list of topics extracted from the articles and shown in Table 2 does not clearly reveal an explicit sect-based discourse as a mainstream topic published by Al Jazeera. But, CDA requires a systematic contextualization of all background information in the analysis of discourse. CDA depends on the researcher's knowledge and context of the conditions around the production of a specific text. That is why a CDA-guided TM opens up new avenues of inquiry that TM as a method does not usually investigate. For example, in Topic 19, the terms from the TM above were "Humanitarian aid, UN, and Madaya, Kefraya, and Faoua." These terms alone do not indicate the possibility for a sect-based discourse, rather one might imply that it is about humanitarian aid about these towns. However, the context is very important in this case. At the time, these towns were being reported on using two conflicting discourses; on the one hand, opposition anti-regime media used the case of the long siege of the towns of Kefraya and Faoua whose residents were predominantly Shi'a Muslims, to advance the argument that the Syrian government is supporting Shi'a Muslims against Sunni Muslims, and that the Lebanese Hezbollah was defending Shi'a Syrians against Sunni Syrians; on the other hand, pro-regime media used the case to advance the argument that the Sunni-based takfiri oppositions were brutally sieging, bombing and shelling the two small Shi'a villages and the 'civilian villagers'. With this additional context, it is clear that this topic will probably contain sect-based discourse. In order to pursue this possibility, I ran a TM on the articles that pertain to Topic 19 because I suspected they either include explicit or implicit sect-based discourse. The results show, as expected, that one of the extracted sub-topics contain

the words Islam, Sunna, Shi'a, Sect, and fundamentalism. For further confirmation, Figure 8 shows the evolution of Topic 19 which confirms the progression of the events as they unfolded. First, when the siege on the two towns took place in March 2015, and when it became a humanitarian issue and a bargaining chip between the opposition and the government while there were intermittent attacks taking place. Then, it was no longer mentioned in the media until a deal to evacuate the towns started to take place in mid-2017 (which does not show in my data because the data collection stopped at around that period). Next, I ran a TM on the articles within Topic 19 only. One of these subtopics contained the terms Sunni, Shia, Alaoui, Taifi, which indicates the presence of a sect-based discourse.
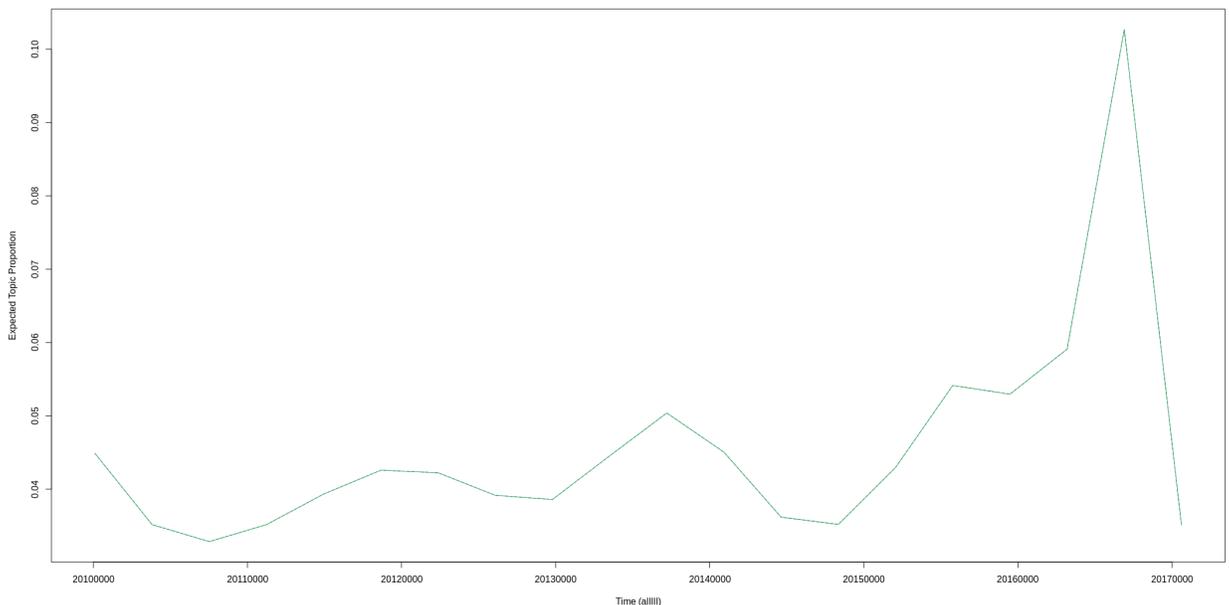
Figure 8: Evolution of Topic 19

226

Figure 9 is a visualization of the evolution this latter subtopic of Topic 19 which contained sect-based discourse. It shows that a sect-based discourse started showing up in the Al Jazeera articles around mid-2010. That sect-based discourse continued to increase until early 2011. At that point, the discourse was characterized by a short stable period before decreasing between mid-2011 and mid-2012. After that, the sect-based discourse increased again to its highest peak in mid-2013. It also shows that between mid-2013 and mid-2014, it was absent, and that it started increasing again until about mid-2015, but then fluctuated throughout 2016 and 2017. Two conclusions can be drawn from this observation. First, despite the prevalence of this discourse, it is unknown whether Al Jazeera used sect-based discourse as defined above in reporting or whether it was more ubiquitous in opinion pieces[376] but the prevalence of this discourse was higher in earlier years. Even when the Kefraya and Faoua situation unfolded starting in 2015 to 2017, this discourse was lower than it was in 2011 and 2013. For future work post-dissertation, I will analyze the ratio of opinion pieces to reporting that include this discourse in order to settle this possibility. Second, the difference in saliency of the sect-based discourse between the early and then later years could be attributed to the fact that by 2015 a hegemonic sectarian divisive discourse between Sunni and Shi'a had been set in place, so the use of Sunni and Shi'a categories to describe Kefraya and Faoua in reporting was not needed at that point. And because CDA questions the working of power, it would be imperative to conduct a close analysis of the texts in earlier years and in 2015. This

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[376] I hope to carry out an analysis of this in the future

227

conclusion would need further investigation in order to determine whether it was

intentional use of sect-based discourse by Al Jazeera or not.
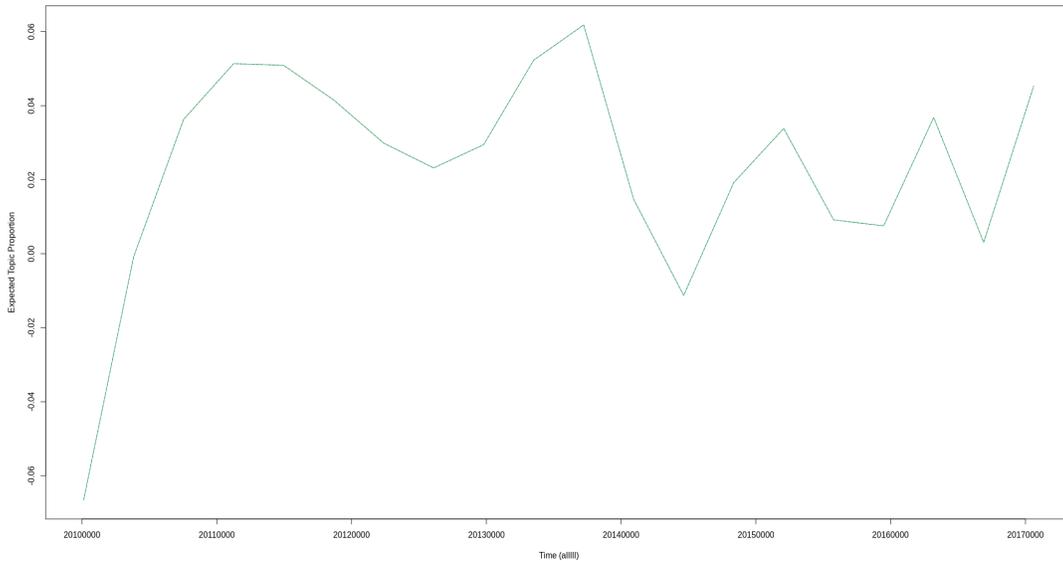
Figure 9: Evolution of Sect-based discourse in subtopic of Topic 19

The list of topics extracted from the comment dataset have many more topics

that potentially include sect-based discourse (including topics 5, 7, 8, 13, and 18). To

identify which of these topics, if any, include sect-based discourse, I propose running

a TM on the combined comments in topics 5, 7, 8, 13, 18 altogether, and then a TM

on the documents in each of the topics separately to reveal subtopics within these

documents (See Appendix H for the extracted topics).

The topics extracted from the combined TM are shown in Table 4. Topics 4,

11, and 12 might include sect-based discourse with the reference to Islam, Sunnis and

Shi'a. However, Topic 1 is clearly about divisive sect-based discourse with its use of terms Shi'a, Sunnis, Sectarian, Zionist, Arab, Muslims, and Islam. Included in the frequent and exclusive terms to this topic there are terms such as Christians, Safavid, and Crusaders. Figure 10 shows that divisive sect-based discourse drastically increased in 2011 and then fluctuated until 2015 then plateaued afterwards. This could be due to the intensification of the fight between a violent ruling minority and using military force against a Sunni majority until the rise of ISIS and its theatrical killings (however, this conclusion needs further investigation).
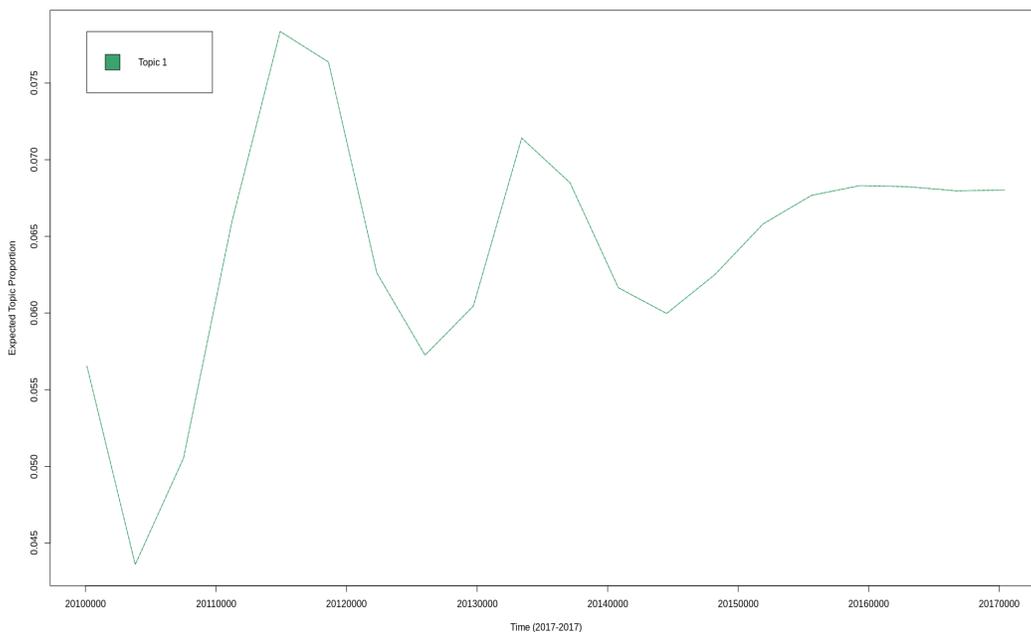
Figure 10: Evolution of Sect-based Discourse in Topic of Subtopic of Topic 19

Sample of comments from Topic 1 are shown below, translated here using automated Google translation:[377]

[1]"Iran and the party (...) with this American act prove that they are despicable soldiers in the service of Uncle Sam and his brothers the Zionists and the Crusaders and all the enemies of Islam and Muslims."

