THE TRANSFORMATION OF ETHNIC CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN SYRIA

by

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by

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my family, especially my two amazing children, Giovanny Alexander and Gabriel Eduardo, and Maria Doris Garay Novoa, who allowed me the time to complete this work. It is also dedicated to all the people of Syria who are suffering through this difficult and dangerous time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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ABSTRACT

THE TRANSFORMATION OF ETHNIC CONFLICT AND IDENTITY IN SYRIA

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This dissertation analyzes the transformation and social reproduction of ethnic and religious identity for five Syrian ethnic groups, Sunni Arabs, Alawites, Kurds, Christians and Druze. The study used mixed methods for data collection, including 26 in-depth surveys and 127 surveys of Syrian humanitarian workers living in Turkey conducted in 2015 and 2016. Key findings include commonalities found across all five groups, such as language, names, family, gender inequality, marriage norms, honor, ethnic group salience and segregation, mistrust and fear of other groups, social stratification, and geographical barriers. Unique distinctions for each group are also examined, along with religious features. The two main findings are that ethnic identification depends considerably on opposition to or support for the Assad regime, and minority group fears of Sunni conservatives and extremists. Two theoretical models are developed demonstrating ethnic identity formation under threats of violence and group extermination, and ethnic identity dynamics for the five Syrian groups in this study.

CHAPTER ONE: OVERVIEW AND METHODS

> I would like to say something. People try to sell me reassurance of the ethnical background of the people during the time of crisis. People back in Syria said, yes, we are co-existing greatly.… Before the Syrian revolution we were coexisting greatly. I don't think religious people who are from different religions were coexisting, because if you really study the geographic allocation of the people, you will find that the Alawis have been on shores, the Sunni inside Syria and in eastern Syria, and the Christians are a minority, and so I don't believe it. I always told my friends that. But I think the people are afraid to expose themselves and their ideology. So they prefer to stay close to each other… and isolate themselves. I think that is what got us here in the first place. I won't credit all that to the Syrian government or Syrian regime. But it is something historical. (informant 23)

Introduction

This informant recognizes several key aspects of this study of ethnic identity in Syria: peaceful coexistence may be difficult, ethnic groups have segregated themselves geographically from other groups, the historical context affects boundaries between ethnic identities, and each group may be trying to protect their core beliefs and ideology. Underlying this realization is the debate on whether there is more conflict or cooperation between ethnic and religious groups in Syria, with many believing it is more conflictive than cooperative. Syrians also question whether this ethnic or religious conflict is newly created by the Syrian Arab Spring uprising starting in March 2011 or has existed for much longer, and whether it has been affected by such issues as geography or regime

policies. In effect, while the current Syrian conflict is one of the largest humanitarian crises since World War II, the role of ethnic or religious identity is deeply contested. In this vein, this study originated from the comments of a Syrian friend living in Antakya, Turkey in July, 2015 who mentioned that he used to have many friends from other ethnic and religious groups before the conflict, but had very few now. This comment raised flags for me about intergroup conflict and cooperation, as well as ethnic identity. While the focus for the study have meandered slightly throughout its implementation, the core problem of ethnic identity and intergroup relations remains at the heart of the study.

The issue of ethnic and religious identity in Syria is ripe for study for a number of reasons. First, as I will review, there are just a handful of recent studies on ethnic and religious identity in Syria, leaving a substantial gap in knowledge about the unique characteristics and distinctions of the various groups, whether the majority Sunni Muslim Arab population or the various minorities. Second, most Syrian minority groups have been repressed and marginalized by the Sunni Muslim Arab majority or the Syrian regime since the 1960s. This has led these minority groups to struggle and fight for their rights and identity, often with dire consequences if caught by the regime, creating a sense of pride in being able to endure such marginalization and even prosper at times under harsh conditions. Finally, the armed conflict since 2011 has exacerbated the historical tensions and sharpened the boundaries between the Syrian ethnic and religious groups with deep mistrust and fear of the *other*. Many Syrians from different groups now believe that it is impossible to live peacefully with members of other social groups.

For these reasons this modest study seeks to examine the characteristics and qualities of the five largest Syrian ethnic and religious groups – Sunni Arab, Alawi, Kurd, Christian and Druze. First, chapter two summarizes the Syrian political and ethnic context, and literature on ethnic identity in Syria. I note that there is little agreement on identity definitions and concepts, with differing models for psychosocial, role, group, ethnic and core identity. Next, chapter three examines a number of key identity considerations that exist cross-culturally in Syria, such as language, gender, marriage, honor, mistrust, fear, stereotyping, segregation and group interaction. I posit that these commonalities are shared across Syrian ethnic and religious groups. Following that, chapter four documents numerous distinctions for the five Syrian groups. These distinctions are generally unique to each group for culture, social or historic reasons. Chapter five finds that minority identities are dominated by a fear of living under an extremist Sunni Muslim government or conservative Sunni sharia society. Chapter six documents how binary positions of support or opposition to the Assad regime are fundamental for ethnic and religious identity attachment for most Syrian groups. While these general patterns appear, complexities and within group variations abound as well, as I document. Chapter seven identifies the main conclusions from this study and lays out two models that explain a) ethnic identity formation under conditions of threat and b) relationships between the five Syrian ethnic groups and the Assad regime.

The **purpose** of this study is to examine ethnic identity for Syrians and explore how these identities affect ethnic group relations. Of special interest are the unique characteristics or distinctions of each group, commonalities across most Syrian ethnic and

religious groups, and historical contexts and ethnic group relations. Findings from this study will facilitate understanding of ethnic identity in Syria and ethnic group relations, and may provide insight for future peace prospects (Byman 2014; Azar 1990).

Problem statement and research question

During the course of this study, the **research problem** has changed slightly. The initial problem was focused on how the intense armed conflict in Syria was affecting ethnic identity and intergroup relations. It assumed that the conflict had a major effect on ethnic and religious identity in Syria. While that assumption was found to be generally accurate, the research problem expanded to include the broader historical context between ethnic and religious groups in Syria starting in the early 1900s, and plateauing with the Assad regimes from 1970 onward. Much of the focus of the study is an examination of the basic identity distinctions of each of the five Syrian ethnic and religious groups in this study, and the social and historical circumstances that affect these identities and relationships. Hence, it is a historical sociology of the formation and transformation of ethnic identity for Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawi, Christians and Druze. Data for the analysis of the early period around the 1900s relies mainly on secondary sources, with increasing reliance on primary sources for recent decades, especially since the Syrian Arab Spring uprising in March 2011. The past histories enable the underlying social structures that formed the more recent ethnic identities, which were then affected, stressed, and modified by political and social dynamics of the armed conflict since 2011.

The reason for the initial focus on the nexus between the armed conflict and ethnic identity in Syria is self-evident once you understand the Syrian version of the Arab

Spring uprising. The devastating armed conflict in Syria since March 2011 has created a huge humanitarian crisis as well as an intense ethnic upheaval. The conflict since 2011 has impacted almost every Syrian: of the 21.4 million population prior to the conflict, about 5.8 million people have become refugees outside the country, 6.3 million are internally displaced, and 13.5 million are in need of assistance (UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. 2016). As of October 2015, the population has been reduced to estimates of 16.3 million (Aldo Binini) to 20.4 million (Confronting Fragmentation).[1] The number of people killed in the conflict may have reached 470,000 (Confronting Fragmentation), although the United Nations stopped counting deaths in Syria in 2014. About 1.88 million people have been injured (Confronting Fragmentation). There are as many as 150 armed groups (List of armed groups), a number which is constantly changing. Fighting was persistent and heavy in most of the 14 governorates for four years, until the fragile cessation of hostilities started February 27, 2016 (Wikipedia, INSO daily reports). In effect, this is one of the most intense conflicts in the world, with a huge impact on a relatively small, ethnically and religiously diverse population.

Sociological research finds that under normal conditions people develop social, group and ethnic identities which provide a sense of who they are and impact a host of other issues, such as social comparisons, self-esteem and group membership. Such

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[1] Accurate population and mortality data is difficult to find or non-existent. The question of how many Syrians are left in Syria is a significant one, and must consider deaths rates (470,000 from the conflict alone) and emigration (about 6 million Syrians). Hence, SPCR's estimate of a remaining population of 20.8 million appears very high, considering there were only 21.4 million people in Syria in 2011.

identities are strongly influenced by the nature and stability of the social structures in which they are formed (Ellemers et al 2002; Spears, 2011:203). As Tajfel and Turner (1979:34) explain, the social context affects the salience of group identities along a continuum of interpersonal to intergroup identifications. In the latter, the person is "fully defined by their respective memberships in various social groups or categories" (1979:34). Wartime contexts are the most likely to generate the ideal type of intergroup identification.

> The main empirical questions concern the conditions that determine the adoption of forms of social behavior nearing one or the other extreme. The first and obvious answer concerns intergroup conflict. It can be assumed, in accordance with our common experience, that the more intense is an intergroup conflict, the more likely it is that the individuals who are members of the opposing groups will behave toward each other as a function of their respective group memberships, rather than in terms of their individual characteristics or inter-individual relationships. (Tajfel and Turner 1979: 34)

Intergroup conflict, such as in Syria, affects how members of the various groups see each other and their interactions. Syrians are experiencing major changes in their social structures due to the armed conflict, including homes, family, community, marriage, and work. Here I hypothesized that the armed conflict and changed social structures in Syria have affected ethnic group identity and relations, with more group stereotyping and polarization between groups. Hence, the concern with the effects of the armed conflict on ethnic and religious group identities in Syria. In hindsight, the longer term historical social structures – patterns of relationships between these groups – were

found to set the stage for the relationships between the various groups in Syria during the armed conflict since 2011, as I document in this study.

The main **research question** initially was: How has the Syrian armed conflict affected ethnic identity for Syrian ethnic groups and relationships between such ethnic groups? After starting this study, the research question refocused on the social reproduction of ethnic identity for the five Syrian ethnic and religious groups involved in the study, and broadened to historical conditions over the past century that affected these group identities. In effect, the research questions became: *How are ethnic or religious identities for Sunni Arab, Christians, Kurds, Alawites and Druze in Syria socially produced, and how does the historical context, opposition to the two Assad regimes, and fear of Sunni extremism affect exploration and salience of, and commitment to these group identities?* The reason for the expanded historical analysis was that several Syrian informants described historical events going back several generations that were important to their ethnic identification, which showed the need to consider the longer time period in this analysis. This study explored ethnic identity similarities and differences for the various Syrian ethnic groups presently and changes that have taken place in the recent past. It also studied how ethnic group identification has been affected by intergroup relations and vice versa.

Justification

The main finding in this study is that ethnic identity in Syria is contingent on complicated group, family and individual relationships with the Assad regime and Sunni Arab extremists. While the various Syrian ethnic and religious groups have unique

cultural beliefs, languages and traditions that set them apart in their own right, and some shared features of identity, the dominant characteristics of Syrian ethnic and religious identities are based on a) positions on the Syrian Assad regime, and/or b) positions on conservative Sunni Arab religious ideology. What we see is that the unique historical conditions in Syria over the last 40 to 50 years has created a *process* (Barth 1986) whereby ethnic group ascription and identification has come down to these two main factors: one political and one religious.

Why is this study important? Historically, most Syrian minority groups – Kurds, Alawite, Christians and Druze – have significant cultural or religious differences from the majority Sunni Arab ethnic group (Allsop 2015; Kastrinou 2016; Sahner 2014; Lewis 1999; Van Dam 2011). These ethnic differences are important for three reasons: few comparative studies of ethnicity have been done in Syria; the Syrian regime under the Baath-party has tried to minimize ethnic differences under the Baathist socialist political agenda (Van Dam 2011); and future peace prospects hinge on bridging these differences and creating cooperation, trust and peace between Syrian ethnic groups. These points are documented throughout this study.

Also, historically Sunni Arabs, at about 60% of the total population, have generally controlled access to resources and opportunities for Syrian minorities, through land and business ownership, as well as determined societal norms on religion and social status, notwithstanding that many Sunnis Arabs were poor (Phillips 2015). This Sunni Arab resource domination argument is counter to Byman's (2014) belief that the Syrian Alawi minority has had power over the Sunni Arab population. Most Sunni Arabs in

Syria are unable to see the larger social structures that benefit Sunni Arabs and repress

minority groups in Syria. Instead, most Sunni Arabs feel oppressed by the Assad regime

and Alawite minority (Droz 2014; Phillips 2015). This debate could be explained by

significant Sunni Arab domination prior to the 1970s, when Alawis and other minorities

had little power. Since the Assad regime rise in the 1970s the corresponding

improvement in the Alawi roles, opportunities, and conditions increased their power,

relative to Sunni Arabs, but even just prior to the 2011 conflict Sunni Arabs still had

considerable power economically, politically and socially in Syria.

A time factor also reinforces the importance of this study. The March 2011

revolution has created both opportunities and threats for all Syrian ethnic groups: the

opportunity to build their ethnic identities and group power, and the threat of further

violence from the regime. For conservative Sunnis, the revolution is an opportunity to

implement sharia law and live more fully within Prophet Mohammed's norms. Sunni

extremist groups, like ISIS, Jabhat al Nusra and Arhar al Sham, want to create a very

strict government and society based on Salafi Sunni sharia law, which would

significantly limit the ability of Christians, Druze or Alawi to practice their religious

beliefs and social customs, and even the moderate religious practices of Syrian Kurds

who are Sunni.

The potential for ethnic minority group empowerment is significant within this

armed conflict. For Christians, Alawites, Druze and Kurds, a moderate, secular

government would allow them to continue to practice their unique languages, beliefs and

traditions, unhindered by conservative Sunni norms and laws. Of the Syrian minority

groups, the Kurds appear to have made the most of the Syrian Arab uprising, taking control of extensive territory and implementing various policies on language and government in their areas. The Druze have maintained some ethnic group power, often through a position of neutrality. Syrian Christians have been caught in the middle of the fighting, and many appear to have emigrated for safety. The Alawi have gained some power for their group, but at the expense of longterm hostilities with all opposition forces. This analysis hints at the potential for social change, through an understanding of social status, relative social positions for specific ethnic groups, and social identity (Tajfel and Turner 1979).

One of the principal findings here is that minority group identities for Kurds, Christians, Druze and Alawites are differentiated by their opposition to the conservative identity and norms of Sunni Arab extremists who are pushing for more traditional religious and social norms based on literal interpretations of the Quran. All Syrian minority groups believe their freedom, of religion, of movement, and personal choices on women's rights and dress, for example, will be drastically curtailed if conservative Sunni Arabs rule Syria. Even Sunni Kurds and moderate Sunni Arabs fear conservative Sunni Arab social norms. Concomitantly, the Assad regime argues that it is the only force that can protect minority groups from Sunni Arab radicalism, further raising the profile of religion and ethnic identity. These conservative Sunni Arab beliefs and minority perceptions of those beliefs make a complicated picture of Syrian social structures. Meanwhile, statements by conservative Sunni Arab informants justify their beliefs of why their religious views and sharia law should govern Syrian society.

Lastly, a salient aspect of ethnic identification for many Syrians is determined by their position on supporting or opposing the Assad regime, which is closely tied to family and ethnic group positions on the legitimacy and worth of the Assad regime. Arrests, torture, disappearances, and killings by both of the Hafez and Bashar Assad regimes has created ethnic group identities of persecution, victimization, struggle and pride for all Syrian ethnic groups, except for a distinctive, complicated Alawite-Assad relationship. At the same time, some minorities see Assad as protection from conservative Sunnis. The conflict has polarized group identities, increasing pressure on in-group members to support their ethnic group and increasing stereotyping of outgroup members. Christian, Kurd and Druze ethnic groups are generally unified as neutrals, with Alawites as pro-Assad, and Sunnis split in their support and opposition. In effect, the revolution is not only about the survival of the brutal Assad regime, but also about the future of majority and minority ethnic groups in Syria.

For these various reasons, it is important to document and analyze the differences and similarities between the five main Syrian ethnic groups, and to examine the relationship between the Syrian regime and Sunni extremism, and the five ethnic/religious groups. In sum, while each of the five largest ethnic-religious groups in Syria have their own unique histories and identities, their current identities depend considerably on their past victimization by the Assad regime, and on whether they believe they can live under a conservative Sunni Arab religious society. These issues are important for future peace prospects, basic human rights, religious freedom, and all Syrian ethnic and religious group identities.

Research methods and ethical issues

   To answer the research questions I have used a mixed methods approach. Data are

drawn from methodology which included semi-structured interviews of 27 Syrian

humanitarian aid workers living in Turkey, as well as a short survey completed by 127

Syrians. For the interviews the study attempted to obtain a balanced response from the

main ethnic groups in Syria - Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Alawi, Christians and Druze - with the

goal of 6-7 interviews per group. Initially, Shia were included in the list of groups, but it

was impossible to find Shia informants, since they make up only 1% of the Syrian

population (Izady 2014), and could not be found in Turkey, where I was working on the

humanitarian response to the Syrian conflict (see my personal role below). The

demographic breakdown is provided below. In addition to the 26 cited in the table, one

Syrian Turkmen was interviewed, but that interview is not included in this analysis.

Table 1 Demographic breakdown of informants

Group	Total # informants	# female informants	# male informants	Mean age
Sunni Arab	7	4	3	30.3
Alawite	5	2	3	26.4
Kurd	7	3	4	28.9
Christian	4	2	2	28.0
Druze	3	1	2	27.7
Total =	26	12	14	28.5

   The effort made to obtain gender balance in the interviews was reasonably

successful. A geographical balance was generally reached as well, with nine informants

from Aleppo City, four from Lattakia, three from Damascus, three from As Sweida, and others from Idleb, Homs, Deir E Zor, Qamishli, Azaz, and Afrin. In terms of age, the average age was 28.5, with Sunni Arab informants averaging a little older and Alawite informants a little younger. Most informants had a bachelor's degree from a Syrian university, and some had completed graduate degrees. Most were single, with a few married and with children.

All interviews were conducted between December 2015 and February 2016 in Antakya or Gaziantep, Turkey. Personal contacts and snowball sampling were used to identify willing participants, making this a convenience sample intended to sample for a range (Small 2009). The interview questionnaire was used flexibly to adapt to subject responses and emerging issues, as recommended by Babbie (2013). Subjects were asked about their key life events, decisions made, and issues that affect their perceptions of identity. This approach supports the narrative methodology for exploring interaction between Syrian personal stories and collective discourses about local groups (Hammack 2010a; Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Exploration of multiple identities was done by adapting Dunbar's (1997) seven social group categories model and asking about ethnicity, age, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and ascribed group identity. Interviews were conducted in English, and transcribed and analyzed using NVIVO data analysis software. Inductive analysis was used to identify patterns and themes across cases, and generate findings on Syrian ethnic and religious identity (Schutt 2006).

The survey was designed using a modified version of the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure Revised (Phinney and Ong 2007) to assess ethnic identity exploration,

salience and commitment of the various ethnic groups in Syrian, with 127 responses. The survey used non-random sampling methods, was designed in both English and Arabic, and implemented using Survey Monkey. The survey data were not used in this report. Both the interview protocol and survey questionnaires can be found in the appendix.

Ethical concerns were significant for this study and required steps to ensure safety for research participants and the researcher. Syrians living in Turkey have been displaced and in some cases traumatized by the conflict in Syria. The main concerns were maintaining confidentiality of subjects and minimizing trauma. Electronic data were encrypted and files maintained in secure locations. Data access was limited to only those who need access, such as the transcriber. No direct benefits were provided to informants.

Efforts were made to limit psychological trauma arising from this research by avoiding questions that might revisit traumatic experiences. One exception was when in-depth questioning occurred for one informant regarding personal experiences with a family member who was forcibly disappeared by the regime: in this case the informant was repeatedly asked if the questions were too personal and if they wanted to stop the interview. On another issue, confidentiality of participants was paramount but often difficult. One conundrum for maintaining confidentiality was the use of snowball sampling: when some informants recommended friends for interviewing, maintaining confidentiality of those friends was difficult. More seriously, several minority informants, especially Alawites, expressed major concerns about their safety and ensuring confidentiality from Sunni Arabs in Turkey, due to prejudice and discrimination by Sunnis against Alawis in Turkey. Also, various informants described events where their

family members or friends had been arrested, imprisoned, tortured or killed by the regime, which reinforced the need to ensure their privacy in the final paper. Descriptions have been modified and citations limited in some cases to ensure such confidentiality. This is also why generic citations like informant 1, 2, 3 are used, instead of informant names or aliases.

While some people, such as university officials, had concerns about the safety of the researcher, the reality is that Antakya and Gaziantep, Turkey are relatively safe places to live and work for foreigners, like myself. In conducting this research, I lived and worked in the humanitarian field in Antakya for 14 months, including the period of data collection, with no major security events.

My personal role in Syria and Turkey

A brief note on my work in Turkey is necessary to explain my understanding of the Syrian conflict. I was hired by International Rescue Committee in January 2015 and seconded to the NGO Forum for humanitarian NGOs operating in Turkey in response to the Syrian crisis. As the Humanitarian Trends Analysis Unit Coordinator I led a unit with three Syrian staff to collect data on what was happening for the civilian population in Syria due to the armed conflict. Being based in Antakya, Turkey, I traveled extensively between Gaziantep and Antakya meeting with many of the 50 NGOs that were part of NGO Forum, half of whom were international NGOs and the other half Syrian NGOs, plus UN agencies. After conducting a scoping exercise to determine the needs of the NGO Forum members, and range of similar assessment work being done by the humanitarian response clusters and research organizations such as REACH and SNAP, I

developed the research plan for my unit. I led this work until March of 2016. It was during this time that I also collected my dissertation data.

One of the challenges for the humanitarian community, and the main reason for the existence of my research unit, was the difficulty for senior management staff from the international NGOs to cross into Syria, and monitor the needs of the Syrian people and NGO work. This was due to security risks for travel inside Syria following the kidnapping of an expat, Kayla Mueller, in Aleppo in August 2013 (Sherlock 2015). Instead, NGOs hired local Syrian staff inside Syria to run their humanitarian programs and a small group of cross border staff who went back and forth between Turkey and Syria relaying messages and leading in-country responses. In 2015 the security situation inside Syria was tense with heavy fighting and constant regime bombing of opposition areas leading to massive humanitarian needs. However, life in Turkey along the Syrian border was relatively safe, with large expat communities in both Gaziantep and Antakya. My friends often joked the biggest danger was getting hit by a Turkish driver crossing the street.

My team and I collected data on the Syrian population leading to six reports. Five reports were based on in-depth qualitative interviews with NGO staff, key informants and Syrian civilians inside Syria. Usually about 25 interviews were done for each report, completed in Arabic, transcribed to English, and then analyzed using NVIVO. The interview questions focused on: most important problems for internally displaced persons and local communities; how the local population was dealing with those problems; major recent changes; recent population movements; urgent humanitarian needs; most

vulnerable groups; and relationships between various civilian and armed groups. A sixth report used secondary data to examine which actors initiated the most attacks, and which armed groups caused the most civilian casualties, between January and October 2015. The audience for these reports was the NGO Forum member organizations and the larger humanitarian community, such as the United Nations.

It was during this work that I made many connections with Syrian staff working in Turkey. About 50-60% of the staff in the international NGOs and almost all the staff in the Syrian NGOs were Syrian – several thousand in total just in Turkey. Many spoke English. To coordinate data collection and information sharing I met with many of the Syrian and international NGOs. It was through these connections that I had my discussion with a Syrian friend who said that he had few friends now from other ethnic or religious groups, compared to before the conflict, which led to my framing the research problem. It was also through these connections that I was able to find my informants for this study. It is in this context – one of fairly deep understanding of what is happening to the Syrian civilian population and concern for the Syrian people – that I write this dissertation. My hope is to help others understand the situation better, and assist with making peace and a safe place for all to live, if possible.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

> Individuals have few obligations to their ethnic group at large. Ethnic loyalties only take shape when one's group is under attack by another. For example, Kurds close ranks against Arabs if Arabs landowners are raising land rents. Such action could be interpreted by Kurds as Arab persecution. (Collelo 1987:63-4)

This literature review summarizes key concepts from theories of identity, research on ethnic identity in Syria and the armed conflict that has been taking place there since 2011. It then examines current research and theory on relevant social, group and ethnic identity paradigms.

Key concepts

Many changes have taken place in the study of identity in recent decades. Theoretical work differentiates between ego, personal, role, social and collective identities, but there is little consensus on definitions or concepts within or across disciplines. To briefly delineate the scope of work here, definitions of several key terms are provided. It should be noted that there is little agreement on theories, concepts and definitions of identity, with variation based on self-categorization into groups, social roles, ethnic group memberships and other concepts. My summaries below do not attempt to reflect the diversity of models within each type of identity.

Brubaker and Cooper identify a number of problems with identity theorizing and conceptualization in the social sciences, identifying a split between its use in categories of practice and analysis. The first are the everyday usages of the term by common people. The second are the more abstract usages by social scientists Part of their argument is that the concept of identity is used in too many different ways:

> Clearly, the term "identity" is made to do a great deal of work. It is used to highlight non-instrumental modes of action; to focus on self-understanding rather than self-interest; to designate sameness across persons or over time; to capture allegedly core, foundational aspects of selfhood; to deny that such core, foundational aspects exist; to highlight the processual, interactive development of solidarity and collective understanding; and to stress the fragmented quality of contemporary experience of "self," a self unstably patched together through shards of discourse and contingently "activated" in differing contexts" (Brubaker and Cooper 2000: 8)

Hence, the concept of identity is used in many different ways by social scientists, in some cases in opposing ways, such as to explain similarities or sameness among groups or the lack of such sameness. One problematic assumption with the usage of the term identity is the idea that there is a strong sense of collective identity within a group and well-marked boundaries between groups (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). This study runs the same risk. Due to the need to make clear statements about findings and arguments, sometimes findings are presented as being more black and white than they should be. In reality it is more grey. The finding on fear of Sunni extremists is an example of that – while some patterns were found among minority groups of such mistrust and fears, and examples of massacres that justify having such fears, it can easily

be seen as essentialist – a dominant characteristic of all Syrian minority identities, when in fact it is more subtle than that, or part of multiple, sometimes competing identities.

In Brubaker and Cooper's terms, my study clearly uses weak terms of identity, which are "multiple, malleable, fluid, and so on." (2000: 11). Notwithstanding, or even in response to, Brubaker and Cooper's arguments about problems with identity, I see the characteristics of identity of the five Syrian ethnic groups found in this study as having a sameness, a continuance or persistence over time. They may change, and sometimes I document that change, but they are concepts that have continuity for at least some set of people within each ethnic group. Yes, the use of a weak framing of identity in this study limits the theoretical analysis and modeling that may be done, but I believe it is necessary in a rapidly changing, armed conflict context like Syria today to have a broad, inclusive framework for identity. As we see in the chapters to follow, a wide variety of issues are pertinent for ethnic identity in Syria, including language, religion, culture, social norms, roles, and gender relations, to name a few. A narrower definition would miss key aspects of who these groups are, and the cultural items they use to construct and solidify a sense of ethnic self.

One challenge is the definition and operationalization of the terms ethnic identity and ethnic identification. As Phinney (1990) noted, the term ethnic identification is often used in varying ways, with different meanings for *with* and *as*. *Ethnic identification* is defined as the act of labeling one's self as part of an ethnic group. Identification *with* a group signifies that the person has some sense of being part of that ethnic group (Phinney 1990). Sociologist Nelson Foote (1951) views ethnic identification more as the

appropriation and commitment to a specific identity. It is possible to have identification with two or more groups, especially for minority group members who may identify with their ethnic group and the larger dominant societal group (Phinney 1990). In social science research ethnic identification is often determined using secondary markers, such as skin color, instead of direct self-attributions by the person, as suggested by Eifert, et al (2010). They also identify factors that affect when a person may self-identify with their ethnic group, such as economic development, electoral systems, ethnic diversity, colonial history, and leader's promotion of nation building, which highlights the variable salience of ethnic identification by individuals (Eifert, et al 2010). In some cases people are more likely to identify with their ethnic group, in others not. While ethnic identification is a more fluid concept that recognizes change over time and space, ethnic identity is a more static concept.

Ethnic identity is defined as "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership." (Rotheram and Phinney 1987:13). Ethnic identity involves four major aspects: ethnic awareness, ethnic self-identification, ethnic attitudes, and ethnic behaviors (Rotheram and Phinney 1987). *Ethnic group* is defined as a group of people who believe themselves to be alike based on ancestry, race, religion, or national origin. Typically a person's ethnicity is operationalized by identifying the ethnic group or country of origin of the parents (Phinney 1990). Ethnicity includes a range of social dynamics that affect the individual and the group: group values, social customs, perceptions, roles, language, and norms for social interaction (Rotheram and Phinney 1987:11). Ethnicity is also

related to resources and positions with the larger society (Eifert et al 2010). The concepts of ethnic attachment, ethnic salience, and ethnic solidarity are closely related to ethnic identity. Sects are defined as a group of people with distinctive religious or political views. Sectarianism often means that there is discrimination, tension or hatred between two sects or groups (Phillips 2015; see also Coser 1964 and Simmel 1955).

Personal identity can be defined as the parts of the self or "internalized position designations" based on "structured role relationships." (Stryker 1980: 60). The personal identity model considers the unique biographies, characteristics, roles, and experiences of each person. Thus multiple personal identities exist for the various social roles that a person assumes (Stryker 1980). They vary in importance, with some more salient than others, in a form of a salience hierarchy. Those identities that are higher on the scale are more likely to be used in specific or multiple situations, and will there will be more commitment to higher order identities (Stryker 1980). This model is closely related to the identity theory model discussed below.

Identity theory defines identity as a person's knowledge that he or she occupies a social role, according to social scientists. As articulated by McCall and Simmons (1978), identity theory holds that people organize themselves along the lines of roles or positions between various individuals, following self-categorization and symbolic interaction processes (Stets and Burke 2000). Individuals typically hold multiple role identities or status sets (Merton 1969), such as parent, worker, student, sibling, son, daughter or leader. The positions or roles come with associated meanings and expectations accruing from symbolic interaction and structures. In identity theory, social roles are important as

the person incorporates the meanings and expectations associated with the chosen roles into behavioral guides and a sense of self. The control of resources, those things necessary to maintain people and social interactions, is significant for role implementation (Stets and Burke 2000). Each person's perceptions of his or her social roles requires negotiation of meanings and identities to enable effective interaction. Self-efficacy, defined as a person's belief in their ability to accomplish a task, is a possible outcome in identity theory (Stets and Burke 2000).

Social identity theory defines identity as "a person's knowledge that he or she belongs to a social category or group." (Stets and Burke 2000:225). Social identity may be self-ascribed or assigned by other people. Social groups consist of people who share common characteristics or a sense of similarity, which leads to self-labeling as members of the in-group. Self-categorization and social comparison are critical components of the social identity model, with the former accentuating in-group similarities and the latter emphasizing out-group differences. Intergroup comparisons in turn influence social attitudes, beliefs, values, norms, language, and other personal issues, especially self-esteem (Stets and Burke 2000). The social categories that people become associated with are specified by the larger structured society and its social organization, which determines the relative power, prestige, and status of each group and corresponding individuals. People become members of multiple groups with the pertinent characteristics of each group, leading to unique combinations of multiple identities (Stets and Burke 2000). Social identity theory stresses the shared characteristics of group members, efforts

by the individual to be like others in the group and see things from the group's vantage point (Stets and Burke 2000).

Core identity can be defined as the basic thoughts and feelings that a person has about themselves that are generally salient in all situations (Turner 2012:349). More broadly, Turner identifies four types of identities for the self: core or person identity; social identity or as a member of social category; group identity, as a member of a collective body; and role identities, which exist for various roles that people take on in society. Turner states that his core identity model is similar to the person identity model (1964; Cote and Levine 2002). Similarly, personal identity can be defined "as a unitary and continuous awareness of who one is" (Ellemers et al 2002:164) and centers on the concept of self. It is related to the concepts of individual self, individual processes, and interpersonal level interactions. Burke and Stets (2009:124) describe it as the unique attributes and goals of each person, which are relatively stable once developed, but may change over time. For this study, we need to understand ethnic group identity, of which core or personal identities are key aspects.

There is growing recognition of the fact that people can and do hold *multiple identities*. This builds on Williams James' (1890) idea that each societal role a person has is one self. Stryker (1980) elaborates on this idea of multiple selves to include different selves for person, role, social and group identities, with each one forming the nucleus of an identity. As people move through society and life course stages, the various identities are more or less salient, with varying commitment levels: for example, in some situations, a mother role may be salient, in others a coworker or a sibling. Eifert et al (2010) note

that people may self-identify with groups other than their ethnic group, such as religion, gender, or class and occupation, which supports the idea that multiple identities may exist, and that ethnic identity may be more salient in some social contexts. I argue that the armed conflict situation in Syria is one such situation, due to external threats that break down along ethnic boundaries.

A related issue is the problem of multiple, possibly competing identities for a person, aka role conflicts. A Syrian woman may have a strong feminist identity that desires gender equality while also being a daughter or wife to a man who requires accommodation of social norms that place women at a secondary status to men. Or, men could have conflicting roles over trade with outgroup members in their own industry versus in-group members. These conflicts of self can vary in given situations, depending on the constraints, specific situation, and salience and commitment to the competing identities. Nonetheless, such conflicts of self can affect connectedness to larger group identities.

Historical perspective on ethnicity in Syria

Conflict and ethnicity in Syria must be put into historical perspective. Syria has been a meeting point of different cultures for centuries, through conquest, trade, conflict and cooperation. Syria was part of the Roman, Greek, and Byzantine empires until 634 AD, and then became the basis for the Islamic empire which included much of the present-day Middle East. Many more invasions took place from the eighth century till 1516, although there was toleration of religious and ethnic minorities through the Muslim period (van Dam 2011). In 1516 the Ottomans conquered Islamic Syria, ruling it until

1918. While Phillips (2015) notes that Jewish, Christian, Druze and Alawi minorities were discriminated against by the Ottomans, other sources mention the general tolerance and peaceful coexistence between these groups. Lewis (1998:116) documents the general acceptance by Muslim leaders of religious minorities, albeit with some limitations for their religious practice. Many Christian minorities found refuge in Muslim lands over the centuries (Lewis 1998:117; van Dam 2011:1). The emphasis on religious tolerance in these examples is worth mentioning, since religion has been the dominant source of identity in the Middle East for centuries, together with tribal identity (Lewis 1998).

The Ottoman Empire rule of Syria ended in 1920 with French colonial rule until 1946. Some experts argue that the present Syrian conflict is rooted in French divide-and-rule tactics, in which France set up separate political states for Christians (Lebanon in 1920), and Alawi and Druze (Fildis 2011; Phillips 2015). French policies benefited a few Alawi, Druze, Christian and Kurdish minority elites at the expense of the Sunni Arab majority (Phillips 2015). The French sought to suppress Sunni power and Arab nationalism with various policies, including by creating special military units from minority groups that were used to suppress rebellions, often by the Sunni majority, thus increasing minority-majority conflict (van Dam 2011). Also, while the French created the first *Syrian* nationality which could promote similarities, it added religion as a demographic and highlighted religious differences among the people (Phillips 2015; van Dam 2011). Following French colonial rule, Syria became an independent country in 1946, but political conflict was continuous, with eight coups between 1946 and 1970.

However, minorities generally agreed on nationalist political ideologies, mainly

following the Ba'ath and Communist parties (Phillips 2015).

The Assad regimes

Since the 1970s, the Syrian regimes of Hafez and Bashar al Assad have been

promoting ethnic differences by benefiting some ethnic groups while marginalizing

others. Hafez al Assad came to power in 1971, after participating in three coups (1963,

1966, and 1970), and Bashar gained power upon Hafez's death in 2000. Most power went

to the family, Numailatiyya clan and Matawira tribe of Hafez al Assad (Batatu 1999).

Hafez al Assad's regime stoked fears among the poor, marginalized Alawite ethnic group

and gave them many security positions to ensure their alignment with the regime (Byman

2014; International Crisis Group 2011; Hokayem 2013), while also removing Druze from

senior military positions (van Dam 2011). As Byman (2014) notes:

> Syria was an almost perfect setting for a sectarian
> conflict… In Syria, a minority regime ruled brutally over a
> majority. Furthermore, the Alawite-dominated government
> was considered deviant even by many Sunnis who accepted
> the Shi'ites as legitimate… As peaceful opposition
> morphed into violent resistance, the shift to sectarian strife
> was utterly predictable. Insecurity, payback, outside
> manipulation and, above all, mobilization for war led to the
> formation of sectarian-focused groups and their steady
> increase in strength. (Byman 2014:88).

During the father-son Assad regime rule through the Ba'ath party, a *fear of*

sectarianism developed among many Syrians (Phillips 2015:365). The amount of

manipulation by Hafez al Assad of minority-majority group relations was very extensive

(Byman, 2014; van Dam 2011; Phillips 2015).

Any discussion of identity groups in Syria must address the political repression and violence in Syria. The Hafez al Assad regime was well noted for its authoritarianism and brutality (Heydemann 2013). Since the 1960s frequent arrests and torture of anyone who opposed the regime were common. The 1982 repression of the Muslim Brotherhood revolt in Hama led to 10,000 to 30,000 people killed (Hokayem 2013). Discontent with the regime's violence was part of the motivation behind the 2011 uprising (Phillips 2015; Hinnebusch 2012). The violent repression in early 2011 in Daraa is a second example. First the regime arrested and tortured 15 children for writing graffiti. After public protests by local tribal groups, the regime set up a siege around the city, employed snipers and heavy weapons, and tortured many people, killing at least 418 people in a two month period (Hinnebusch 2012; Droz 2014; Human Rights Watch 2011). The massacre at Daraa was the first major example of how the Bashar al Assad regime would respond to the peaceful uprising in Syria. Later it would include chemical weapons and over 11,000 barrel bombs, with many dropped on public spaces, such as hospitals, schools, and markets. Violence and repression were the modus operandi of the Assad regimes, and it affected the identity of people from all Syrian ethnic and religious groups.