[2]"This is what is happening to the Sunni areas of Iraq, they withdrew from Mosul and handed over to the Baghdadi gang and now in Anbar, a bombing, displacement and siege to destroy it and displace its Sunni population with the knowledge, implementation and planning of a caliph (...)"

[3]"(...) \ n God is the greatest God is the greatest God hasten your victory for the free heroes of Syria

[4]"Because first of all, we want to overthrow a criminal, corrupt gang that has attacked all the people of Syria from all sects, and we welcome every participation from these sects and curse all those who support this gang, especially from its Sunni clients. Secondly, we did not attack any sect, whatever it was, and the Syrian people were the first to protect the Armenians who fled One of the massacres of the Turks, and this is what explains their large number in Syria and Lebanon, and the strange thing is that the Romans in Lebanon participated in the Sabra and Shatila massacre, and we did not revenge their art in Syria, so they stopped these nonsense because our revolution is against injustice, insult and humiliation.

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[377] The comments in Arabic are in Appendix I

[5] "Oh God, you, the people of Syria, the heroes. Oh God, compensate our brothers who were affected and afflicted with good. Oh God, and take revenge on those who hurt them and shed their blood."

[6] "The one who ignited the Lebanese war was Hafez al-Assad when he brought weapons to Lebanon for the Palestinians when he prevented the Palestinians in Syria from carrying weapons, and then, in agreement with the Zionists and the Americans, he played the role of a fireman to enter Lebanon under the pretext of striking the Palestinian organizations, destroying Lebanon and killing tens of thousands of Lebanese and Palestinians, and every goal is to annex Lebanon. To Syria, but in 2005, after they assassinated Hariri at the hands of the Hezbollah group ... the Assad army was expelled from Lebanon and rushed under cover of darkness.

[7] "Things in Egypt, praise be to God, are heading towards good. They are all a crisis. And here the elections are completely cattle. What happened in Egypt are just demonstrations with some actions and not like the situation in Syria. Nevertheless, things are fine. Praise be to God and Egypt will be adopted, God willing, as Syria will be built. \ N Ghalyan and the National Council is just a stage. Most of the people are against Assad, and he has nothing but a sectarian or beneficial minority, and every Syrian knows this. "

[8] "There is a big difference between the wars that the Messenger and his companions fought against the infidels and polytheists, and the war that the organization is now waging in the name of Islam, God, then God, and then

God. If the organization followed the approach of Islam's divine message and the just Sunnah of the Messenger, there would be no human being left without the organization and its victory, our religion is the religion of mercy and our Prophet prayed God And upon him be peace, the Prophet of Mercy, Islam began in person and ended with the entry of hundreds of thousands of unbelievers and polytheism into his religion. Why, when they saw forgiveness and tolerance for prisoners, for this reason they entered and embraced this religion? Was the Messenger and his companions doing the prisoners as the organization is doing now?

[9]"When the pen and tongue is unable to cut the contract with the sword so that the statement comes. This is what the mullahs in Tehran realized and applied and the Arabs were unable to understand. All this killing in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen. The writer does not believe that Iran has declared a sectarian war. Your submission and your inaction are killing us. What will Morsi do when the oil pipelines blow up in Sinai and Tehran's money flows?

[10] "Every mujahid who raises the banner of monotheism is wanted and honored in his country of Syria, so may God live the youth of al-Qaeda, the men of al-Zawahiri, the men of Sheikh Osama, Khattab, the Taliban, al-Zarqawi, Abu Yahya al-Libi, and Sheikh Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr. Yes, the heroes of those men who do not abandon the Syrian people, unlike the Arab

League, the United Nations and the client Arab governments. For those who have nothing but to grow up (...) "

(11)"The Shiites blame the past, the Sunnis blame the present, but we non-sectarian Muslims blame the future for the stupidity of Sunnis and Shiites.

[12]The reason for the non-interference of the West: is the fear of a Sunni government that represents true Islam that seeks to liberate the Golan and the Al-Aqsa. As for the king of propaganda and major advertisements in the arts of resistance, Bashar and his colleague Hassan Nasrallah, their side has been safe for decades..As for the question of supplication, why is not answered..Does the brother want that He speaks in the tongue of God and judges that the hearts of the imams and preachers are not pure? Then, while we are in the elementary school, we learned that the answer is not when we want it. Rather, when God wants it. And one of the conditions of the supplication is not to hasten the response. God overthrow Bashar. We are honored that the supplication is his servants even if not even Die in your anger

[13] "Turkey receives more than 3 million Syrian refugees, and how many refugees are receiving from Safavid Iran, which is trying to give certificates of good behavior to Turkey? The so-called international community accepts Iranian terrorism against Arabs and helps it even to practice it, we are facing a real problem related to the classification of so-called "terrorism" How did the Lebanese Iranian Party transform from a terrorist movement and militia in the West to an ally on the land of Syria and Iraq ?! In the sense of Shiite

terrorism, it is acceptable because it kills Arabs only, and the "Sunni"

resistance is terrorism, whether in Syria or Iraq ... there is no A legitimate

regime in Syria until Iran invokes it .. "

[14] "The criminal Syrian regime strikes with chemical weapons for the sake

of a proposal from Brahimi with the intervention of the United Nations and

the separation between a Sunni region and an Alawite region from Homs to

Tartus, but this is far from you, incest. We live with the Alawites and there is

nothing between us. We want to try you and your gang, and no foreign

separation forces will enter Syria. Because it will not stand and it is not

desirable. We, the Alawites and all the sects will fight any foreign

intervention. Syria will return better without the Assad family and the

beneficiaries of this gang from the Sunnis and those who wipe the cloth

because their trade with this gang will end and their money has gone

unheeded !! "

[15] "Did this Alawite Dashdushi take a license from Putin before speaking

because Russia is the supreme authority for the colonialist in Syria, Bashar is

the one who carries out orders and conducts business. I mean the internal

government under Russia. After all, we tell him not to dream too much with

Aleppo. Do not expect that you won the war and that tomorrow it will be seen

by him soon. "

Before moving forward with the analysis of one topic that will clearly contain sect-based discourse (Topic 1) and another that potentially might contain sect-based discourse (Topic 11), it is important to note that sect-based discourses from Topics 1, 4, 11, and 12 are salient with discourses about Zionism, the Muslim brotherhood, regime violence, opposition violence, ISIS, Nusra, and the regional and international players' roles in the situation. This means that sect-based discourse circulates in tandem with other embedded ideological stereotypes and sectarian narratives. In order to test whether there is a correlation between the articles and the sect-based comments, I now analyze Topic 1 and Topic 11 and apply TM on the articles where the comments from these topics were employed (see Appendix G).

The TM on Topic 1 produced the subtopics as shown in Appendix E along with its Google translation to English. The topics extracted out of Topic 1 are all active military events including war, bombings, killings, refugees, jiahadists, violence which includes regional, and international players and the geopolitics involving those players. A singular exception, Topic 6, is about the Muslim brotherhood. All these topics overwhelmingly include sect-based discourse.

The TM on Topic 11 produced the subtopics as shown in Appendix E along with its Google translation to English. Similarly to Topic 1, the majority of the topics extracted from the articles connected to comments of Topic 11 reveals a total of 17 topics dealing with active military events including war, bombings, killings, refugees, jiahadists, violence which includes regional, and international players, and the geopolitics involving those players (Topics 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, 17,

18, 19, 20). One topic (Topic 3) is about the Muslim brotherhood and two other topics use sect-based discourse (Topic 14 and 16). Again, all these topics overwhelmingly include sect-based discourse.

Method 2: Applying TM on dataset partitioned by year

In this method, I start with the assumption that the topics from Tables 2 and 3 only offer a good general overview of the articles and the comments but are not enough to capture the nuances of the unfolding war events and the shifts in fields that might impact sect habitus. Thus, there is a need to home in on the data and one way to do this is to run topic modeling by year in order to extract topics pertaining to the articles and the comments of each year. Appendix F includes all the topics in Arabic and their translation via Google translate into English. Out of these topics, I will focus solely on the ones that include explicit sect-based discourse and analyze them.

Tables 4 and 5 show the topics that potentially include sect-based discourse extracted from the article and comment datasets with the number of documents included in these topics.

Table 3: Topics that potentially include sect-base discourse in the Articles Dataset

Year	Corpus Size	Sect Based Topics	Number of Articles

2011	562	4,16,19	35
2012	3795	8,10	326
2013	4183	N/A	0
2014	3363	3,6	205
2015	4252	1,14	273
2016	5292	14	251
2017	1858	12	132
Total	23305		1222

Table 4: Topics that potentially include sect-base discourse in the Comments Dataset

Year	Corpus Size	Sect Based Topics	Number of Articles
2011	7379	10, 13, 16,	508
2012	42089	1, 4, 18	4165
2013	32,906	7, 12, 15	3267
2014	16,867	5, 9, 13, 17	1067

2015	14,582	12, 13, 17	3047
2016	8,532	6, 7, 8, 17, 20	701
2017	2181	14, 19, 20	122
Total	124,536		12877

Before getting into the analysis of the topics themselves, a few notes are worth starting with. It is clear that with the exception of 2013, Al Jazeera articles that potentially include sect-based discourse are on average about the same. A close analysis of 2013 is worth conducting especially because of the military losses of the Syrian Army, the peace talks, the rise of Free Syrian Army, and it was just before the meteoric rise of ISIS and Al Nusra Front.

Going back to the averages, we notice that the sect-based comments do not follow an average which could lead to the conclusion that despite the instrumentalists' assumptions that elites (Al Jazeera) inflame peoples sectarianism at will, we notice that in 2013, there were 3,267 comments that fit the sect-based discourse category and in 2014 these comments amounted to one third of 2013. This leads to the conclusion that sect habitus online is dynamic and changes with the unfolding of the events, and that elites are not in control of popular sect habitus. I am not excluding the role that the media and political elites play in shaping sect habitus, but I am arguing that they are not in control of it. I will run TM on the 2013 comments that fit the sect-based discourse category to show the topics relevant to

these comments and then extract the respective articles and their topics to deduce the relationship between these topics and the articles.

The topics extracted from the 3,267 comments from the year 2013 reveal a combination of sect-based violence, sectarian strife, war activities, killings, local, regional, active, international players in Syria. The number of articles that these comments commented on is 994 articles and the topics covered by these articles shown in Appendix F cover active military activities, reporting the violence killings, shelling, bombings, sniping, Al Qaeda, Israel, Hezbollah, and some international players.

The dynamic nature of sect habitus online is in interaction with media representations of sect-based discourse but never actually determined by it. It is less of a question of causation/determination ("aljazeera makes them do it") and more of a media's attempt to represent the sect habitus barely scratches the surface ("aljazeera is like the top of the sectarian iceberg we can see with our current methods of analysis").

It is worth linking CDA's concept of "contexts" to Bourdieu's concept of "fields;" that sect habitus enters (in this case online) where the rules of these fields include the platforms' environments, for example, user agreements. In other words, these rules are different on Al Jazeera comments because these comments are 'responses' to specific articles, while Twitter for example has much more limited text and is not in the context of replying to an article (see the chapter on Twitter). In CDA's terms, the context of Al-Jazeera is different than Al-Jazzera. Sect habitus

online is influenced by and is influencing these fields. The latter are both online and offline even when it comes to the manifestations of sect habitus online. For example, sect-based comments were produced in 2013, regardless of the absent sect-based discourse in Al Jazeera's articles. This tells us that sect habitus is not controlled by Al Jazeera's editorial policies only. This relationality of sect habitus within multiple fields dismantles the top-down theories of "sectarianism as controlled by elites." Also, the articles that include sect-based comments tend to include more than one sect-based comments which mean sect-based discourse leads to more sect-based discourse.

Conclusion

I have presented a method, CDA-guided TM, examining the specific question of sect-based discourse. I showed two different approaches to use this method in analyzing Al Jazeera articles and the respective comments. I found that Al Jazeera used sect-based language in its content, and that articles reporting violence receive the most sect-based comments. I also showed that by splitting the corpus into sub-corpora by year, that not only the topics revealed are more specific, but that there is fluctuation in the sect-based discourse of the comments which reveals the dynamic nature of sect habitus.

The significance of this method is both in its ability to analyze online discourse from below and how the discourse evolves in the context of other power structures. There are still infinite ways to use this method including answering

different questions about the data in these datasets, investigating the most salient

topics covered by aljazeera by running topic modeling on the articles that received the

highest number of comments. It is possible to also measure the likes and dislikes on

the comments by topic. I could even include a Social Network Analysis of the top

commenters and reveal their positions regarding topics of interest. This method could

be also used to investigate the role of the international community, the question of the

refugees, the humanitarian NGO work, the ongoing war events, violence, peace talks,

the use of chemical weapons, etc. This method could also be used to analyze any

social media datasets.

Conclusion

This project presents four main interventions, two theoretical and two methodological. At the theoretical level, I first argue, similarly to Haddad's recent work, that sectarianism lost its analytical usefulness and propose sect habitus as an analytical tool to study the manifestations of sect identities in times of peace, war, and those in between. Second, I show how ordinary peoples' understandings of their sect identities through everyday life experiences and practices set the conditions of possibility for violent, peaceful, and indifferent sect identities. At the methodological level, I first, argue that it is critical to simultaneously study both the online and offline spaces as part of the everyday practices that affect the meaning-making and remaking of sect identities. Second, with all the data that researchers can collect and analyze online, through social media, forums, and many other outlets, these data are not enough to give us a clear picture of what is going on in both the online and offline spaces, that is why I propose an ethnographically informed computational method to analyze the manifestations of sect identities both online and offline.

In this dissertation, I focus on the Syrian uprisings turned war since 2011, and I propose, develop, and apply a theory of practice of sect identities and use sect habitus as an analytical tool to study the role that sect identities have played at the popular level in the making, unmaking, and remaking of political affiliations, decision to join or not the military operations, migrate internally or abroad, or just seek a sense of normalcy that has been lost throughout the unfolding of the war events. I show that a dynamic model is needed to be able to capture the workings of sect identities and be

able to unravel the conditions of when they become violent. A theory of practice allows for an analysis of the working of sect habitus in relation to many fields in my case safety and security, human rights discourse, and Aljazeera were relevant, and in future work I will show the role of the democratic field, Twitter field, and Facebook field.

In chapter One, I lay out the theoretical framework and develop sect habitus as conceptual apparatus that highlights the set of dispositions that sect identities present under specific conditions in relation to a set of fields—in my case safety and security, humans rights discourse, and Aljazeera online—that affect and are affected by sect habitus. At different times, sect identities take on new meanings and/or reinforce old ones, through frameworks presented by these fields. So, what this project proposes is not a grand theory of sect identities rather an understanding of these identities at a specific conjuncture in relation to a specific field or set of fields. That is why this project required a combination of intensive ethnographic fieldwork and online data analysis to be able to dissect each of these fields and get an understanding of how they relate, influence, and are influenced by a sect habitus. Using habitus allows for bracketing a specific field to analyze without dismissing the import of other fields and conditions.

In Chapter Two, I show how a discourse of safety and security understood, deployed, and practiced through a different set of sect habitus dispositions, sectarianized the meanings of safety and security which in turn created a binarized opposing reality for different groups in Syria. Regardless of the sect, some people

found safety and security in the confines of their sect, and others found that sectarianism is the cause of losing safety and security. This chapter shows that sect identities understood through the lens of safety and security shifted sect habitus into becoming sectarian and in some instances 'revealed the true nature of groups fighting in the ongoing war." The safety and security discourse changed the meaning of these sect identities and led to either a disavowal and projection of sectarianism or to fear and introject sectarianism and violence.

In Chapter Three, shows how a human rights discourse took hold in 2011 and led to increasing sectarian divisions which defies its raison d'être. I ask how ordinary Syrians made sense of the human rights discourse before and during the revolution, and then throughout the war, in order to analyze how most warring and non-warring parties adopted some aspects of the human rights "field" to justify their positions. I show how, under the conditions of war, sectarian habitus transformed based on an ambiguous understanding of human rights, which in turn got sectarianized and hardened sect identities into sectarian divisions.

In chapter Four, I show how Aljazeera.net as a platform, editorial team, and an outlet influenced by the Qatari government's politics played a major role by using a sect-based discourse during specific periods of the Syrian struggle and refrained from using such a discourse during other moments. In this chapter, I also show that a sect-based narrative in user comments is strongly connected to the coverage of violence.

This dissertation is a steppingstone towards an understanding of sect habitus in relation to safety and security, human rights discourse, and Aljazeera website. In future work, based on the data collected during my ethnographic fieldwork and online from Aljazeera, Twitter and Facebook, I will analyze the role of the democratic field in addition to the safety and security and HRD. I will also present a comparative understanding of Twitter, and Facebook as differing platforms that open up and foreclose specific conditions in the online sphere that differ between each other and in terms of what Aljazeera website enabled. There I will show how regional and small-scale political and military events have a deeper impact than geopolitical national and international events (usually covered by mainstream media), on these sect identities and fuel sectarian discourses online. Starting with the idea that online platforms have become an intrinsic part of our daily lives, I argue that it is important to study how these platforms affect, enforce, and shape the making, unmaking, and remaking of people's identities. What are the limitations and the openings that these platforms provide? What do they illuminate, what do they hide and how? How do people live with and contribute to the flow of information from these platforms?

Appendices

APPENDIX A
List of matching words used to collect Al Jazeera articles

الإيرانية	Iranian
روسيا	Russia
إيران	Iran
موسكو	Moscow
الروسية	Russian
الإيراني	Iranian
السورية	Syrian
الروسي	Russian
دمشق	Damascus
مضايا	Flashlight
الإخوان	Brotherhood
جماعة	group
المسلمين	Muslims
حلب	Aleppo
سوري	Syrian
الإرهاب	Terror
دير الزور	Deer Al Zour
حمص	chickpeas
تنظيم الدولة	ISIS
درعا	Daraa
الغوطة	Ghouta
بداريا	daria
جرابلس	Jarablus
الإرهاب	Terror
الخلافة	caliphate
الإسلامية	Islamic
البغدادي	Al-Baghdadi

APPENDIX B

List of stop words used to preprocess the text

Arabic Stop words	Translated
من	From
أن	that
على	On
في	In
ما	What
إلى	To
الذي	Which
عن	About
التي	Which
يقول	He says
و	And
بين	Between
إن	That
وعن	And about
وأن	and surely
يكون	is being
وكان	And it was
مع	With
لو	If
لم	did not
وفق	according to
فإن	The
هذه	this is
لا	No
هذا	This
لكن	But
أيضا	Also
أو	or
هناك	over there
منذ	Ago
بعد	distance
كل	Each
دون	Without
ما	What
يزيد على	Over

تكون	Be
لهذا	For this
أنها	It
وهذا	and this is
وفي	And in
وعلى	and on
لها	to her
قد	may be
وهو	and he
،	,
مما	Than
بينما	While
التى	Which
إلي	to me
هى	she
منذ	Ago
التي	Which
على	On
هي	she
ضمن	within
الذى	Which
عليها	on her
هو	He
حيث	Where
الذي	Which
عليه	on him
وهي	Which
الان	right Now
الذين	Whose
اما	As for
وهي	Which
الآن	right Now
الى	to me
أما	As for
وهو	and he
خلال	During
الي	to me
إما	As for
فهى	It is
بعد	distance
إلى	to me

ايضا	Also
فهي	It is
قبل	Before
أيضا	Also
فهو	He is
حتى	Until
كل	Each
انت	You are
عند	At
وكل	And all
أنت	You are
عندما	When
لم	did not
لك	is yours
لدى	I have
ولم	And did not
لها	to her
جميع	all
لن	will not
له	for him
ولن	And will not
هذه	this is
هذا	This
ذلك	that
هناك	over there
كانت	she was
تلك	That
كان	It was
يكون	is being
تكون	Be
وكانت	And she was
وكان	And it was
غير	Non
بعض	Some
قد	may be
نحو	Toward
بين	between

APPENDIX C

The list of words that have al as part of the base words not as a definitive article

الله	Allah
الذي	which

اللذان	who
اللذين	who
الذين	whose
التي	which
اللتان	which
اللتين	which
اللائي	who
اللاتي	who
اللواتي	who

APPENDIX D

Frequency Table of Top 50 terms used in the Articles

Terms	Freq	English
وقال	22818	And he said
سوريا	18921	Syria
قال	17837	He said
الرئيس	17245	President
السوري	16695	Syrian
اليوم	16387	Today
المتحدة	16044	United
النظام	15907	the system
السورية	15858	Syrian
وأضاف	15251	He added
الماضي	15041	the past
الجزيرة	12879	The island
العام	12779	The year
رئيس	12663	President
المعارضة	12474	Opposition
قوات	12044	Forces
أخرى	11906	Other
مدينة	11660	City
الدولة	11619	The state
الخارجية	10963	External
عدد	10907	Number
وزير	10903	minister
أمس	10877	yesterday
وقالت	10707	She said
الأمن	10600	Security
وقد	10534	Has
الإسلامية	10251	Islamic
عام	10181	Year
الولايات	10117	the states
الجيش	10113	Army
الدولي	10013	International
بشأن	9870	about
وقت	9841	time
الحكومة	9546	the government
الأميركية	9484	American
روسيا	9336	Russia
قالت	9244	She said

بشكل	9144	Form
الأسد	9034	Assad
دمشق	8934	Damascus
وذلك	8911	And that
الأميركي	8910	American
تنظيم	8743	group
سوريا،	8736	Syria,
البلاد	8702	Country
مجلس	8670	board
بسبب	8641	Because
إيران	8582	Iran
بشار	8581	Bashar

Frequency Table of Top 50 terms used in the Comments

Terms	Freq	English
الله	50348	Allah
سوريا	31159	Syria
الشعب	26659	The people
السوري	24345	Syrian
النظام	21365	the system
ايران	16067	Iran
بشار	15453	Bashar
العرب	15114	Arabs
الجيش	14690	Army
العالم	13161	the world
المسلمين	12177	Muslims
العربية	11903	Arabic
مصر	11227	Egypt
العراق	10865	Iraq
فقط	10461	Just
الدول	10446	Countries
اسرائيل	10240	Israel
امريكا	10145	USA
والله	9958	I swear
الغرب	9723	the West
روسيا	9637	Russia
الاسد	9191	Assad
العربي	9052	Arabi
الحر	8872	Free

دولة	8189	Country
الثورة	8080	revolution
إيران	7954	Iran
نظام	7915	System
دول	7786	Countries
حزب	7725	party
مثل	7668	Such as
لماذا	7636	Why
قتل	7602	killing
يجب	7503	Must be
السورية	7391	Syrian
الناس	7234	People
الدولة	6940	The state
الأسد	6893	Assad
أمريكا	6811	USA
وليس	6745	And not
اليوم	6741	Today
علي	6633	Ali
يعني	6621	Means
الحرب	6557	the war
الخليج	6459	Gulf
لقد	6266	lhave
سورية	6208	Syrian
وهذا	6170	and this is
اللهم	6151	O Allah