The 2011 revolution and competing narratives
The present conflict in Syria began piecemeal in early 2011. Daraa was the first major event. Some cities and rural areas protested peacefully and then later violently after brutal responses by the Syrian state. Other areas refused to rebel. However, rebels and regime supporters are mixed along rural/urban, class, and ethnic lines, with some people in each group aligning with or against the regime (Droz 2014; Phillips 2015). Ethnicity

did play a role though, as in the Daraa protests which were strengthened by tribal

structures (Hokayem 2013:42) and division of Sunni tribes along tribal lines (Phillips

2015). Early protests also occurred in the major cities of Hama and Homs, as well as

many rural villages and Sunni areas. Rural dwellers suffered from a severe drought from

2006 to 2009 and a policy shift by Bashar al Assad to support urban development,

increasing rural frustrations (Hokayem 2013). Hama residents had been ostracized as

radical Muslims by the regime since the 1982 rebellion. Many Homs residents perceived

unequal benefits for a few elites, while most people remained poor due to corruption and

nepotism. Other areas, including the largest commercial city, Aleppo, and much of

Damascus did not rebel until mid-2012 (Hokayem 2013:46).

By 2013, sectarian tensions were increasing, with parties becoming more

radicalized along ethnic lines, and increasing attacks or discrimination against other

ethnic groups (UN Human Rights Council 2013; Hokayem 2013; Reese 2013; Phillips

2015). In the following year the region (and beyond) experienced the swift growth of

ISIS and Jabhat al Nusra (affiliated with al Qaeda), both of which follow strict, literalist

Muslim practices, exacerbating conflict between moderate and literalist Muslim groups.

While the Alawi are generally aligned with the regime, Druze, Kurdish and Christian

ethnic groups have attempted to remain neutral in the conflict. As Phillip notes, there are

multiple complexities, including sect, tribe, politics and socio-economic class:

> …[S]ect was far from the only dividing line or mobiliser.
> Political ideology motivated some Alawis, Christians and
> Kurds to join opposition ranks in 2011. Another factor was
> sub-state identity beyond sect. Whole Sunni tribes backed
> either the opposition or the regime, often driven by
> economic benefit. Traditional tribes such as the Ageidat,

Hadidiyin, and Beni Khalid were more marginalised under Assad and backed the opposition, while the Baggara, who thrived under his rule, continued to back their patron. Economic motivation was also important elsewhere. Opposition initially sprang up in poor neighbourhoods, often hosting recent rural–urban migrants. Most were Sunni but protests were not replicated in richer Sunni areas…. On the regime side numerous Sunni bureaucrats dependent on government pay checks remained loyal, as did many in the middle classes, including conservative Sunni merchants in Damascus and Aleppo, even if some secretly aided the opposition. (Phillips 2015: 360-1)

We see here the role of sect, tribe, economic factors like poverty, and rural/urban dynamics shaping support to the Assad regime. The narrative of the Syrian regime and the opposition is summarized by Droz-Vincent as well: "The Asad regime has presented itself as an incarnation of a Arab nationalist (*qawmi*) and Syrian patriotic (*watani*) state project that has been defined as "Asad's Syria" (*Suriya al-Asad*) in official media, in order to deny the existence of any groups, sects, regional differences, or ethnic identities besides the country's Syrian and Arab identity." (Droz-Vicent 2014: 40). At the same time, the Bashar al-Assad regime also framed the opposition as terrorists, radical Islamists, and foreign interventionists, calling the conflict the *crisis* or the *events*. Meanwhile, opposition activists frame the conflict around shared goals and rights for all ethnic groups, calling the conflict the *revolution* or *uprising,* first promoting non-violent means for political change, and then coordinated armed actions.

Opposition activists have struggled to underline the message that the objective of the uprising concerns political and civil rights in Syria, not foreign alliances or ethno-religious grievances. By using terms used like Syria (*Suriya*), the Syrian people (*al-shaʻb al-Suri*), and the Syrians (*al-Suriyyun*), protesters have tried to uproot all symbols associating Syria with the Assad family from

political discourse. Unified slogans have been used across the country as a means to nationalize the movement, with people demonstrating across regions in solidarity with cities under siege (such as Darʻa, Hama, or Homs) and banners naming martyrs from other regions as their own in order to delocalize the conflict and give it national meaning. The Sunni/ʻAlawi sectarian dimension was very much at the forefront of the six-year confrontation (1976–82) between the Asad regime and the Muslim Brotherhood. This was neither the case in 2011 nor even in 2012, as things began to change with increased militarization. Slogans like "Sunnis, Kurds, and ʻAlawis, we want national unity" (*Sunni wa Kurdi wa ʻAlawiyya, baddna wahda wataniyya*) have been widely repeated in demonstrations (Droz-Vincent 2014:47).

As can be seen, both opposition groups and the Assad regime are framing the narrative around a national identity, but with unique messages. The extent to which key publics accept each of these narratives is uncertain: clearly Assad has been able to mobilize some support, although opposition messages have also gained public support, as I document in later chapters.

Overall, there appears to have been considerable **tolerance and cooperation** between and among minority and majority groups in Syria throughout its history, although there were periods of oppression and genocide. There is an academic debate on whether there has been more conflict or cooperation historically between ethnic groups in Syria (Phillips 2015; Lewis 1998; Batatu 1999). The simple fact that present day Syria is made up of many diverse ethnic and religious groups, most of whom have lived in Syria for many generations, is testament to a general pattern of ethnic and religious tolerance and coexistence. Historically there appears to have been considerable class stratification and little social mobility, with the Alawites and Druze at the bottom, Kurds slightly

above, Christians in the middle, and Sunni Arabs at the top, based on informant

interviews. Meanwhile, the rapid changes arising from the armed conflict has led to areas

controlled by democratic opposition groups, which give ordinary Syrians more space and

ability to make their own decisions, complicating the traditional social structure narrative.

Identity models

There has been increased theorizing and research on ethnic identity since the

1980s, although early anthropological and sociological research addressed fundamental

aspects of group identity, such as work by Thomas and Znaniecki (1918). Ethnic identity

is defined as "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking,

perceptions, feelings and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership." (Rotheram

and Phinney 1987:13). Ethnic identity involves four major aspects: ethnic awareness

(understanding of various social groups), ethnic self-identification (labeling of one's own

group), ethnic attitudes (feelings about social groups), and ethnic behaviors (behaviors

common to specific social groups) (Rotheram and Phinney 1987). Other aspects include

residential or occupational segregation, and other emergent aspects of ethnic

identification. Ethnic identity develops through experiences over time and the choices

made by the individuals who make up the group. Ethnic identity is unique in some ways,

but includes aspects of personal and group identities (Phinney and Ong 2007).

Building on the work of Tajfel (1981) and Ashmore et al (2004), key aspects of

ethnic and collective identity include: self-categorization and labeling, or self-

identification as a member of a social group; commitment or a sense of belonging to the

group, often seen as the level of attachment to the group; exploration or learning about

the history, traditions and customs of the group; ethnic behaviors, such as using the language, preferring the group's food and spending time with group members; evaluations and attitudes about the ethnic group, especially positive or negative attitudes about the group, since minority groups have often been oppressed; ethnic values and beliefs that are unique or special to each group; and the salience or importance of the ethnic group identity, since minority groups often give more importance to ethnic group identity than dominant groups (Phinney and Ong 2007). These special characteristics of ethnic identity highlight the similarities and differences with other types of identity.

Phinney and others designed the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure to measure the strength of ethnic identity attachment, although it has not been used much outside the United States. After the informant identifies his or her ethnic group, six questions measure the level of commitment to the group and exploration about the group, with a Cronbach's alpha of .81 (Phinney and Ong 2007). This six item measure was used as a survey tool for this study, and is seen in Appendix B. It is hypothesized that Syrian minority groups do not identify with the majority Sunni Arab group, as found with minority groups in the United States by Gong (2007), with some variation.

The salience of social identity during times of political or armed conflict can be a burden or a blessing (Hammack 2010a). As a blessing, social identity can increase self-esteem, resiliency, and interest in seeking positive social change. For example, a person living in armed conflict may have learned skills that enable him or her to manage problematic social situations. They may also have developed strong attachments to a social group, which provide a sense of belonging to a group. In this sense the social

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identity provides the person with a positive self-concept, the strength to overcome certain challenges. This positive identity may also give meaning and purpose to life, and the potential for social transformation and liberation. As a burden, people in armed conflict may internalize a social identity that promotes continued intergroup conflict by de-legitimization and negative stereotyping of others (Hammack 2010a). The person may have developed a strong attachment to the group, which may have strong biases against other groups. Other groups are then discriminated against or even targeted for attack. Such a social identity leads to continuing conflict with other groups and makes it difficult to build cooperative relations after the conflict. A number of studies support the identity as a burden argument (Merrilees et al. 2013; Hammack 2010b; Miller and Rasmussen 2010; Shahnazarian and Ziemer 2012; Korbin 2003; Coundouriotis 2010) while other studies support the identity as a blessing case (Denov 2010; Wessells 2006).

Within sociology the work of Weigert, Teitge and Teitge (1986) in *Society and Identity* summarizes early sociological work that addresses social identity. Weigert et al (1986) posited that Erikson's psychosocial identity theory influenced work on identity in three different sociological fields that are relevant for this study: a) Chicago school symbolic interactionism emphasizing the process and emerging nature of social reality, b) Iowa school symbolic interactionism focusing on the fixed, structural aspects of social reality, c) sociology of knowledge, especially the work of Berger and Luckmann (1967). The latter field emphasizes the social construction of reality, which assumes that people, as part of larger social systems, create mental representations of the human body and actions which become aspects of social roles played out in social interactions. In effect,

the meanings underlying human actions and social roles are socially constructed

knowledge used to reproduce and transform society.

Identity and armed conflict studies

The importance of social identity in wartime was recognized by two of the main

theorists on identity. Henri Tajfel developed his social identity model in part based on his

experiences as a Jew living in France during World War II, highlighting the positive role

group identity has for the in-group, and potential negative role that occurs when it is

diminished by outgroups. (Spears 2011:202) Erik Erikson noted the value and importance

of group identities for World War II immigrants, refugees, and soldiers. Two aspects of

his identity model included *wholeness* and *totality*. Wholeness refers to a complete set of

pieces or parts that make up a coherent or cohesive identity. Totality refers to the

boundaries of the group identity: what must be included and excluded in the group

identity. "True identity, however, depends on the support which the young individual

receives from the collective sense of identity characterizing the social groups significant

to him: his class, his nation, his culture." (Erikson, 1964: 93) When conditions such as

war conflict with deeply rooted identities the person may feel in danger, which can lead

to acceptance of radical identities and extremist ideologies, leading to completely

stereotyped views of enemy groups, and justification and use of systematic terror and

even extermination of enemies. (Erikson 1964).

Only a few relevant studies on identity and armed conflict exist, some of which

deal with child soldiers and others with the larger community. Studies found strong in-

group affiliation and social identity can promote a range of attitudes including hatred,

prejudice, discrimination, indifference and liking (Merrilees et al. 2013; Hammack 2010); past traumatic war experiences and everyday stressors may impact identity formation and salience (Miller and Rasmussen 2010); and child soldiers produced and contested social structures, and formed multiple identities in the chaotic Sierra Leone context (Denov 2010). Given the importance of early identity development and (disrupted) social structures for identification processes, the study of child solder identity Shahnazarian and Ziemer (2012) found male child soldiers had different pre-war, war and post-war identities, with five war identities: as a patriot, a sense of honor, masculinity, a trusting and unselfish friendship with other combatants, and a killer. They note the strong influence that structural forces have on the person's ability to choose between simple everyday life options, with many not having much choice in many situations, although they still were able to develop their own interpretations and responses.

The recent research by Moshman (2012) on identity and genocide is very relevant for this study. Moshman posits a four step model for explaining how ethnic identity affects intergroup conflict and violence in extreme situations like genocide. While few writers classify Syria as a genocide, the deep polarization in Syria matches that described by Moshman very well. The first phase of his model starts with identity dichotomization putting people into either us or them groups (Moshman 2012). This is followed by dehumanization of the outgroup, which removes moral considerations when acting outside normal social bounds. This is followed by violence against the other group, even complete destruction in cases of genocide. The final phase is denial of the humanness of the other, which means moral concerns are not relevant. Moshman (2012) documents six

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different ways, based on past literature, that dehumanization and denial processes occur.

In Syria we see how Moshman's model on dichotomization and dehumanization is played

out in real time. Throughout this study I provide many examples of dichotomization – the

polarization argument I advance is similar dichotomization – and a few examples of

dehumanization, such as Alawi comments about killing the Dara'a children in March

2011. Capturing data to fully confirm the applicability of Moshman's model, especially

the dehumanization and denial processes, to the Syrian ethnic conflict may require more

time and a longer term view of the conflict.

In summary, related to ethnic identity and identification models, this study builds

on the model of Phinney to examine Syrian identity focusing mainly on the social and

ethnic identity levels. It explores pre-war and current identity, though recorded

respectively, especially key life events, and informant's responses to such events, to

examine how such experiences influence ethnic identity. It also examines group

memberships, social roles, and personal identity characteristics, such as values,

preferences, and beliefs, as they relate to identification with ethnic groups. Relevant

Syrian social structures will also be examined, especially patterns of social behavior by

families, armed groups, and other groups, to determine constraints and opportunities in

the process of identity management.

Ethnic and religious identity literature in Syria

Ethnicity is major part of the current Syrian context, yet the role it plays is in

question. Collelo's quote at the beginning of this chapter posits that ethnicity

identification has little consequence for individual Syrians. However, the map by Izady

shows the lack of geographical mixing of ethnic and religious groups in Syria (2014).

There is considerable homogeneity geographically, with most people in a certain area

from one ethnic group and living isolated from other groups. But, some mixing occurs in

urban areas and some rural areas – Collelo argues that there is "extreme heterogeneity"

(1987:64), but Izady's map argues differently. The largest Syrian ethnic groups are Sunni

Arabs at 59.1% of the total population, Alawites with 11.8%, Levantine Christians at

9.3%, Kurds at 8.9%, and smaller numbers of Druze, Ismailis, Nusairis, Imamis,

Assyrians, Chaldeans, Armenians, and other groups (Izady 2014). Van Dam further

breaks this down by religion and ethnicity. The religious minorities include Alawis,

Druze, Isma'ilis, and Greek Orthodox Christians, with the latter making up the largest

percentage (4.7%) of the 14.1% of Syrian population who are Christian. The ethnic

minorities are the Kurds, Armenians, Turcomans, and Circassians. Only the Armenians

are both a religious and ethnic minority (Van Dam 2011).

Demographically, Syria has seen significant population growth, with an average

annual growth rate of 3.3% from 1970 to 1991. The population rose from 1.6 million in

1922, to 4.4 million in 1946, to 13.8 million in 1994 and 22 million in 2010 (Batatu

1999). While the percentage who are rural has declined from 68.0% in 1946 to 48.6% in

1994, Syria stills has a large rural peasant population, although it diminished due to urban

migration caused by the drought from 2006-2009. As of 1994, 44.8% of Syrians were

under age 15. Unemployment levels are symptomatic of the problems with data in Syria.

Figure 1: Syria ethnic identity map
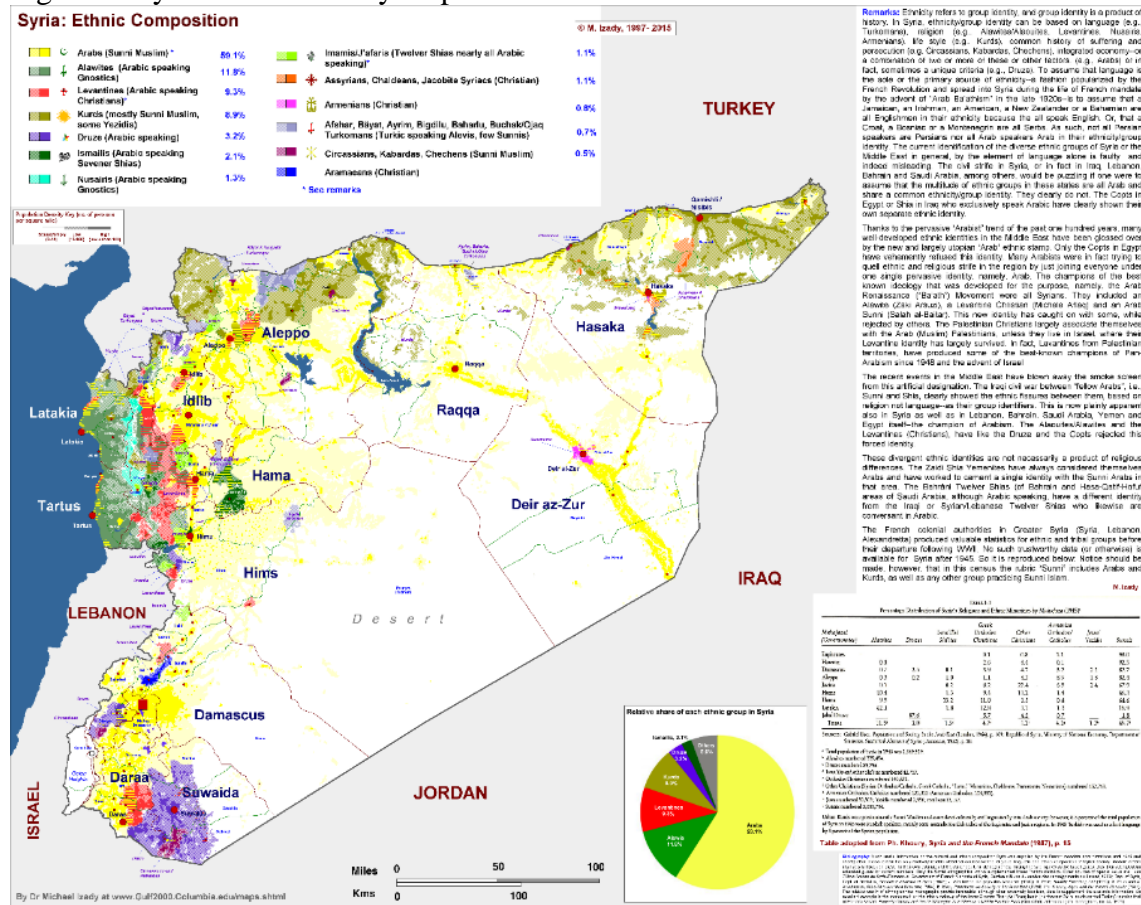
(Izady 2014)

Unemployment levels have been consistently high, at 24.9% in 1970, 22.7% in 1981, and 27.8% in 1991, although female labor force participation rates may be low, according to Batatu (1999). Meanwhile, a UN Development Program study found unemployment rates of 5% in 1981, rising to 11.6% in 2002 (El Laithy and Abu-Ismail 2005). Demographically, as of 2003 of the 11.6% unemployment figure, 24% were youth ages 20-24 and 57% had less than a college education. Underemployment was high, with little demand for skilled labor and the increased labor supply due to population growth.

Most skilled workers were employed in the public sector (El Laithy and Abu-Ismail 2005).

An analysis of the varying urban and rural poverty data in Syria as of 2003 partially supports my contention that minority groups were generally poorer than the Sunni Arab population. This assumption does not use direct poverty rates for each ethnic group, but assumes that the majority of people in specific governorates are from specific ethnic groups, as per Izady's ethnic map. The poverty measure used here is a simple head count index using the lower poverty line (El Laithy and Abu-Ismail 2005).

Table 2 Poverty rates by governorate (percentages)

Governorate	Urban	Rural	Total
Damascus	4.74	n/a	4.74
Rural Damascus	4.87	5.99	5.44
Homs	7.92	10.30	9.02
Hama	11.20	11.74	11.57
Tartous	5.79	7.46	6.94
Lattakia	11.04	12.06	11.55
Idleb	7.34	10.65	9.81
Aleppo	13.05	31.48	19.88
Ar Raqqa	14.92	19.13	17.59
Deir e Zor	3.40	5.29	4.70
El Hasakeh	6.37	11.93	10.09
Al Sweida	12.6	20.0	17.72
Daraa	13.99	16.26	15.43
Quneitra	n/a	14.85	14.85
Total =	8.7	14.18	11.39

Source: El Laithy and Abu-Ismail 2005.

As can be seen from these data, urban poverty rates are much lower (8.7%) than rural rates (14.18%), with a national rate of 11.39%. The governorates with the lowest

rates, such as Damascus, Rural Damascus, Homs, Idleb, and Deir E Zor, have the largest Sunni Arab populations. The Kurds live mainly in rural Hasakeh, which has a moderate poverty rate (11.93%) while the Sunni Arabs in the urban Hasakeh area have a much lower rate (6.37%). They also live predominantly in rural Aleppo governorate, where the urban poverty rate of 13.05% is moderate to start with, yet the rural rate is an astounding 31.48%, the highest in the country, high lighting the difference between the Sunni Arabs in Aleppo and Kurds in rural areas. The Druze are the principal group in both urban and rural As Sweida governorate, with few Sunni Arabs present, and have a relatively high poverty rate of 17.72%. For the Alawis, it is a mixed picture: while Tartous has a rate of 6.94% overall, which puts it at the lowest levels of poverty nationally in Syria, Lattakia has a rate of 11.55%, which puts it near the mean rate for the whole country. The difference in poverty levels between Tartous and Lattakia are unclear: since the Assad family comes from al Qardahah, Lattakia, it has given considerable resources to that area, especially members of his Kalbiyya tribe. Since Christians are spread out over many governorates in Syria, it is impossible to suggest their poverty levels from this data. In summary, these poverty data do not show a clear picture of poverty differences for the five ethnic groups in Syria, but suggest that such patterns do exist. Unfortunately, data collected by El Laithy and Abu-Ismail (2005) do not analyze ethnic or religious variables. The Government of Syria also has a policy of ignoring ethnic variables for data analysis, as noted below.

In general there were few studies of ethnicity or ethnic identity in Syria prior to 2010. The most notable pre-revolution (pre-2010) studies focused on specific groups or

issues, including the Druze (Bennett 2006), Kurds (Kreyenbroek and Allison 1996) and

Bedouin (Chatty 2010) ethnic groups, farmers (Batatu 1999; Martini 2003; La Rovere,

Aw-Hassan, Turkelboom and Thomas 2006), complemented by Bernard Lewis's (1998)

exceptional study on Middle Eastern identity.

Since 2010, a number of studies have addressed Syrian identity issues from

various angles as concerns about sectarian conflict and violence have elevated the topic

on global political and academic agendas. Topics addressed include: women (Galie,

Jiggins and Struik 2013; Totah 2013), social movements (Leenders 2012, 2013), national

identity (Stanton 2014) and religion (Teitelbaum 2011; Tomass 2014; Widdicombe 2011;

Sahner 2014). Some Syrian studies examine sectarianism, and consider ethnic identity to

some extent (Byman 2014; Droz 2014; Heydemann 2013; Hinnebusch 2012; Khashanah

2014; Phillips 2013, 2015; van Dam 2011), ISIS identity (Lipkin 2015; Kfir 2015) and

young jihadis (Van San 2014). A few very recent studies examine specific ethnic groups,

such as Maria Kastrinou (2016) on Druze identity, marriage and politics; and Allsop

(2015) on Kurdish identity in Syria. While this literature is growing, there are still gaps in

understanding the full range of issues – language, religion, beliefs, customs, ideologies

and boundaries – that make up identities for ethnic groups in Syria.

Multiple identities exist for the Syrian people. Byman identifies country,

ethnicity, family and social class (Byman 2014). Lewis follows a model similar to Harold

Isaacs' group identity/idols of the tribe, and identifies multiple possible identities for

Syrians, including religion, race, language, country, nation, and the state (Lewis 1999;

Isaacs 1975). For Lewis, primordial identities in Syria start with blood ties, such as the

family, clan, and tribe; followed by place, such as village, neighborhood, or country; and end with religion. He also notes the importance of gender identities in the male-dominated local cultures. Lewis's model parallels Isaac's primal group identity model of the body, name, language, history, origins, religion, and nationality, although Lewis does not reference Isaacs. The Assad regime discouraged any discussion of minority identities (Bennett 2006).

It is debatable whether Syrian social structures and society are more late-modern, due to globalization, or more traditional, following agrarian models, and may depend on tribal and urban/rural factors. The fact that 48.6% of the Syrian population was rural in 1994, with large, poor pastoral and agricultural populations provide evidence of a traditional model of society (Batatu 1999; La Rovere, et al 2006). These traditional beliefs and practices play an important role in inter-group relations in Syria even in the midst of the most violent battles (Byman 2014). This traditional culture is evidenced by *asabiyya*, or strong group solidarity and kinship, where the tribal leader has final authority over the clans within the tribe (Hokayem 2013; Abouzeid 2015). Often group identity is based on shared memories of a common past, event or key leader (Lewis 1999). Hokeyam finds Syrians have become more conservative since the 1970s (2013).

Notably both nationality and citizenship are relatively new ideas for most Middle Eastern countries. For example, there is no word for citizenship in the Middle Eastern languages; the closest terminology is compatriot or patriot. The classic Islamic word for citizens of a state was *ra'iyya*, which means flocks or herds (Lewis 1999). Droz-Vincent (2014) explains that Syrian nationalism and patriotism involve the Syrian state attempting

to frame a national identity around the Assad regime, while opposition forces frame it around multi-ethnic, national identity. Relations between communities are complex and evolve around what Droz-Vincent identifies as the "alliance of minorities" or *tahaluf al-aqilliyyat*. What exactly this alliance is remains unclear – it may be the actions by opposition groups to frame the armed conflict narrative around a national unity message (Droz 2014).

In summary, we see that social and ethnic identity in Syria is strongly affected by religion, tribe, socio-economic, and rural/urban differences. These factors must be kept in mind as I review findings from informants from the five ethnic/religious groups in this study.

CHAPTER THREE: COMMONALITIES IN ETHNIC IDENTITIES FOR FIVE SYRIAN ETHNIC GROUPS

This chapter identifies and summarizes a number of issues that are shared across all or most ethnic or religious groups in Syria, as identified in this study's primary data collection via the 26 in-depth interviews. In this chapter I explore a number of issues that are pertinent for all or most of the ethnic and religious groups in Syria, including language, names, family, gender, marriage, honor, ethnic group salience, segregation, inter-group interaction, mistrust, fear, socioeconomic class, geography, urban/rural differences, and a larger Syrian identity. In some cases there was agreement across Syrian ethnic groups on the issues, while in other cases the issue was a key point of contention between groups, as seen below with conflicting views on the Kurdish language. All of these issues became salient during interviews with Syrian sources regarding ethnic identity and ethnic group relations in Syria.

Language: dominant Arabic, repressed Kurdish

Language is one of the primary boundaries or differentiators for ethnic identification in Syria. Many informants described how they could quickly identify the ethnic group or geographic location of other Syrian speakers, or how their language was affected by regime policies or ethnic discrimination. Informants stated that they could identify where other Syrians come from based on their dialect or accent, and given that location, could predict which ethnic group they belonged to, making language a critical

factor in first impressions in social interactions. Language also became the "pass code,"

as noted by informant 17, who received automatic inclusion into the Kurdish community

due to his native language skills when he traveled to Istanbul and Germany. While most

Syrian ethnic groups speak Arabic as their native language, a few groups studied here

speak other languages natively, specifically Armenians and Kurds, while some ethnic

groups like Alawi and Druze have significant differences with dialect or accent from

standard Syrian Arabic, according to informants. Also, the Assad regime had a policy of

forbidding Kurds from speaking their own language, which generated a struggle to

maintain the language for Kurds. Many Kurdish informants described the physical and

mental abuse their received as children from Sunni Arabs because of the Kurdish

language. For these diverse reasons, language is a key factor for ethnic identification in

Syria. Here I examine Arabic, English, Armenian and Kurdish language issues in Syria.

Starting with the Arabic-speaking majority, the shared language was an important

connector between the Syrian Arab people, according to one informant (6). While for

most Arab informants speaking their language seemed to be a given and not noteworthy,

this informant recognized that it enabled the diverse groups of Arab Syrians to have a

common thread between them, a key part of their identity. Another example of how

language affected Syrian identity sub-groups was for the small English-speaking youth

population, who were more connected to and informed by Western pop culture.

> Another group that I feel a part of [was] the English-
> speaking community in Syria, which wasn't that big. The
> cultural references when you are hanging out with your
> friends, if you are talking about something you have seen in
> a cool series, like How I Met Your Mother and Big Bang
> Theory series. And the other phrases, to understand it, from

pop culture. Pop culture, I believe it really affected us…. I
have some things from that culture, like references and
these kinds of things, which also limited the people (who I
hung out with). (informant 13)

In both the Arabic and English cases, the shared language brings people together

and creates the group boundary, according to informants. Meanwhile, Syrian Armenian

Christians value their language to the extent that they add an extra hour of instruction to

the school day in Armenian Christian schools to teach Armenian language and history to

the children (informant 4).

The most distinctive language-as-identity distinction case in Syria is for the

Kurds, according to informants. For Kurds, their language has been divided by national

borders and altered by government policies. It has been the locus of considerable

discrimination and even violence from Arabs and the regime. It is a source of pride and

the foundation of many initiatives to maintain the Kurdish culture. Generally Syrian

Kurdish children learn Kurdish at home and learn Arabic when they start school,

according to Kurdish informants. In rare cases Kurdish children learn Arabic as a first

language, usually when their parents live in a large city like Aleppo, and then have to

learn Kurdish later in life.

The larger Kurdish community in Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey has been educated

in three different languages, Arabic, Farsi and Turkish, which was a concern for some

Kurdish informants. Kurds were a minority in each country. Each country limited the use

of the Kurdish language through formal policies. As I document in the Kurdish section

more, the agrarian reform policies of the Syrian Baath party moved many Arabic

speaking groups, such as Turkmen and Bedouin, to Kurdish areas in northern Syria,

leading to the adoption of many Arabic words into the Kurdish language: "The Syrian Kurdish dialect has adopted many, many Arabic words and phrases. So you can say its 30% Arabic, when you speak Kurdish." (informant 17) The formation of the United Arab Republic in 1958 and implementation of the pan-Arab, Baathist philosophy impacted Kurds through the prohibition of speaking Kurdish and changing of Kurdish village names to Arabic (informant 19).

Informants noted that they were prohibited from speaking the Kurdish language in Syria for many years in public schools, and no Kurdish written materials were allowed as well. As informant 17 explained, Syrian regime policies affected the Kurmanji dialect used in most of Syria:

> During the past 40 or 50 years, since the Ottoman empire has fallen, the broader Kurdistan… got separated into four countries, four regimes. Each regime speaks a language to some extent.… What… the four regimes have done is influence the language to a major extent. The Kurdish language was basically banned. You go to prison for speaking it publically. So generation after generation the actual dialect of Kurmanji or Sorani have been impacted so much by the local languages. So for example the Iraqi and Syrian Kurds mix the Kurdish with Arabic. The Turks mix it with Turkish. And the Iranians mix it with Persian. So if you are speaking with a Kurdish that is even from Turkey, you will find some difficulties in communicating with each other. So you would either have to speak both Arabic and Kurdish and Turkish to be able to comprehend everything that they say. (informant 17)

This regional political context highlights the role of language in ethnic group identity formation and maintenance for the larger, regional Kurdish ethnic group.

Within Syria, the Kurdish language has been a source of discrimination and violence for Syrian Kurds, according to informants. They noted that many Kurdish

children would learn Kurdish at home and often come under intense discrimination when they started primary school, including beatings by Arab teachers or Arabic-speaking students. Kurdish children were discriminated against by other Kurds for not speaking Kurdish fluently and discriminated against by Arabs for not speaking Arabic well. Another informant described the situation for her parents 40 years ago: "At their time it was forbidden to talk in the Kurdish language in public places, schools, at work. It was forbidden. But recently, about 15 years [ago], Kurdish people are able to talk, at schools, university, at work…. in the language." (informant 19).

Goffman's (1963) work on stigma helps explain this discrimination based on language: the language handicap forms the basis for others to treat them negatively, which often leads to special efforts by the stigmatized person to shows competence on that characteristic. This discussion highlights the dilemmas that individuals face in their representations of self and interactions with others. Furthermore, these Syrian examples emphasize the role that language plays in ethnic identification. The unique symbols used by in-group members may support group solidarity, a sense of heritage, and group feelings, possibly creating a sense of difference from out-groups (Phinney et al 2001). Language may not always be a critical factor in ethnic identification, but in some contexts it may become a primary symbol of ethnic identification.

While Kurds have only recently been able to speak their language in public, the conflict generated between Arabic and Kurdish speaking children was sometimes intense:

> In schools and early ages of childhood, in the streets, you
> are going to fight – if you speak a Kurdish word, you get
> expelled from the team for no reason. In the school you are
> not allowed, ever allowed, to speak Kurdish. Especially in

this area, we were wearing military suits. Around 2003 it was finished. After that, it was more freedom to use the Kurdish language in the street and inside school, but still historically if you have a period of 40 years, 5 years wouldn't give you much security. For instance, my bigger family, I have a lot of cousins, and 90% of them can't speak Kurdish, because they weren't taught at school, and their parents are young enough not to know about their language or things like that. The language is very important thing for me, that's why I'm bringing this thing up. (informant 18)

At the same time, language is critical identifier within the Kurdish ethnic group, and a means of identifying who should receive special assistance or resources. One Syrian Kurdish informant (17) described getting special attention and help in both Germany and Istanbul simply based on being able to speak Kurdish. It wasn't the exact same dialect as the people providing the help, but close enough for the informant to be labeled as an in-group member and receive either free food in Germany or an important job in the Kurdish business community in Istanbul. "Even though they were Turkish Kurds and I was Syrian Kurds. So just speaking Kurdish is a code between each other. I saw that also in Germany." (informant 17) However, language is also a divider within the Kurdish people. Those Syrian Kurds who grew up speaking Arabic more than Kurdish were sometimes ostracized by family members in rural areas because of not speaking the dialect or accent perfectly, and hence, not being 100% Kurdish: "they will expel you and treat you as alien." (informant 17) Language may be the most important identifier in these relationships, followed by skills, practices and beliefs.

In summary, one of the main findings from this study is that language is an important distinction and driver for ethnic identity in Syria for all ethnic groups. Syrian

state policies have targeted and sought to eliminate minority languages. Meanwhile minority groups like Armenians and Kurds have fought hard to continue their maintain their ethnic language, overcoming discrimination and violence, and valuing ethnic language education considerably.

Names and family: important values

Many informants described the importance of names and family in the Syrian society. Syrians often identify specific names with specific ethnic or religious groups – whether Sunni, Alawi, Kurdish, Druze or Christian, making names an important first identifier in social interactions across ethnic groups. Names become markers of who you are socio-economically. Some names are very popular across various ethnic groups and some names are special to specific ethnic groups (informant 13). Supposedly Syrian names in Arabic changed during the French colonial period with the addition of the *vous* form, although how is unclear (informant 9).

The positive potential of names arises in several contexts. For some Syrian Arab women, keeping their last name after being married is important, as it maintains connection with the wife's consanguine family identity and reflects women's rights under Islam (informant 20). In another case, Christians in As Sweida governorate valued the names of local saints, with each family naming one boy each generation after the local patron saint (informant 27). Ironically, Syrian Kurds were prohibited from naming their children with Kurdish names: "A long time ago it was forbidden to Kurdish people to name their children Kurdish names." (informant 19) In both cases, the ethnic group

valued specific first names for their children, but one group was allowed to do so while the other was outlawed.

Secondly, family names often carry status, prestige, honor or risk, according to Syrian informants. Upper class families work hard to limit who can enter their family through marriage, and middle class families try to marry into upper class families. The name means everything in these cases. In other cases, like middle or lower class families, the name reflects the family's honor: they may not have much money, but they are honorable, which may mean hardworking, honest, and/or religiously observant. One Druze informant (25) noted the value of keeping Druze *clean*, which refers to doing good deeds, speaking well of others, and similar acts. This value is tied to family honor and the family name. Family members are concerned that bad deeds may denigrate the family name, and sometimes reflect on this when going about their everyday social interactions.

Names are used as identifiers, and can lead to threats and danger. In the case of family names that can be confused with other groups, such names also convey risk for family members. Interesting cases arise when a person has a last name from a different ethnic group – for example, a Sunni Arab has an Alawite-sounding last, according to informants. Often when there is this confusion, the birth place is used to clarify any confusion, i.e., no Alawites would live in Idleb**,** or finally the question, *Are you with or against the regime* (informant 12). Due to interest in maintaining the homogeneity of their group, some Syrian Christian ethnic group members sometimes ask other Christians about the names of friends, to see if they are from a different group or are Muslim.

These cases of confusing names quickly raise suspicions of being a spy, as mentioned by informants from different Syrian ethnic groups. One informant mentioned that her dad was Sunni Arab from Deir E Zor, but had a last name that was common in Alawite villages in Lattakia: when he sought marriage with a family in Hama, it took him a long time to convince the bride's family that he wasn't Alawi (informant 5). In a more extreme case, an informant described a situation where a woman from a well-known Alawite family affiliated with the regime was caught between extremists from both sides. Her last name made her suspicious to opposition groups, while the regime was searching for her as well (confidential informant). This dynamic, which occurred because of her last name, led to considerable risk for family members. One Kurdish informant noted that ISIS readily uses last names to identify people who are opposition. If the man has a strictly Kurdish name, they are more at risk from ISIS (informant 17).

On a separate issue, the names used by opposition protest leaders for the Friday protests at the beginning of the revolution were named after Muslim figures. This alienated some minority ethnic and religious groups members, who felt that it didn't respect the diversity of the country (informant 23).

As can be seen by these examples, names play an important part in Syrian ethnicity, albeit in different ways for different groups, according to informants. In some cases, names carry prestige, status and honor. Names reflect or reproduce socio-economic class, as upper class families work to maintain upper class status and middle class families try to break into the upper class. In other cases, names have been controlled or prohibited by the state. And, under the polarized wartime conditions, names can be a

source of danger and threat for some individuals. Of note, while the importance of *clan* identity was explored with informants when discussing the connection between family and ethnicity, for most people the clan was not a source of identity: few were aware of which clan they belonged to or how the clan affected family or ethnic identities.