APPENDIX E

Topic 1 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, متحدة, قرار, مجلس, أمن, سوري, أسلحة, أمم, سورية, مشروع

FREX: كيميائية, دبلوماسيون, نقض, حظر, سابع, عقوبات, فيتو, أوروبي, مشروع, شحنات

Lift: مفتشون, أسهم, أنتظر, إحجاما, إيفاد, احادية, اختبارات, استقالته, اطلعت, الإذن

Score: كيميائية, أوروبي, عقوبات, انان, قرار, دبلوماسيون, صين, فيتو, نقض, كيميائي

Topic 2 Top Words:

Highest Prob: نظام, قوات, معارضة, مدينة, بريف, ريف, حلب, قصف, اشتباكات, سوري

FREX: متفجرة, مورك, براميل, بالبراميل, شرقي, غارات, سيطرت, شمالي, طيران, بريف

Lift: قاطرجي, مورك, أنفال, اخركما, استقدامها, استمرارا, استهدافهم, استهدفتا, امهلت, انفاق

Score: بريف, غارات, ريف, اشتباكات, قصف, مورك, بلدة, متفجرة, ناشطون, إدلب

Topic 3 Top Words:

Highest Prob: إخوان, مصر, مسلمين, مصري, جماعة, رئيس, محمد, عام, شعب, مصرية

FREX: سيسي, انقلاب, مرسي, إخوان, مصري, عدوية, مصريين, مصرية, اعتصام, مصر

Lift: أندلس, إخواني, اضيف, اطاح, الملك, انتسب, باعتصام, تليفزيون, جمهوري؟, خافيا

Score: سيسي, إخوان, انقلاب, مرسي, معتصمين, عدوية, مصر, منسوب, مصري, اعتصام

Topic 4 Top Words:

Highest Prob: الله, حزب, سوريا, لبنان, سوري, اللبناني, رئيس, سورية, وقال, إسرائيل

FREX: اللبنانيين, اللبناني, لبنان, اللبنانية, لحزب, بيروت, إدريس, نصر, الله, لبنان،

Lift: أسرى،, اجتيازهم, اختطافهم،, اخذته, اسابيعه،, الامتناع, التضامن, الرهان, العودة, الغزاة

Score: اللبنانيين, اللبناني, الله, لحزب, حزب, مخطوفين, إسرائيلي, إدريس, غارة, لبنان

Topic 5 Top Words:

Highest Prob: إيران, إيراني, إسرائيل, دول, إيرانية, نووي, منطقة, طهران, رئيس, سعودية

FREX: نووي, نووية, نتنياهو, روحاني, حوثيين, إيران, إيراني،, يمن, لإيران, إيران،

Lift: آفي, ألعاب, إصلاحيين, انتجها, اوسطية, بسياسة, تتبعها, تراجعا, تعتبرها, تقايض

Score: نووي, إيران, روحاني, نووية, إيراني, حوثيين, نتنياهو, طهران, إسرائيل, إيرانية

Topic 6 Top Words:

Highest Prob: نظام, قوات, جيش, مدينة, قصف, اشتباكات, دمشق, سوري, بريف, ناشطون

FREX: قصير, براجمات, مطار, معضمية, عنيفة, جوبر, بالمدفعية, محيط, خالدية, ثوار

Lift: أماسي, أوتستراد, أوحال, إعدامها, اخترقوا, اسبوعها, استنفرا, السيدة, اللاسلكي, النصر

Score: بريف, اشتباكات, قصف, ناشطون, قصير, جوبر, قصفت, براجمات, داريا, مطار

Topic 7 Top Words:

Highest Prob: تنظيم, دولة, إسلامية, ابو, سوريا, رقة, نصرة, عراق, جبهة, عام

FREX: جهادي, خلافة, مقدسي, همام, سلفي, بكر, شيشاني, أبو, عدناني, مجاهدين

Lift: أبو, أصبح, أمراء, أنباري, أنصار،, إخوانه, إخوانوأكد, إغارة, إيجابيات, احتجزته

Score: تنظيم, رقة, خلافة, همام, مقدسي, جهادي, موصل, شيشاني, عدناني, بكر

Topic 8 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوري, سوريا, معارضة, خارجية, سورية, مؤتمر, رئيس, نظام, وزير, وقال

FREX: إبراهيمي, جنيف, ائتلاف, مؤتمر, انتقالية, وفد, مفاوضات, جولة, قمة, خطيب

Lift: آجلا, أفترض, أمام, أمينان, أنان, إجرائية, إداري, إيرانيأما, إيريك, ابراهيمي

Score: إبراهيمي, جنيف, انتقالية, مؤتمر, لافروف, ائتلاف, انان, مبعوث, قمة, محادثات

Topic 9 Top Words:

Highest Prob: أردن, سوريا, سورية, اللاجئين, سوري, أردنية, سوريين, حدود, وقال, قوات

FREX: لاجئ, أردنية, أردن, مشعل, تهريب, عمان, اللاجئين, كهرباء, فلسطينيين, أردني

Lift: أونروا, الأونروا, انتحار, اوامرها, بالمخيم, بالموت, بركات, تأوي, تحويلية, تذاكر

Score: أردني, أردنية, مخيم, مشعل, زعتري, لاجئ, مستشفيات, عمان, أردن, تهريب

Topic 10 Top Words:

Highest Prob: جيش, سوري, سورية, سوريا, قوات, تركية, تركيا, منطقة, وقال, حدود

FREX: عرسال, جولان, معبر, طلاس, تركية, انشقاقه, طائرة, حدودي, مقاتلة, انشقاق

Lift: إنذارها, اشتباك، اطمة, بلدنا, بيعته, تركيتان, ديماس, رستم, سياج، عسكريين

Score: عرسال, جولان, طلاس, انشقاق, قنيطرة, مقاتلة, طائرة, معبر, انشقاقه, محتل

Topic 11 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, حزب, عربية, رئيس, دول, تركيا, سورية, سلطات, عام, تركي

FREX: عمالة, جائزة, تعريف, جزائر, تنمية, بريطانية, جزائرية, جزائريين, تأشيرة, عمال

Lift: أسلاك, إسترليني, استخبارية، استعمارية، الأستاذ، بشر، بودهانالجزائر, تستحق, تقديره،, تكريم

Score: عمالة, جائزة, تعريف, إمبراطورية, تأشيرة, اردوغان, مسلمي, جزائريين, عفو, عبوات

Topic 12 Top Words:

Highest Prob: تنظيم, دولة, سوريا, قوات, عراق, إسلامية, تحالف, أميركية, سورية, جوية

FREX: كردية, ضربات, تحالف, تدريب, مناورات, تنظيم, دولة، لتنظيم, وحدات, لمحاربة

Lift: أسايش, إرهابيي, اجلها, اسلامية, الإستراتيجية, النهج, انجرليك, اوكار, اونلاين, بالأزمات

Score: تنظيم, تحالف, سليماني, ضربات, غارات, مناورات, كوباني, كردية, رقة, عراقية

Topic 13 Top Words:

Highest Prob: روسيا, سوريا, نظام, أسد, عام, سوري, روسية, رئيس, شعب, روس

FREX: قذافي, الليبي, معمر, روس, ليبيا, سوفياتي, ليبيا, قذافي، ورقة, قرضاوي

Lift: أرثوذكس, اختلافها, استبدادية، تشتهر, حامي, لموازين, مافيا, متحد, نظرها, وإحلال

Score: روسيا, موسكو, قذافي, متغيرات, سوفياتي, عثمانية, الليبي, كرملين, رام, قرضاوي

Topic 14 Top Words:

Highest Prob: ثورة, نظام, عربي, سورية, عربية, سوري, سياسية, شعب, سوريا, سياسي

FREX: شيعي, فقيه, ولي, شقير, سني, تميم, وعي, شراكة, طوائف, ثقافية

Lift: أبرياء،, إشكالات, إشكاليات, إفتاء, ادوارا, اصطفاف, افزع, اقدام, الأمة, المهم

Score: ولي, شيعي, فقيه, شقير, بطريرك, أقليات, حماس, طائفي, سني, اعتدال

Topic 15 Top Words:

Highest Prob: جيش, قوات, قصف, دمشق, ناشطون, سوري, مدينة, نظام, سورية, اشتباكات
FREX: برصاص, مظاهرات, خرجت, بنيران, وكفر, لجان, أسود, نظامي, حجر, سوسة
Lift: أحدهما, إعطاب, احتشدت, احياؤها, استجابت, اسفرعن, اعطبها, اقترابهم, الاشتباك, القوات
Score: ناشطون, قصف, احياء, بريف, اشتباكات, نظامي, حيي, نظامية, قابون, مرصد

Topic 16 Top Words:
Highest Prob: سوريا, أسد, نظام, سوري, سورية, معارضة, رئيس, حرب, وقال, صحيفة
FREX: كاتب, علويين, أهلية, سيدا, تسليح, اهلية, إندبندنت, فارس, إطاحة, زكريا
Lift: أشار, أمل،, أمن—, إغناشيوس, إمعان, إنكار،, اتسم, احتفظ, استغلا, اعمى
Score: انان, كاتب, زكريا, علويين, انتقالية, كوسوفو, اردوغان, سيدا, أهلية, توصيف

Topic 17 Top Words:
Highest Prob: مجلس, سوري, متحدة, سوريا, أمن, أمم, دولي, نظام, سورية, انان
FREX: جنائية, انان, مضايا, بعثة, مراقبين, انتهاكات, حولة, إحالة, كوفي, جريمة
Lift: مضايا، أشعر, إيرفيه, اعترض, اكل, السماح, انتقاله, اوبراين, بالتفاصيل, بالحولة
Score: انان, حولة, مضايا, مجزرة, كوفي, بعثة, جنائية, مراقبين, للأمم, إحالة

Topic 18 Top Words:
Highest Prob: سوري, نظام, دمشق, مدينة, قوات, يوم, سوريا, مناطق, سورية, أسد
FREX: جثث, شعيطات, مزدوج, عثر, تفجيرات, إعدام, إيكونومست, اعدموا, سيارة, سفارة
Lift: عائلتين, نادت, أخيرةشهدت, إيكونومست, اذرعات, استشهادهم, بالظروف, بانياس،, ببنائه، بتركيبتها
Score: شعيطات, داريا, جثث, مرصد, عثر, إيكونومست, مغنية, مجزرة, ناشطون, اعدموا

Topic 19 Top Words:
Highest Prob: روسيا, سوريا, روسي, روسية, رئيس, سوري, أسد, موسكو, بوتين, متحدة
FREX: بوتين, فلاديمير, روسي, روسية, اوباما, حلف, موسكو, روسيا, ضربة, كرملين
Lift: آرنست, إدارات, إدوارد, إزفستيا, إليوشن, إيرين, إيسنا, احتواءها, ارباع, ازمتي
Score: بوتين, روسيا, موسكو, اوباما, روسي, روسية, لافروف, فلاديمير, كرملين, أميركي

Topic 20 Top Words:
Highest Prob: نظام, ثورة, سورية, سوري, درعا, دمشق, مدن, أسد, للثورة, جزيرة
FREX: حوراني, عظيمة, فدائية, استشهاد, اقتراع, شهيد, مكلفة, شهداء, قضائية, نوعي
Lift: شهدائها, عاطفي, فبقاء, الحوراني, انتهجته, اندماجية, بداياتها،, بشجاعته، بطن, تحريري
Score: فدائية, حوراني, عظيمة, درعا, اقتراع, شبابية, ضريبة, وحراكها, قضائية, استشهاد

Topic 1 Top Words:
Highest Prob: Syria, United, Resolution, Council, Security, Syrian, Weapons, Nations, Syria, Project
FREX: chemical, diplomats, veto, embargo, seventh, sanctions, veto, European, draft, shipments
Lift: inspectors, shares, wait, resignation, dispatch, unilateralism, tests, resignation, read, permission

Score: chemical, European, sanctions, Annan, resolution, diplomats, China, veto, veto, chemical

Topic 2 Top Words:
Highest Prob: regime, forces, opposition, city, countryside, countryside, Aleppo, shelling, clashes, Syrian
FREX: Explosive, Morek, Barrels, Barrels, Eastern, Raids, Controlled, Northern, Flying, Brave
Lift: Katerji, Morek, Anfal, others, as well as, recruiting, continuation, targeting them, they targeted, slowed down, spending
Score: the countryside, raids, countryside, clashes, shelling, Morek, town, explosives, activists, Idlib

Topic 3 Top Words:
Highest Prob: Brotherhood, Egypt, Muslims, Egyptian, group, president, Muhammad, general, people, Egyptian
FREX: Sisi, Coup, Brotherhood, Morsi, Egyptian, Adawiya, Egyptians, Egyptian, sit-in, Egypt
Lift: Andalus, my brothers, add, overthrow, the king, associate, sit-in, television, Republican ?, hidden
Score: Sisi, brothers, coup, Morsi, sit-in, Adawiya, Egypt, attributed, Egyptian, sit-in

Topic 4 Top Words:
Highest Prob: God, Hizb, Syria, Lebanon, Syrian, Lebanese, President, Syria, and he said, Israel
FREX: Lebanese, Lebanese, Lebanon, Lebanese, Hezbollah, Beirut, Idris, Nasr, God, Lebanon,
Lift: prisoners, passing them, kidnapping them, I took them, weeks, abstinence, solidarity, betting, return, invaders
Score: Lebanese, Lebanese, God, party, party, kidnapped, Israeli, Idris, raid, Lebanon

Topic 5 Top Words:
Highest Prob: Iran, Iran, Israel, countries, Iran, nuclear, region, Tehran, President, Saudi Arabia
FREX: Nuclear, nuclear, Netanyahu, Rouhani, Houthis, Iran, Iran, Yemen, Iran, Iran,
Lift: Avi, games, reformers, produce it, mediocrity, with a policy, it follows it, backs it, considers it, barter
Score: Nuclear, Iran, Rouhani, Nuclear, Iranian, Houthis, Netanyahu, Tehran, Israel, Iranian

Topic 6 Top Words:

258

Highest Prob: regime, forces, army, city, bombing, clashes, Damascus, Syria, countryside, activists

FREX: short, pragmatic, airport, moadamiya, violent, Jobar, artillery, vicinity, Khaldiya, thuwar

Lift: Amassi, highway, mud, her execution, penetrated, her week, alert, Mrs., Lasilki, victory

Score: Brave, clashes, shelling, activists, Qusayr, Jobar, bombed, Pragmat, Daria, Airport

Topic 7 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Organization, state, Islamic, Abu, Syria, Raqqa, victory, Iraq, front, general

FREX: Jihadist, Caliphate, Maqdisi, Hammam, Salafi, Bakr, Chechen, Abu, Adenani, Mujahideen

Lift: Abu, became, princes, Anbari, supporters, brothers, brothers, confirmed, raiding, positives, detained him

Score: Organization, Raqqa, Caliphate, Hammam, Maqdisi, Jihadi, Mosul, Chechen, Adenani, Bakr

Topic 8 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Syrian, Syria, opposition, foreign, Syria, conference, president, regime, minister, and he said

FREX: Brahimi, Geneva, coalition, conference, transition, delegation, negotiations, round, summit, speaker

Lift: Yes, I suppose, in front of, Aminan, Annan, procedural, administrative, Iranian, Eric, Brahimi.

Score: Brahimi, Geneva, transition, conference, Lavrov, coalition, Annan, envoy, summit, talks

Topic 9 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Jordan, Syria, Syria, refugees, Syrian, Jordanian, Syrians, borders, and he said, forces

FREX: refugee, Jordanian, Jordan, Meshaal, smuggling, Amman, refugees, electricity, Palestinians, Jordanian

Lift: UNRWA, UNRWA, suicide, its orders, the camp, death, blessings, shelter, transfer, tickets

Score: Jordanian, Jordanian, camp, Meshaal, Zaatari, refugees, hospitals, Amman, Jordan, smuggling

Topic 10 Top Words:

Highest Prob: army, syrian, syria, syria, forces, turkish, turkey, region, said, borders

FREX: Arsal, Golan, crossing, Tlass, Turkey, defection, plane, border, fighter, defection

Lift: warning, clash, Atma, our country, its sale, two Turkish, Dimas, Rustam, fence, soldiers,

Score: Arsal, Golan, Tlass, defection, Quneitra, fighter, plane, crossing, defection, occupied

Topic 11 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Syria, party, Arab, president, states, Turkey, Syria, authorities, general, Turkish

FREX: employment, prize, introduction, Algeria, development, British, Algerian, Algerians, visa, workers

Lift: wires, sterling, intelligence, colonialism, professor, human beings, Boudhan, Algeria, deserves, appreciation, honor

Score: Employment, Prize, Definition, Empire, Visa, Erdogan, Muslims, Algerians, Pardons, Packages

Topic 12 Top Words:

Highest Prob: organization, state, Syria, forces, Iraq, Islamic, coalition, American, Syrian, air

FREX: Kurdish, strikes, alliance, training, maneuvers, organization, state, to organize, units, to fight

Lift: Asayish, terrorists, for it, Islamic, strategy, approach, Incirlik, dens, online, with crises

Score: Organization, coalition, Soleimani, strikes, raids, maneuvers, Kobani, Kurdish, Raqqa, Iraqi

Topic 13 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Russia, Syria, regime, assad, general, Syrian, Russian, president, people, Russians

FREX: Gaddafi, the Libyan, Muammar, Russia, Libya, Soviet, Libya, Gaddafi, paper, Qaradawi

Lift: Orthodox, different, tyrannical, famous, protector, for scales, mafia, united, its consideration, and replacement

Score: Russia, Moscow, Gaddafi, variants, Soviet, Ottoman, Libyan, Kremlin, Ram, Qaradaw

Topic 14 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Revolution, regime, Arab, Syrian, Arab, Syrian, political, people, Syria, political

FREX: Shiite, jurist, guardian, Choucair, Sunni, Tamim, awareness, partnership, sects, cultural

Lift: innocent, problems, problems, fatwas, roles, alignment, panic, feet, the nation, the important

Score: Wali, Shiite, Jurist, Shukair, Patriarch, Minorities, Hamas, Sectarian, Sunni, Moderation

Topic 15 Top Words:

    Highest Prob: army, forces, shelling, Damascus, activists, Syrian, city, regime, Syria, clashes

    FREX: With bullets, demonstrations, went out, with fire, infidelity, committees, black, regular, stone, Sousse

    Lift: one of them, ruined, gathered, revived, responded, repelled, damaged it, approached, clash, forces

    Score: Activists, bombing, neighborhoods, countryside, clashes, regular, neighborhood, regular, Qaboun, observatory

Topic 16 Top Words:

    Highest Prob: Syria, Assad, regime, Syrian, Syrian, opposition, president, war, and he said, newspaper

    FREX: Writer, Alawites, Ahlia, Sid, Arming, Ahlia, Independent, Persia, Overthrowing, Zakaria

    Lift: pointed, hope, security -, Ignacius, introspection, denial, characterized, kept, exploited, blind

    Score: Annan, writer, Zakaria, Alawites, transitional, Kosovo, Erdogan, Sida, eligibility, description

Topic 17 Top Words:

    Highest Prob: Council, Syrian, United, Syria, security, nations, international, regime, Syria, Annan

    FREX: Criminal, Annan, Madaya, Mission, Observers, Violations, Houla, Referral, Covey, Crime

    Lift: Madaya, I feel, Irve, thwart, eat, let, move, O'Brien, with details, in the hull

    Score: Annan, Houla, Madaya, massacre, Kofi, mission, criminal, observers, for nations, referral

Topic 18 Top Words:

    Highest Prob: Syrian, regime, Damascus, city, forces, day, Syria, regions, Syria, Assad

    FREX: Bodies, Scrapbooking, Double, Found, Explosions, Execution, The Economist, Executed, Car, Embassy

    Lift: two families, called, one last, witnessed, the Economist, arms, their martyrdom, by circumstances, Banias, by its construction, by its composition

    Score: Shitat, Daria, corpses, observatory, found, The Economist, Mughniyeh, massacre, activists, executed

Topic 19 Top Words:

    Highest Prob: Russia, Syria, Russian, Russian, President, Syrian, Assad, Moscow, Putin, United

FREX: Putin, Vladimir, Russian, Russian, Obama, Pact, Moscow, Russia, Blow, Kremlin

Lift: Ernst, departments, Edward, Izvestia, Ilyushin, Irene, Isna, contain it, quarters, my crisis

Score: Putin, Russia, Moscow, Obama, Russian, Russian, Lavrov, Vladimir, Kremlin, American

Topic 20 Top Words:

Highest Prob: Regime, revolution, Syria, Syrian, Daraa, Damascus, cities, Assad, for the revolution, an island

FREX: Hourani, great, fida'yah, martyrdom, voting, martyr, costly, martyrs, judicial, qualitative

Lift: its martyrs, emotional, survival, Al-Hourani, his approach, integration, its beginnings, with his courage, stomach, liberation

Score: Fida'iyya, Hourani, Azima, Daraa, voting, youth, tax, and its movement, judiciary, martyrdom

Appendix F

Topic 1 Top Words:

Highest Prob: عربي, فتنة, ربيع, نظام, ثورة, سوريا, ناس, اردن, سوري, مسلمين

FREX: فتنة, ربيع, درعا, روح, يجدوا, ارجو, كفر, بالمال, جوار, درس

Lift: يجدوا, ابى, اسمعوا, اعزة, اعيبكم, افلاس, انتهكت, بنفسها, تتذكر, تتركو

Score: فتنة, ربيع, روح, يجدوا, كفر, درعا, ابراهيمي, كويت, جوار, يساعد

Topic 2 Top Words:

Highest Prob: إسرائيل, إيران, فلسطين, سوريا, صهيوني, مقاومة, صواريخ, بشار, جيش, عرب

FREX: إسرائيل, سلمت, كيان, إيران, ضوء, صهيوني, فلسطين, جولان, اخضر, ولايات

Lift: اللجنة, باتريوت, حالنا, مقياس, وممانعة, يلقي, إسترجاع, احلاها, امريكا؟, انحطاط

Score: إسرائيل, ضوء, إيران, جولان, صهيوني, اخضر, فلسطين, كيان, صواريخ, عربيه

Topic 3 Top Words:

Highest Prob: علي, دول, عربية, مثل, يوم, غرب, لماذا, ناس, مسلمين, عراق

FREX: ترضى, ملتهم, علي, عقلية, عنك, ينطبق, اسرائيلي, ازمة, خطوط, وسوريا

Lift: اردنيين, انتصاره, تنتظرون, كبري, هههههه, وأيضا, ،أمريكا, أهواءهم, إفريقي, اتبعت

Score: عقلية, ملتهم, ترضى, علي, خطوط, اردنيين, كبري, تتبع, عنك, ويا

Topic 4 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوري, شعب, نصرة, جبهة, اطفال, سوريا, نساء, سوريين, نظام, حرب