Gender inequality and marriage norms

Gender is a major part of ethnic identification in Syria due to the particularly patriarchal Muslim society, with different norms for men and women across most ethnic and religious groups. Gender issues are linked closely to marriage and honor. According to informants, men have many more legal rights under Syrian law, including property rights, legal rights over children, and the ability to marry outside the group. Meanwhile, Syrian women have few legal rights in practice. One area of gender equality appears to be in education: all ethnic groups studied here seem to value education for women, and encourage their daughters to go to school and get a good education, according to female informants. Meanwhile, in areas of dress, marriage, and freedom of movement, the dominant societal norms are patriarchal and give very little power to women, as I explain below. In this section I examine several issues for women in Syria, such as the hijab, marriage, divorce, movement, and money. This section does not address many issues for Syrian men, such as the forms and uses of power by men.

Identity for Christian, Muslim, urban and rural women vary in Syria, with many unique characteristics, which I briefly touch on here. According to one Christian female source, Syrian women are:

> Strong, clever, high ability of coping mechanism, and it's a real component of the Syrian identity…. It's not a struggle

to be a woman in Syria. It could be in some communities, as we have a lot of types of communities in Syria; the rural community where it's not easy to be a woman in that part, and even in the urban in some religious parts, in parts of the Muslim Sunni community, where it's not easy for them. But at all levels, I know that the Syrian women are fighting to get their voices out. I know that as myself, I have a lot of chances to express myself, and to have the chance to be as I'm now, but I really feel sorry for other women who don't have that. (informant 27)

As she notes women's identification depends on the cultural and institutional settings in which they live, and the agentic response to those conditions. Of course, when she is talking about self-expression, her status as a NGO worker in Turkey, a relatively privileged position, means that her experiences may not be representative of all Syrian women. How other women, especially lower class or minority women, express themselves is worthwhile of further research. The challenges Syrian women face are complex:

It could be on many levels. It could start from not being a divorced or a second wife. And against the violence, for protecting her children, and to move on to the highest level into being very independent women and having their own life…. it's always related to where we are talking about, because I used to live in many places, because being in Aleppo countryside for example is really difficult, but living in Damascus city is totally different.

[Rural Aleppo] is very difficult. I've visited rural Aleppo for many times for work…. The idea of a lady going there without hijab, that means that everyone would try to - it's a really strange thing. People were looking at you, as someone coming from outside. So all these steps you have to fight to make the community accept that. So it's different. By the way, in the countryside of Sweida, it's not the same situation. Because there are no Sunnis. They could be either Druze, even Sunnis. In Daraa, in the countryside of Daraa, it is really fine to have a woman there without a hijab. Because they are more knowledge[able]

there about having the others, the Christian, the Druze. So
it's fine for them to see people like this. (informant 27)

We can see here that gender, specifically women's identity, are important for ethnic identification for Sunni Arabs, more so than for other Syrian ethnic groups: the symbolism that comes with women wearing the hijab is a critical aspect of the Sunni Arab identification, according to informants. Also, as can be seen in this quote, dress is one high profile area for gender differences and social control, with different norms on wearing the hijab between the various Syrian ethnic groups. Whether to wear the hijab appears to a personal choice for women in theory, though in actuality not. The hijab is a symbol of ethnic affiliation for Sunni Arabs. While men have some limits on dress in public, in many areas of Syria women have significant social pressure to wear the hijab.[2] Following patriarchal logic, the most common justification for why women must wear the hijab is to stop men from becoming tempted or aroused by a woman's beauty or hair, according to informants. Admittedly, this is a complex issue that can be seen from a feminist perspective of women's rights or a cultural perspective that supports patriarchal norms. As one Sunni informant (12) noted, wearing the hijab was easier than not wearing it in Idleb, more of a cultural than religious practice. However, it was her own decision as to whether to wear the hijab outside of Syria.

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[2] In this study, I asked Syrian women many questions about the hijab, since it appeared to be salient examples of ethnic identification, male domination and women's freedom. From a Western perspective, it appears to be uncomfortable and an imposition on women, especially during hot summer days. Hence, understanding how Syrian women from the various ethnic and religious groups view it was important in this study. Whether wearing the hijab is a problem is partially subjective, yet part of broader patterns of meaning. Here I try to defer to informants' opinions about the issue, giving more weight to female informants. But even among Sunni women, there is considerable debate.

After I came to Turkey, a lot of that changed, because I've started to realize that I'm just doing it because it's just easy…. I didn't want to always be looked at, or to hear things like: oh, you have everything, but you only lack the hijab. Or you only need to do this and then you would be perfect. So hearing that sometimes put a lot of pressure on you. But being in Turkey, I started to say wait a minute - why I'm wearing this scarf? And all of these questions started to pop out in my head. It's not comfortable. I spend a lot of hours wearing it and there's no point of it. So I started to think about this and I decided to take it off. (informant 12)

In this case the Sunni woman enacted the Sunni practice of internal deliberation leading to a rejection of the conservative Sunni practices from Idleb, through reading and reflection. Other Sunni female informants described going through that same internal debate. As the informant read other books, she explained her thinking:

Because the reason is, in brief words, everything that's been written in Quran, everything that we've been taught, that its God's words. But then I read different books and different articles, and how to interpret Islam in different way - we only take that because it's the only written book and it hasn't changed. But there's nothing actually to prove that: that it is the only words that comes from God. And that there are no human errors in it, which there is. So having that made me think about it.

And even a lot of text in the Quran, which is the main core of the Muslim Sunni, how you want to do things, just read the Quran and do it. A lot of the text can be interpreted in so many ways. And a very small example of how women should walk on the streets, like how covered they should be, there's no direct text in Quran saying that they should cover their heads. It says that they should conservative and modest, but it doesn't say that they have this. (informant 12)

But the social pressure to wear the hijab or niqab (full facial and body cover) can be very intense for some Syrian women. One Syrian Sunni female informant (12) who stopped wearing the hijab in Turkey said her father had received "hundreds of phone

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calls' from relatives who put pressure on the father to get her to follow the traditional

Sunni norms. Another Sunni Arab female informant (24) from Aleppo described the

heavy social pressure when she went to a religious group meeting for teenage girls when

she was in 7th grade. She felt a lot of pressure to wear the hijab from her religion teacher

and mother, who argued that by wearing the hijab she wouldn't be tempting other men.

The religious group leaders used an analogy of fine jewelry: if you have very nice

jewelry, would you keep it hidden in a safe place or would you show it off. The leaders

believed such jewelry should be hidden. She thought that less secure girls would succumb

to this group pressure. According to her, more than half of the teenage girls in her class

wore the hijab. But she didn't wear it herself, reasoning that God probably wasn't so

concerned about her hair, and she would be happy to show off her nice jewelry. One

Sunni female informant (12) from Idleb, a conservative Syrian city, noted that wearing

the hijab was required in Idleb – not wearing it would cause considerable commotion and

questioning on the streets, and raise issues of honor for the family. This suggests that the

hijab becomes a symbol of attachment to the family, at least for women from Idleb.

Female informants (12, 24) did mention that it is uncomfortable, especially during the hot

Syrian summers.

Another Sunni woman provided an interesting quote that highlights contradictions

for the larger free will debate about women and dress: "And believing in God is very

important to me because I believe that that makes me very comfortable, because I know

that whatever is happening in my life is the will of God. With knowing that we have a

choice." (informant 20) While she explicitly states that women have a choice, she also

believes that everything that happens is Allah's will. This contradiction has no easy remedy.

Syrian women's freedom to wear the hijab or not also depends on how conservative the local community is.

> Like in Idleb, even though it's a small town, but there're a lot of differences when it comes to what a proper Muslim you are. So you would have the vast majority of people are - let's talk about women. They would wear a head scarf. They would dress modestly. They might wear jeans, but its modest, not very tight clothes. Everybody would wear a head scarf, maybe they would pray, or wouldn't pray or fast. And those are the moderate. And then you would have the more conservative, who wear long dresses, the black, and would pray five times a day, and fast all the required days. So they are more conservative, and they would be less accepting of the others. So they wouldn't have Christian friends. They will try to avoid that because they would think everything else, [other] than Muslim Sunnis is kafir. (informant 12)

As one Sunni male informant noted, Sunnis would never change their religious values to accommodate Alawis or other groups. He first argued that Sunnis wouldn't impose their norms, such as the hijab, on other ethnic groups, but then added: "I will say that your woman should be wearing a veil because sharia says that women should not go out without wearing a veil. Because we believe in sharia, and they are right about this point actually." He was fairly adamant that Sunni beliefs in the need for women to wear hijabs were justified. He noted that Sunnis would try to convince minority group members through persuasion, logic, options and choices to follow the Sunni rules on the hijab. But in the end he said: "If they want to stay in the Sunni control[led] areas, we would prefer that your wife would wear a veil because of these evidences [sic] from

Quran. This is what she will gain if she wears it. So [in a] peaceful way. Not in violence [sic] way. But they are right - they need to wear a veil." (informant 7) We can see here the conservative Sunni thought processes regarding enforcing Muslim social norms in Sunni areas, regardless of how minorities may view such impositions.

There are two parts to Syrian social norms on marriage between groups, one religious and one ethnic, based on informant interviews describing restrictions on marriage outside their social group. Regarding religious norms, Muslims are prohibited from marrying anyone who doesn't believe in God, meaning Muslims can only marry Muslims, Christians and Jews, according to informants. But these norms don't apply to Muslim men, since it is assumed that the woman he would marry would become Muslim. Secondly, Muslim women are prohibited from marrying outside their religious group. One Sunni Arab female informant (12) described this as a "double standard" for men and women. Muslim men can marry a woman from another religious group, but Muslim women are forbidden to do so, at the risk of being excluded from the family and becoming totally isolated from her original community. Similar marriage constraints appear to exist for Alawite, Druze and Christians, but seem to come more from cultural norms than religious norms.

The double standard of Muslim men versus women on marriage partners is a good example of the lack of rights for women and difficulty for some Syrians to see gender inequality in such religious norms. When one Sunni Arab female informant (20) was pressed about minority concerns for freedom and rights, her explanation of Muslim

women's marriage rights was informative for understanding the status of women within

the Muslim society:

> Let me explain for you. Islam doesn't let a woman marry a Christian. This is Islam. It is not to make it up or we don't understand it. A Muslim man can marry a Christian woman, but a Muslim woman cannot marry a Christian man. And that is because the dignity of Islam, when you are Muslim and female, you cannot be under the power of Christian male. But a Muslim male who has a female as Christian, he is going to influence her. We don't want [a] Muslim [woman] to be influenced by [a] Christian husband. See what I mean.

> So we have this [sic] little, little, little things, but it's not more than those little things. And it is very few cases where you see those little things get broken. But it is anyway happening. I know so many Muslim girls who married Christian men. It happens. And the community gets crazy [violence against the women.] Yes, yes. This is a little thing. It is not made up, its real.

> There is a reason behind it. Because of the pride of Islam… and honor. I think it is also relates to the children, the offspring. In Islam, the religion of the children will be the religion of their dad. He imparts the religion of the father. That is why there is [a limit] for the female, because her offspring is going to be a different religion…. Islam protects a lot of women's rights. And our rights are part of our identity. We keep our name. It's something I am very proud about. It's my name, not my husband's name. (informant 20)

In her explanation, this informant (20) describes women's rights under Islamic

law. Husbands should treat their wives with respect. Women have the right to be

educated, assist in decision making and raising the children. Some of these rights

originate from the Prophet Mohammed's consultations with his wives during important

events and battles, when women made important contributions. However, the many

informant stories of the lack of rights for Sunni women, and imposition on minority women by Sunnis, problematizes this narrative.

Regarding the ethnic dynamic on marriage, many young people from the ethnic groups in this study strongly criticized within-group marriage norms, according to informants. In these cases, parents, extended family members and other community members put strong pressure on both men and women to marry within their ethnic group. In many ways, this is the *litmus test* of what types of social interactions are permitted between ethnic groups: working relationships, and friendships are acceptable, but not marriage. The most conservative groups appeared to be Sunni Arabs and Christians, with Kurds, Druze and Alawite social norms more flexible on marriage. Even Sunni Kurds said it would be hard to marry Sunnis Arabs, due to different ethnic norms, not because of religious norms (informants 17, 19). Sometimes these social prohibitions are family-based, with several Sunni Arab informants (5, 12) noting that their families would allow their children to marry anyone except Alawites, in this case possibly due to the violence caused by Alawites against their families in the past.

In extreme cases the social pressure for in-group marriage leads to violence against those women and men who break the norm. Druze, Kurdish, and Sunni Arab informants mentioned unusual, but recent, cases where inter-ethnic couples were subject to violence by their own or the other ethnic group. In one case between a Kurdish man and Yazidi woman in Afrin, upholding these norms had significant consequences:

> We did have some Yazidi neighbors and I do have a cousin
> that fell in love with a girl from that family. They almost,
> that family almost killed the guy, or killed the girl. They
> threatened to kill them if they run away together, or if they

get married, or if they insist. My family tried to arrange a marriage for this guy with a another girl. And her family tried to arrange a marriage for her. Eventually they ended up fighting. The Yazidi family had to move to the other side of the village because of this issue. This was a major problem because of this. We almost had this armed conflict between the two families. (informant 17)

In cases like this the community starts with talking to the woman and man to enforce the social norms, followed by threats, and possible violence against the couple, and, if the conflict escalates further, to violence between the families and larger communities. Other Syrian ethnic groups have similar gender inequalities.

Comparatively, the Druze, Alawi, Christian and Kurdish ethnic groups permit women more freedom of dress and movement than Sunni Arabs, according to female informants. Possibly the most hidden, but extreme, are the Alawi gender norms. As discussed in the Alawi section later in this paper, on the face of it Alawi women may have the most independence of any ethnic group, with Alawi women having considerable freedom of movement and sexuality, compared to other Syrian ethnic groups. In reality, they seem to be treated with extreme disregard by Alawi men due to religious beliefs (informants 15, 16, 22). Alawi women are not allowed to be taught anything about the Alawi religion – on pain of death. For example, Alawi women are taught that if they touch the Alawi Holy Books, they will go deaf, dumb and blind. These beliefs are so ingrained into Alawi women that even well-educated Alawi women fear to touch the books (informants 15, 16). Also, when the Alawi husband or father dies, the women in the family have a legal right to part of the *miraz* or inheritance. However, in practice the Alawi community pressures the women to go to court and sign a document giving up

their share of the miraz, giving it to the male members of the family, according to one source (16). This leaves women dependent on men for a place to live and property. As informant (16) noted, "In the law they have this right. So usually they go to court to sign that they don't want their share and giving it to their brothers. Otherwise, the whole village will push the woman out of the village or the family because she didn't waive her right of the inheritance." Some Alawi women justify this discrimination by stating that it is enough that Alawi men give them an education. More broadly, Alawi gender relations, as one informant expressed, are informed by the Alawi male belief that women don't have any value, other than to give birth, according to informant 16. While Alawi women appear to outsiders to be free according to those interviewed, Alawi men control the women very much through hidden traditions and social controls. There may be variation among Alawi women on this issue, given my limited sample population.

The flip side to marriage is divorce, another area of gender inequality in Syria. Several female informants mentioned the social stigma, limitations and sexual abuse suffered by Syrian women who are divorced. Since Syrian women have few rights to property, they are reliant on their husbands for a place to live. If divorced, they may have to live with the parents, who often don't want them as well for economic reasons. One informant reported that divorced women are sometimes pressured to have sex by some Syrian men, because they are considered easy or experienced (informant 21). Divorced men have the right to male children over age 11 and female children over age 13, taking the children away from the divorced mother. Technically Alawi women are also not allowed to get a divorce by the local community. There is a strong social stigma that

divorced Alawi women are bad, can't be trusted and are at fault for the divorce (informant 16). Few Syrian women get divorced because of these oppressive social and economic structures.[3]

The women's rights movement appears to be growing slowly in Syria. According to several female informants, individual women were taking small steps to address the inequality. Some younger and middle aged women are protesting these gender inequalities, such as one Druze informant who is involved in the Syrian Feminist Lobby. These female informants described actions that women are taking to expand their rights, such as talking with other women about stopping domestic violence, and encouraging more education and independence for Syrian women.

Other problems exist for Sunni women beyond marriage and dress norms. When they work their husbands may take their salaries and only give them a little money for transportation and food. Limitations exist on women's movement in some parts of Syria, where the woman must travel with an unmarriable male relative. The "men are controlling, They are very, very much controlling" the women, according to one Sunni Arab female informant (24). Several Sunni informants described strong social controls on women, even being disowned or physically abused, when the women disobeyed social norms. While it is unclear how often domestic violence occurs, there were a number of cases mentioned by informants of husbands or male family members beating women,

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[3] Syrian crude divorce rates were .06 (per 1000) in 1970 (n=3,480), 0.6 in 1985 (n=6,679), 0.8 in 1996 (n=11,283), 0.9 in 2005 (n=17,821) and 1.0 in 2006 (n=19,984). (UN World Marriage Data 2008)

with the women having little recourse to end such violence. From a Sunni religious perspective, such violence is something between the husband and wife, and is part of the man's rights and responsibility, to control the women in the household and uphold the family honor. Violence is not encouraged in the Quran, but in practice the community looks the other way when domestic violence occurs, according to informants. However, treatment of Sunni women by Sunni men may change when they enter the university, where young men may treat women more equally since they are looking for relationships (informant 24).

In summary, it is evident that Syrian women have a strong social identity and sense of who they are, yet live within a society that generally denies them equality with men. Women play a major role within families in all five ethnic and religious groups studied here, and some are actively working to improve gender equality in Syria. At the same time, a number of social and religious norms on marriage, dress, movement, religious education, inheritance, property ownership, and divorce constrain women and make for significant inequalities for them. Women in the Sunni Arab ethnic group come under strongest social pressure to wear the hijab, marry within their ethnic or religious group, not get divorced, curtail their movements, and limit other important daily activities. Women in minority ethnic groups often have to live within the dominant Sunni Arab norms as well.

Honor is crucial in the traditional Arab society
As mentioned in the section on names and family, honor is a key value for ethnic groups in Syria, with cases from Sunni Arab, Alawi, Christian, Druze and Kurdish ethnic

groups. Often this honor is connected to immediate or extended family. With the community imposing various social controls, the consequences for breaking honor codes can be substantial, according to informants.

Family honor and respect are important values in Syria. Many informants noted that they monitor their behavior closely out of concern for criticism of any bad behavior which would then reflect on their family. Breaking social norms of not wearing the hijab, having sexual relations with someone from a different group, or drinking alcohol, for example, would bring shame on the family. The family, especially parents and elders, would then talk with the misbehaving family member to encourage conformity. In more serious cases, shunning, beatings, being locked in the house or honor killing may occur, especially for women, according to informants. Within the Druze community, for example, a major part of everyday life deals with maintaining the honor of the family name, as part of the larger Druze culture and history.

Family honor appears to be connected with social status, which in turn is often related to education. In the Kurdish community, doctors or engineers, or the upper class, have higher social status in the society (informant 17). Family honor revolves around the man being honorous, which entails following the ethnic traditions, such as completing verbal commitments and maintaining the purity of the women in the family. Honorous men are usually dominant men, especially over the women (informant 17). While Kurdish women appear to have more freedom than Syrian Arab women, the Kurdish men still maintain much of the power in their households (informants 17, 19). Similar social

status dynamics appear to exist for Sunni Arab, Christian, Druze and Alawi ethnic groups.

One example of the Kurdish value of honor is the prohibition against relations between unmarried men and women.

> But relationships between men and women is very
> prohibited. Each sex, pre-marital sex is like death. The
> punishment is death. We have a cousin that had a scandal
> [an affair] and her father had to kill her…. He was arrested.
> Also an honor crime. It is really sad to hear this, he was
> released and is now a free man. After killing his daughter
> for having an affair. So honor is very similar to the Sunni
> Muslim understanding of honor, which is the female pride -
> protecting themselves from affairs, pre-marital affairs.
> (informant 17)

I note here the tremendous significance put on family honor and the dire social consequences of breaking the honor code. A second aspect of honor evolves around social customs about being generous and helping other people. As mentioned by several informants, this is a strong religious value for Sunni Muslims, Alawi, Kurds and Druze, according to informants. I learned from one informant that in Arabic poetry there are references to the people of the desert, such as Raqqa and Hasakeh, for being generous (informant 27).

To get some sense of the impact of honor issues on intergroup relations, I note that the Syrian government created special courts that only hear honor crimes for the Druze and Kurdish communities. Several decades ago the Syrian regime gave Druze sheikhs the power to implement special honor courts, whereby the sheikhs hear cases of honor or revenge killings, such as women killed for having an affair. The process involves the sheikhs hearing the case and conciliating between the parties, with some

payment usually made by one party to provide justice. As reported by one informant there have only been a few such cases in recent years (informant 25). Even for killings between Kurdish families, the guilty are usually punished only with fines, to break the revenge cycle and gain peace between the families (informant 17). Both Druze and Kurdish young adults mentioned that the normal legal system should be used for these honor cases, to ensure justice for the victims, although the Syrian criminal system is seen as corrupt.

As seen in the various contexts across most Syrian ethnic and religious groups, honor is an important value that has many implications for everyday life. Personal honor is associated with the family name or larger ethnic group in the case of the Druze. Consideration of honor often affects daily behavior, whether potentially bad things, like disrespecting someone else, or good things, such as hospitality for people in need. When honor has been invoked in a conflict, the consequences may be significant for all families involved and require special institutions to resolve.

Ethnic group salience, segregation and inter-group interaction

One of the main hypotheses for this study was that members of the various Syrian ethnic and religious groups had lived together more or less peacefully prior to the start of the conflict in 2011. This assumption was problematized in different ways. Yes, some people report having positive experiences with intergroup interactions prior to the conflict. But others had little interaction, living in self-contained homogenous communities made up mainly of people from their group, with little outside travel or contact, as a I document in chapter two. Some Syrian informants report negative

experiences with people from other ethnic or religious groups in Syria. The 2011 conflict seems to have increased inter-group polarization and segregation, both reducing and increasing intergroup contact. Hence, intergroup integration, segregation and social interaction is a complicated picture in Syria, as I elaborate below.

One noteworthy finding from informants' comments concerns the *homogeneity and segregation* of ethnic and religious groups in most of Syria. Several informants noted that communities were often fairly segregated or homogenous, with social interactions usually limited to other people within the neighborhood from the same group. Minority children, such as Christians, would go to Christian schools, and have little outside contact. This occurred especially in rural areas, where villages would often be composed of just one ethnic or religious group, and even in in urban areas, like Damascus and Aleppo, where certain neighborhoods would be predominately Sunni, Christian, Kurd, Alawite or Druze, and most social interactions would occur with people from the same ethnic group. While homophily, the principle that people usually interact with similar people (McPherson et al 2001), seems to be a very strong pattern throughout Syria, in a few cases informants noted that some villages or urban neighborhoods are more heterogeneous and they had friends from many different groups during childhood.

Several informants describe changes in community homogeneity, such as with local migration patterns for education or employment. In Idleb City for example, it was almost 100% Sunni Arab prior to the conflict, then many original residents left and Alawites moved in, till it was about 50% Sunni Arab and 50% Alawite (informant 12). Then the Jabhat al Nusra armed group captured it and imposed stricter social norms, like

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the hijab. These social controls may lead to out-migration or preference for internally

displaced persons to avoid this area (Salm 2015b). Rural Kurds had an urban

concentration in the northwest section of Aleppo City, called Sheikh Massoud, covering

several neighborhoods, which has been controlled by Kurdish armed forces throughout

the war. Rural Kurds would often move into and out of this neighborhood from their rural

areas for education or employment reasons (informant 18). Similarly, Alawi and Druze

families often moved to urban areas for education or employment.

Historically, ethnic segregation in Syria may have earlier roots in the socialist,

Baath regime urban and rural planning policies, at least as described by one informant.

> Basically I'm not very much into politics, but this is how
> the Syrian regime started it. They made a big map, actor
> mapping, which was solid and smart in its structure. In each
> city you would have at least three communities, and these
> communities are not so interactive – they are like separated
> in different areas with their own schools and their own
> businesses, so they didn't have to be open to other
> communities. It's not that obvious, but 90% of each group
> used to live like this. For instance, in Aleppo you would see
> the Armenian people are one society… they have their
> neighborhood, their schools, their private sector
> business…. The same thing with the Kurds. Since I am
> Kurd, we have our areas, northern part of Aleppo basically.
> So you wouldn't have much interaction going on. For
> instance, in my village and many of the villages around us,
> much of the people don't know what's going on inside
> Aleppo right now. So they are into their regions, and they
> are having their lives, and that's it. (informant 18)

According to this informant, the Assad regime developed an urban planning

scheme of have multiple ethnic groups in each urban area and mixed groups in some rural

areas – a response to high levels of homophilial residential and ethnic segregation.

However, even with these various groups in close proximity, Syrians rarely traveled to

other areas or interacted with people from other ethnic or religious groups, according to informants. Also, it seems many Syrians didn't care what was happening to Syrians in other cities or villages: as long as they were fine in their area, there was no interest in anyone else. Informant 23, a Druze, mentioned the same problem of group isolation and lack of contact. Yes, the various Syrian ethnic and religious were nominally co-existing, but mainly because they kept to themselves, hid their ideologies and isolated themselves. The informant blamed this isolation partly on the Syrian regime, but also on the historical relations and conflict between groups.

One Kurdish informant noted the consequences of being secluded from other groups – not knowing much about other groups or that they even exist – and how it changed after young adults start interacting with people from other ethnic groups and religions.

> So, whenever you go 18 or 20, you start to be more open to the society and try to figure out what's happening around you. And at that age, we didn't recognize many differences in Syria, we were just Arabs, Kurds, and maybe Alawites, because they are ruling the country basically. Part of them. But other ethnic groups, we didn't hear about the other different groups. For instance, we didn't differentiate between Alawites and Ismailis, we didn't differentiate between Christians and Assyrians, which was basically the same religion but with different groups. So these things came to surface after the war, a little by little. And maybe there are more than six communities in Syria right now. (informant 18)

For another informant (13), the homogeneity and segregation was the underlying cause of the hatred and violence between groups. His response was to reach out to the

people who should have been his worst enemies via social media, to form new

relationships and break down stereotypes.

An imperceptible, but notable, change in relationships between Syrian ethnic

groups occurred after the March 2011 revolution. The opening quote in chapter one is

reinforced by comments from informant 12: "I just want to generally say in Syria as a

country, it has a lot of diverse ethnic groups. And these different ethnic groups to some

point, were able to interact and have good relationships together before the war. And a lot

of that has been dramatically changed after." The informant is referring to more mistrust

and polarization between ethnic groups, as well as ethnic displacement inside Syria, and

emigration to Turkey and Europe, which increased interactions across ethnic and

religious groups. So the types and the nature of social interactions changed over time.

Not only were there generally homogenous communities prior to the conflict, but

displacement during the last five years may have maintained or increased this

homogeneity. As an informant noted, many Syrians tried to move to places where their

group would be safe, usually because they were the majority group in the location.

> I think there has been movements to where the majority
> are. But I say the minorities are trying to leave Syria more
> than be inside Syria. So a lot of Christians tried to leave the
> country and to go somewhere where [they] know that it's
> going to be safe for them, rather to be in somewhere else in
> Syria. While Muslim Sunnis tried to be in the areas where
> they know that it's going to be mainly Muslim Sunnis.
> (informant 12)

My research for the NGO Forum in Turkey supports the contention that

displacement affected relations between ethnic groups: many of the 6.5 million internally

displaced persons have had to move multiple times since 2011. They seek safe places to

go, usually along the Syria/Turkey border in Idleb and Aleppo governorates, and prefer to go where they have kin or someone of similar ethnicity (Salm 2015b).

Universities emerged in the interview as the space for creating more inter-group interactions and changing group beliefs about such heterogeneous relationships. As informant 12, a Sunni Arab, noted:

> So when students go and meet all these students, and then bring that back to their families, they could have relationships with them, and they would sometimes want to marry from other groups. To be with different ethnic groups. And this creates a lot of contradiction because the family would say no, we want a Muslim girl or a Muslim guy. And a lot of conversations happened between the families. And I think in the last twenty years I would say, when a lot of Idleb students started to go to get education in Aleppo or even Damascus, it changed a lot of that thinking. So people started to accept the idea of having somebody who's different. So you could easily find somebody who's married some Alawi people, some families. Kurdish became popular recently. Easily, like my cousin is married to a Kurdish girl. It's not a very favorite thing for a Muslim Sunni, even though they [the Kurds] are Muslim Sunnis. But we just want them to be 100% like us. So that part of it is important. (informant 12)

This conversation emphasizes how migration to the university setting can facilitate interactions, relationships and exposure to alternate belief systems, all culminating in changes to ethnic group identities. What is notable about this example is that Idleb is known for being a conservative city, so if inter-group marriage is accepted there, then significant intergroup changes are taking place, even though there may still be a deep drive to have everyone "100% like us." While some informants stated that they had some friends from other ethnic groups at the university, many informants said university students typically banded together with people from their own ethnic groups.

Considering the role that intergroup contact has for ethnic identity formation and maintenance, there is a mixed picture on social interactions across ethnic groups in Syria, with both cooperation and conflict in evidence. Many informants stated they had friends from other ethnic or religious groups while they were in school or the university, with positive inter-group experiences. At the same time, many minority informants mentioned that they were victims of discrimination, abuse and violence from other groups, mainly Sunni Arabs. In addition, many stated they had limited intergroup contact due to segregated communities. These interaction dynamics also changed over time, due to regional differences, migration, state policies, regime repression, and other factors, according to informants. Hence, there is no clear picture of whether intergroup contacts were generally more peaceful or conflictive, or exactly how such interactions affected ethnic group identities. Some small inferences can be made from this study, but not a systematic sociological model or theory.

In summary, I see a complicated picture of generally homogenous communities prior to the conflict, with some intergroup interaction. Such seclusion may arise from within group identification maintenance processes, in conjunction with or counter to the regime or Baathist planning policies. With the seclusion came limited knowledge of or interest in other social groups in Syria supposedly. Meanwhile, there was some limited intergroup contact in primary and secondary school for informants, with expanded interactions at the university and due to war-induced migration during the last five years.

A legacy of mistrust and fear

Notwithstanding informant's comments about intergroup cooperation and tolerance, there appears to be a pervasive mistrust and fear of other ethnic and religious groups in much of Syria today, which make outgroup ascriptions of group identities as relevant as in-group characterizations. Some of this mistrust is due to historical relations between the groups and some has been generated by the armed conflict since 2011. Many people from various groups mistrust Alawis because of the group's ties with the regime's security agencies, military and the *shabiha*, which are violent militia groups. Meanwhile, many Syrian minority group members mistrust and fear Sunni Arab conservatives and extremists.

Key historical events cause such mistrust and fear, and shape ethnic identities. For one Sunni Arab family from Hama, the distrust of Alawis was very strong, in part due to the 1982 Hama massacre, which an informant (5) from Hama said was perpetrated by Alawi. Her older family members recognized the Alawi accents when regime soldiers and militia killed family members in 1982. She described at length the Alawi female parachute battalion that committed many atrocities for the regime during the Hama uprising, continuing a narrative shared by her family for generations. For one Alawi informant, since 2011 the Alawi have been seen by other groups as synonymous with the Bashar Assad regime and its killing of children.

> When I was young, I didn't know the difference between Sunnis and Alawites. And in the last few years, especially after the conflict, it became so obvious. It's kind of nothing changed when it comes to differences, but the hatred that spread was too hard for me to handle. The visual identity of Alawites, right now, Bashar Assad criminal killed children, Bashar Assad criminal killed children…. And yes, I do

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> agree that a lot of Alawites are in the army. I'm not with
> killing civilians and bombing civilians' areas, but the idea
> of how people see Alawites right now is really devastating.
> Like the vision changed from poor, happy people to
> criminals. (confidential informant)

This ascriptive identification of Alawis, what he calls the visual identity, has changed radically, to one that is criminal and violent. Other informants expressed similar concerns of mistrust and fear of Alawis, with Sunni Arabs probably having the most mistrust, followed by Kurds, Druze and Christians.

Meanwhile, minority ethnic group fears of Sunni Arabs are grounded in the belief that Sunni Arabs would impose very conservative Muslim beliefs and norms on all Syrians, including the implementation of sharia law. This concern is raised when discussing what type of government should rule Syria: conservative Sunnis believe it should be based on sharia law, while minorities believe it should be secular. Specific minority group concerns included wearing the hijab and other restrictions for women, the closing shops during prayer time, or even violence against anyone considered kafir or infidel by Muslim religious standards, according to informants. Both Alawi and Druze are considered kafir by many conservative Sunni Arabs – which means they can or should be killed. This dynamic is described more in chapter five.

One Sunni Muslim informant acknowledged the fears of minority group members of Sunni Muslim domination, noting that while Sunnis have the best understanding of Islam compared to other interpretations, it is still not perfect.

> The Sunni Muslim does not understand the Islam in the
> best way, the perfect way. They are the ones that have the
> better understanding of it, but they do not have the
> complete understanding of it. That is my main concern.

And that is why I always say I don't want Syria to have an Islamic government unless we have a good, deep understanding of Islam religion. And right now I don't see Muslims do understand their religion as deeply, and that is why I don't want the Islam government because we don't understand it very well, so we don't practice and apply it very right.

So they [minorities] have the right to be concerned. I am concerned for them too. I have a lot of Shia, Christian, Alawi friends, and I know and understand their fear. It is very religious. When we look at how DAESH is treating Muslims, not even non-Muslims, you understand how bad our understanding is…. We are, after how many years, not really looking into the science of our religion. Of understanding the deep parts of the religion. We have now a very superficial understanding of it. (confidential informant)

In this discussion, this Sunni Arab informant commented on the fear that minorities, even Kurdish Sunnis, may have of being imposed upon by conservative Sunnis. Some Sunni Muslim extremists are literalists who believe that anyone who is not Muslim should be converted or killed. This is discussed more in chapter 5 on religion. Regarding lesser impositions by Sunnis on ethnic or religious minorities, this informant noted that she didn't think Sunnis would interfere with women's rights or other issues.

In general, the level of mistrust and fear of other ethnic and religious groups appears to be quite high. While the causes of such mistrust and fear may differ between individuals, families or ethnic groups, and vary by region and over time, the general impression in this study is that such mistrust and fear may be growing among these Syrian ethnic groups. In later sections, such as chapters four, five and six, I look at various reasons why this may be so.

A stratified socioeconomic class system

It should be noted that the sample population of informants in this study clearly affects findings on socioeconomic class, since the informants were Syrians working in Turkey with humanitarian organizations, with most having university degrees and relatively well paying jobs. I assume the general Syrian population is not as well educated and are generally lower on the socio-economic ladder.[4] According to Knoema.com, in 2004 the bottom 60% of the population earned 34.6% of the income in Syria, while the top 20% earned 44%. The GINI index was 35.8 in 2004 (knoema.com). While salaries for Syrians working in the Turkey humanitarian response sector often started at US$800 per month, comparable salaries in Syria were usually around US$250 per month in 2015.

One of the major hypotheses of the study centered on the impact of socioeconomic class on ethnic identification, as I document in chapter two, Table 2. Based on the initial literature review, especially the work of Batatu (1999), Collelo (1987) and El Laithy and Abu-Ismail (2005), I assumed that the Kurdish, Druze and Alawi ethnic groups have been the most marginalized over the years, being isolated to mountainous areas that made farming and transportation difficult, with very little infrastructure development and few economic or education opportunities. However, an additional literature review found that Kurdish areas (Hasakeh and Aleppo governorates)

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[4] Accurate data on demographics and income in Syria is hard to find since the start of the conflict. Even before the conflict the quality of the data was questionable due to regime political manipulation. On Transparency International's corruption perception index, Syria scored 18 out of 100 (0 being most corrupt) and ranked 154 out of 168 countries (Transparency International Syria).

have generally good agricultural production, in terms of wheat and sheep (Chapman 2014), while Alawi and Druze areas (Lattakia, Tartous and As Sweida) have poor agricultural production. Since agriculture is the primary source of income for minorities due to their locations in rural areas, agricultural production is a primary indicator of socio-economic development. These data are supported by the poverty data in chapter two. Hence, while Druze are both politically and economically marginalized generally speaking, Alawis are economically marginalized yet have some political power, while Kurds are politically marginalized yet have some economic power. Since Christians are located in different urban and rural areas, analysis of their economic and political power is more difficult.

When the marginalization assumption was presented to informants, most agreed with the idea. Specific examples supported it further, such as the moraba peasant system used mainly by Sunnis over Alawis, described more in chapter four. Given the anecdotal information from the interviews, it appears that in general the Kurdish, Druze and Alawi ethnic groups have been the most marginalized over the years. Ethnic socio-economic stratification is problematized by the fact that within-group ethnic differences may be larger than between-group differences. For example, many Sunni Arabs are poor and some Kurds, Alawi and Druze are wealthy. As one Sunni Arab informant noted, the precariousness of the Syrian lower and middle class was significant, with both his parents and extended family in the lower class, with limited education and few employment opportunities (informant 3).

A second part of the hypothesis is that as a consequence of the poverty and socioeconomic challenges for the Kurdish, Alawi and Druze minority groups, these groups have come to value hard work and perseverance. They acknowledge that life is a struggle and hard work is the only way to succeed. Such values and beliefs have become a core part of their ethnic group identities. This part of the hypothesis was confirmed in interviews with Syrian minority group informants, who provided various anecdotes and stories to support the assumption.

Like most generalizations about ethnicity in Syria, this hypothesis has its limitations. First, within all ethnic groups there were some people who were wealthy, upper class, and with more opportunities and power over others. Over the last 40 years, a small group of Alawis clearly became much wealthier through patronage and corruption within the regime. Secondly, the socioeconomic class levels of the various ethnic groups is not well documented: while many Sunni Arabs were poor and living in conditions similar to many ethnic minority people, most Sunni Arabs seemed to be better off than the minorities, based on the poverty data by governorate in chapter two. Third, some minority groups members contested the idea that their lands were less valuable or productive than Sunni Arab lands (informant 19).