FREX: جبهة, نصرة, اطفال, نساء, أبطال, وجبهة, اكراد, يحرك, دماء, خامنئي

Lift: أذا, احرارا, اذيال, ارضنايجب, اشجع, اضاعت, اعاق, اعطاك, الكل, امهاتهم

Score: جبهة, نصرة, اطفال, نساء, أبطال, بعضا, تابع, وجبهة, اكراد, بالدرجة

Topic 5 Top Words:

Highest Prob: حزب, الله, لبنان, قصير, سوريا, شعب, حسن, جيش, سورى, عرب

FREX: حزب, سورى, قصير, صهيونى, اللبنانية, لبنان, اللبناني, حسن, عربى, خيار

Lift: أخي, إجلالا, ابشر, استكبار, اصبحتم, اقتصاص, اقولها, اللوجستي, اوائل, ايات

Score: حزب, الله, صهيونى, قصير, لبنان, سورى, عربى, اللبنانية, يعنى, حسن

Topic 6 Top Words:

Highest Prob: جزيرة, سوريا, قتل, نظام, شبيحة, بشار, قال, ؟؟؟, سلام, يجب

FREX: تعليق, طرفين, نفقات, ؟؟؟, آلالاف, بلبنان, نبي, سلم, بدو, انشري

Lift: انشري, بجنازته, خيرة, قربت, كافرون, مخيماتهم, مسخرة, مصدي, يكم, أجرام

Score: آلالاف, نفقات, نبي, ؟؟؟, تعليق, طرفين, قتيل, جزيرة, بدو, محزن

Topic 7 Top Words:

Highest Prob: نظام, سوريا, اين, بشار, مدنيين, كيماوي, فقط, سلاح, سوري, مصر

FREX: شهر, استخدام, فرصة, مجزرة, هيك, ضعيف, اين, ايامه, معركه, مدنيين

Lift: أنظار, بوسنة, فسفوري, متحدث, مرت, يأتوا, يعلق, إعلاميين, اخبرني, اذكر

Score: مجزرة, هيك, ضعيف, ايامه, استخدام, شهر, لاي, مستعد, كيماوي, فرصة

Topic 8 Top Words:

Highest Prob: بشار, مجاهدين, لله, والله, مسلمين, اهل, شام, نصر, اللهم, الله

FREX: انصر, وكيل, تعالى, شام, الله, حسبنا, يارب, باذن, ونعم, اللهم

Lift: خلقه, حسبنا, جيش, جناته, تنصروا, تدميرهم, باذن, اقدامكم, رحمك, تعطيها

Score: يارب, ونعم, وكيل, لله, شاء, تعالى, نصر, شام, اللهم, الله

Topic 9 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سيد, ثورة, نظام, لأن, عالم, فقط, غرب, سوري, سلاح, شعب

FREX: شئت, الأسد, سيد, كرامة, فاسد, بديل, لقتل, يدافع, معلم, وحش

Lift: انتهاك, الشبيحة, التهمة, اطلاقا, اشلاء, اشرس, احرص, اجتمع, االجيش, مدفيدف

Score: يؤمنون, كرامة, مزبلة, خذل, وليد, انتهاك, إصلاح, اختطفوا, معلم, وحش

Topic 10 Top Words:

Highest Prob: اسد, ايران, مسلم, اكثر, معارضة, شعوب, عربي, عربية, سورية, على

FREX: دكتور, تركي, يوم, خيارات, شيخ, سوريا, اردوغان, اسرائيل, ايران, على

Lift: تؤثر, تأثيرا, بشعبها, بالمصالح, بأنو, بالصدفة, امثالك, اضرحة, اسمهم, إثنين

Score: بالسكاكين, بيضا, كيف, حتى, روسيا, سوريا, يوم, اسرائيل, ايران, على

Topic 11 Top Words:

Highest Prob: حلب, حرب, حرب, عاجل, دمشق, عالم, سورية, سوريا, نظام, سوري, جيش

FREX: فرقة, تسقط, الحمد, نصرك, ابد, حسم, عدوان, اسبوع, لأبطال, عاجل

Lift: تدبير, تاريخى, بكفي, ايمانهم, انشقوا, إدراك, إثارة, إخلاص, أشاوس, آخره

Score: للارهاب, مطار, عدوان, مقالة, داريا, ابد, سيطرته, زور, عاجل, لأبطال

Topic 12 Top Words:

Highest Prob: بشار, نفس, روسيا, عربية, ثورة, شعب, جيش, دول, سوريا, سوري

FREX: خراب, لديها, قتلوا, بريطانيا, للشعب, نفس, كثيرة, قصة, هزيمة, قومي

Lift: باليأس, بالشيشان, بالتأكيد, باءت, ايلك, انتخب, ارآدت, إنت, الآلمصالحهم, إستخدام

Score: تتقدم, بمال, باليأس, ارآدت, بعدم, معارضة, قتيل, هزيمة, هولاند, قومي

Topic 13 Top Words:

Highest Prob: حكومة, اكثر, سوريا, غرب, دولة, سوري, روسيا, شعب, نظام

FREX: ايرانية, ممنوع, يستخدم, ذاتية, روسيا, كذب, حجر, اظن, اتباع, لروسيا

Lift: غفور, شريفة, سفراء, ذاتية, تعطيل, تصديق, تابوا, بنيت, اللعب, اسد،

Score: صحابي, ذاتية, قدرات, يشوف, دويلات, سوفياتي, تمثل, يستخدم, ممنوع, اظن

Topic 14 Top Words:

Highest Prob: مجتمع, عالم, شعب, متحدة, نظام, دولي, سوري, ثورة, معارضة, سورية

FREX: سورية, فكرة, للمعارضة, جنيف, مزعومة, متحدة, امم, مجتمع, دولي, معارضة

Lift: اشتراك, استفزاز, اتصالات, إنسان،, إختراق, يكف, وقود, جيدة, تفاهم, الأمم

Score: رموز, بوتين, فكرة, امم, متحدة, دولي, سورية, مزعومة, معارضة

Topic 15 Top Words:

Highest Prob: ثورة, سوريا, جيش, حكم, سوري, نظام, سورية, شعب, بشار, أسد

FREX: أسد, إسقاط, سيهزم, عاش, ومرتزقة, ريف, جمع, ابو, كهرباء, وها

Lift: أساسي, بأمر, جائزة, حيي, خضراء, سنعيد, مايقوله, مفخخة, ممرات, نفديك

Score: أسد, إسقاط, سيهزم, حلب, ومرتزقة, توبة, ريف, علوي, جمع, ويولون

Topic 16 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, نظام, شعب, سوريين, اسد, دفاع, تدخل, لقد, سوري, عليكم

FREX: سورى, دفاع, ضربه, دولار, ياجزيرة, عون, بقتل, كلنا, ضابط, ملكي

Lift: اقدموا, ربح, ضابط, ملكي, آباء, أوراق, اردنيون, اغتيالات, اقالة, بدلك

Score: سورى, ضربه, بانكم, دولار, معاذ, ضروري, ضابط, واقول, عون, تأكد

Topic 17 Top Words:

Highest Prob: عرب, سنة, عربية, مسلمين, دولة, شعب, سورية, سوري, إسلامية, سوريا

FREX: عروبة, مؤامرة, عرب, إسلام, إسلامي, أمة, أخرى, تعامل, اللتي, غربيين

Lift: آبائهم, أثمان, أروبي, ارادو, اعزنا, افعل, اقله, اللانظام, بأبخس, بالكرت

Score: عرب, عروبة, تعامل, وتارة, تسعينات, مؤامرة, إسلام, ببعيد, اللتي, مسيحيين

Topic 18 Top Words:

Highest Prob: جيش, سوريا, اسد, سوري, عربي, نظام, بشار, شعب, مرتزقة, اجل

FREX: يتقدم, ارهابيين, جيش, سقط, مرتزقه, مات, شيشان, مرتزقة, وقتل, نظامي

Lift: فتوى, الوف, امامكم, انكار, بحتة, بسهولة, بقعة, بقنبلة, تافهه, تسطيع

Score: جيش, ارهابيين, يتقدم, مرتزقه, مات, مرتزقة, حربية, اطاحة, فيتو, ابرياء

Topic 19 Top Words:

Highest Prob: نظام, دول, حوار, حرب, سوريا, ثوار, عرب, سوري, عربية, والله

FREX: حوار, إرهاب, ومصر, أنظمة, تسليح, وبريطانيا, شعوبها, وليبيا, إنسانية, توجد

Lift: الرجاء, متدخلين, يوحد, آلام, أشعل, احرقت, اخرى؟, اخلاص, اخوننا, استقلالها

Score: حوار, إرهاب, ومصر, أنظمة, شعوبها, للصهاينه, وبريطانيا, ثروات, وليبيا, دكتاتورية

Topic 20 Top Words:

Highest Prob: امريكا, ايران, اسرائيل, عراق, سوريا, خليج, دول, سعودية, شعب, مصر

FREX: امريكا, ايران, عراق, اسرائيل, خليج, وايران, سعودية, اتفاق, غزو, وامريكا

Lift: اختباء, القصير, بزعامة, تقاطع, خالصة, سياح, شاركت, فأمريكا, فإيران, للكاتب

Score: امريكا, ايران, عراق, اسرائيل, خليج, سعودية, وايران, غزو, اتفاق, واسرائيل

Topics Articles 2013 on these comments

Topic 1 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, نظام, حلب, مدينة, إنترنت, باب, مسجد, سوري, أسد, ثوار

FREX: إعزاز, انقطاع, إنترنت, جينغ, تلبيسة, شتاء, سلامة, تفتناز, مسجد, جامع

Lift: خزانات, زكريا, غدت, لتهدئة, للكهرباء, ماني, يلتفت, أزقة, المواجه, انقطعت

Score: انقطاع, إعزاز, شتاء, لواء, جامع, تلبيسة, إنترنت, زكريا, مازوت, غوغل

Topic 2 Top Words:

Highest Prob: متحدة, كيميائية, أسلحة, سوريا, استخدام, كيمياوية, أمم, دمشق, مجلس, اسلحة

FREX: كيميائية, كيمياوية, مفتشين, مزاعم, كيمياوي, استخدام, فريق, عينات, كيميائية،, مفتشي

265

اتضح, بوليسي, بيلتون, سيتخذونه, سيزورون, فرحان, فورين, للمعاهدة, لوموند, متسارع :Lift
كيميائية, كيمياوية, كيمياوي, مفتشين, ترسانة, عينات, كيميائي, مفتشي, مزاعم, غوطة :Score

Topic 3 Top Words:

قوات, جيش, سوري, سورية, متحدة, جولان, حدود, سوريا, منطقة, أمم :Highest Prob
جولان, حفظ, هضبة, جولان،, محتل, قنيطرة, أندوف, بالجولان, نار, نمسا :FREX
أوحال, إعدامها, بعيار, تأمينهم, تغطيهم, تولوا, سنديانة, عدد،, للأركان, لنقلهم :Lift
جولان, هضبة, قنيطرة, حفظ, أندوف, جولان،, معبر, محتل, هاتاي, بارزاني :Score

Topic 4 Top Words:

سوري, سورية, ائتلاف, رئيس, سوريا, معارضة, نظام, شعب, أسد, وطني :Highest Prob
بوطي, خطيب, سفر, استقالته, بني, معاذ, استقالة, ألمانية, مناع, ائتلاف :FREX
أفترض, ابر, استقالتي، اعتصاما, اغتصب, افتراضات, اولوياتنا, بأفكار, بإدانة :Lift
خطيب, بوطي, معاذ, مقعد, مناع, بني, سفر, للائتلاف, استقالته, وتبرأ :Score

Topic 5 Top Words:

إخوان, مصر, مسلمين, جماعة, مصري, محمد, مرسي, رئيس, مصرية, شعب :Highest Prob
عدوية, إخوان, مرسي, مسلمين, مصرية, اخوان, مصري, مصريين, جماعة, انقلاب :FREX
ونعم, اتلانتيك, بجماعة, شقفة, عدوية, أخطاء،, احتوى, احضر, اردن, استنكرت :Lift
إخوان, مسلمين, مصري, مرسي, انقلاب, عدوية, مصر, جماعة, ملك, اخوان :Score

Topic 6 Top Words:

سورية, سوريا, دولار, سوري, ليرة, نظام, عقوبات, عام, أزمة, ماضي :Highest Prob
الليرة, صرف, سعر, ليرة, اسعار, لحماس, شركات, نفطية, نفط, مالية :FREX
أجور, ائتمان, اديب, الليرة, ديزل, قيمتها،, لتر, للدولار, لموظفي, ليرات :Lift
ليرة, الليرة, سعر, صرف, عملة, تضخم, حماس, مصرف, عقوبات, انخفاض :Score

Topic 7 Top Words:

قوات, نظام, معارضة, قصف, سوري, دمشق, مدينة, جيش, سورية, ريف :Highest Prob
متفجرة, بالبراميل, مرصد, سيطرت, براميل, ناشطون, وجرح, قتلوا, ريف, وأفاد :FREX
أضحى, إسقاطها, إنذارات, اخريين, اشتبكوا, اشتعلت،, اعقبها, اقرانهم, انفجارات،, بارث :Lift
مرصد, بريف, ناشطون, ريف, متفجرة, اشتباكات, قرية, هاون, درعا, احياء :Score

Topic 8 Top Words:

جيش, نظام, سوريا, ثورة, سورية, سوري, ثوار, كتائب, جزيرة, حلب :Highest Prob
حوراني, صبرا, لنجدة, صالح, استشهد, ألوية, قناص, قضائية, نجدة, قادر :FREX
جبتهين, حوراني, سيمكنهم, لتشتيت, مجزرتين, مسالمة, نجدة, ولترسل, يمنى, الحوراني :Lift
حوراني, لواء, صبرا, درعا, لنجدة, قضائية, نجدة, مسالمة, قناصة, قناص :Score

Topic 9 Top Words:

الله, حزب, لبنان, سوريا, اللبناني, اللبنانية, سوري, سورية, منطقة, وقال :Highest Prob
اللبنانيين, اللبنانية, سليمان, لحزب, اللبناني, لبنان, حزب, ميقاتي, نصر, لبنانية :FREX
أوقفوا, اسرانا, اللبنانيين،, امينه, ببيروت, بلبنان،, بيرت, جونيور, ستير, سراج :Lift
اللبنانيين, اللبنانية, تفجير, لبنان, اللبناني, حزب, بطريرك, الله, قصير, سفارة :Score

Topic 10 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, إسرائيل, إسرائيلي, إسرائيلية, سوري, رئيس, أسد, أسلحة, اوباما, نظام

FREX: إسرائيلية, نتنياهو, إسرائيل, إسرائيلي, جوي, متطورة, غارة, للطائرات, بنيامين, إسرائيلية،

Lift: أردوغان, إيبسوس, احتجاجها, اخذته, اسابيعه،, اعتراضية, القبة, بخمس, برادارات, بطارية

Score: إسرائيل, اوباما, إسرائيلية, نتنياهو, إسرائيلي, جوي, غارة, كيمياوية, ابيب, صواريخ

Topic 11 Top Words:

Highest Prob: اللاجئين, سوريا, أردن, سوريين, سوري, أردنية, سورية, أردني, متحدة, رئيس

FREX: اللاجئين, لاجئ, زعتري, مفوضية, للاجئين, عمان, للأردن, نسور, أردني, أردن

Lift: إيفاء, استنفدت, افتتاحه, الاتصالات, انمار, دواء،, رنتاوي, سايبر, ستي, سجلوا

Score: اللاجئين, أردنية, لاجئ, أردني, مفوضية, زعتري, مخيم, فلسطينيي, عمان, نسور

Topic 12 Top Words:

Highest Prob: إيران, إيراني, نووي, إيرانية, رئيس, اتفاق, طهران, دول, منطقة, روحاني

FREX: روحاني, نووي, نووية, طهران, خامنئي, إيراني،, لإيران, إيران, نووي،, نجاد

Lift: أعداء،, أعلى،, إصلاحي, إيما, احتمالية, اراك, الإيرانيون, الاتفاق, الموت, اهدافهم

Score: نووي, روحاني, إيران, إيراني, طهران, نووية, إيرانية, نووي،, خامنئي، يورانيوم

Topic 13 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوري, سوريا, معارضة, مؤتمر, سورية, رئيس, خارجية, جنيف, أسد, وزير

FREX: جنيف, مؤتمر, إبراهيمي, انتقالية, أوروبي, لافروف, أخضر, مبعوث, اجتماع, عقده

Lift: أؤكد, أسد—, أسدعلى, أسدفي, أمثل, أمد،, أمينين, أمد، أوضح, أيديهم, ٢٠١٤

Score: جنيف, مؤتمر, لافروف, إبراهيمي, أوروبي, روسي, انتقالية, محادثات, سيرغي, كاميرون

Topic 14 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوري, سوريا, نظام, سورية, معارضة, شعب, عربية, أسد, قمة, ائتلاف

FREX: قمة, حمد, هيتو, دوحة, امير, غسان, خليفة, كلمته, قطر, سفور

Lift: الأمة, سيحكمه, وآفاق, قمم, أحاديث, إفتاء, افسحت, الاستقلال, انتقادا, انفضاض

Score: قمة, دوحة, هيتو, غسان, حمد, مقعد, خطيب, خليفة, حسون, حوار

Topic 15 Top Words:

Highest Prob: صحيفة, سوريا, متحدة, اوباما, رئيس, ولايات, واشنطن, أميركية, أسد, حرب

FREX: بندر, صحيفة, بوست, للكاتب, مقال, روسيا،, وأشارت, تناولت, بوتين, كرملين

Lift: أرجاء, انخرطت, انعزاليين, بمصر،, بيلد, تبتعد, تحركها, سجينا, شتوية, فات

Score: اوباما, بندر, واشنطن, ولايات, للكاتب, سعودية, بوست, كاتب, مقال

Topic 16 Top Words:

Highest Prob: قوات, نظام, جيش, قصف, مدينة, اشتباكات, دمشق, بريف, ناشطون, سوري

FREX: خربة, متحلق, رقة, اريحا, ضبعة, حيي, خالدية, جوبر, داريا, عنيفة

Lift: آغا, آليات،, أثري, أعظمية, أورم, إدلب, إضرابا, إعدامهم, إعطاب, احكموا

Score: اشتباكات, بريف, رقة, احياء, داريا, قصفت, بالمدفعية, درعا, ناشطون, شام

Topic 17 Top Words:

Highest Prob: سوريا, متحدة, إنسان, سوري, منظمة, سورية, جرائم, مجلس, تقرير, حرب

FREX: انتهاكات, بيلاي, اللجنة, جنائية, جرائم, حقوق, بارتكاب, رايتس, أطفال, طفل
Lift: جنسي, ضياع, آموس, ابطلت, اتجار, احادي, اختاما, اشمئزاز،, الجدير, الذخائر
Score: بيلاي, انتهاكات, جنائية, طفل, إحالة, رايتس, اللجنة, بارتكاب, يونيسيف, جرائم

Topic 18 Top Words:
Highest Prob: سوريا, سوري, إسلامية, قاعدة, عراق, أسد, نصرة, رئيس, نظام, جبهة
FREX: ظواهري, سلفي, جهادي, نصرة, تيار, للقاعدة, ايمن, كونغرس, علماء, ولادة
Lift: إغناتيوس, اريك, الشيوخ, المعتدلة, باعتبارهما, براعتها, بشهادته, بصلات, بغرفتيه, بيلوسي
Score: ظواهري, سلفي, كونغرس, جهادي, نصرة, تيار, بونر, علماء, ولادة, كاتب

Topic 19 Top Words:
Highest Prob: ثورة, نظام, عربي, سياسي, سياسية, سورية, سوريا, سوري, عربية, دولة
FREX: زيدية, صعدة, دماج, دينية, قومية, يسارية, استبداد, تمرد, حوثي, تمدد
Lift: إثنية, استنزاف،, اضطرار, اطيافهم, التوقيت, اهلهم, ايديولوجي, بالتقارب, بديهي, تحولا
Score: صعدة, زيدية, دماج, عرب, ربيع, جماهير, اللعبة, قومية, انقلاب, تيارات

Topic 20 Top Words:
Highest Prob: سوريا, روسية, روسيا, سوري, موسكو, بحر, روسي, رئيس, عسكري, عسكرية
FREX: بحر, متوسط, روسية, رعايا, سفن, بحرية, إجلاء, موسكو, مناورات, طرطوس
Lift: اندري, روسيوس, سيفاستوبول, شواطئ, طائرتان, فيدوموستي, كوالالمبور, منقطعة, بلطيق, سفينتي
Score: سفن, موسكو, متوسط, روسية, بحر, روسي, رعايا, إجلاء, روس, روسيا

268

Appendix G – Top Ten Terms for Topics 1, 11, and 12 in Arabic and in English

Topic 1 Top Words:
Highest Prob: سنة, مسلمين, عراق, اهل, عرب, دولة, شيعة, طائفية, صهاينة, اسلامية
FREX: سنة, صليبي, فاتيكان, سني, مليشيات, شيعة, شيعي, صفويين, صفوي, سنية
Lift: انسيت, خمنئي, وألنجف, ،واشف, آستخدامها, ألكترونية, إجتاح, إرانية, إعتبر،, اجيبوني
Score: سنة, اهل, عراق, مسلمين, شيعة, طائفية, شيعي, صليبي, شيعية, سني

Topic 11 Top Words:
Highest Prob: دولة, مسلمين, منافقين, تجد, نار, خلافة, عرب, اللهم, يوم, سوريا
FREX: منافقين, وجهان, سيهزم, موتوا, اكره, باقية, حفرة, دبر, وتتمدد, اغفر
Lift: مدخلهم, إغارة, احزابهم, احسانا, اكفاركم, اكلتك, الجبهات, الجهاديون, الحكومات, الطغاة٬
Score: منافقين, تجد, اللهم, باقية, قبور, خلافة, سيهزم, موتوا, اغفر, جمع

Topic 12 Top Words:
Highest Prob: عربيه, سوريه, دوله, سنه, سوريا, ثوره, معارضه, اسلاميه, علي, دول
FREX: عربيه, طائفيه, سوريه, حكومه, ارهابيه, سياسه, شيعه, انظمه, متحده, اسلاميه
Lift: مقرب, ومخلفات, يعاقبوهم, إشارات, اختلافا, اعاده, اقليميا, اللحمه, المعلن, المنطقه
Score: عربيه, سوريه, دوله, معارضه, ثوره, اسلاميه, سنه, سعوديه, منطقه, حكومه

Topic 1 Top Words:
Highest Prob: Sunnis, Muslims, Iraq, people, Arabs, state, Shiites, sectarian, Zionists, Islamic
FREX: Sunni, Crusader, Vatican, Sunni, Militia, Shiite, Shiite, Safavid, Safavid, Sunni
Lift: Forget, Khamenei, and Najaf, and see, use them, electronic, invade, Iranian, consider, answer me
Score: Sunnis, People, Iraq, Muslims, Shiites, Sectarianism, Shiites, Crusaders, Shiites, Sunnis