In summary, the Alawi and Druze ethnic minority groups in Syria were generally living in less productive agricultural areas of the country and lower on the socioeconomic scale, which engendered strong work ethics and a determination to struggle against life's challenges. The Kurds also have higher poverty rates than normal, although they did live

in generally more productive agricultural areas. Thus, these socioeconomic conditions affected core aspects of the ethnic identities of the groups.

Geographic barriers and urban/rural differences

In this section I discuss several issues that involve geographical or urban/rural social processes. One issue is the identification of ethnic groups based on place of birth. A second issue is the relationship between geographic location, homogenous communities and diversity of relationships, which is compounded by displacement from the armed conflict. A final issue in this section is the relationship between geography and conservativism/liberalism. As discussed in the section on socioeconomic class, geography also impacts economic conditions and social class issues.

Location counts when people are moving through checkpoints or are trying to quickly identify which ethnic group another person belongs to. When Syrians are moving through checkpoints, they have to show their Syrian identification card, which states where they are from. Simply by knowing which place or city identifies the person – the first impression; in Lattakia Jableh means Alawite while Sulayba means Sunni, Afrin means Kurdish, Idleb is Sunni, Sweida is Druze, etc. These quick assessments may not be 100% correct, but they are the perception and reality for the people involved in these interactions (informants 13, 16). In effect, Syrians are often closely associated with their place of birth, which is used to classify individuals into ethnic or religious groups.

Geographic location may be a more important factor for ethnic identification than generally thought due to the relationship between location and types of social relationships. As informant 6 noted:

I was thinking about the ethnic groups that you wrote, there
is the Sunni Arab, and this is where I fall in. But I was
thinking that it never occurred like this. All my life I think
of myself as an Arab, rather than Sunni or Shite. I think the
difference in Syria is more between places and this is what
I've noticed with the revolution. So, the difference is
basically between the places, like for example I'm from
Aleppo and most people around me are Sunnis, Christians,
Kurds, not many Shia or Alawites. (informant 6)

This informant infers that the location affects the diversity of relationships that a

person has. In some areas, Syrians are more likely to interact with certain groups and not

with others. This interaction can be positive, through friendships, or negative, through

discrimination and violence. Several minority informants from rural areas mentioned the

significant discrimination their families faced when going to urban areas in the past. Such

discrimination may be a rural/urban dynamic (all rural people are treated poorly) or may

be ethnically based (anyone from X minority group is treated poorly). One informant

posits that it is the rural/urban dynamic:

Because in Syria, all villages, whether it's Sunnis or
Alawites, suffer this discrimination from the people of the
city and people from the villages. Even in Damascus, yes,
urban and countryside, even in Damascus, there's a real
discrimination between people from Damascus and people
from Dar'a for example. So the problem is not because they
are Alawites. But they are feeling that because they are a
minority, they are referring to everything that happened
with them, even in the history, because I am Alawite.
(confidential informant)

Furthermore on this location/relationship connection, the armed conflict has

forced about 6.5 million Syrians to become displaced, many multiple times. While data

are not available to say exactly where most displaced Syrians go, generally they go where

they have family or where they feel safe – meaning they likely go where they have a

similar ethnic makeup (Salm 2015b). Such displacement likely has a complicated effect

on ethnic group interactions and segregation in both urban and rural areas, even though

overall intergroup interactions may have increased.

> The vast population displacement caused by the war is
> producing fundamental shifts in these trends. It has
> increased sectarian segregation within cities even as they
> become more diverse in the aggregate due to internal
> displacement. It has also led to partial sectarian cleansing in
> rural areas, destroying longstanding patterns of
> intersectarian tolerance between Sunni and minority
> villages in conflict-affected areas. (Heydemann 2013:65)

This issue of location and types of social relationships ties into the homogenous

and segregated communities findings made earlier in this chapter.

On a separate issue, there are significant differences in the level of conservativism

- liberalism between some cities, and urban and rural areas, according to informants. The

issue is the level of freedom for minorities, freedom for women to wear the clothes they

like (no hijab or shorter dresses), or religious tolerance. Of the urban areas, Damascus

was seen as the most liberal, followed by Aleppo, with smaller cities like Idleb more

conservative compared to the larger cities. Some informants noted that Homs and Hama

were very conservative, while Lattakia City, an Alawi area, and Qamishli, a Kurdish area,

were more liberal. Deir E Zor was more liberal as well in the past, with some women

wearing short skirts and half sleeve dresses (informant 5). Some Syrian cities have fairly

clear boundaries between conservative and liberal neighborhoods. In Hama, there are two

main areas, Al Hadar, which is very conservative, and Suk, which is more liberal: "The

differentiation between the very, very extremely conservative and the generally

conservative people." (informant 5) In Al Hadar, women wear all black and if other men

come into the area with long hair or tight jeans, they will be beaten up by Al Hadar men, according to one informant (5). Since Al Hadar is the larger community, Hama as a whole has a conservative reputation. The reputation of Hama precedes it. People from Hama just have to say to other Syrians that they are from Hama, and the other person will immediately know that he or she is conservative: "It is enough to describe how they are against Alawis and how they are conservative. Everybody in Syria knows what is Hama." (informant 5) For better informed Syrians, the next question would be are you from Suk or Al Hadar, each with its own ascription and identity. Generally, the minority Kurdish, Alawi and Druze areas were thought to be more tolerant of differences, according to informants. Rural areas were more conservative, unless they were Sunni villages with Christian villages nearby, in which case they were more tolerant (informant 24).

In summary, I find that geography affects the types of relations Syrians have with people from other ethnic or religious groups, and as such is associated with such issues previously discussed as homogeneity, segregation, and socioeconomic class. Syrians are often closely associated with their place of birth, which is used to classify individuals into ethnic or religious groups. Also, specific places in Syria have their own unique cultures, with Aleppo City as different from Idleb City, and an Alawi village from a Sunni village. Geography also impacts the frequency and types of interactions with other ethnic groups, with many rural people rarely intermingling with out-groups and even limited intergroup interactions in some urban areas. These intergroup interactions have been complicated even further by displacement of about 35% of the Syrian population, who try to move to

safe places, with safety often contingent on being close to people of similar ethnicity, religion or level of conservatism or liberalism.

A larger, but limited, Syrian identity

In the exploration of ethnic identities in Syria, one question was whether Syrians identify themselves as part of a larger Syrian identity more than a specific ethnic group identity. I found that many informants strongly identified with a larger Syrian or humanistic identity. In some cases this larger identity existed in tandem with their ethnic group identities, part of a multiple identity scenario. In other cases, the larger identity superseded or overshadowed the ethnic group identity. Overall, while many informants voiced affinity for a larger Syrian identity, the intense mistrust and fear between ethnic groups and primordial drive of ethnic identities in Syria limit the development of a larger, national identity.

Historically a strong Pan-Arab nationalism movement existed throughout the Middle East since the 1920s (Hokayem 2012). One branch of the Arab nationalism was called the Arab Renaissance (Ba'ath) Movement, which had three key Syria leaders, one Alawite (Zaki Arsuzi), one Levantine Christian (Michele Aflaq) and one Sunni Arab (Salah al-Baitar). These Pan-Arab leaders attempted to form a larger Arab identity across the region that subsumed the local ethnic group identities. In some places and with some groups it was more successful. Izady (2014) notes that most of the Syrian minorities rejected this Pan-Arab identity, including the Alawites, Druze, Levantine Christians, and Copts, for religious or ethnic reasons.

Starting in the 1950s and 1960s, the Ba'ath movement encouraged a socialist national identity, with a fight over pragmatic versus idealist socialism, in which Assad's pragmatic socialism won. The Ba'athist slogan was unity, liberty and socialism. Unity meant a united Arab nation across the Middle East region. Liberty meant freedom from colonialism, and of speech and thought. Socialism referred to an Arab form of socialism based on liberty for the Arab nation and from general oppression (Salem 1994). Hafez al Assad promoted an ambiguous, yet strong national identity, in part based on a Pan-Arab demonization of Israel, support for interventions in Lebanon, and a less conservative Islamic identity than the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Phillips 2015). Hafez Assad's Pan-Arab identity saw him as the savior of ethnic and religious minorities against the conservative Muslim Brotherhood. Some minorities have accepted this narrative, as seen in chapter six, but support may be quite limited and more pragmatic than ideological.

One Sunni Arab informant, when asked if he thought there was a stronger Syrian Arab identity in the 1960s or 1970s, responded: "Yes, and even before the 60s; the 40s and 50s. I mean this is what is shown of the people. Even before the 1920s, when the French was there, and revolutions coming up everywhere. Many people were jailed, and they kept repeating that they [we] are Arabs, we are Syrians. So, I think it was a very strong part of our identity." (informant 6) However, this informant noted the decline in the larger Syrian identity since the 1960s due to the political manipulation and corruption of Hafez Assad.

Several informants in this study voiced affinity with a larger Syrian identity. Some viewed themselves as *Syrian*, especially Sunni Arabs, but also some Kurdish,

Christian and Alawi sources. A number of the Druze, Kurdish, Alawi and Christian sources described themselves as *humanist*. For the younger adult generation of Syrians, humanist or human being means an inclusive group identification that emphasizes the similarities for all people, and rejects boundaries and discrimination between groups. They seek friends who are more open minded and willing to discuss any issue in a frank, objective manner. The source for this humanist identity is multifaceted as well:

> So for me, I would say that I'm an Armenian first of all, I'm a human being and earthling. I'm a humanist. I love helping people and that's what I'm doing here. And what had really shaped me are my parents and my Armenian culture. But most of it was science, books and stuff, which helped me be who I am. Like the urge to study, to explore, to take pieces from here and there. Also, Syrians, Muslims and Christian Syrians helped to design my personality too. (informant 4)

The younger Druze generation may be more open, as seen by the self-identification references to being humanist or human, and trying to change some Druze traditions and customs. Part of the Druze identity is as a humanist, with an openness to other groups and belief that all people are equal, a "more open mentality… more understanding." (informant 2) With this humanist mentality is a belief in honesty and saying what is right. The commonality seen across people by Druze can be explained by the following:

> The trick in here is the word "human being." Well actually the most common thing between us is not mentality, it's not the brain, it's not the way of thinking, it's the adaptability. So if you take a human being and put him in a culture, what makes him survive is that he adapts to this culture. So it's the same thing. If you take a person to a mountain he adapts to the mountain. Otherwise he won't survive. So this is the most important common ground between us.

(informant 2)

These humanist examples from Christian and Druze informants were paralleled by some Kurdish, Alawi and Sunni Arab narratives. Possibly as a result of the war, the younger generation of Syrian adults, especially among those who are aid workers, is searching for a broader, inclusive Syrian identity that can provide a framework for peace between all ethnic and religious groups in Syria. So, while the war drives people apart, it also drives a search for common ground on identity. I think they are specifically looking for a Syrian identity that will enable the various ethnic and religious groups to find commonality and live in peace.

Conclusion on commonalities

In this chapter I found a number of issues that are pertinent for all or most of the ethnic and religious groups in Syria. These include strong values, beliefs and norms about language, names, family, gender and marriage, honor, ethnic group salience, segregation, and inter-group interaction, mistrust and fear, socioeconomic class, geography and urban/rural differences, and a larger Syrian identity. In some cases there was agreement across Syrian ethnic groups on the issues, while in other cases the issue was a key point of contention between groups, such as the conflict over the Kurdish language. What is important is that individuals from multiple ethnic or religious groups identified each of these issues as an important part of their ethnic identity. The viewpoints and salience of these issues varies across informants and ethnic groups, but these issues help define key aspects of the narrative on Syrian ethnic and religious identity. The broad range of factors identified here also means that ethnic identity and identification in Syria is related to a diverse set of social science theories.

CHAPTER FOUR: UNIQUE ETHNIC IDENTITY DISTINCTIONS FOR THE FIVE SYRIAN GROUPS

> When I see the youth and how they are lost, they don't
> have their identity, and they are more lost now than before,
> even in Europe or Syria. They are now in search for their
> own identity. I hope that one day that they are better and
> they are going to empower themselves and know
> themselves. They are proud of who they are. (informant 21)

This anecdote by a Kurdish source captures the challenges of identity formation within the chaotic Syrian armed conflict context: many youth have been caught up an intense struggle for basic survival while being deluged by polarized propaganda. The normal ethnic socialization processes have been disrupted and all but destroyed. Hence, their ability to capture the distinctive aspects of their ethnic or religious group identity identified in this chapter may be severely limited.

This chapter examines the unique characteristics and distinctions of each of the five main ethnic and religious groups in this study –Sunni Arabs, Alawis, Kurds, Christians and Druze. As a brief reminder, Sunni Arabs make up 59.1% of the Syrian population, Alawites 11.8%, Levantine Christians 9.3%, Kurds 8.9%, and Druze 3.2%, according to Izady (2014: see map in chapter two). The findings here build on previous ethnic, sectarian and religious identity research in Syria, as summarized in chapter two, supporting some previous theories and suggesting new findings in other areas. Analysis of religious aspects of ethnic identity are found in chapter five.

The hidden yet prevailing Sunni Arab identity

In this section I summarize key issues and findings for the Sunni Arab ethnic group in Syria. I cover such issues as awareness of ethnic identity, pride, social groups, roles, and religion. With Sunni Arabs making up 60% of the pre-war Syrian population or about 12.6 million people, their social norms and beliefs guide much of the Syrian society and become a reference point for other Syrian ethnic and religious groups. Sunni Arabs live predominantly in the central corridor from Damascus to Aleppo, with smaller groups in other locations through the country (Izady 2014; see map in chapter two). There are two facets of the Sunni Arab identification – the Sunni religious identity and the Syrian Arab identity. The Sunni religious identity is much more visible through every day practices such as prayer and the hijab. The Arab identity is less visible and harder to recognize, with few Sunni Arab informants able to identify any special characteristics of the Syrian Arab identity. Outgroup views by Kurds, Christians, Alawites and Druze help to paint both pictures through the ascribed Sunni Arab identity. I examine the Sunni Arab cultural identity here and the religious identity in chapter five.

In hindsight in this study I found little information on the Sunni Arab identity. However, that appears to be appropriate given the nature of Arab identity. As Nisan (2002) documents, the Arab identity is very nebulous. It originated with the Bedouin nomadic tribe, but few Arabs are directly linked to that group. Now being Arab is best defined by three characteristics: the Arabic language, a strong cultural dynamic especially involving the Islamic religion, and broader pan-Arab identity related to nationalist interests. Arabs make up many different groups of people and are interspersed with many minority groups, diluting the Arab identity, but being inclusive to many different people

Nisan (2002). And, of course, this makes it harder to identity and describe what exactly the Arab identities are all about. Djait (2011) argues that the Arab Muslim identity is in crisis because its fundamental characteristics of sharia law, absolutism, and idealization of violence conflicts with the characteristics of modernity, such as democracy and human rights. Hence, Islam has a cultural tension with modernity, making it difficult to examine in present day contexts.

As the dominant ethnic group in Syria Sunni Arabs may take their ethnicity and ethnic differences for granted, similar to white people in the United States. Two Sunni informants (12, 24) mentioned the lack of knowledge of their ethnic group due to the limited discussion of other groups by their parents. In one case, the informant (12) described how her community seemed to be too parochial, just focused inward on their group, with little interest in other groups. The other Sunni informant (24) said her parents simply never discussed other groups until she was age 12 or 13, when by coincidence her mother mentioned that Shias were different. This led the informant to feel like she was ill-informed about other groups, and start asking her parents and friends about other groups. When she asked how they were different her father responded that "they are not different at all… It's just about names." (informant 24) It wasn't until she went to college that she learned about other ethnic groups. This lack of discussion of other ethnic groups may reflect the limited interactions with other groups, and may promote stereotypes, mistrust and fear of other groups.

Similarly one Sunni Arab informant noted the difficulty in describing what it meant to be Arab and Syrian, even though she was very proud to be a Syrian Arab and

felt it was the best description of her ethnic identity. She stated "it was like being in her own skin in Syria," a feeling of being comfortable with who she is, distinct from her experiences living in other countries under strange societal norms. Still, she could not verbalize the specific aspects that make up the Arab or Syrian identities. The Syrian identity is "multicultural" in some way, but still not explainable. The Syrian identity was stronger for her than the Muslim identity, even though she strongly identified herself as a Sunni Muslim (informant 20). Some Sunni Arab informants found it difficult to detect the specific values that make up their group identity. In some cases Sunni Muslim informants looked at other groups, such as Europeans or extremist Muslim jihadis, and said we are not like that group, providing a good example of the use of outgroups to identify in-group characteristics (informant 12). However, while they are able to identify what they are not, they are less able to identify what they are.

The Sunni Muslim identity may be taken for granted in cities like Idleb where Sunnis dominate, since they are the majority group and assume everyone else is also Sunni. As informant 12 states: "It became part of your social identification, more than your religious identification." The sense of being Muslim informs and guides social behavior as much as religious behavior: Sunni religious norms guide most social behavior. As informant 12 explained: "What I've noticed after having to live in Idleb for a long time, because everybody is Muslim Sunni, they have laid that down (Sunni norms), and started to interpret the habits that we have that is extracted from being a Muslim Sunni and bring it to the society." So, for example, if an unmarried couple is walking on the street or having lunch, others would judge them by conservative Sunni

norms and say that such behavior was shameful. Informant 12 explained how the Arabic word for shame, *hari*, is used more often in social judgements than the word *haram*, which means forbidden by God. Over time the Sunni *religious* norms have become the dominant *social* norms.

Other Sunni Arabs have explored their ethnic identity more and have more knowledge about it. One Sunni Arab source (12) said she was proud of being an Arab because of its history, the Arab scholars, and their accomplishments for humanity. Another Sunni Arab informant (20) was proud of its Islamic principles, and its values of honesty and family. Another Sunni Arab male informant stated that his two most salient identities were the Syrian and Arab distinctions: "Most of the time I think of myself as an Arab. So I would look at the bigger picture. For me I think we have more connection between us as Arabs - the language helps a lot. I think would say, identity as an Arab, but also as a Syrian. I am very aware of my nationality." (informant 6) For him, part of this Arab identity refers to the breakaway from the Ottoman Empire and the strong electoral support in Syria for the United Arab Republic (UAR), the shared state between Egypt and Syria under Gamel Abdel Nasser in 1958. Even though the UAR union failed, it reflected the people's desire for a broader Arab state (informant 6). As seen here the few Sunni Arabs who understand their history link their identity to various historical or cultural attributes going back generations or centuries.

Another issue for Sunni Arab ethnic identification is the principal values and beliefs of the group. The most fundamental Sunni values appear to be based on their religion – believing in Muhammed the prophet, doing good deeds, not doing anything

that is *haram*, such as drinking alcohol, eating pork, and listening to music, according to informants. One Sunni Arab man (3) described his main values as honesty, honor, being friendly, removing harm, and similar values based on Islamic hadiths studied in the mosque. From his father he learned to be economically independent, and from his mother to be ambitious and do his best. He didn't think his religion affected the values that guided his daily actions. Informant 20 valued protection and equality, because of the violence and insecurity in Syria. It seems a significant number of young Syrian Sunnis in Turkey deviate from Sunni norms, by drinking alcohol and listening to music.

Consistent with identity theory on self-esteem (Stets and Burke 2000), several Sunni Arab informants mentioned issues related to pride. Some described how they see themselves as holding and practicing the Muslim values better than any other religious (i.e. Shia) or ethnic group (i.e. Kurds), through their customs, prayer, and practices. One informant (12) noted how the more conservative Sunni communities like Idleb are very proud of the Arab culture, but this pride leads to being only interested in their own culture, and not interested in or open to other Syrian cultures.

A separate issue that may be a significant part of Sunni Muslim identification is socio-economic class, as mentioned in chapter three. Many of the land and business owners in Alawi and Kurdish areas were Sunni Arabs according to informants. Sunni Arabs used the *moraba* system to manage their agricultural production and maintain economic power over minorities. Moraba means quarter and stands for the system whereby the peasant received 25% of the farm income while the landowner received 75%, even though the peasant provided all the inputs. Many Alawi peasants were moraba

to Sunni landowners prior to the ascendancy of the Alawis with the Assad regime

(informant 26). The higher socio-economic class for Sunni Muslims may be a source of

pride for the in-group and form part of their positive ethnic identity, while also generating

a perception from minority groups that Sunni Muslims are exploitive.

Sunni social roles, relationships and groups
Most Sunni informants described their major social roles as being family

members, friends or workers. Family was a very important social role, mainly directed at

the immediate family, parents, siblings, spouse or children, and much less with the

extended family of grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. The family also affected

many of their values. Based on informant comments about marriage, the Sunni Arab

community values social status, with clear boundaries between Sunnis of different

classes.

Traditionally the father is the bread winner and mother takes care of the children

in Sunni Arab households, although some mothers also work outside the house. The

family role appears to have changed for many of the young Sunni adults interviewed,

since their families had moved to Turkey or were displaced and the young people had

taken on the responsibility of being the primary breadwinner for the family, as well as

managing healthcare and other challenges for their parents or siblings. This role change

has disrupted leadership roles in the family, with elders often relying on the younger

generation in their 20s and 30s to make important decisions and lead the family through

major social changes.

> I think being a part of my family for the last three years
> was very intense. I still remember the day when I was

notified that my mom has a cancer. I had a very good
relationship with my mother and being my mother's
daughter kind of relationship played a huge role in the
family, because of having my brother away…. But her
having cancer was not [an] easy thing for the family in the
last three years. So that made me think a lot about my role
as a daughter. I mean I don't want to say that my parents
wouldn't be able to do it without me, but I think I tried to
do 300% of my energy to make sure that we get here. I had
a job immediately about the first month that we arrived
here. So my dad and I split tasks together. He would take
care of her and I would work. So I would take care of work.
So I would be the financial support for them. (informant
12)

It can be seen here how major family events and the armed conflict have changed

the roles of some young Sunni Arab adults, giving them more responsibility than younger

adults had in pre-war Syria. Culturally, usually male elders made important decisions and

provided economically for their families. Now it is younger Sunni Arab adults. This role

change occurred for young people from other ethnic groups as well.

A related issue are the types of relationships that exist within and between Sunni

Arabs and others. One Sunni Arab male informant (3) mentioned that it was unusual for

Sunnis to interact socially with people from other ethnic groups: it was shunned by

parents, elders and sheikhs. He was part of a mixed ethnic group of friends who did

outdoor activities and learned about other ethnicities in that space. Another Sunni Arab

described a change to more open relationships between Sunnis and minorities in recent

years:

In the last five years they have become more open I feel.
And sometimes they accept, they see the different
ethnicities that are living with them. It's not just about
them. And before you [would] hear Sunni believed that
they are the only ones who exist and that they are the

majority. So they were not seeing [recognizing] the minorities that much or giving an interest or importance to minorities, but now during the war, they are becoming aware of other ethnicities. They are, you know, kind of starting to be sensitive. (informant 24)

These differing opinions may be explained by varying regional social norms, changes in social relations or displacement during the last five years of armed conflict.

Even though many Sunni Arabs have suffered from Alawi massacres, as noted in chapter two, some Sunnis are able to differentiate between outgroups regarding who is to blame for their suffering. For one Sunni Arab informant, even after all the abuses by Alawis against Sunni Arabs, he still states that:

We don't have a problem with the Alawites right now. If Alawites come to our areas, which are Sunnis areas, of course we will host them, because they don't have any relationship with the regime. Because the government doesn't represent him. Those groups fighting us, that doesn't mean that all Alawites are fighting us. For sure…. The identity of Sunnis didn't change… as well as the values, because we have one value. Of course we don't have problems with Alawites, even Christians. You can easily, if you are Christian, you can easily live with me in my town. (confidential informant)

While other informants noted the hatred some Sunnis have for Alawi, as discussed in chapter six, Sunni's also differentiated between Alawis aligned with the regime and those who are not.

In general, Sunni Arabs were not able to identify specific social groups that they belonged to. One exception are the social groups organized by local mosque leaders who try to keep youth involved through social groups in the mosque, from Quran study groups to employment networking (informant 3).

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In summary, I have identified a number of key findings about Sunni Arabs in Syria. I note variation in levels of exploration and knowledge of their own ethnic group, but generally most Sunni Arabs take their ethnic identity for granted, which can be explained their being the largest ethnic group in Syria. There is considerable pride in the Sunni identity. While there is variation socio-economically among Sunni Arabs, generally they have been the business and land owners in the Syrian society, making up the core of the upper class society. Given the sample population of young Syrians who make up the informants for this study, I also document the changing social roles for Sunni Arabs. The basic issues noted in this section provide the background for later discussions of each of the minority groups in this chapter as well as underlying religious conflict in chapter five.

Alawites: oppressed, yet celebrating life

The Alawi made up about 11.8%, about 2.5 million, of the pre-war Syrian population (Izady 2014; see map in chapter two). The Alawi have reportedly lived in the Syrian Coastal Mountain range of Lattakia and Tartous since the 14th century, after fatwas by Sunni religious leaders in Iraq, followed by widespread killing (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). Nguyen-Phuong also posits that this persecution led to the Alawi practice of taqiyya or dissimulation to protect themselves. In this section I explore Alawi values and beliefs, the role of women, poverty and social class, the association between Alawi identity and the regime, and Alawi extremism.

Historically most Alawi have lived in the mountainous areas of Tartous and Lattakia governorates along the Mediterranean Sea. While there are small pockets of

Sunni and Turkmen communities within the Alawi area, their area is fairly homogenous. The Alawi area is bordered to the east by the small Nusari Gnostic ethnic group and Levantine Christians (Izady 2014). A number of Alawi urban communities have developed in larger cities like Damascus and Aleppo in the last 40 years due to support from the Assad regimes according to informants. While most of the Alawi informants in this study were from Lattaki Province, one was from a small Alawi village in Homs, with its own Alawi history and experiences over the last 100 years. Important social roles for Alawis include family roles, such as brother, sister, son or daughter, and friend (informant 13). The Alawi have historically been farmers, but since 1970 many Alawi men have entered the military or security agencies.

A brief look at the Alawite ethnic group provides an important case study for how identity has been manipulated in the Syrian conflict. Demographically the Alawi are a small group of about 2.6 million people (11.8% of the Syrian population), living in the mountainous area of Tartous and Lattakia provinces. The Alawi culture is based more on clan than religious institutions, although they follow an offshoot of Shia Islam. There were a number of actions done by the two Assad regimes to manipulate the Alawite ethnic group. Prior to the 1960s the Alawi had low levels of social and economic development, with the landless Alawi often working as laborers for Sunni landowners. Since the late 1960s, the regime stoked fears among the poor, marginalized Alawite ethnic group and gave them many security positions, so as to ensure their alignment with the regime (International Crisis Group 2011; Hokayem 2013). The Assad regimes also

encouraged the development of Alawi neighborhoods in many cities, to build loyalist

communities throughout the country (Hokayem 2013:33).

Even though there is a strong value of family in the Alawi culture, there is also a

mixture of cooperation and conflict between Alawis. On the one hand "they would

support each other like crazy… if they were in conflict with each other… because they

know that they are a minority, and they know that they only have each other." At the

same time there is considerable conflict between Alawis. "When you go to Alawites,

there's a lot of other groups. And there's no difference, but they are called differently.

And the only difference between them would be the way they pray…. But I think that

there is a very small difference between each group, but when they are together, they start

to have fights, actually there are some families that wouldn't get married to other

families. That's how the people are." (informant 15) As another Alawi stated: "It's very

rare to see a very close Alawite family." (informant 13) This within-group conflict can

involve both long time family feuds and economic or social status competition. When

asked if the within-group conflict was due more to economic competition or desire to

maintain the ethnic identity, one Alawi source provided this explanation:

> I would say it's kind of both. Because for my family the
> major issue was moving out from their community, and my
> uncles and aunts never liked the idea of my father moving
> out. So here's where it gets tricky, because why are you
> moving out? Is it to get a proper education? Is our
> education is not good now? And the next generation comes,
> they would say, my son is an architect, what about your
> son? And here's where it gets complicated, because some
> of us really want to serve in the army, because as I told
> you, that is what they believe that they are good for, while
> others think that we can do something else. But it's being
> perceived differently by the family. Why this person is not

in the army? Or, as my family sees them, why are these
people not studying? Why are they joining the army? Don't
they see? (confidential informant)

In this narrative, there is tension between values over education, occupation, and

social status, all impacting the group's relationships and sense of ethnic identity. This

tension can be partially explained by desires for social mobility and intra-group change.

The Alawi, along with the Druze, appear to be one of the few ethnic groups who

have a significant clan dynamic in their society – for the other groups clans do not seem

to be as important social structures. Here I define clan as a group of closely related

families connected by kinships ties. The Klaziya and Haydariya are two of the largest

Alawi clans. Since the Assad family comes from Klaziya clan, its members have

benefited more from the Assad regime over the past 45 years, through education,

economic opportunities and corruption. A third Alawi clan, the Taro, was active

politically during the post-French pre-Assad era, 1946-1960. One informant's grandfather

was a Taro political leader during that period and disagreed with other Alawi political

leaders on need for the separate Alawi state which had existed under the French. This

leader called for a unified Syria since he knew the French and Sunni Arabs would not

allow a separate Alawi state. The Taro clan argued for a Syrian confederacy that includes

Alawi territories, due to the impracticality of an Alawi state and lack of trust between

political and ethnic groups. According to informant 26, the other Alawi clans "hated" the

Taro clan for this political position led by his grandfather and uncles. This informant

commented that Alawi clans often provide special resources and opportunities to sub-

group members, while also establishing important social norms and beliefs.

Alawi informants described their ethnic group as being more cultural than religious, with more openness and gender equality than other Syrian groups, albeit with limits for women.

> The Alawite society is more of a cultural one. They have their rituals but they are not committed deeply to the religious part of Alawites. We do these festivals, but we don't do it because we are religious, we do them by the culture and custom. The Alawite culture is more open minded, basically related to the women's position in society. But there's also some discrimination against women within the Alawites. They don't believe that Alawite women should take any religious culture or religious teaching. So they don't teach women about religion. The Alawite religion is restricted to men. But they give women their freedom to speak and to do whatever they want. And there's also sexual freedom in the Alawite society more than in the other groups. But they don't believe that women should learn the religion. Yes, socially more open. They interact with other groups with no borders. But when something is related to marriage, the women and the men, they have some restrictions. They don't allow women to marry anyone outside the Alawite community. And also the Alawite men don't prefer to marry a woman from another religion. (confidential informant)

For this female Alawi informant, gender differences are salient within the Alawi culture, with intersectionality with traditions, religion, sexuality and inter-ethnic group contact. The intergroup contact is very relevant, reflecting Izady's (2014; see map in chapter two) map, since there is considerably diversity in parts of Lattakia and Tartous provinces with scattered Kurdish, Turkman, Sunni, Nusairi Gnostic and Levantine Christian communities in predominantly Alawi territory. With this ethnic and religious diversity, supposedly comes more tolerance and openness to discuss various issues, according to another informant.

> I think it is the diversity. Since Lattakia is very diverse and there are more liberal groups by nature, like Alawis and Christians, there are many. So you see the Sunnis in Lattakia, you would be surprised to see many Sunnis, there is no hijab in Lattakia. So I think diversity created these discussions and its… the acceptance. It has to come from you and it has to come from an outside power. In Syria, in Lattakia there is this dynamic within the social dynamics that really allows the person to go and ask questions, and meet different people and not be afraid. (informant 26)

In addition to diversity and tolerance, for many Alawites the culture is dominated by a sense of enjoying life and connection to the land and local village.

> From the Alawite identity I think the sense of humor, the sense of fun, they have. They are connected to the land. Most of the Alawites has lands or farms and they are connected to their lands, and I'm really connected to this part and I believe in it. I'm connected to my village. I am radically connected to my village and most Alawites would talk about their villages as the center of their souls or the center of their identity. There are many reasons and the first one is the economic reason: these farms and lands are their life. Because they don't have any other jobs or any other careers. You know the Sunni society have [sic] the professional life. They work in the industry or trade, but the Alawites just if you go back 100 years ago or 650 years ago, most of the Alawite worked in farms. So this is the only way to make a living for them. So this is economic. The other reason is something they talk about in the religion. They have their own lands, but the Sunnis excluded them. So they want to keep their lands. (informant 22)

Informants from other groups in Syria also mentioned the sense of fun as a description of the Alawi ethnic group – the ascribed identification by others. The connection to the land and farming is part of my hypothesis mentioned earlier about being marginalized and working hard to prosper. According to Van Dam, 75% of Alawis were rural farmers who were exploited by wealthy Sunni Arab, Christian and Alawi

urbanites: "urban-rural contrasts were sometimes so great that the cities seemed like

settlements of aliens who sponged on the poverty-stricken rural population." (2011:7) For

many generations the Alawis had been exploited, leading to the beliefs that hard work

and control of their land would be the only things that would improve their situation.

Thus, this marginalization and struggle is a key part of the Alawi identity, as well as the

Druze and Kurdish.

Possibly because of the need to question contradictions in the Alawi culture, some

young Alawis reject the Alawi culture. Like some young Sunni Arabs, they don't feel

connected to their group's identity.

> As an identity I am, let's just say this, in Syria the way I
> think, and I have this small social group of friends, and that
> really would not reflect the dynamics of Syrian society….
> Coming back to your question I never identified as Arab.
> We always talked bad about Arabs like Saudi Arabia and
> the Gulf. At the same time in Syria we never really
> developed a sense of patriotism, because we have a shit
> system. So I don't know what is my identity. I have no
> idea. If you call me Arab, I don't feel Arab. If you call me
> Alawi, I don't feel Alawi. It's not an easy question for me
> personally…. Again, the way it worked for me is there are
> the seven very close friends. We have been together
> forever, so likeminded people, just like this small group.
> We are really shut down. We don't make many new
> friends, because we can't discuss things in religion the way
> we do in our group. We can't really discus relationships
> and other stuff like this. That is the difference."
> (confidential informant)

This is good example of young Syrians moving away from their group's

traditional identity after being reflective and critical of existing social structures. This

group of friends were influenced by Western movies, the Internet and heavy metal music

as teenagers. This worldview may be unique for many Syrian millennials, and more

common in larger cities like Aleppo and Damascus and less likely in rural areas,

according to informant 26. With this critical thinking, one young Alawi informant

explained his views on the role of ethnic and religious groups in the current Syrian armed

conflict, and how he came to strongly value peace. After reflecting on the segregation,

hatred, and violence between the Unity and Freedom soccer teams in Aleppo, and

between Palestinians and Jews in Israel, he explained his understanding of how ethnic

and religious groups have been part of the Syrian conflict.

> Actually it started in 2011 when I figured out what it meant
> to have a revolution against the regime and then this feeling
> of hatred grew in both sides, which I kind of think is stupid.
> Because first I am not going political. I thought it wasn't
> the ethnicity that took us there, it was something else, and
> the ethnicity just played a role to put people against each
> other…. So I kind of think that all this separation between
> Alawites, Sunnis, Shia, and even the… I can go into it later,
> the Alawites are not one group: we have the Murshidia, we
> have the Asidia, and they also hate each other….
>
> Yes, so even when it comes to Alawites, they hate each
> other. Between Sunnis and Alawites, they hate each other.
> Between Alawites and Shia, they hate each other. And the
> same for Muslims and Christians. So all this got me losing
> faith for some reason, and at that moment I created my
> theory that religion [was] meant to create wars…. I don't
> think it's the groups themselves. First, I think that religion
> wasn't the reason for war, but it was used as a way to create
> wars, to separate people and to have this imaginary border
> between people. (confidential informant)

This informant described his thought processes and that of other young Syrians.

While ethnicity may not be the primary source of the intergroup conflict, animosity and

hatred break down along ethnic lines – in this case Alawis versus Sunnis and between

Alawi sub-groups. In chapter two I mentioned the Assad regime's manipulation of

ethnicity to play one ethnic group against others. For example, the regime enumerated

religions but not ethnic groups, downplaying the role of ethnic identities in intergroup

relations and politics (Collelo 1988: 64). Other informants also questioned the role of

ethnicity between Sunnis and Alawis, identifying changing attitudes and conflict

intensities over time. One Alawi informant described the lingering mistrust between

Sunnis and Alawis, which was often overcome through personal relations and trust

building, such as when two university students from the two groups would get married.

But when increased violence occurred between the groups, which was often instigated by

Hafez or Bashar Assad, such as the 1982 Hama massacre or the current barrel bombing,

the conflict escalated again leading to polarization between the two groups.

Alawi values, beliefs and customs

In this section I examine several salient issues related to the values, beliefs and

customs that make the Alawi identity unique. Alawis as a group value various freedoms -

of speech, to practice their occupational specialties, to enjoy life and participate in

collective celebrations (informant 22). This informant described the Alawi beliefs in the

following way: "They are radical and they don't accept any change in their beliefs. But

sometimes the beliefs in the Alawite society are very strange – some magical or mystical

beliefs don't relate to anything in the real life, but they believe in it. And I have friends

from the Alawite society who are religious and well-educated, but he still believes in

these mystical things. And he is PhD." (informant 22) In the section below on religion, I

discuss the religious beliefs more fully.

Among other things, Alawis value the family, honesty and helping people in need.

To be honest is something that's so crucial to the Alawites
– they don't tolerate any lying. Even so, honesty is

something so important for them. Because most of them are farmers and they work with the lands. They don't have the political kindness. If they hate you, they would say I hate you. Maybe in a different way, but they are not so polite. But this impoliteness comes from their honesty, not from their rudeness. (informant 22)

I note here how the occupational role of farming affects other aspects Alawi identity such as communication and social relationships. Also, the extended family is important for some Alawi families. Informant 13 explained that part of the reason for wanting to keep the extended family together was to maintain the simple lifestyle and pleasurable culture of the Alawi, but also to avoid social relations with Sunni Arabs. "According to my parents, the life style in Lattakia is pretty simple: just do your basic job, go back to your basic house, eat, go to the sea, have fun, and those kind of things." (informant 13) Part of the Alawi mentality may be due to the marginalization and oppression: they had few opportunities in the past and had come to have limited expectations and goals. This Alawi informant goes on to describe this further:

I would say poor. I would say mostly uneducated, stubborn, like the Kurds as well, more a stereotype more than a real thing…. Their vision is a bit limited. Like most of the people I grew up with. Family, friends, and most of the Alawites I know, have this very limited mentality. So I would be: what's your goal? And they would answer: to get a good job, and to get married. And then I would be: no, I mean your goals. What do you want to achieve in life? And they would say: get a good job, get married. I think that there are bigger goals in life than getting a good job and getting married. I would say the sheikhs and the way they were raised in this kind of closed society. So, can you imagine growing up in a very small society, with so much (sic) restrictions and the exterior influence is limited to you? So they are not big fans of let's say watching a movie, Hollywood movies. As when it comes to Alawi sheikhs, it would be nope. (confidential informant)

Simple life style, limited goals, and targeted social norms and controls by Alawi

religious leaders are key ethnic aspects identified by this informant. Like chapter three,

when the marginalization hypothesis was explained leading to limited expectations, this

informant thought the theory worked well to explain the Alawi mentality.

> Actually, it does make sense. And you can't calculate it,
> but most of the Alawites that I know are happy. For a
> human being, happiness is being relaxed and not to have to
> worry about anything. But if they get a fish, they would be
> so happy. They would get so happy when they get their
> salary. That's nice, an appreciation of little things….
> Actually, here's when it gets tricky. They have no
> expectations, but for the last generation that I grew up with,
> their goals and aims were to join the military. And during
> our conversations when I was growing up and talking about
> what we want to be in the future, and I would say I want to
> be a [professional], while my other friends would say that
> they want to be in the army, or be a pilot or something like
> that. And then I ask: but you won't get paid much, so why?
> And they would say, we know, but it's mostly because we
> will never be able to get in schools. (confidential
> informant)

In the eyes of this informant, many Alawi have limited goals and expectations due

to the larger environment and historical subjugation of the group.

Like other Syrian ethnic groups, many Alawis are proud of their ethnic group and

identity. When asked if the Alawite are proud of their identity, another Alawi source

noted:

> Yes. And even the women who don't know anything about
> their religion, but they are really proud of it. Yes, they have
> their own culture and tradition which I really like, but I
> don't like the religious side of it. They are proud of their
> sons and because they are fighting for their country. They
> feel that all Alawite men are fighting and putting and
> spending their lives just to protect their county, to protect
> Syria. They are doing anything to protect Syria. So that's

why they are proud of their sons and of their religion. It's
not because of the tradition, food, music in this time.
(confidential informant)

This pride in having the men fight to protect Syria is likely influenced by the

regime propaganda, which will be discussed more in chapter six. This sense of pride also

reinforces the belief that the regime and Alawi fates are tied together.

Celebrations, fun, drinking, music, dancing, and getting together with friends are

a major part of the Alawi collective life. "I think the fun and celebrating is a reflection of

their bad situation and bad condition in life, so they have to be fun to tolerate this

oppression." (informant 22) Since Sunni Arabs refrain from making or listening to music,

the Alawis have actually been the leaders in making music in Syria. Alawis have a

special dance called *dabke* and the alcoholic drink *arak*, both well-known throughout

Syria. While there are often parties every weekend, Alawi men and women usually

celebrate separately (informant 22). Also, unlike the Muslim religion, the Alawi religion

does not restrict these forms of pleasure: "The religion is a secret religion, a door

opening. They are not against having fun. There is not haram. There is no taboo against

anything for the Alawite." (informant 22) The Alawi social custom of partying may

extend to young adults from other Syrian ethnic groups, with some young Sunni Arab

men from Idleb also drinking alcohol and listening to music. It is a broader reflection of

the rejection of traditional social norms and customs, with a large number (supposedly

40%) of Syrian women getting divorced or going to Europe, and many Syrian women

outside of Syria taking off the hijab (informant 26).

Most Alawi families allow marriage to people from other ethnic and religious groups, although some Alawi families are more conservative and only permit in-group marriages (informant 13, 15). There is one group of Alawi Kurds, in part due to a pocket of Kurds near Lattakia, showing the ties between Alawis and Kurds (informant 13). In the 1980s there was considerable conflict between the Alawis and Sunnis, so it was difficult for Sunnis and Alawis to marry, but a few did (informant 16).

One of the stereotypes of Alawis by outgroups is that they receive preferential treatment due to their connections with the regime or fear of reprisals. For example, some other ethnic group members mentioned being afraid of confronting Alawites because they are afraid the Alawites may contact the security agencies and have them arrested. As for Alawis being favored or receiving special treatment in the university, one Alawi informant noted that he knew many Alawis who were failing university classes. Moreover, if an Alawi student did have a problem at the university, he probably would not ask his father for help, since his father would probably "kick my ass and tell me to study harder." (informant 13) While it is unlikely that Alawis get preferential treatment in the classes, it is true that education and access to positions in the military, previously blocked, are more open than they once were. However, Alawis may receive favoritism when it comes to intelligence and police agencies – if they are arrested, they are more likely to be released quicker than other ethnic group members (informant 13). Two Alawi informants told stories of being arrested with friends from other Syrian ethnic and religious, with them being released quickly while their friends were imprisoned and tortured for several months (no citation for confidentiality reasons).

Alawi women, more independent yet marginalized

On the surface Alawi women have considerable freedom and independence, especially compared to more conservative Sunni customs. There are no dress or movement restrictions, they can drink alcohol, and other everyday practices are permissible for women. However, at a deeper level there is a significant disparity in equality between Alawi men and women, mainly around the Alawi religion and certain social customs. Comparing Alawi women's treatment on religious issues to other Syrian groups, it could be said that the Alawi women are treated much worse than any other group. While there is inequality between Muslim men and women, Muslim women still can learn about and practice many aspects of the Muslim religion. The same is the case for Druze and Christian women. However, Alawi women are completed forbidden to know anything about the Alawi religion. Hence, while I briefly explore women's roles in the broader Alawi culture, I examine these areas of inequality more closely.

Alawi women play a major role in Alawi households. Many women work inside the house and outside the house, especially on farms. As one Alawi man stated:

> Well women among Alawites, since we live in the mountains, they are helping with farming and the basic things, and not actually raising the kids, because raising the kids that was always the man's job. And he should make sure that his son or daughter are actually taught. And they don't teach Alawite (religious) values to girls. And I didn't like that. Because I still believe that women can do as much as men can. (confidential informant)

Reportedly Alawi women are taught the basic values of the Alawi culture, of what it means to be a Alawi, how to be a good Alawi woman, and how to pray, but nothing about the Alawi religious secret (informant 13). At the individual or family level, Alawi

women may be taught the values of equality from their parents, as this anecdote from an

Alawi woman explains when asked if there is more equality for women in the Alawi

community:

> Yes, I think so. Well, I can talk about myself. The only
> sound that I could hear very clearly from my dad is that
> don't let anyone control you ever, even if it was a husband
> or a father or a brother or anyone. And don't let anyone
> make you think that you are less than a man, because you
> are not. Maybe only physically, but he used to make me
> feel better by saying women are smarter than men, and this
> is why God made men stronger than women. I know it's
> not true, but it used to make me feel better. So most of the
> Alawite families would pay more or sell more to send their
> daughters out to school. And I have heard it from a lot of
> people saying that men can get a job anywhere – he can be
> a farmer, he can wash cars, he can do anything, while
> women can't do those things, so she should be educated.
> She should have something in her hand. I was living in an
> Alawite community, 100% of the women that I met from
> the age of 40 down to 10 were all in school and
> educated…. But I know a lot of families that didn't have a
> lot of money to support both of them, to go to the
> university, so the women would go to the university and
> their brothers would support that. (informant 15)

Several Alawi informants support this idea that Alawis value education for the

Alawi women. Alawi women are also able to be in the same room as other men, unlike

Sunni households, possible due to the fact that in the past their houses had limited space

so they had to share such space. Alawi women also generally have freedom of movement,

with young Alawi women even riding motorcycles (informant 15). These individual

actions support the general view that Alawi women have more equality with Alawi men

and personal freedom than women from Sunni Arab families. These Alawi gender norms

are clearly different from most Sunni Arab norms, and possibly more liberal than even

Kurdish, Druze or Christian gender norms.

Alawi gender inequality is most visible in several specific areas, such as property

rights and religion. However, on the issue of property rights, there appears to be an Alawi

societal practice of taking away property from women upon the death of the husband or

father, by denying women the right to *miraz* or inheritance. Such women are forced by

the community to sign away their property rights.

> And also in the villages, miraz, if the father is dead, this
> miraz, the inheritance of the father, the daughter will take
> the half of the two…. The women don't have the right to
> take the money from their father's death, not even one
> Syrian penny…. Yes, in the law they have this right. So
> usually they go to court to sign that they don't want their
> share and giving it to their brothers. (confidential
> informant)

When asked how Alawi women respond to this practice, the Alawi woman said

that one older Alawi woman justified such discrimination by saying that the Alawi men

educate the women, so that is enough. They don't need the property. One informant

expressed the following in trying to understand the Alawi men's views on women:

> Well, that's because they don't have any fear about their
> girls – they don't want to protect them. They [the women]
> don't have any value. Those girls and women are just to
> give birth, and that's it. They feel that the only purpose
> from a woman being is to give birth. So they don't feel that
> they need to protect their daughter. That's not freedom.
> Some people think that Alawite women are free, but they
> are not…. Sunni people or other ethnics, they consider
> Alawite women are free because they can wear anything
> they want, or they can go to another city to study, and they
> can go and do whatever they want, so they see them as free
> women. (confidential informant)

However, Alawi women don't feel that they are free and do feel controlled by Alawi men. Another example of male control over women is in divorce. As this informant explained "And the big thing, if the women divorce it is the end of the world for Alawite people. Alawite women cannot be divorced, even if she is under violence, even if she will be killed by her husband, she can't be divorced…. she has that fear." (informant 16) This fear is of the social stigma within the Alawi community that divorced women are bad, can't be trusted and it's her fault.

As I explore later in the section on Alawi religion, "Alawis don't teach girls anything about the religion, they teach only boys" (informant 15) This denies women access to an important area for ethnic identification for the Alawi. Alawi women are denied access to the Alawi religion and threatened with mystical punishments if they read the Alawi Holy Book.

> They have a book that they told us women, if we read it, God will make you blind, paralyzed, and you can't speak so you can't tell anyone about what did you read in the book. And I swear that 100% of my female friends in the university… they see the book and they didn't dare to even touch it. Because they believe inside them that they will lose their sight, and God will punish them to not to be able to tell anyone. And I told them, just take me to your house, and I will open it in front of you and read it, and you will see that nothing is going to happen to me. And they wouldn't let me, all of them. And this is in the university!
>
> So, it's for everyone who wants to, but only men. And they make men swear inside that he wouldn't tell anyone, even his wife or his daughters. And very shockingly, this was working perfectly. I mean, for two years I was dying to know what's in this book for two years, because it was so prohibited that I wanted it. None of my male friends, none of my female friends, none of the families that I knew, none of my cousins, no one would tell me anything. And

the minute I ask, they would say, this is none of your
business, don't ask again this question. How they planted
that in all of these minds, I will never know! (confidential
informant)

Here we see how the Alawi religion practices instill fear in women to prevent

them from learning about the religion and the extent to which it functions as a social

control. Furthermore, as narrated below, the Alawi religion may be androcentric or

possibly even misogynistic, although the details are hard to confirm due to the secrecy

surrounding the religion.

Once my mother told me that she asked her father about
Alawite people, and what you mean to be Alawite, and he
said that he doesn't want to talk about it because it's
insulting to you as a Sunni, and as a woman as well, so
please you don't need to know about that. I don't have a
big idea about what that means, because as I said it's very
secretive and women don't have any access to know about
this religion. I remember also when I was a child, my
mother was with her friends, all women. They were all
professors so they are educated, and one of them had some
religious Alawite books for her husband, and her husband
is dead. But for ten years she didn't touch any of those
books, because she has a fear that something will happen to
her if she touches any of those books, and she's an
educated woman. So my mother said that she wanted to
touch them, and just to tell her [what was in] those books,
and she said, no, I can't. Something will happen to me if I
did this. (confidential informant)

There is diversity in the male role models for Alawi women. Some Alawi men are

very conservative in terms of maintaining the ethnic group beliefs and values, while

others may be more tolerant of ethnic difference. For one woman who had an Alawi

father and Sunni mother, her religion and ethnicity was Alawi since it comes from the

father. However, since she had little contact with her father, her paternal grandfather

questioned her religious identification closely, in part to see if her Sunni mother had

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raised her to follow the Alawi religion per the social norm. When she told him that her religious beliefs were more eclectic, he was not happy with the answer (informant 16). In this case the grandfather is somewhat ethnocentric, attempting to preserve the Alawi religion. In another case, an Alawi woman said her maternal grandfather who was Alawi was very neutral religiously, attending different places of religious worship, such as mosques, churches, or the Alawi *aret* or religious building. As she said: "He knows all the religious books, and if you ask him about his religion, he would say everyone, all of them, because each of them is great in a way." (informant 15) This paternal example provided the woman with a very inclusive view of religion. But more broadly, male role models and socialization practices for Alawi women vary from liberal to conservative.

These accounts about gender relations within the Alawite group give shape to the Alawi social structures that appear to give more freedom to women. But, in fact the underlying structures may treat women as second class citizens with the Alawi community. Issues of property, divorce, and religion identify gender distinctions and inequality for Alawi women. Clearly this is an area in need of more research, both on the exact nature of these norms and structures, as well as the historical contexts that generated such dynamics.

Alawi poverty, social class and status

The general argument of Alawi oppression and lack of development by Sunnis for many generations, leading to frustration and conflict with Sunni landowners, was supported by Alawi informants. As mentioned earlier regarding socio-economic class, most Alawis were very poor until the 1970s, and many still were at the beginning of the

Syrian Arab uprising in 2011. However, there was considerable Assad regime/Baath party support for development and employment opportunities for Alawi at the expense of Sunnis since the 1970s. This dynamic also tied Alawis to the Assad regime, and increased mistrust and hatred between the more radical members of both Alawi and Sunni Arab groups in the years leading up to the conflict, culminating currently in extreme polarization, in part due to polarizing narratives on both sides (informants 13, 15, 22, 26).

It is fairly well known in Syria that the Alawi were generally poor prior to the rise of the Assad regime in the 1970s. One part of the socio-economic structures that prevented Alawi development was the unique class system, called *moraba*, which primarily describes the Sunni Arab – Alawi landowner/peasant relationship in Syria, although it may extend to any lower-upper class relations between or within ethnic groups. Moraba means quarter and signifies that the Sunni landowner would give one quarter of the income to the Alawi peasant to run the land, while the landowner kept 75% of the income. The peasant would also have to pay for any farm supplies. In addition describing this work relationship, the term is also a pejorative used to insult someone. "This title moraba… it is not a good word. It is a bad word… If you want to insult someone, call them moraba." (informant 22) Sometimes the Sunnis landowner would call Alawi 'my moraba.' "And sometimes the Alawites [would] insult themselves" by calling themselves moraba (informant 22). In effect, many Alawi farmers took on the moraba identification, as this practice continued over the last 200 years. Some Alawi farmers were able to buy their own land and start to employ Alawi moraba themselves (informant 22).

One Sunni Arab highlighted the class differences within the Alawi society by stating:

> For one thing, Alawites were poor and are still poor, because they have a problem in that they are living in the mountains where no agriculture can be there. So their way for moving along in their life and getting income is either to work in the public services or work in the army. So they would go work there. And even within the Alawites themselves, they are divided into rich Alawites, the Assad [family] is a big chunk of them, but there are others who are very rich.

> You have the poorer Alawites. So, the poorer Alawites don't have any money, and they would not give them any money, but they have the power. That's always a debate. He would tell you that in my phone I have numbers of very high level and powerful people, they won't give me money but will give me the career pathway. For example, if he needs to work in this area or this profession, they would just call somebody and they would facilitate it. So they never gave them money and always for them they were still poor. I noticed that, not only in this discussion, but in general, they are not rich, they are poor, but they had the power to change things in their terms. (informant 6)

As this informant observed, there is a clear set of class distinctions within the Alawi. The wealthy Alawi try to get as much for themselves while limiting the wealth of other Alawi. Meanwhile, some poor Alawi have access to employment resources through social capital. While a few Alawis benefited greatly from political corruption, and many Alawis had improved opportunities for education and employment, there still existed many poor Alawis at the start of the armed conflict in 2011.

When asked if there were improvements for the Alawi in recent years, one informant refuted the idea that such improvements have occurred:

> I don't think so, because even in the last few years, I was checking the education was so bad in Lattakia, starting

from the elementary school and going all the way to the
university. Health care in Lattakia has always been the
same in all of Syria, and personally speaking I found it
better in Aleppo. And when comes to job opportunities,
there's this stereotype that I've heard of, and actually seen
later after the beginning of the conflict, that when you join
the army, only the high ranks are mostly for the Alawites.
But this is what I've heard. I haven't join the army.
(confidential informant)

This source disagreed with the idea that Alawis could blame Sunni Arabs for their

poverty. He felt that most Alawis had owned their land for the last 70 years, so could not

blame anyone else for their situation (informant 13).

However, most other narratives reinforce the Alawi as poor people, recognizing

significant discrimination against Alawis and limited resources going back generations.

Many Alawi had to travel to larger cities, such as Aleppo or Damascus, to get a better

education. Schools were hard to access in Lattakia and Tartous 40 years ago – and were

too far for children to walk. The poverty forced families to decide which children to send

to school 30-40 years ago: for one family the two teenage boys had to decide which one

would go into the army and which would go to the university (informant 16).

This Alawi-Assad regime-Sunni Arab conundrum is complex. The social status of

Alawis was often ascribed historically by Sunni Arabs, were captured by the moraba

social structures. Also, the forms and intensity of the discrimination and violence against

Alawis by Sunni Arabs may justify the strong mistrust and hatred for Sunni Arabs by

Alawis, and support for the Assad regime. Meanwhile, the benefits and resources gained

under the Assad regime may have been real and significant. The following narrative

captures these pieces of the puzzle well:

And also there's something that I can't believe that I forget to tell you. So my dad would say when I talk with him about there [being] too much support for the regime, that before Hafez, we weren't able to go to universities. So a long time ago, Alawites used to live in the mountains, in the villages, and they didn't have schools or electricity. And my dad told me, I don't know how right or wrong this is, and not only my dad, all the old people in the Alawite community would tell you the same [thing], that when Alawite people go to the city, they (Sunni Arabs) would kick him and send him back to the mountain. And it was so hard for them. I mean they would go to the university, but they would get harassed. They would not be happy. They would be kicked. By the time Hafez came, and he started to build schools in their villages, and make them go to college, and give them their rights, so they started to feel that this is the family that gave us what we want and made us who we are. And that idea stuck with them, generation after generation. I was raised a bit away from these beliefs… because it didn't make any sense to me when I heard it later on. I don't see Assad family is protecting me. (confidential informant)

This story supports the general minority marginalization argument, leading to frustration and various forms of struggle or protest, made in chapter three. For the Alawis it has its own unique path, with the Assad regime being the ethnic group's savior and benefactor from the marginalization and violence by Sunni Arabs, combined with Alawi over-representation in the Syrian military and security agencies since the 1970s. Other informants (22, 26) corroborate the intense discrimination against Alawis by Sunnis, but note that such behavior was more common in Lattakia, where there was more separation between Sunnis and Alawis, than in Homs, where the Alawis were more integrated into the community. Reportedly, Lattakia and Tartous farmland was owned mainly by Sunnis and Alawi sheikhs, while more Alawis owned land in the Homs area (informant 22). Supposedly the few Alawis who were wealthy prior to the Assad regime were those

Alawis working with the French (informant 15). For informant 26, this marginalization

argument must be extended to all minorities, since all minorities were peasants under the

Ottoman Empire and later Sunni domination.

Alawi identity conjoined to the Syrian regime

A number of issues arise when discussing the relationship between the two Assad

regimes and the collective Alawi identity. One issue is the perceived linkage between the

two by other Syrian groups, since many Sunni Arabs see all Alawis as connected to the

regime. A second matter are attempts by some Alawis to distance themselves from the

regime, whether to be neutral or in the opposition. Third, connections to the Assad

regimes vary based on clan distinctions, with the Klaziya clan, from which the Assad

family originates, being more associated with the regime and benefiting the most. In sum,

the relationship between the Alawi identity and the Syrian regime may be best

understood as a continuum, from a complete overlap of Alawi/regime identities, to a

middle ground with some shared characteristics, to complete disavowal of the Syrian

regime for some Alawites. In terms of numbers, one Alawi informant noted that about

70% support the government, less than 5,000 are in direct opposition, while the balance

may be in the neutral category (informant 22).

While the Alawis have tried to blend in with the larger Syrian society historically

to survive, the rise to power of the Assad family made the Alawi ethnic group more

visible. Alawis took many positions in the military, government and Baath party

(Nguyen-Phuong 2015). The Assad regime has downplayed any other unique

characteristics of Alawi ethnic identification, which left just the regime-Alawi connection

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for outgroups to see (Phillips 2015). Instead of Alawi historical, cultural or religious characteristics becoming distinctive and salient for outgroups, most outgroups simply see Alawis as supporters of the Assad regime.

When thinking about the connection between the Alawi ethnic identity and the regime, it must be remembered that many Alawi people and communities have suffered from the theoretical connection to the Assad regime. Many Alawi men joined the military and have been killed or injured in the fighting over the last five years: "Many of them have died or [been] killed in the wars. Maybe there are around 200,000 Alawites who were killed…. Many of my friends in Tartous and Lattakia, every day they have 10 people, especially men, killed." (informant 22) While this number may be high, it may not be too far off, given the tremendous role Alawis have played in the Syrian military since 1970, and strong pressure inside the Alawi community for men to perform their military duty and protect the regime and Alawi people. The male death rate from the conflict is especially felt in Alawi communities: "In most of the Lattakia and Tartous villages, if you go to a small town, you barely see males age 18 and 40. There's not this class of age in this time. No one. You can't see anyone…. they [are] dead or they are in the hospital or something. Most of them are fighting." (informant 22) The heavy loss of life has led some Alawi men to hide from conscription, emigrate or end their support for the regime (informant 22). The Alawi ethnic group has paid a heavy price for the conflict so far – proportionally for the size of the ethnic groups, the Alawis may have suffered the greatest loss, even though the regime has carried out a brutal war on Sunni communities. Due to the lack of transparency and accurate data in Syria, this finding is hard to confirm,

but is important to bear in mind when thinking about Alawi identity, since the threats and persecution affect their sense of group identity. It also may affect future peace and reconciliation efforts.

A related issue is the various control mechanisms used by the regime on the Alawi community. When asked about protests in Alawi communities, one informant noted that such protests were eliminated quickly with Alawi protesters jailed, tortured and/or killed. This informant also noted the percentage of regime supporters among the Alawi: "So 90% of the Alawites support the regime, and the remaining 10% can't say anything because they know they would get killed or their children will get killed." (informant 15) Sociologist Lewis Coser's (1956) tenet that conflict with outgroups increases internal cohesion, with opposition to traitors or in-group members who have opposing views, applies here. We see that many Alawis and Sunni Arabs believe strongly in their positions on the armed conflict and legitimacy of the Assad regime, which increases the social bonds and participation within each group. It also increases hatred against negative reference groups or outgroups. Under these conditions, any dissention within their group is met with strong opposition; in-group members must either be completely with the group or out of the group (Coser 1956).

As I noted earlier, this regime-Alawi ethnic group identification is strong: "The visual identity of Alawites right now [is] Bashar Assad criminal killed children …. The idea of how people see Alawites right now is really devastating. Like the vision changed from poor, happy people to criminals." (informant 3) Hence, within the current conflict most opposition members see the entire Alawi group as the enemy which must be killed

(Nguyen-Phuong 2015). The strong identification of many Alawis with the regime is supported by numerous informant comments about the watching of state propaganda on TV and support for regime policies, as well as criticism of any dissention among Alawis (informant 15). One consequence of this perceived connection between Assad and Alawis is the threat of massacres and genocide by Sunni extremists (Nguyen-Phuong 2015; informant 16). A second consequence is the view by many Alawis that Bashar Assad is their only hope for protection, along with an acceptance of the regime's brutality: "I mean what I've heard from… my best friends, so they were like maybe Bashar Assad was not the best to rule, but he's eventually is the one protecting us. And if protecting my family means killing other's children, then let him kill them. That's how they think. They think that he protects them." (informant 15). Hence, these various perceptions and interactions push many Alawi into supporting the Assad regime.

For those Alawi who are neutral, the ascribed ethnic identification to the regime makes life difficult. Some Alawis try to separate themselves from the regime. This group is more critical of the regime's actions and may be trying to stay neutral to survive (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). Their ethnic identification may be more avowed or achieved than ascribed (affected more by their own views than others). Some of these neutral Alawis may be trying to return to traditional dissimulation practiced by Alawis for many years, as described by Nguyen-Phuong (2015).

This conundrum of being stuck in the middle is explained by one Alawi source.

> I was sort of appreciating stability, but at the same time
> there is something deep inside that would say this is a
> brutal dictatorship and it killed many people. So people in
> Syria, I am not just saying Sunnis, I say everybody, they

deserve the chance. We never really got the chance. It was
always shit choices. So I really wish someday Syrians have
other options, better options…. It's either Islamic extremist
or an atrocious dictator, that is not really options.
(confidential informant)

How many Alawis are seeking the neutral ground is very difficult to tell, yet the

number may be larger than expected. As a proxy indicator, one Alawi informant said

many of his Alawi friends inside Syria ask if it is really safe for Alawis in Turkey due to

the large number of Sunni Arab Syrian refugees in Turkey, the potential hostility from

that group, and their interest in leaving Syria.

I think these questions are really good, because it made me
think about things that I didn't think before. I think the last
thing I was thinking about recently, was the migration thing
- all these people going to Europe. And the fact that the
Alawite percentage is so small, maybe intimidating for
others. Because a lot of Sunnis are going, a lot of Christians
are going, with a very small amount of Alawites are going.
And I was talking to some of my friends in [Lattakia] and
telling them please leave, as they are not getting their
education, they are not in the university. They are afraid of
being conscripted and they are just like living in their
parents' house, and not wanting to get out. So they still
have this fear that if they go elsewhere, this stereotype that
Alawites are criminals is going to haunt them there. And
they always ask me about me living in Gaziantep, with
99% of the population are Sunnis: aren't you being
harassed? And I would reply: no one is asking me. I might
get harassed because I'm Syrian, not because I'm Alawite.
(confidential informant)

These Alawi friends who are asking about life in Turkey and wanting to emigrate

from Syria are likely seeking neutral ground. They are in fear of Syrian Sunni Arabs,

even in Turkey, and the Assad regime in Syria: "For an Alawite, to be not on any side, is

extremely difficult, because outside Syria is mainly dominated by people who are anti-

Assad and unfortunately they are mostly Sunni with Sunni mentality. Inside Syria would

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be (more risk), inside the regime held areas. So it's been extremely difficult." (informant 26). Hence, while the number of Alawis seeking neutrality is unclear, but may be higher than expected, it is evident they are caught in a dangerous situation between Sunni extremists and Assad regime loyalists.

With the dominant narrative of Alawi ethnic identification linked tightly to the Assad regime, their commitment to a more neutral ethnic identity raises doubts about their Alawi-ness. For this group, their in-group (Alawis) see them as lacking commitment to their ethnic identity, while the outgroup (Sunni Arabs) perceives them to be just like the dominant Alawi stereotype of Assad-regime supporter. For these people, it is likely that a larger Syrian identity is more salient than the Alawi ethnic identity. This would be worthwhile to study further. The tension is even worse for the next group.

A small number of Alawi – 5,000 to 10,000 – reportedly are part of the opposition to the Assad regime. Opposition may exist due to suffering caused by the regime, conflicts between clans, and socioeconomic class issues. As I have documented previously, any dissidence within the Alawi group is often met with violence by the regime: the harshest measures by Syrian security forces may exist for those Alawi who they considered traitors to the cause (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). It may also cause shame for the family. Nguyen-Phuong (2015) argues that one of the few options for Alawi survival is to cut ties completely with the Assad regime and stage a coup. That leaves them at the mercy of the Sunni extremists, but may show Sunnis their interest in stopping Assad's brutality and creating peace in Syria.

The reasons for opposition vary from political, to economic to clan-based. One Sunni Arab informant described the class frustrations that exist among the Alawi ethnic group: "That if [it] weren't [for the uprising in] Daraa that started the revolution, the Alawites may have had to start it!" (informant 6). This statement hints at an underlying frustration among poor Alawis that may be explained by relative deprivation theory, first articulated by sociologist Ralf Dahrendorf (1959). Conflict between clans may also be a reason for opposition to the Assad regime. As I noted earlier, the Klaziya and Haydariya are the two main Alawi clans, with Assad from the Klaziya clan. Other clans benefit less from regime largesse, but are caught between Sunnis and the regime, as one Alawi informant describes:

> We have two main sub-groups within Alawites, Klaziya and Haydariya. And Bashar Assad is from Klaziya, and my family, for example, my dad, was from Haydariya. So Haydariya group always feels that they are neglected by Klaziya people.… But when I was in Syria I heard some gossip among the Alawi people themselves – between the Haydariya and Klaziya. The Haydariya feel that Bashar Assad is sending their sons of Haydariya group to fight while keeping Klaziya men safe. So they put them in the first front against the opposition.… And I don't know if it's really true or realistic what Haydariya are saying, but they feel there is a discrimination against them, and that Klaziya are being more supported since Bashar Assad is from the Klaziya. And even before the revolution, my uncle used to talk about that even though he's a high-rank officer in the army, but he can't go to the highest level because he's from Haydariya group, not the Klaziya. (confidential informant)

Hence, there is frustration by one Alawi clan against the Assad regime. The Haydariya Alawi clan may still identify themselves as Alawi, but are much less supportive of the Assad regime.

Persecution by, or disagreement with, the Assad regime's brutality may be another reason for opposition among Alawis. One Alawi informant described being arrested along with friends who were Druze, Christian, and Sunni. Once the regime security agents realized the person was Alawi, first there was preferential treatment, followed by an attempt to convince this Alawi source that the other friends were enemies, and then torture of the friends. The security officer was trying "to create this fear inside me to not support the revolution anymore, but they didn't succeed with me because I don't believe them." (informant 16) While the Alawi informant was held for just 13 hours, six minority group friends were let go shortly after, while the six Sunni friends were held for six months. This experience led this informant to become firmly opposed to the Assad regime. Hence, various reasons exist for Alawi opposition to the Assad regime, whether class, clan or a response to regime's manipulation and violence. This anecdote highlights the fact that opposition to Assad regime is a major part of the personal or social identity for some Alawi: inverse to those Alawis who identify with the Assad regime, opposition forms a significant part of their identity.

There are diverse consequences of being opposed to the Alawi regime. I have already documented the persecution of Alawi who opposed the regime. Alawi who have not supported the Assad regime have suffered like non-Alawi groups. Hafez Assad supposedly "wanted to eliminate any rivalry in terms of leadership for the Alawi" and persecuted those Alawi who didn't fully support him (informant 26). Alawi opposition leaders have been forced into exile and their property has been confiscated. For some

Alawi, the family dynamics are significantly affected by members who are opposed to the

Assad regime:

> I'm an Alawite and I'm against the regime, but I can't even
> say that in front of my family. It's not because I'm afraid of
> the regime, it's because if I say it my father would get a
> heart attack. All of my family would be devastated, because
> they would think that I brought shame to the family. So I
> really can't say anything, just because I'm afraid about my
> family. I want to protect my family, as my father would
> have a heart attack, because they are supporting the regime
> too much. (confidential informant)

The possible shame and dishonor arising from opposing the Assad regime effects

Alawi who are opposed to the regime. For many Alawi, their own identity is so closely

connected to the regime that they would disavow their own family members to maintain

the core beliefs of the ethnic group.

In this section I examined the relationship between the two Assad regimes and the

Alawi identity. For the majority of Alawi, a significant part of their group identity is

connected to the Assad regime, mainly due to a belief in the Assad regime as their

benefactor and protector. For the rest of the Alawi, those who are neutral or opposed to

the Assad regime, their sense of ethnic identification is likely rooted in the more

traditional cultural beliefs of the Alawi group or a larger Syrian identity. For a small

group, opposition to the regime forms a major part of their identity. In sum, the

relationship between the Alawi identity and the Syrian regime may be best understood as

a continuum, from a complete overlap of Alawi/regime identities, to a middle ground

with some shared characteristics, to complete disavowal of the Syrian regime within

some Alawi identities.

In summary, I document an Alawi ethnic identity that involves a strong sense of mistrust and fear of other ethnic groups, in part based on a perception of a history of marginalization and discrimination by the Sunni Arab majority. Historically many Alawi were farmers under a indentured slave system called moraba, which created a sense of connection to the mountainous land where they are from and of injustice at the social and economic structures. Ethnic identification for most Alawi is tied to the Assad regime, seeing it as a source of pride and protection for the group. The Alawi culture is much more open and festive, with music, drinking and dance as common actions, unlike the more conservative and dominant Sunni Arab culture. These characteristics make for a distinct ethnic identity for the Alawi in Syria, with some similarities to other minority groups like the Druze and Kurds, but unique aspects in other areas.

Christians: multiple sects, common histories

Based on Izady's map (2014; see chapter two), the Christian community made up about 14.1% of the total population in 2010, representing a number of different Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. The divergent histories and present day social interactions of Syrian Christians increase the likelihood of localized or regional Christian identities and narratives, with each group having specific key events that are unique to their own group.

Demographically Christians are dispersed throughout Syria. The largest Christian population, mainly Levantine Christians, lived in a north-south belt between Idleb/Hama and Lattakia/Tartous governorates, providing a buffer between the Sunni Muslim population to the east and Alawi population to the west (Izady 2014). Some Assyrian,

Chaldean and Jacobite Christians live in the Kurdish areas of Hasakeh (Izady 2014). Levantine Christian villages are intermingled with Druze and Sunni populations in Sweida and Daraa (informant 27). The largest urban populations are in Aleppo and Damascus. Before the 2011 conflict the Christian population in Aleppo was the second largest Christian population in the Middle East, after Beirut, and congregated in four or five neighborhoods (informant 1, 6).

Historically a large Armenian Christian community fled present-day Turkey following the Armenian genocide 100 years ago, moving to Aleppo and Deir E Zor. The Syriac Orthodox Christian community also fled violence in Mardin, Turkey about 100 years ago (informant 27). This geographic migration highlights both the history of persecution by Ottomans and Muslims, and the diversity of groups with which local Christian communities interact. More recently, many Syriac Christians from Hassakeh governorate emigrated to Europe to find work and would then send remittances home, which were used to help people in their home villages. Many of these Christian families left to Sweden in the 1980s to flee the insecurity caused by the regime after the Hama massacre and to find economic stability (informant 27).

These historical events, especially persecution and migration into and out of Syria, have had a major effect on Christian ethnic identities. For example, Assad regime polices considerably changed the quality of life for some Christians. While life was supposed much better for Christians before the Assad regime started in 1970, Baathist policies of moving rural Arab Muslim villagers to certain urban areas, such as Qamishli,

changed the Christian life styles greatly. Christian women could no longer wear short

skirts and other revealing clothing (informant 27).

The importance of Christian values and social organization
Some of the main values and beliefs of Syrian Christians evolve around the

religion and are critical for maintaining the distinctive or ideal identity of the group.

Honesty, respecting others, equality, peace, love and helping needy people were

mentioned as important values for many Syrian Christians (informant 4, 8). Christians

also value their own community, environment and space. Most Christian sources noted

the high value placed on education for children, including university studies for both men

and women.

The family is very important in the Christian community, including the extended

family. Parents seek advice from grandparents when family problems occur (informant

1). The family socialization process had a significant effect on the values formation and

everyday behavior of at least one Christian.

> It affects a lot actually, but in an indirect way. I'm not
> talking about the values, the beliefs or something. But I
> grew up in this environment, so they were feeding me their
> culture and values even without knowing about it. Like
> when I deal with people, taking my job seriously, the
> Christian values are peaceful, being nice with people, they
> forgive. So those values, I don't think about them. I grew
> up within this kind of thing so I can't ignore it. This would
> be my behavior in my work, with friends…. They have
> some deep things…. helping other people. Being nice to
> people, or forgive when someone makes a mistake or
> something. Those things are very important. (informant 1)

As seen here, values this informant associated with Christians or identified as

Christian are strongly inculcated into the children and meaningfully, yet subtly, affect

their behavior and relationships. One the unique characteristics of the Christian

community in Syria is the Scout program, which is affiliated with or managed by local

churches. Christian boys and girls participate together in a variety of activities, including

camping and other outdoor activities, to teach the children social values and skills

(informant 1, 4). No other ethnic group has anything comparable to the scouts as a

socialization mechanism.

Generational or political differences may exist within Christian families, with the

older generation being more religious. For one young Christian man, the questioning of

the Christian beliefs led to his becoming atheist. When he told his father that he was

atheist, laying out his thorough argument against religion, and that he was also against

Bashar Assad, it was a shock to his father's beliefs which he later regretted.

> I just wanted to prove my idea and to prove him wrong. I
> wanted to win over my father. And I think all teenagers go
> into at some point, but they don't realize the damage that
> they are doing. And I think I did a pretty serious damage,
> because in one night my father discovered that I'm an
> atheist and I'm against Bashar. It was too much. And I was
> so certain about my ideas, so confident. And he didn't have
> answers and was so depressed…. And I was happy at the
> moment because I felt that my ideas are the best, but after a
> while I felt so sorry for what I did and I decided from now
> on, my father who is sixty years old, I'm not going to
> debate with him in these areas…. So now, we don't discuss
> politics anymore. And we have a good relationship.
> (informant 8)

In this story there are generational conflicts that sometimes arise over religion,

and the impact such conflicts can have on families. They also hint at the changes in

ethnic group identification that are taking place for Christians in Syria, like with Gidden's

structuration theory (1984), whereby micro level encounters combine to instantiate or

modify macro level social structures. As more younger Christians question traditional Christian religious beliefs, either Christian beliefs may adapt to their concerns or these young Christians may exit the Christian religion, in either case changing Christian social structures.