Topic 11 Top Words:
Highest Prob: State, Muslims, hypocrites, find, fire, caliphate, Arabs, God, day, Syria
FREX: hypocrites, two faces, will be defeated, die, hate, linger, pit, pit, stretch, forgive
Lift :' their entrance, raiding, their parties, charity, your infidels, your food, the fronts, jihadists, governments, tyrants
Score: Hypocrites, find, God, remain, graves, caliphate, will be defeated, died, forgive, collect

Topic 12 Top Words:
Highest Prob: Arab, Syrian, state, Sunni, Syria, revolution, opposition, Islamic, Ali, countries
FREX: Arab, sectarian, Syrian, government, terrorist, politics, Shiite, regimes, united, Islamic

Lift: close-up, remnants, punish them, signals, disagreement, replay, regional, meat, advertiser, region

Score: Arab, Syrian, state, opposition, revolution, Islamic, Sunni, Saudi, region, government

Appendix H – Topic Modeling on the combined Topics 5, 7, 8, 13 and 18 from the comments dataset

Top Topics

Topic 4: مسلمين, سوريا, شاء, قال, لله, شام, والله, نصر, اللهم, الله

Topic 13: جيش, بريد, معارضة, قتل, سوريا, ثورة, سورية, نظام, شعب, سوري

Topic 7: اسلحة, ناتو, روسي, داعش, سورية, معارضة, دولة, سوريا, تركيا, روسيا

Topic 14: شعبه, رئيس, قتل, جيش, نظام, سوريا, اسد, مجرم, أسد, بشار

Topic 6: غرب, عرب, خليج, سعودية, مصر, شعوب, عربي, سوريا, عربية, دول

Topic 1: اسلامية, صهاينة, طائفية, شيعة, دولة, عرب, اهل, عراق, مسلمين, سنة

Topic 15: وايران, امريكي, امريكا, روسيا, غرب, سوريا, عرب, عراق, اسرائيل, ايران, امريكا

Topic 19: صورة, جيش, قناة, ناس, حقيقة, اخبار, اعلام, خبر, كذب, جزيرة

Topic 17: حمص, مدينة, يوم, نظام, جبهة, ابو, نصرة, حلب, دمشق, جيش

Topic 9: وحزب, حسن, حرب, سوريا, مقاومة, الله, لبنان, إسرائيل, إيران, حزب

Topic 18: عصابات, أطفال, ابرياء, شهداء, ثورة, مدنيين, قتل, جيش, نساء, اطفال

Topic 3: بسوريا, بلد, عرب, انو, سوريا, فلسطيني, سوريا, حماس, والله, اردن, يعني

Topic 12: دول, علي, اسلاميه, معارضه, ثوره, سوريا, سنه, دوله, سوريه, عربيه

Topic 16: نظام, عالم, كلام, استعمار, صهاينة, سورية, اسد, صهيوني, سوري, فعل

Topic 8: اخوان, معك, عربي, تاريخ, اسم, عالم, غرب, شكرا, مقال, كاتب

Topic 5: مسلحين, سورية, نار, سوريين, سلاح, معارضة, سوريا, وقف, جيش, حوار

Topic 2: عاشت, عربي, علي, سوريين, سورية, قائد, ملك, أردن, اسد, سوريا

Topic 11: سوريا, يوم, اللهم, عرب, خلافة, نار, تجد, منافقين, مسلمين, دولة

Topic 10: عالم, اسرائيل, غرب, حرب, دولة, اسلام, سوريا, عرب, على, ايران

Topic 20: غرب, مجموعة, يقف, امر, جيش, فصائل, عالم, زمن, سوريا, اين

| 0.00 | 0.05 | 0.10 | 0.15 | 0.20 |

Expected Topic Proportions

Appendix I – Sample of Comments from Topic 1 in Arabic

[1]" ايران وحزب (...)بهذا الفعل الامريكي يثبتان انهما جنديان حقيران في خدمة العم سام واشقاءه
"الصهاينة والصليبيين وكل اعداء الاسلام والمسلمين

[2]" والان والعصابة البغدادي وسلمو هالموصل من انسحبوا بالعراق السنه لمناطق مايحصل وهذا
خليفة وتخطيط وتنفيذ بعلم السنه سكانها وتهجير هاوتدمير لحصارا وتهجيرا قصفا بالانبار (...)"

[3] "(...)\nالله اكبر الله اكبر اللهم عجل بنصرك لاحرار سوريا الابطال"

[4] " لأننا اولاً نريد الإطاحة بعصبة مجرمة فاسدة اعتدت على كل ابناء سورية من كافة الطوائف
ونرحب بكل مشاركة من هذه الطوائف ونلعن كل من يدعم هذه العصابة وخاصة من عملائها السنة
ثانياً نحن لم نعتدي على اي طائفة مهما كانت وكان الشعب السوري اول من حمى الأرمن اللذين هربوا
من مجازر الأتراك وهذا مايفسر عددهم الكبير في سورية ولبنان والغريبة ان الرمن في لبنان شاركوا
في مجزرة صبرا وشاتيلا ولم نقتص فنهم في سورية فكفوا عن هذه الترهات لأن ثورتنا ضد الظلم
والإهانة والذل ومن يقف ضدنا فهو يشارك النظام المجرم "

[5] " و اللهم ، خيراً المنكوبين و المتضررين اخواننا عوض اللهم ، الأبطال سوريا أهل يا الله لكم
"انتقم ممن آذاهم و سفك دماءهم

[6] " ان من اشعل الحرب اللبنانية هو حافظ الاسد حين ادخل السلاح الى لبنان للفلسطينيين حين منع
الفلسطينيين بسوريا من حمل السلاح ثم بالاتفاق مع الصهاينة والاميركان لعب دور الاطفائي بالدخول
الى لبنان بحجة ضرب المنظات الفلسطينية فدمر لبنان وقتل عشرات الالاف من اللبنانيين والفلسطينيين
وكل هدفة هو ضم لبنان الى سوريا ولكن سنه2005 بعد اغتيالهم للحريري على يد جماعة حزب ...
"طرد جيش الاسد من لبنان وهرولو مسرعين تحت جنح الظلام

[7] " وما تمام ماشية الانتخابات وهاهي ازمة وكلها الخير باتجاه ماشية لله والحمد مصر في الأمور
حصل في مصر مجرد مظاهرات مع بعض الاعمال وليست كالوضع في سوريا ومع ذلك الامور
غليون والمجلس الوطني مجرد n\.ماشية بخير والحمد لله ومصر تبنى ان شاء الله كما ستبنى سوريا
مرحلة انتقالية ومعظم الشعب ضد الاسد وليس معه الا قلة طائفية أو منتفعة وكل سوري يعرف هذا."

[8] " هناك فرق كبير بين الحروب التي خاضها الرسول واصحابه ضد الكفار والمشركين والحرب
التي يخوضها التنظيم الان باسم الاسلام والله ثم والله ثم والله لو أن التنظيم سار على نهج رسالة الإسلام
السماوية وسنة الرسول العادلة لما تبقى انسان إلا وحالف التنظيم ونصره ديننا دين الرحمة ونبينا صلى
اله عليه وسلم نبي الرحمة بدأ الإسلام بشخصه وانتهى بدخول مئات الآلاف من أهل الكفر والشرك في
ملته لماذا لما رأوا من الصفح والتسامح عن الاسرى لهذا السبب دخلوا واعتنقوا هذا الدين هل كان
الرسول واصحابه يفعلون بالأسرى كما يفعل التنظيم الان."

[9]" في الملالي طبقه و أدركه ما هذا .البيان ليأتي بالسيف العقد تقطع واللسان القلم يعجز عندما
طهران و عجز عن فهمه العرب. كل هذا القتل في لبنان والعراق وسورية والبحرين واليمن والكاتب لا
يعتقد أن إيران قد أعلنت الحرب الطائفيه. خنوعكم و تقاعسكم يقتلنا. فالنرى ماذا سيفعل سي مرسي
"عندما تفجر أنابيب النفط في سيناء و تتدفق أموال طهران

[10] " كل مجاهد يرفع راية التوحيد هو مطلوب ومكرم في بلده سوريا فحيا الله شباب القاعده ورجال الظواهري ورجال الشيخ اسامه وخطاب وطالبان والزرقاوي وابو يحي الليبي والشيخ مختار ابو الزبير, نعم ابطال هولاء الرجال الذين لا يتخلون علي الشعب السوري بعكس الجامعه العربيه والامم المتحده والحكومات العربيه العميله الذين ليس لهم هم الا ان تكبر (...)"

[11] " الشيعة يلطمون على الماضي و السنة يلطمون على الحاضر , اما نحن المسلمون الغير متمذهبين فنلطم على المستقبل الذي اضاعه غباء السنة و الشيعة."

[12] " سبب عدم تدخل الغرب:هو الخوف من حكومه سنيه تمثل الاسلام الصحيح تسعى لتحرير الجولان والاقصى،أما ملك الدعايه والاعلانات الكبرى في فنون الممانعه بشار وزميله حسن نصر الله فجانبهم مأمون منذ عقود..بالنسبه لمسألة الدعاء لماذا لا يستجاب..هل يريد الأخ ان يتكلم بلسان الله ويحكم بأن قلوب الائمه والدعاه ليست طاهره؟ثم ونحن في الابتدائيه تعلمنا ان الإجابه لا تكون متى ما نحن نريد.بل متى يريد الله.وان من شروط الدعاء عدم استعجال الإجابه.اللهم اسقط بشار.نتشرف كون الدعاء عباده وان لم يسجب حتى..موتوا بغيظكم"

[13] " تركيا تستقبل أكثر من 3 ملايين لاجئ سوري،وكم من لاجئ تستقبل إيران الصفوية التي تحاول إعطاء شهادات حسن سلوك لتركيا ؟ ما يسمى المجتمع الدولي يقبل الإرهاب الإيراني ضد العرب و يساعدها حتى لممارسته،نحن أمام إشكالية حقيقية تتعلق بتصنيف ما يسمى\"الإرهاب\"،كيف تحول حزب إيران اللالبناني من حركة و ميليشية إرهابية عند الغرب إلى حليف على أرض سوريا و العراق ؟! بمعنى الإرهاب الشيعي مقبول لأنه يقتل العرب فقط،و المقاومة \" السُّنِّية \" إرهاب سواء في سوريا أو العراق...ليس هناك نظام شرعي في سوريا حتى تتذرع به إيران.."

[14] " النظام السوري المجرم يضرب بالكيماوي من أجل طرح من الابراهيمي بتدخل الامم المتحدة والفصل بين منطقة سنية ومنطقة علوية من حمص الى طرطوس لكن هذه بعيدة عليك ياسفاح نحن نعيش مع العلويين وليس بيننا اي شئ نحن نريد محاكمتك انت وعصابتك ولن تدخل اي قوات فصل اجنبية الى سوريا لانها لن تصمد وغير مرغوب فيها نحن والعلويين وجميع الطوائف سنحارب اي تدخل اجنبي سوريا ستعود افضل بدون عائلة الاسد والمستفيدين من هذه العصابة من السنة والذين يمسحون الجوخ لأن تجارتهم مع هذه العصابة ستنتهي وأموالهم ذهبت ادراج الرياح !!"

[15] " هل أخذ هذا العلوي الدشدوشي ترخيص من بوتين قبل الكلام لأن روسية هي السلطة العليا للمستعمر في سورية وبشار منفذ الأوامر ومسير الأعمال يعني الحكومة الداخلية تحت روسية على كل حال نقول له لا تحلم كثيرا مع حلب لقد ربحت معركة مع ثوار تلاعب بهم الغرب صديقك وخدعهم لاكن لا تتوقع بأنك ربحت الحرب وإن غدا لناظره قريب"

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294