One finding from this study is that many Christians have a tight social organization with strong support for in-group members and reinforcement of the group's ethnic and religious identity. One Kurdish informant (18) noted that Armenian Christians try to help each other, follow the group's norms, and solve community problems much more than the Kurdish community. Conformity to the Christian social norms, such as having girlfriends or boyfriends from within the group, is an important part of maintaining the Christian identity. If a Christian is breaking these norms, community members would talk with them: "Your parents first, your friends, your uncles and aunts, and the priests, and the people in the scouts. Your leader in the scout for instance." (informant 1) These social dynamics may be explained by sociologist Emile Durkheim's (1982) ideas about solidarity and collective consciousness.

With conformity comes judgement about others and other social dynamics that affect group cohesion, such as gossip about others and debates about what is right and wrong.

> Yes, there's a lot of gossip, since all the community know each other, which is not good, so they judge even in the extended family. They judge. I am thinking of an example. Like my sister is not married, she's 30-31 years old I think, so my aunts they used to judge her. She should be married or maybe she has a boyfriend we don't know about. And they usually talk to my mom about that, so they are kind of judging and gossiping. If my cousins are married before

thirty and my sister is not, they judge. (informant 1)

This snapshot of Christian values, family dynamics, socialization, social conformity and social organization in Syria likely reflects the history of persecution and oppression, the fact that they are a minority in Syria that must accommodate fairly strong Muslim social norms, and the desire to maintain and/or rebuild their communities after various purges over the last five generations. I generalize here about such values for all Syrian Christians, but recognize that differences and similarities exist among and within the Syria Christian subgroups, whether Syriac, Armenian Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant or others.

The tight Armenian Christian sub-group

The distinctive history and practices of Armenian Christians are insightful for understanding a minority group's ethnic identification in Syria. The identity of Armenian Christians in Syria is strongly influenced by the group's history, especially the Armenian genocide in Turkey and following marches and massacres. Starting in 1894 the Turkish Sultan Abdul Hamid started a pogrom against Armenians in Turkey, who were mostly Roman Catholic. In 1914 with the start of World War I, the Young Turks under Talaat Pasha reignited the genocide against Armenian Christians, using death squads and forced marches. One of the forced march destinations was Deir E Zor in southern Syria (Armenian Genocide). The story of the Armenian genocide was the defining historical event of her group, according to informant 4. Her great grandparents were from Kilis in southern Turkey and forced to leave Turkey. All of southern Turkey, including Kilis and Gaziantep, and east to the Armenian border, was heavily populated with Armenians who were forced to move during the genocide. A point of pride is that Armenia was the first

country to acknowledge Christianity in 301 AD (informant 4). Armenian Christian children are taught this history repeatedly at home, school and in scouts – "brainwashed in both good and bad ways." (informant 4) Armenian Christian leaders in Syria reinforce this history since "They want us to stay together, and not to integrate with other groups. So we stay together and multiply, and make up the loss of a hundred years ago." (informant 4) Armenian Christians in Syria hold a series of events to commemorate the genocide each year.

For Armenian Christians, it is important to conserve the group's integrity through more group members and maintaining the Armenian language. The Armenian General Benevolent Union in Syria coordinates a wide variety of activities for their ethnic group members, for children, teenagers, college students, and adults, to promote group solidarity and provide resources for the group (informant 4). There are many activities to keep children busy, but which also reduce their interaction with other ethnic groups:

> Scholarships… the music school, the basketball team. So
> they offer you everything, every opportunity. So you don't
> need to integrate with other people from other groups. So
> it's good and bad in my opinion. In their opinion, it's not
> bad, it's a good thing to stay in the community, but for me
> it's better to integrate with other people, especially if
> you're Syrian. (informant 4)

Armenian Christians in Syria are also proud of their work in the arts and education. Art and music are important aspects of the Armenian Christian culture and identity. Painting, poetry, writers, and other artists are common. Art and music classes are central in the schools, more so than in the Syrian public schools. In Aleppo there are a number of music schools primarily for Armenians. The value of education is evidenced

by the fact that some Armenian Christian high schools in Aleppo require four languages, Armenian, Arabic, English and French (informant 4). In sum, the history of oppression in Turkey is a major part of the Armenian Christian identity, and many values, beliefs and everyday actions of Christians in Syria are a response to this oppression.

Christian social status and discrimination

Many Syrian Christians appeared to be slightly higher socio-economically than Sunni Muslims, although this may be due to a skewed informant sample. This higher social class may be due to the community's stronger emphasis on education or increased social capital from its dense social networking and within group connections. Meanwhile, I also note preferences for interaction with in-group members and stereotyping of Christians by outgroups.

There appears to be preferential treatment for in-group members, whether for helping people in need or buying goods and services.

> You know there is something about solidarity. Armenians like to help people, although they are not Armenian too, but there's something different if that person is Armenian. If the person in need is Armenian, then they would say that we really need to help that person. They want to help everyone, but you can really feel the discrimination, and you can see that when there are two people, one is Armenian and the other is not, so you will see how they choose the Armenian person over the other one, if they have to choose one of them. (informant 4)

> My father used to tell us always, that if we wanted to buy something, then we should buy from a Christian shop so you can help him. Even if it's a worse products, but you buy it from the Christian. (informant 8)

Some Christian informants described a sense of superiority or entitlement for Christians in Syria, which they felt was inappropriate or wrong. In this narrative Christians see themselves as better than Muslims:

> Actually this is in all the religions. They think that they are the right group. But I'm talking about my group in Aleppo – they think they are much better, not just that, they believe that they believe in the right things and they are better than Muslims in so many ways. They think themselves as classy, this is one thing. And they are not open-minded, they are not open up to the other groups. This is one of the reasons why I don't belong to my group. (informant 1)

So we see here that Syrian Christians have a positive self-image and identity, but this leads to negatively evaluating other groups and less interest in knowing about or interacting with those groups. At the micro level this involves Christian group members asking other Christians about the names of friends to see if they are Muslim and from a different group. This also means a person should not "mix too much with the other groups." (informant 1) According to an informant, most Armenians are not "open minded," (informant 4), although with only a few interviews it is difficult to draw broad conclusions.

There is also stereotyping and judging by Sunnis against Christians which affects their ascribed ethnic identity. In the university context, Christians are seen positively by other groups like Sunni Arabs, who try to develop relationships with Christians (informant 8). In other contexts this stereotyping by Sunni Arabs is more refined, evaluating Christians negatively as a group, but valuing individual Christians. As one Christian from Aleppo noted:

> There's this sentence that I hate. I heard it many times from

Muslim people: even that he's a Christian, but he's nice! Yes, not just nice. They would add "even though he's Christian" in saying: he's good to deal with, etc…. Muslim people they obviously think that they are right and we're wrong, this kind of thing which is normal. It's not just different beliefs, its different lifestyles. The Christian women would wear t-shirts, skirts, while Muslim women are covered. So they would describe Christian women as not conservative. We drink alcohol and they do not, so they judge us as people who drink alcohol and eat pig. (informant 1)

These examples of Muslim views of individual Christians versus the Christian group as a whole may be an effort to reduce cognitive dissonance about ethnic in-group-outgroup values. Since they value the Muslim ethnic identity highly, they need to devalue outgroups like Christians to reinforce the positive features of their own group. Hence, Muslims may view Christians as a group as bad (because they dress loosely or eat pork), but individual Christians may be good, especially friends. More generally, social status differences between Christians and outgroups, especially Sunni Arabs, preferential in-group behaviors, and stereotyping dynamics affect ethnic group positions relative to others, and thus avowed and ascribed ethnic identities.

Conflict, cooperation and group boundaries

Conflict and cooperation between the various Christian groups in Syria and with the Muslim majority was also found in this study. Informants provided mixed reports regarding interactions between Christians and other groups in Syria. While the demographic dispersion of Christians and large Christians communities in some areas supposedly created considerable interaction between Sunni Muslims and Christians, some sources noted that most Christians interact only with other Christians, leading to little knowledge about other groups (informants 1, 6). We explore these issues further here.

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Among Christian sub-groups both cooperation and boundaries were common. Christians would go to another sect's church if necessary, as with Syriac Christians attending Orthodox Christian churches in Qamishli and Roman Catholics attending Syriac Christian churches when no Roman Catholic churches were available. This highlights some shared beliefs and customs (informant 27). There are also boundaries with other Christian sects. Supposedly there is little interaction between Armenian Catholics, Orthodox Christians and Protestants (informant 27). When asked if there was conflict between Christian groups, one Armenian Christian informant, referring to Orthodox Christians as Christian Arabs, explained:

> Not really, but I had a feeling there were some sort of
> between the Christian Armenians and Christian Arabs, but
> not with the Muslims. The Christian Arabs are very weird,
> as they see themselves as a high standard people, just
> because they are Christians. So they see Armenians as a
> threat, not a threat, threat is a big word. They want to be the
> best in their type of thinking because they are Christians
> and they are better than Muslims. And since Armenians are
> Christians also, so they always used to hate us…. Not a
> conflict, a tension or cold war let's say. They didn't help
> each other much, where you can find Muslim and
> Armenians helping each other, but that doesn't happen with
> the Christian Arabs. The Armenian Christians want to help
> the Arab Christians, but the latter won't accept that and I
> saw that in the university by the way. (informant 4)

We see this perception of tension between the two Christian groups in Syria, although the cause is not clear. It may be the need to positively view one's in-group, relative to similar groups. These two groups prohibit marriage across groups, providing evidence of each group seeking to maintain its own unique identity. While marriage with another Christian is "half bad," marriage to a Muslim is even worse for some Syrian

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Christian groups (informant 27). Syrian Christians who marry Muslims would be "excluded" from the group, after being talked to by the family and church leaders (informant 4). Tension may also exist over social status and economic competition.

The complexities of sub-group boundaries are seen in the case of a man whose father was Alawite and mother was Armenian Christian, and wanted to marry an Armenian Christian woman in Aleppo. The young couple had gone to the same school together. He spoke Armenian and was Armenian in many ways, but his identification card said he was Muslim, so it was problematic for him to marry the Armenian Christian woman (informant 4). The child's identification follows the father's legal identity. Since his parents were married by the state and not by the church, some Christians questioned the decency of his mother – without the church's endorsement, the marriage was not acceptable (informant 4). This unique case highlights the social boundaries between Christian sub-groups: even when many everyday practices such as language, education and love are shared by a couple, perceptions of a diluted ethnic group identity prohibit such relationships.

While supposedly Armenians have become more open to other ethnic groups with the start of the current armed conflict, informants noted Christian preferences to avoid Sunni Muslim areas. Because of the fighting and insecurity, many Armenian Christians were displaced to regime controlled areas, or internationally to Armenia, Lebanon or Canada. Yet, it appears that Armenians don't feel safe in opposition controlled areas due to actions or threats by Sunni extremists (informant 4), as I discuss in chapter five. Another Syrian Orthodox Christian describes the change in intergroup interaction

differently: while Aleppo was a cosmopolitan city with few conflicts between members of different groups prior to the conflict, after 2011 people took sides. While he was against the regime, the rest of his family supported the regime, leading to considerable conflict within the family. His father, who had always been against the Assad regime prior to 2011, changed his position and starting supporting the Assad regime, out of fear of Sunni extremists (informant 8). This fits with a larger pattern according to informants.

Christian views of Muslims may have worsened since 2011. Some Catholics blame Muslims for all the problems, and see little difference between ISIS and the moderate Free Syrian Army. This has led to more hatred among some Syrian Christians for Muslims. When asked if there was a way to reduce the mistrust and hatred between the two groups, informant 1 stated: "No, I don't think Catholics can live with the Sunni community anymore." For this informant, the only solution is for Christians to leave Syria. Without any military power in the Syrian regime or opposition groups, the only solution is to leave Syria and move to some place like the United States where Christians can live according to their customs and culture in peace (informant 1). Another Christian woman echoed those opinions, feeling it was impossible to find a space for herself in Syria: she couldn't live with the regime supporters since she saw how they treated the people and couldn't live with the Islamic groups because of their conservative life style (confidential informant).

The events since 2011 must be placed into the larger historical context as well. Historically, Christians have had to accommodate to Sunnis in many aspects of their everyday life, while, from my perspective on the outside looking in, it appears Sunnis do

not make many changes for Christians. The issue of dress and movement restrictions for

Christian women are the most visible examples. One Christian described the problem of

having a Muslim college friend over to his house. He would have to let everyone in the

family know so the women would not be seen or interact with the Muslim in any way. It

was impossible for the Christian man to have the Muslim male friend for dinner with his

family or to have dinner at his Muslim friend's house with the whole family, due to the

Muslim restrictions on female interaction (informant 1). While seemingly small

incompatibilities, the larger trend appears to be Christians being forced to accommodate

to Sunni Muslim norms in many spaces. Such tensions affect ethnic group relations and

identities.

Other identities for Syrian Christians

For some Syrian Christians there is a strong ethnic identity attachment to a larger

Syrian identity. One informant, when asked if he felt Arab as well as Christian, provided

the following narrative.

> I try not to you know. But when I had conflicts or
> something, I feel that there's something inside of me, a
> pride Syrian, and I'm an Arabic person. But I try to be just
> a person… I was really proud of that at one point, when I
> was a child, of Christianity and being a Syrian…. It's
> ideology, when you are a kid, you want to have an identity
> - in schools, in home, in the scouts. I was in the Scouts, and
> everywhere I go, every social group, they kind of keep
> repeating that you're a Syrian, you're a Christian. And
> these great things, as we discovered fire. They said Syrians
> had discovered fire and I believe that we are the most
> intelligent people. And every country does that to their
> children. But I also had my father tell me the politicians in
> our country are corrupt, and you should be proud of being
> Syrian and being Christian. Christian Syrian. He always
> talked about how Christians built this country. (informant

8)

This quote emphasizes the pride of the Christian self and sense of superiority. For some Christians, part of their identity was formed around opposition to or support for the Assad regime. One informant's father brought outlawed books into his house and, while a generally peaceful and respectful man, was most angry when Assad photos came on television. The simple representation of Assad and what he stood for made this Christian man very upset (informant 27). Other younger Christian sources also expressed opposition to the Assad regime as an important part of who they are. However, various sources mentioned that most Christians support the Assad regime, due to fear of Sunni Muslim extremism and violence. One Christian informant described how going to work in the humanitarian sector in Turkey was seen by the larger Christian community in Aleppo:

> Well, this is a really funny story: Armenians hate Turks, and Turkey is fighting the regime as we all know, and Armenians are pro-regime. So these two aspects. So when I told them that I'm going to work in Turkey, a really funny thing happened. They told me that I was a traitor because of two reasons: first I'm going to work in Turkey, the enemy, and secondly I'm going to work in Turkey, the enemy of Assad regime. The enemy of Armenians from hundred years, and the enemy now in the Syrian crisis. That is I think maybe the main reason why I'm away from Armenians, because most of them would think the same thing. (informant 4)

In effect, Syrians Christians working in Turkey are seen as double traitors, first since Turkey committed the Armenian genocide and second since the Turkish government opposes the Assad regime. For Armenian Christians this is the worst thing a Christian could do to the ethnic group.

To summarize based on the small number of Christian informants studied here, Christians identities in Syria vary by Christian sect, yet share commonalities due to histories of persecution and oppression, leading to significant efforts to maintain the ethnic group and its identity. Stories of genocide and forced marches five generations ago are kept alive in the collective memory. Meanwhile, many social institutions, such as the education, Scouts, marriage and group boundaries, exist to rebuild the group's size and distinctive cultural aspects, such as language, music, and the arts. I also recognize the institutional support Christians have from their church which helps them build group identity. While generalizations about a singular homogenous Christian political position are problematic, many Christians support the Assad regime, primarily out of fear of Sunni Muslim extremists, making this another case of ethnic identification determined at least partly by the larger societal context and relations with the dominant, majority group.

Diverse Kurdish identities: marginalization, struggle and pride
Kurds made up 8.9% of the Syrian population in 2000 (Izady 2014; see map in chapter two) or roughly 1.9 million people as of 2011. Geographically Syrian Kurds mainly live along the northern border of Syria in the three areas of Afrin, Talia Abad, and Hasakeh, with some living in Aleppo. The larger history of marginalization and oppression of Kurds across Kurdistan occurred in Syria as well, and affects the ethnic group identity and its relations with other ethnic groups in Syria. Syrian Kurds have suffered in various ways from the Assad regimes. Lack of citizenship, constant threats of imprisonment and torture, restrictions on language usage, and loss of lands due to agrarian reform are but a few examples. They have also lived with discrimination from

Sunni Muslims. This oppression has been countered by various actions to maintain the Kurdish culture and ethnic identity, and gain political independence. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, with some Yazidi, Christian and Alawi as well, making it the only group on this study that is split across religious groups. In this section I summarize several issues that affect Kurdish ethnic identity and ethnic group relations, including their history, language, festivals, values, beliefs, gender roles, within-group and intergroup relations, marginalization, oppression, and struggle for basic rights.

Kurdish history

The history of Syrian Kurds is one dominated by marginalization, oppression, and persecution by the Assad regime and Sunni majority according to informants. There are also unique cultural traditions that inform their historical narrative. In this section I review a few special historical aspects, and in the next section I examine the general persecution, lack of development, everyday hardship, frustration, struggle, and the "pride dynamic" that existed for Kurds.

One of the key aspects of Kurdish ethnic identity in Syria is the history of Kurdistan, which included territory populated by Kurds in four countries: Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Iran. After the breakup of the Ottoman Empire in the 1920s, Kurdistan was separated into the four countries. In each country Kurds were a minority, generally poor and suffering political oppression, with little interaction between Kurds from each country (informant 9). Kurdish rebellions against Saddam Hussein in Iraq, Hafez Assad in Syria, and Turkish leaders in southeastern Turkey were responses to such marginalization and oppression. For example, each country limited the use of the Kurdish

language through formal policies. In Syria Kurds were prohibited from speaking the Kurdish language or have Kurdish written materials for many years, as noted by informants. The social structures of the four Kurdish groups vary as well, partially reflecting other ethnic groups in their area. According to one informant, Syrian Kurds were surrounded by conservative Sunnis and therefore developed more liberal social norms. "The Kurds escaped to the open minded, more accepting mentality. You would see mixture between men and women is ok, sitting down together. A hijab is not implemented into the Kurdish society. Drinking and social habits, western thinking is implemented into this." (informant 17) Meanwhile, Kurds in Turkey became more conservative than local Turkish people, where they have "strict and complex conservative rules for communities." (informant 17) While the shared identity between Syrian Kurds and other Kurds has been significantly reduced because of the political barriers by the four states over the past 90 years, the shared Kurdistan identity still exists for some Kurds (informants 9, 10, 11).

A major debate within Kurdish circles exists over the Kurdish *rojavi* or country that the Kurds in the four countries are trying to build. There were mixed opinions on its value or viability from Kurdish informants. For some Kurds it is major part of their identity – having their own country and space where they can be free, safe, and practice their customs in peace (informants 9, 11). Other Kurdish informants did not see the rojavi as viable, due to it being landlocked and surrounded by hostile countries. Instead they argue for other options, such as a loose federation of Kurdish states that maintain their political status with the four host countries (informant 17). What is significant is that the

Kurdish are the only Syrian minority group with a potentially viable state system in the near future, since they have de facto control over considerable territory in Iraq and Syria, are fighting for territory in southeastern Turkey.

Part of the Kurdish culture is expressed through Kurdish festivals. Nawruz Day, the Kurdish New Year on March 21, is a significant day of celebration, barbecues, dancing, and other festivities.

> You know that for the Kurds, only for the Kurds, we have a very famous day that is 21 of March, Nawruz day. And when I remember when I was a child, they banned this day to be certain, to make a ceremony about this day. Which is for the Kurds is beginning of a new day, a beginning of the new turn, when Kawa had defeated the very bad king. It's in the history, this is what it is about…. So they banned us to just making a new fire and they banned us from gathering together on this day, till the 1990s when they tried to make this day a holiday, and put it under Mother's Day. So for us it's Nawruz, and for the government a Mother's Day, a holiday. (informant 11)

Nawruz Day is one example of regime marginalization. At first the regime refused to recognize the holiday for Kurds and did various actions to limit Kurdish celebration of the holiday, like forcing Kurdish men to work that day (informant 10) or prohibiting bonfires. Then the regime made the day Mother's Day, so all Syrians could have the holiday (informant 10). Kurds in Damascus celebrated Nawruz Day in the Ghouta suburbs of Damascus with police watching, but could not have any political activity (informant 21).

Other events document the oppression of the Kurds. Reportedly the regime didn't want Kurds or other minorities to settle in one place for a long time or develop peaceful relations with other groups (informant 18). During the agrarian reform in the 1960s, poor

Arab villagers were given land in areas that had historically been Kurdish. This policy

took land away from Kurds and intermingled Arab villages with Kurdish villages.

Kurdish informants described these events with strong feelings:

> As I told you in 1960 they were distributing some lands for
> the farmers and the Kurds were banned from owning these
> lands. And there were a lot of Kurds in that area, so from
> what I've heard from my grandfather that they brought
> some Arabs. For instance, one village is Kurdish, then they
> put Arabs in the next village. It's like they tried to put
> Arabs inside the Kurds' villages. What they were thinking I
> didn't know. My grandfather, his stories, our village…, was
> taken and given to Arab people, and we went to stay with
> our uncles and other relatives in another village.
> (confidential informant)

> So during the Baath regime, the Arabization of Kurdish
> areas, whereby Bedouins were supported heavily by the
> Assad government into settling there, into Kurdish
> communities, in order to decrease the Kurdish identity in
> the areas, especially in northern Syria. That took place in
> areas such as northern Raqqa and northeastern Aleppo.
> Turkmen were also supported to move and settle down into,
> to form a separation between the three cantons of Hasakeh,
> Afrin and Khobane. So this impact has changed the
> language. The Syrian Kurdish dialect has adopted many,
> many Arabic words and phrases. So you can say its 30%
> Arabic when you speak Kurdish. (confidential informant)

The consequences from this population move split the northern area of Syria,

which had been one fairly homogenous Kurdish area, into the three isolated cantons

(informant 18). It also changed the Kurdish language, led to more interaction across

groups, and forced Kurds to modify their social norms to accommodate the more

conservative Sunni Muslim norms, such as clothing and movement restrictions for

women.

Another historical dynamic that affects Kurdish identity is influence from

communist and Western, capitalist ideas. First, there was a strong affiliation with

Marxism and communism by some Kurds during the Cold War, which is rumored to have

influenced present day social structures in Hasakeh. Secondly, the large number of Kurds

who emigrated to Germany for work and a better quality of life became more aware of

and interested in European democratic and human rights notions, and a Western style of

life. Both global influences affected Kurdish identities.

> The formation of PKK, the revolution of the Kurds, was
> strongly affected by communism and Marxist folks. [It] has
> affected the culture background. It made them more open
> minded towards atheism, abandoning the religion or even
> believing in communism itself. Communism is now an
> identity to Kurds. The Kurds have the most communists,
> the Kurdish ethnicity have the most communists among the
> Syrians…. Then when the American support came in just
> recently, they started abandoning communism and they are
> going more into capitalism. Let me add one point. During
> the 1970s Ghast Arbeita period in Germany many Kurds, I
> think 2 million Kurds, emigrated to Germany. And the
> German, the western Germany experience, that flavor
> started increasing within the Kurdish community. I know it
> is funny, but the dream of the Kurd becomes a BMW
> M3…. The western German flavor started showing up in
> the 70s, late 70s…. Since a lot of them have emigrated to or
> seek refuge in Germany. And many of them will come back
> later. So I am quite interested in seeing the impact of this
> back and forth. (informant 17)

While the figure of 2 million emigrated Kurds may be high, this migration to and

from Germany has impacted education, socio-economic expectations, the traditional view

of Kurds as farmers, Kurdish relations with other groups and other aspects of the Kurdish

ethnic identity. Meanwhile, the strong affinity towards communism is seen in Kurdish

areas, where more communal, egalitarian social structures exist, according to Kurdish sources (informants 9, 10, 11, 17).

Another important historical event for Syrian Kurds was the violence between Arabs and Kurds in 2004. An argument started at a soccer match between a visiting Sunni Arab soccer team from Deir E Zor and the Qamishli Kurdish team leading to demonstrations by the Kurds. While several Kurds were killed during the riot, the main consequence were reprisal arrests, torture and disappearances by the regime that continued for an extended period of time (informants 10 and 11).

Informant 18 noted two key events for the Syrian Kurdish ethnic group, the development of its army and an openness to interaction with other groups. Prior to the development of the Kurdish army, the People's Protection Units (YPG and YPJ) in 2011, the Kurdish community "was this submerged community in the bigger community" under threat of being "erased." (informant 18) Thus, the ability of the Kurds to protect themselves and control territory has significantly affected their sense of who they are as well as how they are seen by other groups. Because of the Kurdish military power, Kurds have been able to generally stay neutral in the armed conflict. The regime appears to treat Kurds with more respect, allowing Kurds to establish control over some public policies. Meanwhile, some Sunni Arabs question the Kurdish commitment to the revolution, since the YPG does not usually fight the regime. The openness and tolerance of Kurds to other ethnic groups was widely mentioned by Kurdish informants, who commented that all other ethnic groups are able to live peacefully and freely practice their own cultural beliefs in Kurdish areas.

In summary, we see a general historical pattern of conflict, marginalization and oppression against the Kurds over the past several generations, with a response of struggle and rebellion that was hidden from the Assad regime. The Kurds also have a history of tolerance, openness and cooperation with other groups in Syria, as well as economic migration to and from Europe. These negative and positive social interactions have led to new experiences, styles of living and expectations – sometimes increasing in-group solidarity and desires for independence and other times supporting increased intergroup cooperation - which in turn affect their ethnic identification and ethnic group relations. These experiences also connect them to global networks of power.

Kurdish marginalization, oppression and struggle

One of my hypotheses was that there is a historical pattern of general persecution and lack of development, which led to frustration, and an acknowledgement by Kurds that life is hard and each person must struggle to survive. This fight and struggle leads to a sense of pride for Kurds, like with the Alawi and Druze, as was supported by Kurdish informants. It starts with recognizing the many ways that Kurds were marginalized and persecuted. The Sunni majority and Assad regimes limited critical development resources – human rights, employment opportunities, education, transportation and healthcare – to the Kurdish population. This made life very difficult, requiring hard work and struggle to survive and get ahead, and leading to frustration at the social, economic and political structures that created barriers. The struggle involved many actions, such as hard work in farming, political activities to gain citizenship and control their own language and education systems, and hidden actions, like reading prohibited materials. Resilience

becomes a defining aspect of the ethnic self for many Kurds. Most of the Kurdish

informants agreed with the main characteristics of this hypothesis. I look at some aspects

of this marginalization-struggle-pride dynamic in this section.

Informant 9 thought the hypothesis explained the Kurdish context very well:

"Exactly, that's true. That's why you can see that most of the Kurds are aggressive. You

can see them really aggressive. Their impact is different…. Yes, it make a great sense.

The opportunities and… the lack of opportunities and resources." This oppression created

competition and conflict among Kurds, and the struggle against the Assad regimes for

equality, democracy and citizenship.

> That's why all the time Kurdish people are looking for
> democracy. We have 21 [Kurdish] political parties in Syria
> and most if not all of them have "democracy" in their
> name. The name of the party. Democratic party, Kurdish
> party… you know? All of them. Because democracy is
> what the people need and what they are looking for. Like
> they are educated people, rarely you can find somebody
> who is not graduated from the university. But the people
> who graduated from the university, most of them can't find
> jobs. Can't find opportunities. That's why you can see them
> selling something in the streets, one of them could be a
> lawyer,… could be engineer. I remember one time, there
> was a doctor. Watching a soccer match in the stadium,
> there was a small stadium in the city, and I saw someone
> there selling cakes and this person I know was a doctor! He
> graduated from the medicine faculty. (informant 9)

In addition to the lack of opportunities and discrimination against Kurds,

ecologically many Kurds, like the Alawi and Druze, have been forced to live in some of

the least productive land in Syria – dry, hilly, rocky, and difficult to farm. Because these

areas were more isolated, the Kurds and other groups were left to themselves for the most

part. The difficult geography, combined with limited development in other sectors, meant

that many also were poor, as several informants noted:

> Because I can say 75% of the Kurdish people are poor
> people. (informant 11)

> So the Kurdish population was very poor. Some of them,
> many of them. Hundreds of thousands of them didn't have
> the Syrian nationality and they didn't have their basic
> rights. So they were forced to work in very basic
> professions, such as waiters and shoe cleaners. So they
> used to call me "shoe cleaner Kurd," that was at the elite
> school. And that upset me very much. (confidential
> informant)

One informant (17) specifically recognized the existence of "the community and

the system," meaning social or political structures which limit resources, opportunities

and upward mobility for Kurds. To advance, he said you have to leave Syria and build

more skills.

The lack of development was noticeable in Kurdish areas**.** A hospital was planned

for the Kurdish area of Afrin, but built in the Sunni Arab area of Azaz instead. The

French found oil in Afrin, but the regime refused to allow exploration in the area

(informant 19). Many Kurdish towns and villages didn't have schools, electricity, potable

water, healthcare or other basic infrastructure until recent years according to informants.

The same existed for poor Arab villages as well, but when any infrastructure was

developed, it would go to Arab villages first (informant 10). Complicating these

narratives are comments that some Kurdish families in Afrin were middle or upper class

(informant 17) and that Kurdish lands were good for farming (informant 19), making it

difficult to accurately summarize the socioeconomic status of Syrian Kurds. Also, while

the conflict has affected Kurdish income and wealth by taking away income or wealth

from some Kurd, many Aleppo businesses moved to the Kurdish area of Afrin since

2011, which helped the local Kurdish economy considerably. "Even Afrin was

considered one of the major economic hubs since it doesn't have any conflict activity in

it, no shelling, no bombardment. It was considered the second Aleppo, or another Aleppo,

since all of the industries moved to the countryside and to Afrin, due to the security of it."

(informant 17) Like Alawi and Druze areas, the Kurdish areas have seen the least amount

of fighting in the last five years, enabling farming and economic systems to continue

production and families to generate income, unlike many Sunni Arab areas in Aleppo,

Idleb and other governorates. These economic and political changes also affect ethnic

identification for Kurds, whether their sense of being victimized or being successful, for

example.

While regime policies marginalizing or oppressing Kurds are relatively easy to

identify, Sunni Arab practices are more subtle and social. Kurdish informants provided

several stories of how Sunni Arabs systematically discriminated against Kurds. One

example is below:

> Even if we accepted to live with them [Sunni Arabs] and
> we build trust with them, they are never accepting us. They
> always try to deal with us as slaves…. Sunni Arabs are
> always saying we will show the Kurdish, but after we finish
> our war with the regime. And the regime they are saying,
> after we finish this war with ISIS and the opposition side,
> they are going back to the Kurdish people. And we are
> expecting this [to be attacked by Sunnis or the regime].
> (confidential informant)

This perception of oppression and threats by Sunni Arabs appears to be a common

theme for many Kurds. The oppression took many other forms. Even the word "Kurdish"

was seen as a curse or used as a vulgar term sometimes by Sunni Arabs and Christians. "We know Kurdish is a curse the way they're saying it." (informant 10) When asked why this discrimination was occurring, this informant noted that it could be because Kurds are poor, from rural areas, have different customs, and are perceived as being atheist. There was a constant fear of regime arrests and reprisals, with most Kurdish informants having at least one family member imprisoned, tortured or disappeared by the Syrian government, according to most Kurdish sources.

Other acts of oppression occurred. A large number of Kurds lack Syrian citizenship. These people are given red cards and are prohibited from owning property in Syria, becoming a government employee, or receiving government benefits. Red card holders are denied subsidized food allotments that are up to five times more expensive in the private market (informant 21). They often had to take the hardest, lowest paying jobs. Red card status was passed down generation to generation and some Kurdish families have had the red card status for 90 years. Kurdish red card holders felt like they were the lowest class in the Syrian society. Recently the regime changed the policy so that the children just receive an identity certificate, which is an even less useful document than the red card (informant 11). The consequences of lack of citizenship for Kurds are extensive, and affect the Kurdish sense of self and identity.

Some Kurds believe there is a clear policy – almost conspiracy – by the Assad regime to create tension and conflict between groups. There are a variety of actions by the regime to limit the power and development of the Kurdish minority.

In response to the marginalization and oppression, as part of the struggle to fight against the oppression, Kurds took various actions to maintain their ethnic group and identity, building pride in their ethnic group. They worked hard to produce the basic elements for survival. Part of the Kurdish identity is the pride in the recognition that they have been able to survive under difficult circumstances, through hard work and persistence.

Kurds developed an entire underground system within the Kurdish community to maintain their ethnic identity. Many Kurds secretly led efforts to maintain knowledge of the Kurdish culture, through the secret sharing of pamphlets and materials on human rights, Kurdish history and other issues (informants 9, 11). Parents told their children not to speak about politics or the regime in public or with friends. One Kurdish informant's father burned all his books after reading them to hide the fact from the regime (informant 10). Kurds also pushed for Kurdish independence, and for the Kurdish language and citizenship (informant 10). The continued struggle is a source of pride for many Kurds. The recent increase in Kurdish military power and political freedom are examples of success in the struggle (informant 19). There is also pride in overcoming the economic struggle – by getting educated, traveling abroad, finding good jobs, and helping build their communities in Syria (informant 11). Understanding this history and the Kurdish responses are an important part of the Kurdish ethnic identity.

> They are proud of their identity, of who they are. And it's coming from the Kurdish history. We have stories about the Kurds, how the Kurds came to the world, how they led the old world against the dictators at that time. That is why we have Nawruz, the New Year Day, which is the New Year of the Kurds. We hear stories about the people who fought

> in Kurdistan, we hear stories about the heroes, we hear
> stories about who we are, and we know that we are the only
> people without, around 50 million people, without a
> country, divided between four countries. We know that we
> lived, we are coming from, we believed in the first religion,
> which was the Zoroastrian, and Zoroaster was our prophet.
> I mean we have all of these stories, and we know that we
> did many changes in this world and we helped the
> civilization, at least in our region, to get the point that it is
> now. The Kurdish songs. I am trying to find the reasons
> that make me proud, the Kurdish songs, even the music.
> (informant 9)

These issues that generate pride for Kurds are also the areas which they have often fought to get ahead. The current level of self-governance in Kurdish areas in Syria is a historical precedent, enabling Kurds to manage many aspects of their communities and society, including education, language, security, and governance.

In summary, this marginalization and oppression may be a significant factor in Kurdish ethnic identity solidarity, since outgroup threats often promote in-group solidarity (Coser 1956). It also is likely associated with the struggle for ethnic group survival and development, seen through the push for their own language, rights, land, and political space.

Kurdish values, beliefs and gender roles

The Kurdish people value family, education, hard work, within group marriage, independence, safety and support for the Kurdish community. One Kurdish informant noted justice, honesty, living in peace with others, freedom, education, and the family as the most important values (informant 19). There is also a strong connection to rural areas, the mountains and farming. Kurds are proud of their unique traditions, from how they

raise children to dancing, loving life, and even being hot tempered at times (informant 21), which may reflect their strong resilience.

The main signifiers of what it means to be Kurdish are cultural: famous leaders, nationality, language, and religion.

> We are thinking that for us being Kurdish refers to Salah Addin. Being Kurdish, this is my nationality. I was born as a Kurdish. I speak Kurdish as my mother tongue. At the beginning I faced a lot of trouble when I joined the school to learn Arabic. But being a Kurdish for me, I'm proud. There's a statement in Quran "We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another." So as the Quran stated, there's not just one ethnic group, there's a lot of people and they are different kinds of ethnics…. So, I'm Kurdish, yes. This is what I've been born into, and I really want to be in the future. The right to speak, the right to write, right to have our own school, our own language, and everything that the human rights has. (informant 11)

This informant advocates for the promotion of the most fundamental aspects of the Kurdish culture to maintain the group's ethnic identity. Since informant 10 noted that Kurds sometimes hide their ethnicity because of discrimination and social status differences, ethnic identity maintenance requires balancing salience and reinforcement with circumspection and caution. On the one hand, Kurds may take action to express their ethnicity, such as promote celebrations or the Kurdish language, while on the other hand they may limit the salience of these actions to prevent the Assad regime retribution, such as limiting who they talk to about controversial issues (almost like the *taqiyya* or dissimulation use by Alawis and Druze).

A substantial part of the Kurdish sense of self is tied to the rural, rugged environment in which they live. Reportedly rural Kurds are more connected to nature, with a different worldview and a simple form of living.

> We have this thought - the best friends of the mountains or the mountains are the best friends. So this is our belief as Kurds…. You are in your area, you have your water and you have your trees. That's the best life. And this is how my grandfather lived and died. This is the traditional Kurdish living. Very simple. It's even simpler than I told. You can get married at an early age and have your own family, your bigger family might support you or not, but you can survive at the end. You are just growing and connecting more. Whether you are rich or not, you can't distinguish easily between the community, because they are living the same life basically. People who are leaving from Afrin and going to Germany and living there as if they are still living in Afrin. This is the kind of life they like, cheap life, basically you can be happy with whatever you have, and that's it. In other words, there's no need to be sophisticated. There is no reason for this. (informant 18)

This account of living a simply life connected to farming and hard work was reiterated by several Kurdish informants. Supposedly even wealthier Kurds continue to live such a simple life.

Most Kurdish sources noted the strong values for independence, safety and support for the community. These values reflect the history of oppression and second class social status, and desires for a better life. Kurds are seeking independence through more individuality, use of their own language, and following their own customs (informant 18). While at first glance interest in safety would not seem to be so necessary, in their context it is:

> As a Kurdish, as a person, for me it's safety. Yes. Live in safety. Feel safe you can go anywhere in safety. Because

it's very important for anyone to feel that they have a
secure space…. Not just only me. When you are related to
a small group who are banned from everything and anytime
anybody from other groups, the government for example,
can take you without any reason. You don't have any
rights. Nobody can ask about you. Nobody can say where
are you. You don't have human rights to ask where is this
guy, in the space that you are living inside. So can you
consider this as a safe place? No. (confidential informant)

Another Kurdish informant also believed safety was important (informant 19).

This concern for safety is a response to the widespread surveillance, arrest, imprisonment

and torture of Kurds opposed to the Assad regimes or interested in Kurdish

independence, as evidenced by stories from Kurdish informants. Almost all Kurdish

families have had a family member or close friend imprisoned and have the history of

fear of the Syrian state.

Families are highly valued among Kurds as well. There are often strong bonds

among family members, although relations between families can range from cooperative

to conflictive. "So we do have the family bond, where you are from X family or Y

family. X and Y families have like a revenge between each other. You don't go their

street and they don't go to your street." (informant 17) Family roles were very important

for other Kurds, such as being a sister who supports and protects her siblings (informant

10). Family may be the primary identity that is replicated more often in everyday

interactions, while ethnic group is a secondary identity that is activated under certain

circumstances, such as intergroup contact.

Generational differences may also affect Kurdish ethnic identity. One Syrian

Kurd expressed concerns about the lack of ethnic identification for young Kurds. She

sees a gap between the older generation connected to traditional ways of living and the

younger, high-tech, cosmopolitan generation.

> First of all, there are the traditional families. That is what
> we faced when we worked on the ground most of the time.
> They have this kind of tradition in the families. And there is
> another generation, with this big gap, a huge gap between
> them, the IPhones, IPads, the electronic things. The
> generation before were still using oil lamps. They are still
> talking about lamps and horses. So it's a huge gap in the
> time. And they are still thinking in the same mentality of
> the elderly. (informant 21)

This informant explained the disconnect between the traditional Kurdish culture

and modern society. She believes the traditional culture inhibits youth exploration and

expression of selves, which is needed to discover their special talents to be able to fight

against the societal injustices that surround Kurds, including politics, poverty, and lack of

connections (informant 21). Kurds are also proud of being Kurdish and courageous

(informant 10). This courage makes them fierce fighters (informant 11). There is a sense

of pride among Kurds for their history, accomplishments and perseverance.

Regarding Kurdish gender issues there is more equality between Kurdish men and

women than for Sunni Arabs. One source provided a comparison between groups:

> The Kurdish woman has more rights than Arab women….
> For example, the children are for the father…. When the
> [Arab] husband and wife are going to separate, the children
> are for the wife until 9 years old or 12 years old for girls,
> boys until 9 years old. But for the Kurdish women, recently
> the children are the mother's right, not the father's right. If
> they are going to separate, the children are going to stay
> with the mother, not the father. They [women] can work
> outside, they can make decisions. They are participating in
> the war also…. The Kurdish women have this hospitality.
> Even if the husband is not at home, she can welcome the
> men…. Also, she works inside the house and outside the

house, in the fields, in the public places. (confidential informant)

In addition to more power or freedom regarding divorce, children, movement and gender relations, Kurdish women are also very active in the fight against ISIS, forming the highly regarded Women's Protection Units (YPJ).

Another area of difference among Kurds is the level of conservatism. When asked which group of Kurds are more conservative or liberal, informant 10 stated: "The people from Qamishli are more open than the people from Khobane. Khobane is smaller and there are strong bonds between each other." For the continuum of conservatism "It's Qamishli, Afrin, and then Khobane" and Kurds from rural areas or small towns were more conservative than the people from the city (informant 10). This conservatism may be accounted for by increased heterogeneity and diversity of ethnic groups in Qamishli and Afrin, leading to more liberalism in those areas.

In summary Kurdish people value family, education, hard work, closely-linked marriage, independence, safety, women's rights and community support. These values are affected by the history, geography, and outside threats and represent a significant part of the Kurdish ethnic identity. Gender roles differ than other Syrian ethnic groups, with more freedom and power for Kurdish women. Family may be the primary identity replicated more often in everyday interactions, while ethnic group is a secondary identity activated under certain circumstances, such as intergroup contact.

Kurdish within-group relations: particularism and competition
A principal theme identified in conversations with Syrian Kurds was the particularistic nature of their identity. Many informants mentioned that Kurds are more

concerned about their own issues and less about other Kurds. There appeared to be a

strong independence and competitive drive in Syrian Kurds. Socially and politically

Kurds may support each other, but economically all Kurds are fighting to get ahead.

Social-economic class and status are important within-group markers according to

informant 10, as evidenced by class dynamics during marriage arrangements. This

within-group competitive spirit may have been stronger before the conflict, with more

cooperation after 2011. The following story partially explains such dynamics:

> Syrian Kurdish people are different from the community that they are live in. They are different than Arabs, different than Christians, they have their own... They are very basic people. They believe in things easily. They trust people easily. But they mostly don't like each other…. They are really good fighters. They can fight and everybody says that the Kurds, you cannot convince them easily…. They are tough with each other, you can say…. And that's the main problem of the Kurds….

> What I want to say that the Kurds are not united and if they got united they can establish their own country, and their own life. This is what I'm trying to say. So if they see somebody successful, they don't push him to be ahead. They don't support him. This is the problem. They try to pull him down from their own community, but with other communities, with Arabs, they are not behaving the same. I don't know why…. I believe it's coming from the life they were living. Because Kurds are coming from the mountains. They are people living in the mountain. A person living in the mountain - how they can find a place, how they can find their life, for life is tough in the mountains. And later when they were under dictators, even Assad for example, all the time, they were saying that it was very hard to get into the university, very hard to do something special. Maybe you have millions of graduated students and there will be a competition for them to get one place in the governmental work. You know? So all the time life is a competition between them. (confidential informant)

From informants this lack of support within the Kurdish community is partly due to scarce resources, economic competition, and social status. Informant 18 found Kurdish solidarity to be much less than that with Armenian Christians. While there is an individualistic tendency among Kurds at the societal level, at the family level there may be more support.

> Some of them try to help, but just inside their families you know. For instance, if my grandfather has some money he tries to help his sons when he gets married, to pay the fees for the marriage, to pay the fees to buy them a small place to live in. So I can say that the assistance is big inside the families…. In my perspective or point of view, I think that all those Kurdish people didn't think just only of themselves, they think about all the people. (informant 11)

Regional differences may exist between people from the three Kurdish areas of Qamishli, Afrin and Khobane, which may partly be based on varying economic resources in the region. Informant 17 described the exclusion that existed for urban Kurds who were transplanted from Aleppo to rural areas such as Afrin. Urban kids were excluded from many daily activities, such as playing cards or hunting, by the local rural kids. According to a Kurdish informant from Khobane, historically Kurds from Khobane get along with Kurds from Qamishli, but dislike Kurds from Afrin, describing in-group status conflicts (informant 10). Some Khobane Kurdish families have a strong preference for marrying locally: marriage to someone Kurdish from even Qamishli is not liked and someone Kurdish from Iraq or Turkey would be a "disaster." (informant 10). Both younger and older members of the community enforce that rule, arguing "why should I marry someone from Afrin or Qamishli - I can marry from Khobane. Are they better than us to marry someone from out of the city?" (informant 10) One Kurdish father from Afrin

did not want his daughter marrying a non-Kurd and acted differently with her non-Kurdish friends, in part because he did not trust other ethnic groups (informant 10).

There is a subtle dynamic of individualism and competition among Kurds, driven by resource, social and economic factors, that contradicts the strong sense of solidarity within the group. This individualism may dominate with-in group relations, while more solidarity exists when Kurds are interacting with outgroups.

Cooperative Kurdish relations with other ethnic groups

Historically Kurdish areas have generally been very heterogeneous with Sunnis, Christians, Jews, Yazidis, Assyrian and other ethnic and religious groups intermingling, based on informant accounts and demographic profiles by Izady (2014). Local communities are very mixed, especially in Hasakeh Governorate. In Afrin, there is a large Yazidi population and some Kurdish Alawites (informant 17). These various ethnic groups appear to be very tolerant and supportive of each other in day to day social interaction. This is notwithstanding the changes that occurred during agrarian reform, and the history of oppression and discrimination: in fact, the tolerance may be a response to such discrimination. Intergroup relations are a mixture of cooperation and discrimination, as I examine below.

In general Kurds have had good relations with the various ethnic groups in their areas during the conflict and with other armed opposition groups, according to informant 17. Sunni Arabs are able to wear the hijab or niqab in Afrin canton, while Kurds living nearby in Azaz canton, a Sunni Arab controlled area, must wear more conservative clothes. "I see Muslims, regular Arabs Sunni Muslims, have more freedom of worship

and practice their beliefs in Afrin canton more than Europe and Turkey itself. Niqab is allowed. It is fine for them to do whatever or wear whatever they want, to believe in whatever they want." (informant 17) Kurdish acceptance for intergroup contact and marriage may have increased in the last few decades. One informant described efforts by his father to protect people from another group after the 2004 riots, providing evidence of intergroup support (informant 11). Another said: "So at a certain point we started to be open to other groups, as marriage for instance. I mean a hundred years ago you would be killed if your daughter married an Arab guy, whether it's Sunni or Shia. And before the war, a few years before, with the fourth generation let's say of educated Kurds, this routine was broken." (informant 18) Further research is needed on changes in openness, tolerance and cooperation in the Kurdish society.

Most Kurdish informants had stories of discrimination that they bore personally in their childhood or youth. Informant 10 provided a lengthy narrative about discrimination and beatings of Kurdish children in schools by Sunni Arab teachers. Informant 21's father was denied the opportunity to get his Ph.D., attributing this to his Sunni Arab university professors specifically blocking Kurdish higher degrees. Some Kurds have been told to go to Kurdistan, because they hold different opinions or beliefs (informant 10). "People don't care about us now due to the war…. Before we used to say that we are proud to be Syrians. Now we don't, not because we are ashamed of being Syrians, but because the way people are treating us." (informant 10) For this Kurd the increasing intergroup polarization since 2011 has changed the way she makes her ethnicity salient, while also increasing her self-identification with her Kurdish ethnic group. "Well before

the crisis I just felt that I'm Syrian. But after the crisis I try to feel a little more like I am Kurdish. After the crisis I started to feel people don't like Kurds very much, and they talk in a bad way about us. That's why I started to feel that I'm Kurdish and I should be proud to be a Kurdish." (informant 10) Discrimination by the Assad regime and Sunni Arabs against Kurds impacts their relationships and raises concerns about ethnic group ascription and salience. Problems of ethnic group labeling for Kurds occur at the policy level as well. Supposedly the regime has changed the way it classifies Syrian Kurds on the identity card. In the past it was Syrian Kurd and now is Syrian Arab. As informant 19 noted, "So now when they look at my ID, they will not know that I am Kurdish." One consequence of the discrimination is more distrust by Kurds of others (informant 17).

Informant 10 felt that both Sunni Arab and Kurdish ethnic groups demanded 100% agreement to be part of the group. However, the informant never felt 100% comfortable with either group. Her ethnic identification depends on who she is interacting with: with Syrian Arabs, she is proud to be Kurdish, with Kurds she doesn't feel part of their group. She doesn't want to be Kurdish or Syrian because of the demands that come with such commitments, such as marrying the right person or teaching your children about the Kurdish culture (informant 10). In part she is rebelling against the traditional Kurdish culture and the way of thinking, instead wanting more freedom. It is interesting to note that several Kurds mentioned that they are proud to call themselves Syrian, validating the larger Syrian identity (informants 10, 18). So while some Kurds may prefer to hide their identity from the regime and other people, other Kurds want their Kurdish identity to be known to others.

In summary it can be seen how the history, geography, intergroup relations, marginalization and persecution by the regime has affected Kurdish identification in Syria. Kurds have been forced to live in one of the most difficult farming areas, lacked citizenship and other critical development, and were denied use of their language and festivals, providing evidence of systematic marginalization and oppression by the regime and Sunni Arab community. In response, Kurds have surreptitiously shared materials on Kurdish history, culture and politics, and advocated and fought for more rights and equality. Also, the widespread diversity in their areas and globalization dynamics, such as German guest worker and Soviet communist experiences, have affected their social, cultural and economic beliefs. The Kurdish people value the family, education, hard work, in-group marriage, independence, safety and support for the Kurdish community, while being competitive with other Kurds at the societal level. The aggregation of all these experiences have affected Kurdish ethnic identification, leading to a strong sense of pride. These actions and identity changes have been impacted by key events, especially the 2011 uprising, which enabled Syrian Kurds to develop their own strong military capability to the extent that they have de facto control over their territory and are able to implement some policies in support of their culture, such as language and education policies. This ensemble of experiences, values, beliefs and practices represent the Kurdish ethnic identity in Syria.

Druze: a close and warm community

The Druze live in southern Syria on Druze Mountain in Sweida governorate, a dry, hilly area, with another small area near the Lebanese border. In 2000 they made up

only 3.2% of the Syrian population or about 640,000 people (Izady 2014; see map in chapter two). Supposedly about 350,000 Druze still live in the Sweida area with another 100,000 in diaspora (informant 2). Druze also live in Lebanon and Palestine, although there are some political and religious differences. According to informant 2, the Druze people of Palestine are more stubborn, more work-oriented and more materialistic, while the Druze of Lebanon are more spiritual and understanding. The Druze of Sweida are a mix of the two cultures, valuing hard work, understanding and social relationships (informant 2). In this section I summarize their history, values and beliefs, economic situation with migration and remittance, neutrality and role in the revolution.

The Druze ethnic identity is primarily sectarian and traditional, with a strong sense of community and support for in-group members. For the older generation there is a belief in the religious and cultural traditions, such as farming.

> But if I want to describe the Druze ethnic identity, somehow it is a sectarian identity. The Druze identity for them is very important. Sometimes it even more important than the missionary identity. Actually they believe that they are part of Syria of course and part of all other religious and ethnic groups. They believe in living in peace with them in one country, but they also believe in their own identity as Druze….
>
> I think somehow I am proud of the Druze history…. but not that proud. I mean I think we should work for now and for the future. Not that proud to stay still…. because many Druze members are acting like that. Because of the risk they don't even move…. I am proud of the warm relationship between the Druze. I like this warm relationship. It is very close sometimes. Sometimes you feel that you live in a community, not as an isolated member. But at the same time, I don't like many things. Not proud of the identity itself, no. I think we shouldn't think of Druze identity. I told you from the very beginning.

I see myself as a human being. (informant 25)

For this informant, the Druze identity is defined as much by the strong solidarity and warmth within the group as by social prohibitions against marrying someone from another ethnic or religious group, and a general fear of Muslims, politics, and other threats. These fears lead to isolation from other communities (informant 25). In this sense, a significant portion of Druze support traditional social structures, such as family and community relations. However, this informant, like other Druze interviewed, believes in the need to critique and change the Druze culture to keep pace with larger societal changes. In this vein she believes in a broader sense of shared humanity, which I explore more later.

Druze historical events

Several main historical events are important for the Druze culture and identity. Key events include the founding of Druze in the 11th century, repeated migrations, their role in the Syrian fight for independence in the 1920s, and protests during Assad regime rule.

One significant event was the founding of the Druze religion during what they call the kingdom era (informant 2). It was founded by Hakim bi Amr Alla (aka Hamza bin Ali) in the 11th century, when a small group of Fatimi/Ismaeli Muslims became impatient with the delay in the coming of the Mahdi, their God or messiah. Druze followers existed as early as 1030 AD in the areas of Aleppo, Antioch, Damascus and Ramla. Even at that time there was significant persecution, leading to the Druze withdrawal to mountainous areas for protection (Firro 1992: 16). This study's informants recognized that the Druze have been migrating for centuries in search of peace and

safety: "We came basically from… Palestine in the early 1800s…. We kind of circulated from Yemen to Saudi Arabia, to Palestine, Lebanon and then Syria." (informant 23) The Druze were persecuted by many groups over the centuries, which led to the custom of *taqiyya*, whereby the Druze conceal their beliefs to blend in with dominant social groups (Firro 1992). Both the Alawi and Druze practice taqiyya.

A second major Druze historical event was the Syrian independence from France. Sultan Pasha Al-Atrash was a Druze political leader who played a major role in Syria revolution against first the Ottomans in 1920s and then the French from 1925 to 1937. The Druze were well-known as ferocious fighters during this period. Some Druze are proud of the fact that they lost many men fighting in the Syrian independence – supposedly half the people who died fighting for independence were Druze (informant 23, 25). The heavy loss of life a century ago may influence the isolationist stance presently taken by the Druze, as they try to maintain neutrality in the current conflict.

Events under the Assad regime also mark the group's history and identity. In 2000 a Syrian Bedouin working for the regime security system killed a Druze, which led to massive protests by Druze and heavy repression by the regime using tanks and heavy weapons. Thirty Druze were killed and over 400 disappeared (informant 25). In March 2011 the imprisonment and torture of 15 Druze school children was a catalyst for the current uprising in Syria. The regime brought in tanks, artillery and air power to put down the Druze rebellion, with heavy loss of life for the Druze and many people imprisoned (informant 25). These two events may reinforce the Druze position of neutrality. In September 2015 the assassination of the important Druze leader, Sheikh

Wahid al Balous, also led to protests. Al Balous was active preventing Druze

conscription, and mediating the release of Druze prisoners from regime jails and of Druze

who had been kidnapped (informant 25). This story is worthwhile telling, since it reflects

the relative power of the group, even given their small size:

> Actually last September there was this incident in As
> Sweida. The regime assassinated one of the leaders, Al
> Balous he was named. He was kind of a big deal because a
> few or many religious men gathered around his religious
> ideology and he constantly challenged the president even
> with his declarations. "We don't give a damn and I know
> you want to assassinate me." His declarations are on
> YouTube and you can see it.
>
> And once the assassination occurred, like Druze [regime]
> security centers were immediately attacked by the Druze
> and their military officials were held as hostages. They
> were such a mess. I don't believe the Druze people talk as
> much as they take action.… But back in As Sweida there
> weren't demonstrations until something happens. Such
> things they move and react immediately and with amazing
> effects. Seriously three security centers in As Sweida, that
> was a big kind of [deal], the military intelligence, the
> political intelligence and the security intelligence, three
> buildings at once. Since that incident, it kind of changed
> how people think because people judged As Sweida as an
> proponent city and judged the people as all proponents, and
> all bullies, all supporting the regime. They don't have the
> idea, the real idea about As Sweida. (confidential
> informant)

We see here how the Druze have considerable military power when they want to

act, yet the outgroup perception of the Druze is as supporters of the Assad regime. Prior

to the rise of the Alawites into senior positions in the Syrian military in the 1970s, the

Druze held many of those positions.

Politically the Druze community has generally tried to stay neutral in the current

armed conflict in Syria, although there is a split within the group. Some Druze leaders

still support the regime while others are critical of it. Supposedly the Druze have worked

hard to maintain this neutrality, including preventing conscription of Druze fighters into

regime military forces (informant 25). The extended families of Druze who oppose the

regime, like with the defection of UN ambassador, are under constant watch, and often

imprisoned and disappeared (informant 25).

Druze values and beliefs
　　　　A number of important values and beliefs for Druze were identified during this

study. These include family, honor, understanding and respect for others, solidarity,

strong social norms and restrictions, gender equality and a humanist worldview. These

beliefs exist within various parts of the Druze society, sometimes among more traditional

Druze and other times among people seeking social change. I explore these themes

below.

　　　　The Druze value family relationships very highly, with considerable concern

about and effort put into ensuring their safety and wellbeing (informant 2). Each family

has a family *thaluns*, which is the place or base where the extended family gathers for

important events. The family chooses the family elder or leader, who's house is usually

the thaluns. When there is a major event in the community, like a wedding or funeral, the

extended family will gather at the thaluns before going as a group to the event. Weddings

usually occur in the summer, when family members who are abroad can return and

participate (informant 23). The value of family support is described by the following

narrative.

> Well, taking care of the family is something that we all do.
> This is something that is encouraged by the culture. So you

start that from your own house. You need to help your
brother and family first, and after that, secondly your
cousins, so you also have certain roles with your cousins.
And then you have to give back to society, which is
something very important as well. They would see you
doing that and they would actually encourage it. Helping
others is very important and keeping the idea of Druze
clean, this is something that is extremely important.
(informant 2)

The idea of keeping the Druze clean refers to always doing good things, like

speaking good about other people, doing good deeds, and helping others. There is a belief

that bad behavior will impact the whole group: "So they would teach you to never do bad

things in the name of Druze, because then you would actually set the whole culture

back." (informant 2) The idea of keeping the Druze clean is significant because the Druze

ethnic group is so small, each person must make sure that its reputation is maintained. In

this way other ethnic groups don't view Druze as bad people, and thereby limit

opportunities or create threats to the group. In many ways, this idea is about honor for the

family and ethnic group. With the honor is a belief in honesty and saying what is right, as

mentioned by several Druze informants.

Some of the most important values for Druze are understanding and respect for

other group members, along with adaptability (informant 2, 23). Since they are a small

group and value maintaining the Druze culture, they need to accommodate to the

different ideas of group members. This requires tolerance, communication and patience:

"When you relate to other people, the other people will actually feel more open to you. In

that way they will be more open to your ideas. Unconsciously they will start asking you

questions, understanding more about you, and they will be more interested in you,

because you are interested in them." (informant 2) However, more conservative Druze

may reject the need to adapt to other's beliefs, as explained by the informant below.

> And I think most of the Druze are flexible, so you would talk to them and they would absorb all the energy that you have, then you don't have to do a lot of bad things. You don't have to cut yourself away from them. If you give yourself the time to get know them. But we have a lot of people that don't like this kind of mentality, this kind of identity, so they would say that we want to stay away from that culture. (informant 2)

There is a tension between Druze who are more liberal and open-minded, and

those who are more conservative and unwilling to accept different beliefs or opinions.

While I will discuss the more traditional Druze who resist social or cultural change

shortly, the Druze who are more flexible merit further examination.

Generally there is considerable solidarity among group members because they are

a small, closed group. One informant described this solidarity as the "warm relationships"

that exist. When someone accomplishes something, gets married, or dies, everyone

comes together and celebrates (informant 25). They also try to help each other and ensure

other Druze are doing the right things for the group (informant 2). The first priority for

helping others is with the immediate family, followed by the extended family and then

others, although the difficult economic situation for many Druze families makes

providing assistance difficult. The conflict may have increased group solidarity, since

group members may be working together more, "fighting other threats to [the] culture"

(informant 2). Reportedly there is even more solidarity within the Druze sub-group of

religious people: whenever possible they will trade and interact with just those Druze

who are religious. It is this solidarity that is associated with the liberal, open-minded

beliefs of some Druze.

However, with the solidarity comes social restrictions which are disliked by many

of the younger Druze as they try to change some Druze customs (confidential informant).

The younger generation is more open, as seen by frequent self-identification references to

being humanist or human and trying to change social customs.

> I think the new generation is revolting. It's in the middle of
> their own revolution. They are trying to involved against all
> the bad customs, the inherited ones, like the marriage And
> their personal freedom, they are demanding personal
> freedom, many of them actually. Particular the ones that
> participated in the revolution, and they are not few [there
> are many].

> Actually I was a member of the As Sweida Students
> Coordinating [Committee]…. We were coordinating
> demonstrations and the Syrians met this coordinating, we
> call it coordinating. In As Sweida we got a few [groups].
> One of them were the students coordinating. If you saw the
> movement in Syria, the students were the… most active.
> Not the leaders, but the most active. Because one of the
> times, more than 3,000 students were demonstrating in As
> Sweida.… for As Sweida it was a very big number. High
> school and college [students] are pushing for that, but also
> they… need someone to lead the way. Because they are
> educated and have this energy, but they need to attend
> development training to know what is democracy,
> citizenship and their rights. (confidential informant)

So, while there is a perception among Druze of a warm culture with considerable

solidarity, there also is a tension between some younger Druze who balk at the social

restrictions and norms, and seek more freedom.

Generally there is more gender equality in the Druze society than with other

Syrian ethnic groups. Reportedly more women than men finish college, since men may

be poorer, have to complete their military service, or are in other countries. The Druze women work hard to develop and educate themselves (informant 25). Women are allowed to do most things that men do (informant 2). As one example of the respect for women and equality, reportedly a major conflict in Sweida erupted when a Druze man confronted a man who was insulting two Muslim women wearing hijabs, saying that the women were under Druze protection and no one should harm them (informant 2).

Druze marriage rules follow the larger Syrian and Islamic legal frameworks, giving most rights to the man and not allowing Druze women to marry outside the Druze ethnic group (informant 2). However, there is a social movement advocating for civil marriages (informant 25). Divorce and remarriage is permissible in the Druze culture (informant 2). Because the Druze value marriage within the group and the group is so small, they have a saying "The Druze are like a chain." (informant 23) In this sense endogamy is common, along with various social and biological consequences. In any small group of Druze, there is a high probability of being related. Hence families are closely connected by marriage and blood: "If there are three Druze sitting in one office, they are like 80% chance that we are related. So it's that close. But I guess people in time learn to value and have more communication with their small family." (informant 23). These marriage and blood ties complicate social relationships within the group, generating support in some cases and conflict in others. It also makes the breaking of such relationships difficult and traumatic for all concerned.

The Druze ethnic identity contains a mix of religious and cultural aspects. When asked if religion was a big part of the Druze identity, one source stated: "Yes, I guess.

You kind of live by it. Because if you have certain religious morals and certain

principles, they kind of live by it. So it surely affects their identity and who they are, and

the way they communicate with society and community." (informant 23) Other Druze see

their ethnic identification as being more secular than religious, with the Druze more:

"open minded. Most of them are secular. They may be an ethnic group, but not a

religious group." (informant 25) When asked if the Druze identity was mainly religious,

another informant responded:

> No, it's not all about religion. We have religious people
> who are more focused on religion and they try to make
> others understand the way of Druze's thinking and what
> should we do and what we should not do, and they try to
> define that.
>
> But then you go out of the circle and you have people who
> are more into the culture itself, more to the work which the
> culture brought. Druze have been living on mountains since
> forever, and they like this kind of weather, toughness, and
> they work mostly in agriculture. So they have this mentality
> of always to keep and develop it, and pass it down to
> others. Still, we have let's say, 20% of the people who are
> more open to the outside world and they try to develop
> things more. (informant 2)

Seen here are the stronger beliefs in the cultural aspects of the Druze identity for

some people, while religion is a large part of the identity for others. More likely both

dynamics are part of similar continuums, with greater and lesser levels of belief in the

religious and cultural aspects. For example, some Druze may highly value religious

aspects while having lesser beliefs (more or less along the continuum) in cultural aspects.

Others may highly value the culture, with lower values for religion. Still others may value

both the traditional religion and culture – at either high or low levels. For example, one

informant (24) said he didn't believe strongly in either the religious or cultural aspects of the Druze ethnic identity – low levels along both continuums.

As mentioned some Druze believe part of the Druze identity is humanist, with an openness to other groups and belief that all people are equal, a "more open mentality… more understanding." (informant 2) This commonality seen across social and ethnic groups by Druze can be explained by the following:

> The trick in here is the word "human being." Well actually the most common thing between us is not mentality, it's not the brain, it's not the way of thinking, it's the adaptability. So if you take a human being and put him in a culture, what makes him survive is that he adapts to this culture. So it's the same thing. If you take a person to a mountain he adapts to the mountain. Otherwise he won't survive. So this is the most important common ground between us. (informant 2)

With these insightful comments about human adaption and how local environments affect societies, we see the common belief among Druze that they have adapted to the harsh environment that they were forced to move to generations ago. Possibly as part of this humanist world view or simply to blend in with surrounding ethnic groups, the Druze celebrate other religious traditions. Some Druze follow the Eid and Ramadan Islamic holidays and fasting, and Christian holidays like Christmas (informant 2). Even with this openness and adaptability, the Druze are concerned about maintaining their unique culture and traditions: "We try to protect as much as we can, but I think it's also discouraged… of them bringing in a different mentality. The thing is we don't want people to come in and then they force their way of life on us, or to bring out something which we are not used to." (informant 2) Here the informant is referring to

cultural changes imposed by Sunni Arabs or other larger groups, and Druze efforts to maintain their ethnic identity and culture.

In this section I identified key values and beliefs for Druze. These include family, honor, understanding and respect for others, solidarity, strong social norms and restrictions, gender equality, and a humanist worldview. Various parts of the Druze society value these beliefs at different levels, yet generally there is considerable solidarity and recognition of the group's small size and need for special efforts to maintain the group's ethnic identity and traditions, albeit with some changes to keep up with modernity.

Economics, migration, and remittances

One interesting dynamic for the Druze is the combination of lack of opportunities at home, good education and skills, migration to other countries for work, and sending remittances home or returning home after several years. For many years there were few work opportunities in As Sweida. Meanwhile, the Druze have valued education, providing quality elementary education in the local villages and encouraging youth to go to larger cities for university studies. This led to solid skills sets. With these skills many Druze emigrated to other countries for work, sending remittances home to their families and sometimes returning home after several years. In some cases, the extended families travel to the same location, such as Saudi Arabia, and maintain the extended family bonds in that location.

Several Druze informants mentioned that this pattern was common for Druze, due to limited work opportunities for Druze in Syria. As one informant explained: "The

reason that most of the natural resources in Syria are not taken into consideration, they are not developing so well, so people don't have much income. So people try to move abroad and work to send money back, or after getting a little bit of money, they would go back and start their own work, family work." (informant 2) There was little economic or infrastructure development in Sweida during the Assad regimes, in part because the Druze didn't advocate for more development and the Assad regime suppressed any activism (informant 23). The lack of development in the Druze Mountain area was emphasized by several informants. For example, while Deir E Zor has a special trade zone at its border with Jordan, Sweida was denied such a trade zone (informant 25). Also, development in local Druze communities in Sweida has been blocked by the regime, even agricultural projects or digging wells, for the last 40 years (informant 25).

With the widespread poverty in Sweida also comes frugality and living a simple life. When asked if most Druze are poor, one response was that most are not poor, since they are used to living with very little. Older Druze stay active working all day and are happy, not bored, even though they may not have electricity or TV. They are self-sufficient (informant 2). As he described it: "Things are extremely difficult from the beginning. This is not something new, since even from before the crisis, things were the same. So you can get extremely very little money out of such a big mountain, such a harsh mountain, so you need to develop more. You send people outside, most of them would work and send money back, so you can develop something inside of As Sweida." (informant 2)

Druze Mountain is a volcanic mountain and few people lived or farmed there prior to the Druze settlements about 200 years ago, according to informants. Farming in Druze Mountain is very difficult and hard work. Many Druze were farmers, until education levels started rising in the 1960s and 1970s. Presently about 20% of Druze still work in farming, while 80% work in other sectors inside or outside Syria. Many Sweida farms may be controlled by large landlords (informant 2, 23). Hard work appears to be a major part of the Druze identity, in response to the difficult geographical environment they live in.

> They have this idea that there's no hard work - as long as you're working, it will happen. So they are pretty much stubborn. But still though, they make things happen. I have seen a lot of miracles from that place. You would go to a land which has nothing, is very poor, and they don't grow anything there, and they make magic, they make miracles. They invest in it. They put their sweat and blood in it, and after a while, two or three years, it would be productive. They try to promote in our culture the idea of doing good. And quitting is not something good. So always try to keep pushing hard until you achieve the things that are important to you. (informant 2)

The Druze try to be self-sufficient, growing their own food locally. Some of the more common agricultural products include apples, grapes and olives (informant 2).

Druze have emigrated to other Middle Eastern countries, the United States and South America in search of better work (informant 2). For one Druze family the extended family was large, with six separate households living in Saudi Arabia at one time, often getting together each week to maintain their cultural traditions. Reportedly many Druze who went to Latin America have done well economically and send remittances home to their families in Sweida for personal expenses and development projects.

In summary, the Druze economic situation includes combination of lack of opportunities at home, good education and skills, migration to other countries for work, and sending remittances home or returning home after several years. There was little economic or infrastructure development in Sweida during the Assad regimes. With the widespread poverty in Sweida also comes hard work, frugality, and living a simple life. Migration for work and sending of remittances to home communities are common for the Druze.

Druze neutrality and the revolution

I tested my assumptions with one informant about the Sunni belief that their religion can be the basis for the Syrian government and society, and minority groups should accommodate to Sunni norms. She responded by describing her intergroup relations and the social structures that exist between Druze and Sunni Arabs, starting with Sunni Arab beliefs about whether their norms should dominate Syrian society.

> I think the majority, most of them [Sunni Arabs] think so. Not all of course…. When I was coming here to Turkey to attend a workshop, I always had to prove that I am with you. I am against the regime. So they were… I was in that suspicious position all the time…. because how could you, a minority, stand with us. I am not with them, I was with justice. But they think that way…. If you weren't with us, you are against us. For that they are judging the Druze, that they are against the revolution. And they [Druze] are not against the revolution. In their hearts they are, most of them are with the revolution. But because these reasons, complicated situation, they couldn't get involved more.

> You know we have many people who were tortured to death in regime prisons. Actually they are more than 20 people. So the regime tried to act in the different way with the Druze. To try to terrify them in such a way. But indirect way, like they did with other areas of Syria. Like when we are missing someone we are afraid that they are under

torture. (confidential informant)

Here the Druze perception of Sunni Arab beliefs and expectations for Syrians can be seen. From the Druze position, there is a demand from Sunni Arabs that Druze do more to support the revolution and oppose the Assad regime. More generally, there is the imposition by Sunni Arabs on the small Druze minority: the belief that Sunni Arabs know best and Syrian minorities must accommodate Sunni Arab norms and beliefs. Meanwhile, the Druze community is divided in its support for the Assad regime, with some supporting the regime and others encouraging neutrality or opposition. Like other groups, the Druze have suffered from regime persecution and fear more violence.

In summary, there are several key characteristics for the Druze ethnic identity and ethnic group relations. As a small, marginalized minority group of about 640,000 people, they work hard to maintain their ethnic identity and live peacefully with other Syrian ethnic groups. Central values and beliefs for the Druze include family, honor, understanding and respect for others, solidarity, strong social norms and restrictions, gender equality and a humanist worldview. The idea of keeping the Druze clean refers to always doing good things, like speaking good about other people, doing good deeds, and helping others. They have a sectarian, traditional culture, with a strong sense of community and support for in-group members. The group is organized around the family *thaluns*, a traditional, elected patriarchal leadership practice. The Druze have a secretive religion based on reincarnation, with a small group of religious leaders, about a third of the group religiously active, and the balance considered materialistic Druze, or those who are not religiously active. Major historical events over the last century, such as the Syrian

revolution in the 1920s and protests in 2011 leading to the start of Syrian uprising, mark moments when the Druze played significant roles in the larger Syrian society. The Druze are proud of their history and religion. The Druze have been forced to live in an environment with few resources. Economically, the Druze experience comprises a combination of lack of opportunities at home, good education and skills, migration to other countries for work, and sending remittances home or returning home after several years. The small group size and lack of power also means that the Druze live in deference to the social norms of the dominant Sunni Arab ethnic group, and policies and persecution of the Assad regimes.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I identified and examined many characteristics of the five Syrian ethnic and religious groups in this study. Comparatively, in some cases I find similarities across groups, such as with taqiyya by Alawites and Druze, common concerns or fears of Sunni Arab extremists by minorities, persecution by the Assad regime, living in areas with few resources, generational differences, or validation of family as the core of group life. Marriage across ethnic or religious groups is a main ethnic boundary marker in Syria, with most groups prohibiting members from marrying across borders, particularly for women. In other cases the distinctive aspects noted here are unique to each group, whether it be religion for Christians, Druze or Alawites, the Alawite connection to the Assad regime, Kurdish connections in the rojavi, or Sunni Arab social dominance. These diverse issues affect the ethnic group identities in various ways. Groups seek to maintain their distinctive culture and traditions while also maintaining cooperative social relations.

I identified key findings about Sunni Arab ethnic identity in Syria. Comparatively speaking I have less material on the Sunni Arabs culture and identification than for other ethnic groups, possibly since as the largest and most dominant group their culture is taken for granted. Sunni Arabs have considerable pride in their identity. While there is variation socio-economically among Sunni Arabs, generally they have been the business and land owners in Syrian society. The Sunni Muslim religion is central for the Sunni Arab identity, guiding everyday behavior for many Sunni Arabs, although there are few mechanisms to modernize it, and tension between its individualistic and collective aspects. One possible mechanism to modernize the Sunni religion would be for the various sheikhs to develop consensus on the central Sunni religious beliefs, especially those addressing women's issues, that consider and respond to modern belief systems of other groups and moderate Sunnis. Women have few rights in areas governed by the conservative Sunni Arab culture, with limitations on dress, movement and marriage. Many Sunni Arabs believe their social and religious norms provide space for minority religious beliefs and social norms and should govern Syrian society. A few conservative Sunni Arabs are more extremist and believe religious minorities should convert or be removed from Syria through jihad. Some extremist Sunni Arabs are completely opposed to Alawis due to the Alawi/Assad association and violence by Alawis against Sunnis. As can be seen there are different priorities for diverse Sunni Arabs, with some making strong commitments to socio-economic aspects in their ethnic identity, and others to religious (jihad) or outgroup opposition (anti-Alawi) issues. For many Sunni Arabs ethnic identity is less salient with lower levels of exploration and commitment.

The Alawi ethnic identity involves mistrust and fear of other ethnic groups, in part due to marginalization by Sunni Arabs. Historically many Alawi were farmers under the moraba system, which created a connection to the mountainous land where they are from and a sense of injustice at the socio-economic structures. Ethnic identity for most Alawi is tied to the Assad regime, seeing it as a source of pride and protection for the group. The Alawi religion involves reincarnation and other special aspects, but is a small part of the visible ethnic identity since it is hidden from most outsiders. Only men are able to participate in the religion, while women are made to fear it. The Alawi culture is much more open and festive, with music, drinking and dance, than for other Syrian groups. On the surface Alawi women have considerable freedom and independence, but at a deeper level there is significant gender inequality. These characteristics make for a distinct ethnic identity for the Alawi in Syria, with some similarities to other minority groups like the Druze and Kurds, but unique aspects in other areas. The level of salience and commitment appears to be high for most Alawis, although exploration is low to moderate.

Christians identities in Syria vary by Christian sect, yet share commonalities due to histories of persecution and oppression, leading to efforts to maintain the ethnic group and its identity. Stories of genocide and forced marches live in the collective memory. Religion is a fundamental part of the Christian identity, with many activities evolving around the church. Many social institutions, such as the education, Scouts, marriage and group boundaries, exist to rebuild the group's size and distinctive cultural aspects, such as language, music and the arts. Gender-wise Christian women have considerable

freedom. Politically many Christians support the Assad regime, primarily out of fear of Sunni Muslim extremists. Socio-economically, most Christians appear to be better off than other groups, with strong social capital and networks. Salience, exploration and commitment may be high for many Syrian Christians.

Like the Druze and Alawi, the history, geography, intergroup relations, marginalization and persecution by the regime has affected Kurdish identity in Syria. Kurds have been forced to live in one of the most difficult farming areas, lacked citizenship and other critical development, and were denied use of their language and festivals. In response, Kurds have surreptitiously shared materials on Kurdish history, culture and politics, and advocated and fought for more rights and equality. The extensive diversity in their areas and globalization dynamics, such as German guest worker and Soviet communist experiences, have affected their social, cultural and economic beliefs. The Kurdish people value family, education, hard work, marriage with similar people, independence, safety and support for the Kurdish community, while being competitive with other Kurds at the societal level. The aggregation of these experiences have affected Kurdish ethnic identification leading to a strong sense of pride. Key events, especially the 2011 uprising, enabled Syrian Kurds to develop their own strong military capability to the extent that they have de facto control over their territory and are able to implement policies in support of their culture, such as language and education policies. This ensemble of experiences, values, beliefs and practices represent the Kurdish ethnic identity in Syria.

As a small, marginalized minority group, the Druze strive to maintain their ethnic identity and live peacefully with other Syrian ethnic groups. Druze values and beliefs include family, honor, understanding, respect for others, solidarity, strong social norms and restrictions, gender equality and a humanist worldview. The Druze try to do good things to keep the group's honor clean, like speaking good about others, doing good deeds and helping others. They have a sectarian, traditional culture, with a strong sense of community and support for in-group members. The group is organized around the family thaluns, a traditional, patriarchal leadership practice. The Druze have a secretive religion based on reincarnation, with a small group of religious leaders and about a third of the group religiously active. The Druze are proud of their history and religion. Economically, the Druze experience comprises a combination of lack of opportunities at home, good education and skills, migration to other countries for work, and sending remittances home or returning home after several years. The small group size and lack of power means the Druze must adapt to Sunni Arab social norms ethnic group, and policies and persecution of the Assad regime. In general the Druze people have considerable salience and commitment to their ethnic identity, with varying levels of exploration and knowledge.

The individual narratives from Druze, Kurds, Alawis, Sunni Arabs, and Christians highlight the fact that each person often has a life changing event that affects their world view and personal identity, and depending on the context and consequences, their commitment to their ethnic group identity. For some it was war related: a specific bombing that killed 100 people, or the disappearance of a family member or friend. For others, a search for God or a higher power, or the listening to heavy metal music.

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However, these individual stories and paths combine at the group level to form the group's sense of identity, which is often fluid, with group members on continuum of salience, exploration and commitment. For some Syrians ethnic identification is strong and affects many aspects of daily lives. For others, much less so, or only in certain spaces and times, such as when interacting with outgroups. Overall, ethnic identity is a major social identifier, with many Syrians having strong stereotypes about other groups and seeking information about other ethnicity as a means to categorize others and guide social interaction. Next I look at two social dynamics that further affect Syrian ethnic identity.

CHAPTER FIVE: RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN SYRIA: MINORITY FEARS OF SUNNI EXTREMISM

Building on the previous chapters that indirectly address religion, in this chapter I examine the religious beliefs of the five ethnic groups in this study and some of the more visible tensions between Syrian ethnic groups over religion. This builds on Lewis (1998), who stressed the critical role that religion plays in ethnic identification in the Middle East. About 90% of the Syrian population is Muslim, mainly Sunni, and 10% Christian (Widdicombe 2011; Tomass 2014; Pipes 1990; Lewis 1998), making Sunni Islam the dominant religious identity, and basis for social norms and social comparison. Here I look at the broader context on religious issues, examine the religious beliefs of each of the five groups, and finally explain the central finding that Sunni religious extremism and corresponding fear have become a central part of ethnic group identities in Syria. In effect, this finding hinges on minority ethnic group fears of Sunni Muslim religious domination, which I explain further below.

The religious basis for identity in Syria is dominated by the Muslim religion, but is split into Shia and Sunni sects. The two sects have different beliefs as to who is the rightful leader of the Muslim religion, and differing doctrine, jurisprudence and customs. The Sunni sect believes that Prophet Muhammad is the leader, while Shias believe that the Prophet's cousin Ali is the true leader. The more extreme members of each group view the other group as apostates or heretics (Byman 2014), which, as Coser (1956)

found, was the worst form of person for group identity, since they hold roughly the same beliefs as the original group, but create new factions. Heretics create a tremendous dissonance over the core sense of identity of the group.

It should be noted that Shia religious groups were not a major factor in this study. First, demographics bear out the fact that Sunni/Shia interaction was limited: as of 2014 about 2.1% of the Syrian population was Ismaeli or Arabic speaking Sevener Shias and 1.1% were Imami/Jafari Shias or Twelver Shias (Izady 2014). Izady identifies the Alawi as Gnostics, along with the small Nusari group. This means that the Shia may have numbered 720,000 people in Syria at the beginning of the conflict, a small fraction of the larger population. Second, there were no Shia Muslims that could be found in the Turkey-based Syria humanitarian sector. If they existed, they kept a low profile. Few informants mentioned Shia friends or acquaintances. Third, the issue of the Sunni-Shia schism and religious conflict was not mentioned by informants as being an important issue. Shia beliefs were mentioned indirectly by Sunni Arabs in reference to Sunni beliefs that they know the right way to understand Allah and the Islamic faith, meaning the Shia do not. They were also referenced slightly in comments about Alawis being part of the Shia faith. Only informant 3, who was Sunni, mentioned the Sunni/Shia conflict: "This was a sensitive topic in Syria because we used to live in a very engaging way with each other. So they [the elders] were very afraid about these things. Speaking about it will get it to the surface again. So I think that they were very sensitive about it, and they didn't mention it a lot." Generally cooperative social interaction appeared to be common even

though such relationships were sensitive. However overall, the issue of the Shia-Sunni conflict was not a significant theme in this study.

There are several implications of this minimal role for the Shia. First and foremost, the current armed conflict does not break down neatly as a Sunni-Shia conflict. Sunnis and Shia have coexisted socially and politically in Syria for many years. The conflict is much more about power and control by the state, and freedom from oppression by opposition groups. Granted, discrimination and persecution of Shia by Sunnis may have occurred in Syria, but no more so than for any other religious minority in Syria. Shias have not been singled out as a major military force in the Syrian military, like the Alawi currently or Druze in the past. Second, the larger Sunni-Shia regional conflict between Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq and Hezbollah wasn't active in Syria at the beginning of the uprising. Only recently have Shias from Iran and Hezbollah entered the conflict in force, escalating the visibility of the Sunni-Shia split and tensions between groups. What stands out from this analysis is the minimal role for Shias in intergroup ethnic relations and ethnic identification. The Shia just were not an important factor in discussions with informants in this study.

Bernard Lewis (1998) makes the case that religious identity is the central identity for Muslims. First, for Muslims religion is the core value and belief that guides all action. Second, group identity is based on which form of religion a person adheres to, whether Islamic or non-Islamic sects. Allegiance to the religious group, along with communal loyalty and conformity to the group are key aspects of the Muslim identity. Third, Islam does not view a separation between church and state as understood by Western societies,

since Islam was born as part of a religious empire, in which God views the state as a divine good or mechanism to implement his law. Islam developed under the Prophet Mohammed under a growing empire, where God gave his blessing for the victories and dominance over other religions and people. In this vein, a *martyr* in the current Syrian armed conflict is anyone who is killed for the good of the religion, whether civilian or fighter. Martyrdom is a good thing. Lewis' (1998) description of the central role of religion in Muslim identity highlights the need to assess the role of religion in social and ethnic identities, although it is important to note the significant influence of non-religious identities, such as tribe and ethnicity. These findings by Lewis emphasize the differences between the various religions, which in turn affect intergroup relations.

One illustration of variation in religious identification in Syria is the belief in reincarnation, which mainly occurs among the Druze and Alawite sects (Bennet 2006). This belief in reincarnation is not common among Muslims or Christians, and is generally rejected by mainstream Muslims. Druze and Alawite beliefs in reincarnation differ, although Bennett does not clarify the Alawi reincarnation beliefs. Among the Druze, there are various levels of acceptance of reincarnation, from skeptics to strong believers. Bennett (2006) notes the Druze identification is socialized or transferred through reincarnation stories. Only certain adults learn the details of the Druze religious beliefs, which include the ideas that human beings are a fixed number of people, with each person having one body and one soul. When the body dies the soul transfers to, or is reincarnated in, another body. Since the Druze have not accepted converts for 1,000 years, the only way for new Druze to exist is through reincarnation (Bennett 2006:90).

The ideal type or pure Druze occurs through reincarnation. Historically marriage outside the Druze sect was forbidden, although it is happening more frequently in recent generations (Bennett 2006:102). This exclusive, closed circle means that membership in the Druze ethnic group is very limited, their identity is very salient and commitment levels must be high. While intra-personal processes may create doubt about commitment to the Druze identity, perceptions of other groups like Muslims and Christians influence the salience of the identity in public. In the case of the Druze, reincarnation "helps to augment unity, identity, and social cohesiveness." (Bennett 2006:102) These beliefs and customs help to support Druze minority identification against out-group pressures.

Several authors note that even with the different religious beliefs, tolerance and cooperation across Sunni and Shia groups was more common than conflict (Byman 2014). In fact, many of the goals from the March 2011 uprising were shared across religious and ethnic groups (Phillips 2015). Religiosity may differ significantly in Syria with more in-group than intergroup variation, with poor people from Damascus and peasants from Al Ghoutah more active religiously. In these rural villages, they are more likely to have their own mosques, khatibs (preachers) and imams (prayer leaders). Other rural areas have lower religiosity. For example, as of 1970, of the 6,300 villages in Syria, only 1,173 (18.6%) had religious leaders (Batatu (1999). Also, while religious identification appears to be very rigid, it can be elastic, with other identities, such as nationality, ethnicity, family and social class, affecting religious identification (Byman 2014).

Below I look at the religious beliefs and identity of the five main groups in this study.

The centrality of the Sunni Muslim religion

Religion is a very important part of the Sunni Arab identity, although there is variation in levels of religiosity and conservatism. Many Sunnis take their religion seriously and follow its tenants to some extent according to informants. Some Sunni respondents described their families as being religiously moderate. In some cases one parent came from a conservative Sunni family and the other from a more moderate or liberal Sunni family – these relationships often created more moderate Sunni households. For Sunnis in Hama, the 1982 massacre may have increased the conservativeness of their religious practices, with women wearing the hijab more and men refraining from alcohol (informant 5).

The Sunni religion is based on the five pillars of Islam: faith, prayer, charity or zakat, fasting and pilgrimage to Mecca. According to one Sunni Arab informant (20), there are four imams that set the Islamic principles following the Quran and hadiths. Within the Sunni Muslim faith, there are four branches, although only the most devout Sunnis know about these sub-groups, according to informant 7. They are the Shafi'ee, Hanbali, Hanafi, and Malki, each with their own rules and forms for praying. According to informant 5, the Sunni believe that they best uphold the tenants of Islam because they follow both the Quran and the *Sunna du rasul*. Most Sunni Arabs believe in the *Sunna*, which is where the term Sunni comes from. The Sunna are additional instructions or practices of the Prophet Muhammed beyond what is written in the Quran, and include

hadiths or "holy sentences or orders." (informant 5) By following both sets of guidance, some Sunnis believe they best practice the Islamic religion, better than other Islamic groups, such as the Shia, as noted by several informants.

The five pillars are important in everyday Sunni Arab life. Prayer is a very important part of the Sunni identity. The Muslim norm of praying five times a day is followed by more conservative Sunnis and held up as the ideal by many Sunnis, according to informants. One informant (7) described his family's values this way: "So the most important thing is that you need is to pray. I'm talking about my family. The first and most important thing, praying. If you are not praying, you will fail in your life." A second important aspect of Sunni beliefs is doing good deeds, such as helping needy people (informant 12). Informant 11 shared popular stories about prayer versus good deeds: a person who prayed five times a day, but let a cat die from lack of food and water would go to hell, while a person who didn't follow any of the Islamic instructions, but gave water to a dog, would go to heaven. Hence, many Sunnis believe that good deeds outweigh prayer. There is some debate as to whether Sunnis should do good deeds to simply please God or for the sake of helping others (informant 12).

The Sunni religious socialization process is insightful to examine, since it builds the religious identification at the core of the Sunni Arab ethnic identity.

> When their children are young they start sending them to the mosque. I had the same thing. My mother used to send me to the mosque for most of my summertime. When I finished school I would go to attend regular sessions or things like that, speaking, learning about my religion, memorizing Quran, reading. I used to do that a lot during the summertime. So I got connected to that group I think somehow, in some point. And they have stages: each time

you, when you are a very little kid, you go and attend in a
mixed boys and girls, that's when we are very little, like
four or five years old. After that when you got above five
[years old] they start separating the boys and the teachers
would be only men. After that they start to introduce you
to bigger or older kids or a young teacher who can speak
about different topics more related to your age. You create
a lot of relationships in that part with people in the same
group as you. (informant 3)

This informant's training (3) was led by Sunni Arab, and described as Islam, so it

didn't differentiate between Shia and Sunni. He heard a little about some Sunni sub-

groups, such as the Safawi, but didn't learn about the Sunni/Shia difference until age 18

when he started college. For conservative Sunni Arabs, "bringing Islam" or converting

others is an important part of the Muslim faith. It involves explaining the religion, but not

forcing anyone to join (informant 7).

There is some belief by Syrians that conservative religious influences are coming

from outside the country, especially the strict Wahhabi Sunni beliefs from Saudi Arabia.

These influences are most pronounced in the more extreme armed groups, such as Jahbat

al Nusra and Ahrar al Sham, which also have the ability to impose their beliefs on local

populations. However, some informants from conservative Sunni families mentioned

how their families had been conservative for several generations, which problematizes

the argument of conservative outside influences like the Wahhabi. The Muslim

Brotherhood is another conservative Sunni force in Syria. There appears to be a sub-

group of Sunnis who have been conservative for several generations, although the size of

this group is unclear – it is large enough to be mentioned often by informants, but the

impression from this study is that more Syrian Sunnis are moderate than conservative.

There were several criticisms of the Sunni religion. In some cases Sunnis are critical of the foundation of the Sunni religion being on everything said and done by the Prophet Muhammed. Some informants noted that he was just a man, so they think there shouldn't be such emphasis on his every action. "If he touches his hair, people say he touched his hair" and try to determine the religious meaning of that action, with everything the Prophet did becoming sacred. The informant felt this was going too far: if the Prophet married nine women, that doesn't make it right. A Sunni Kurd informant took this a step further, raising questions about the Prophet marrying very young women: in today's world, he would be a pedophile. From the perspective of Syrian minorities, another issue was the problem of power in the hands of Sunni or Shia religious leaders, the sheikhs, with their ability to declare someone an infidel and have them killed. "So the problem you have is power in your group. So if, let's say, I'm a Christian - I can't have power to declare someone as infidel, and the damn Sunnis are declaring me as an infidel – not them, but… their group, they have this ability to kill me if they want to." (confidential informant)

One Sunni Arab female informant identified core dilemmas within the Sunni Muslim religion. At the heart of the religion Sunnis believe that each person connects with Allah directly, without any intermediaries. Each person is judged by their practices and deeds by Allah, not by others. As she put it, when the "Prophet Muhammed came he said there is nothing between you and God. You just have to obey God. And everything you do is for God, not for any other or not for the imam." (confidential informant). While there are benefits from this direct relation with God, the problem is this individualistic

perspective inhibits community or societal-level agreements on the best or most

appropriate Sunni Muslim beliefs, values and norms, even though "at the same time, the

faith encourages us to follow our leaders." (confidential informant). There is little

discussion with other Sunnis about Sunni beliefs and few attempts to reconcile dogmatic

differences. She explained:

> The other thing is when you talk about how Islam wanted
> more of a community based religion, when they asked you
> to be always part of a community, and not get outside of
> your community with your own decisions. This is where
> you find the Sunni Muslims not able sometimes to get
> engaged with each other in the best way. And this is where
> it is a gap. I follow what God says - I don't have to follow
> anybody else. At the same time they cannot balance to be
> part of a community. So they fall between those two and so
> you see a lot of Sunnis have different leaders and visions of
> who is right and what the right is. And they cannot get it all
> under one umbrella or under one leader….

> I think they [Sunni Muslims] do believe in Islam the right
> way, because this is the right way, that you should not
> follow any leader, or you should not obey any leader. You
> should obey just God. At the same time they kept out of
> being part of the community because they misunderstand
> this or they don't understand it quite deeply. Sunnis in the
> end don't believe that they need to judge people, even if
> they do it. But in the end by their beliefs. It is not their role
> to judge them. Nobody's role is to judge them too, because
> it is between them and Allah. So this is where Sunnis are
> really strong at. That is between me and Allah and nobody
> else can judge me or nobody else...

> [Regarding the lack of agreement on everyday practices at
> the community level] Yes, this is where Sunni are very
> weak at…. It is major things that we have differences
> among Sunnis…. Like should we be part with the
> revolution or should we not be part of the revolution. A lot
> of them say we should only follow our leader and others
> say no, Allah asked us not to obey a leader who is not
> following God's [will]. So this is where we came at the
> Sunni, that you see a lot of them are still with the

government and a lot of them are against the government. And lot of them don't really care about the government because where we have a lot of differences about how to act as a community with being a Sunni. So the Sunni is very weak. They usually don't know what is their role in the community. And they cannot get together….

[Regarding the Sunni being more individualistic as a group.] Yes, which is actually opposite what we should be doing. But we don't really have a good understanding of that. Because when you look at the Friday prayer, when you look the hajj, when you look at the 'Eid prayer, you see that it is a collective effort. God asked us to go to Friday prayer, not because he needs us to go to Friday prayer, he asked us go as a community to Friday prayer so we have this collective thinking. This is not happening in the Sunni community. So for us as Muslims… it is 27 times more rewarded when you pray at mosque…. There is a reason why hajj is all at one time during the year. Islam does encourage this collective community thinking, but the Sunni has a very weak understanding of this. Because he has his individual thinking about his religion between him and God. Which he is trying to apply to the community. He does not distinguish between both these roles. (confidential informant)

As seen here several problems exist for the Sunni Muslim religion in Syria. These problems are partly explained by the analysis of Djait (2011). First is the difficulty of modifying or updating the religion from its 6th century roots to present modern ways of living. Several Syrian informants mentioned that the Quran is an ancient document, which leads to the inability of the Islamic religion to regulate or guide modern social practices. Examples noted by Sunni informants include sharia law with its medieval punishments, inflexibility on women's rights, and justifications for having multiple or very young wives. Secondly, Sunni Muslim religious leaders, the sheikhs, do not have a process or system to create consensus on religious interpretations: each sheikh has his interpretation of the Quran and Islamic hadiths, and such interpretations often conflict

with other interpretations. So everyday practices of the Sunni faithful may differ, generating tensions between individuals, families, clans or regions. The fact that Syrian Sunni sheikhs have been installed and controlled by the regime for several decades also inhibits their religious guidance, since every Friday speech in the mosque must be approved by the Syrian regime (confidential informant).

Third, Sunni Islam currently is dominated by a doctrine of individualistic religious practice, with each person determining their own path to Allah, to the detriment of a community orientation. The community orientation of the Sunni religion is exemplified by the zakat, the Muslim tax system, which is either a voluntary or obligatory tax system paid to religious leaders and then given to poor Muslims. However, zakat does not seem to be practiced often in Syria according to informants. One interesting story is that some of the conservative Islamic armed groups in Syria, like Jabhat al Nusra, are attempting to implement the zakat system, and have blocked the work of some of the humanitarian NGOs, since they believe that the NGOs will create dependency among the poor people. The conservative Sunni Arab informant (7) who told this story said that such interpretations and actions were wrong on behalf of Islam, since zakat should be a voluntary donation.

There may be a large gap between the ideal Sunni religion doctrine and everyday practices. As informant 24 noted: "Sometimes to be an ideal person does not exist. They were always stressing on this ideal person, but even themselves, they are not practicing that." (informant 24) Her example is of a man who goes to the mosque every day, but

treats his wife badly. Some neighbors may see him as a good person for going to the mosque, but others see him as bad for treating other people poorly.

More broadly and of import for intergroup relations, one of the main Muslim religious beliefs differentiates people into two groups – those who believe in God and those people who don't. In the first group, the people who believe in God include Muslims, Christians and Jews, since the Prophet Muhammed developed the Muslim religion after studying and building on the Jewish and Christian religions. But all other religions are seen as *kafir (or khafar)* or infidels, including some of the more ancient Syrian religions of the Druze, Yazidis and Alawis, as well as the more global religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, according to informant 20. Some extremist Sunni groups such as ISIS believe it is permissible or even good to kill all kafir. This generates a plausible fear among some minorities of being killed by Sunni for religious reasons, as seen by recent attacks against Iraqi Yazidis by ISIS.

I find religion plays a significant role in the Sunni Arab identification and examine key aspects of the religion and several contradictions mentioned by informants. Key problems include the lack of mechanisms to modernize the Muslim religion and tension between individualistic and collective aspects of the religion.

The secretive Alawi religion
There are several key aspects to the Alawi religion that are important for the group's ethnic identity, even though at first glance it would be seem to be of minor importance for Alawis, since it is not something that is distinctive in the Alawi everyday life. First, it is very secretive and limited to certain Alawi men. Women are not permitted

to learn about the religion. The Alawi religion is passed down from father to son, but only for some families. Second, even though a Shia sheikh declared the Alawi religion a Shia sub-sect (Phillips 2015), the nature of the religion is questioned by Sunni Muslims, some of whom believe it is pagan or idol worship. Some conservative Muslims justify the killing of pagans. Third, there was a major rebellion of an Alawi religious sub-sect, the Murshida in the 1950s, which led to a major schism within the Alawi ethnic group. Finally, it appears the Alawi sheikhs or religious leaders have had considerable power over land, leadership and social norms historically. These various issues highlight the importance of the Alawi religion for their ethnic identity and are explored in this section.

The Alawi religion was originally called *Nusayri*, for Muhammed ibn Nusayr (A.D. 859), but was changed to *Alawite* by the French in the 1920s to signify followers of Ali. It involves beliefs that span various religions, including Shia Muslim, Christianity, Gnostic cosmology, Zoroastrianism, and paganism, with such concepts as a belief in trinities, cyclical events, and reincarnation (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). While one informant said that Alawis supposedly do not have to go to a religious place to pray, since the religion is very individualistic, others said they may worship at a *mazar*, which is like a Shia mosque with a shrine for an Alawi sheikh. Mazar celebrations may involve alcohol, music and dance (informant 22). One informant described the Alawi religion this way:

> They don't change anything. They keep the same traditions
> from one thousand years ago till now. There is not any
> change. But when they interact with other people, they
> have this behavior, personality, between external behaviors
> and internal beliefs. They have their internal beliefs and
> internal rituals, that they don't want anyone to know about.
> But they have social interactions with everyone, and they
> don't refuse any new ideas about science or society or

anything. [This internal-external difference] is something secret in religion. I will give you an example: there is the prayer, every Muslim faction, and the Alawites pray, there is no talk or not any activities. They just sit down or walk, and they empty their minds. They call it the internal prayer. So it is inside. On the other hand, they also sometimes go to the mosque, a regular mosque, and they pray as Sunni and Shia. They are Muslims, but they have their own prayer that is different than the usual Muslim prayer. And also during Ramadan when all Muslims are fasting, they don't fast - they pretend it - because they don't believe that fasting is related to being a Muslim. So they have their internal behaviors and external behaviors. And also they have their internal beliefs and external beliefs. So you just know about their external things, external thoughts, but you can't know about their internal side.… I don't know if you met some Druze or Ismailis – they have the same thing about this internal background, especially the Druze. (confidential informant)

This narrative is supported and expanded upon by another Alawi woman, who

explains why the Alawi beliefs are important to her:

They do believe that God is Ali. You know who Ali is right? So they believe that he's God. And they believe that he came to earth as a human named Ali…. They have beliefs that I really, really like. Like you don't have to pray to be close to God, or you don't have to fast Ramadan to be close to God. You will be close to God by being good, not lying, not cheating on your spouse, helping. I mean, this is what they say, but they are not doing any of this, like what you can see now in Syria. But I love those values that I was told when I was a little girl. Because I remember when I was little, going to my father and saying that all of my Sunni friends are fasting and I'm not, and he said we're Alawite people, and Alawites pray by being good to other people and don't lie…. But when I grew up, I knew from other Alawites that they would support each other like crazy. I mean, even if they were in conflict with each other, when another party steps in, they will be together, one hand... because they know that they are a minority, and they know that they only have each other. (confidential informant)

Here I see the explanation for the values of honesty, doing good, and helping other people, and how the religion has an individualistic nature, with each person communing with God directly.

The secretive and exclusive nature of the Alawi religion was a common narrative for most Alawi informants. A small group of men are allowed into the Alawi religion, with some Alawi families excluded for several generations (confidential informant). Those Alawi men who are religious active are called *khassah*, while the non-religious are called *ammah* (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). Young men who have the right family connections or attitudes are invited to attend the *snarf*, the religious teachings or initial ritual. Alawi men who are initiated into the religion are told the secret to the religion, but are sworn not to tell anyone else other than the person who taught you. "Alawi boys usually learn about the secret when they are 14 or 15 years old. It is forbidden to share the secret with anyone outside the group, and you can only talk about the secret with the person who taught you. You can talk about it with your father, but not your mother." (confidential informant) While several Alawi women referred to a secret Alawi Holy Book that they were forbidden to touch, one Alawi man stated there is no secret book, since the religion is transmitted orally. Initiates may make notes from their religious mentor and then memorize the secrets (confidential informant). These notes may be what the Alawi women were referring to. Supposedly some of the Alawi secrets are very androcentric and treat women poorly. I already documented the sexist and androcentric nature of the Alawi society in the section on Alawi women.

One reason for the secrecy of the Alawi religion may be due to persecution by other groups. Alawi men may internalize the religious beliefs to keep them hidden from outside groups, like Sunni Muslim, who persecute them for being different. Historically the Alawi have been persecuted repeated, with fatwas by Sunni sheikhs in the 14th century, Ottoman violence in late 1500s, and Christian killings during the Crusades. This continuous persecution led to their migration to the mountains in present day Lattakia and Tartous governorates and various actions of dissimulation (the Shia practice of *taqiyya*) to blend in with their oppressors (Nguyen-Phuong 2015). Thus, Alawi religious identification has been threatened continuously for over 700 years, leading to various adaptions by the Alawi ethnic group to blend in with dominant ethnic groups.

The third point deals with the two sub-sects of the Alawi religion, the Murshidia and the Asidia, that had a major conflict in the 1950s.

> This is what I've learned in school, so one of the first things that I think define our ethnic group is in the early 1950s… and at that point the Alawites didn't have any access to power or anything, and the Alawites sheikhs were really abusing when it comes to work, traditions, and that type of thing. So at that point, there was this man who stood against the sheikhs, his name is Suleiman al-Murshidi. He was an Alawite man and he started his own thing called al-Murshidiya. It's a sub-Alawite thing. And it actually started in Lattakia Mountains. So he got a good amount of followers, almost 100,000 or something like that. Then he was executed, so his son took on his role and was also executed.…
>
> But I find interesting was the Murshidiya, they were fought by Alawites and not by Sunnis or anybody else. The Alawites [sheikhs] were saying that those people are infidels. And those guys [Murshidiya] are still there, they are about 100,000 or 150,000 right now, and mostly living in the eastern Lattakia, the countryside. And in the [2011

Arab Spring] conflict, they were neutralized, and the government told them don't carry guns or fight with us, don't fight with us or fight against us. So they were not a part of the conflict, but they are considered Alawites for the opposition groups, they are considered Alawis, but the government is kind of saying stay there [don't do anything].

And there were some small fights, and even when I was growing up, my family would stay away from Murshidiya. Because first they are infidels for worshiping a man. So this Sulaiman Murshidi has become their god, I'm not sure if it's true or not. I know a lot of Murshidiya people and he's like a very famous idol to them, but I don't know if they consider him a god like our parents have told us. (confidential informant)

The reason for the within-group conflict was that Sulaiman Murshidi protested against abuses by the Alawi sheikhs. More traditional Alawis said that all orders from the sheikhs should be obeyed, but Murshidi questioned the injustice and authoritarianism of the Alawi sheikhs. Supposedly the sheikhs were wealthy and worked to limit the development of poor people. For this reason Murshidi was killed in 1946 after creating a large following of as many as 300,000 people (Sevruk 2013). According to informant 13, these followers supported Murshidi because the poor villagers suddenly had more freedom and happiness. Murshidi may have been working to abolish the moraba peasant system, which led to more freedom for poor farmers. Throughout these various narratives I see the power the Alawi sheikhs, in terms of control over social norms, women, within group dissent, land and other resources.

Another issue is the manipulation of the Alawi religious status by the Assad regime. Since the Alawi were considered heretical by the Sunni religion, Hafez Assad got recognition of the Alawi religion from a senior Shia cleric (Hokayem 2013). Meanwhile,

even though the Assad regime leadership was mainly Alawi, it limited promotion of the Alawi culture, which had the effect of downplaying the uniqueness of the Alawi culture, and led to it being seen just as a symbol of the Syrian regime (Hokayem 2013: 32; Phillips 2015:366). Thus other Syrian ethnic groups view the Alawi identity only as regime supporters, and less as a distinctive tribal group. Even more so, religious identification for Alawi is downplayed by the regime and Alawis so that all that is left are stereotypes from outgroups, which are mainly negative.

In summary, I see that the Alawi religious identity is somewhat secretive and hidden, in part due to a long history of persecution. Within the Alawi, there was a major schism in the 1950s by the Murshidiya. Presently another problems exists for the maintenance of the Alawi religion – increasing atheism from young Alawi men and women. All of the male informants in this study said they were atheist or non-religious. Becoming atheist in the Alawi, or broader Islamic culture, is not to be taken lightly. As informant 13 noted, "Because in Islam in general, once you leave Islam, you're killed. As simple as that." Hence, the sub-group of religiously active Alawi members may be shrinking. Or, maybe another part of the group's hidden nature. This suggests that religion is a small part of the visible ethnic identity, since it is hidden from most outsiders, possible as part of taqiyya or dissimulation. The Alawi religion is secretive, with only men allowed to participate and women banned from knowing about it.

The central role of Christianity in the Christian community
Religion is a major part of the ethnic identity of many Syrian Christians, affecting values, beliefs, customs and in-group and out-group social interactions. The leadership in

the Christian community is held by priests, other senior church leaders and family elders. These leaders carry considerable influence on social norms and group boundaries, such as who can date or marry whom (informant 1). Religious holidays or festivals were highly valued by Syrian Christians, including the long Christmas holiday, and Saint Barbara's holiday, which is like Halloween. These festivals involve most members of the Christian community, and create positive memories and connections to the group (informant 1). As an example of the localized Christian beliefs, in one small, Roman Catholic village in Sweida all the families were Catholic except for one Druze family. The church was named St. Elias Church, so each family in each generation would have one son named Elias. Many of the daily actions evolved around the church, with strong devotion, yet the people had a very limited, simplistic understanding of the religion (informant 27). Below I examine other issues related to religion and identity.

Interest in or disagreement with the Biblical basis of Christianity was important for several young Christians. For one Orthodox Christian, there was a major identification crisis as a teenager when he realized the Christian and Biblical basis for his identity didn't explain the real world very well. As a child he studied the Bible to the point of memorizing much of it, but went through a crisis and started studying evolution and quantum physics, leading to a self-definition as an atheist (informant 8). For one Syrian Roman Catholic who lived in Saudi Arabia until she was 7 years old, the change of moving back to Syria was far-reaching. In conservative Saudi Arabia she wore the hijab, but on returning to Syria she immersed herself in the church and Bible, trying to make up for what she had missed. This was her own personal search. Since her parents

were not very religious, they asked her what she was looking for, which made her reflect on where she was going. Later, when her father passed away, she studied other religions, such as Ishtar, the goddess of fertility, love, war and sex, and even physics. Through this process, she developed her own set of religious beliefs, different from her family. In the end, the two main Christian beliefs she has held onto are forgiveness and loving other people (informant 27).

Important religious values for Syrian Christians include going to church and not working on Sundays. One informant noted that his family in Syria goes to church more often since the conflict started, praying for peace and safety (informant 8). Social conformity with religious norms and customs was strong according to several Syrian Christians. Attending church was very important, even when not completely sincere about the devotions, to show the community that you are following the church's practices (informant 1). Within the Orthodox Christian church in Syria, the dues or tithes paid to the church are made public to all members of the congregation, which creates social pressure to conform to the group and pay the dues, or in some cases competition to see which family can pay the most to the church. The informant was critical of this practice: "And when I first saw that book, I was very young and I was shocked. And I said to my father are they seriously doing this! And he said yes, in this way they gather more money because people like to show off…. The church made it like a habit to give, but the way that they made it was wrong. But they were collecting money, which is the important thing." (informant 8).

While it is hard to grasp the full impact of religious beliefs and practices on Syrian Christian ethnic identification, it was clear from informants that religion and the church played an important role in their group's beliefs, every day practices and social boundaries. The snapshots provided here hopefully give a glimpse of that narrative.

Kurdish religion, diverse sects with low salience

Many Kurds are Sunni Muslims, with smaller numbers of Jewish, Yazidi, Christian and Ismaeli Kurds, but religion is not a salient part of their lives and social interactions. Most Kurds don't pray often or wear the hijab. In general, religion appears to be less important for Kurds than Sunni Arabs or Christians. Also, because of the religious diversity among Kurds, there appears to be more tolerance of different religious beliefs.

Comments from Syrian Kurds describe the role of religion in Kurdish society:

> We are not too religious [of a] people, because most of us we have many religions among us. We have Jewish, Christian, Yazidi, Ismaeli, and a lot of types. Specifically, we are not tied [to just one group]… We are Sunnis, we drink, we have Christmas, we have trees and we have New Year. We go to parties, and dance and go to clubs. We live our lives, we love, we go to school and we do everything as normal life, as we like. (informant 21)

> I'm Muslim, Kurdish, Sunni…. Yes, I pray every day. But all the specific details for Islam for our religion. For instance, we know the five elements of Islam, pray, going to mosque for instance. We have five elements. But the details, we don't apply it. Our girls don't put hijab, and festivals are mixed [gender]. We have songs, we dance together, everything. But in our hearts we feel that we are Muslims, but in our own traditions, in our ways and not in the traditional Islamic way. (informant 11)

I see here considerable diversity in Kurdish religious practices along with a more private exhibition. On the individual level one Kurdish Sunni described her religious beliefs as: "I believe in God. I believe I have to not harm anybody, even by words. Not doing wrong things. Lying, using people or feeling happy when someone is sad." stated informant 19, reflecting common Sunni Muslim principles. Meanwhile, other Kurds are less religious or even atheist: "Supposedly Muslim, but I don't believe myself. But my family is, the ID is supposed to be Muslim or Christian or something. It reads as Muslim, but I don't consider myself as a Muslim, not Jewish or not Christian or anything. I don't believe." (informant 9) More than most Syrian ethnic groups, Kurds may have more in-group variation on religious beliefs and practices. Some Kurds are atheist (informant 17).

Religious variation may exist with Kurds from Khobane being "medium religious" compared to other groups (informant 10). Religion may be one way to differentiate Kurdish communities in Afrin. Some villages are Sarasvati Yazidi, others are Sunni Muslim, and some are mixed Sarasvati/Sunni Muslim (informant 19). While relations between these groups are usually cooperative, some boundaries exist, such as marriage. As one Sunni Kurd tells the story:

> We did have some Yazidi neighbors and I do have a cousin that fell in love with a girl from that family. They almost, that family almost killed the guy, or killed the girl. They threatened to kill them if they run away together, or if they get married, or if they insist. My family tried to arrange a marriage for this guy with another girl. And her family tried to arrange a marriage for her. Eventually they ended up fighting. The Yazidi family had to move to the other side of the village because of this issue. This was a major problem because of this. We almost had this armed conflict between the two families. (informant 17)

In this case religion appeared to be the symbolic distinction used to define who could marry whom, although it may simply be a marker for the ethnic groups. It is unclear if religion or ethnicity is the main identifier in these cases.

In summary The Kurdish religion may be best explained as a combination of more private – less public forms of worship, more tolerance for other religions, and more eclecticism in religious practices. The private sense is the idea of Kurds worshipping more individually and less as a large group. The tolerance comes from interacting more with and accepting neighbors of different faiths. The eclecticism exists from the borrowing of other religious practices, such as Kurdish Muslims who celebrate Christmas. Because of such tolerance and moderation, supposedly two of the recent senior religious sheikhs in Syria were Kurdish (informant 21). Kurds are an ethnic group made up of diverse religions, mainly Sunni Muslim, but also Yazidi, Christian and other sects. Religion appears to be less visible or important in everyday life for Syrian Kurds, compared to other groups in Syria. Finally, religious tolerance is common among Syrian Kurds.

The Druze religion: a long history, yet secretive and tolerant
The Druze religion pre-dates Christianity and Islam. The Druze are a subsect of the Shia and Ismaeli religious sects (Lewis 1998, Firro 1992). The Druze religion includes aspects of Gnostic, Christian and Jewish religions. Ismaelis believe the imam should come from the blood line of Muhammed the Prophet. However, when the Druze religious leader Hakim Alla was named Mahdi by the group it was a significant change, moving from hereditary leader selection process to one made by a small group of elders.

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This led to their schism from the Ismaeli sect (Firro 1992: 10). There is also a secretive nature to the religion, with few details available to outsiders (Bennett 2006).

Special aspects of the Druze religion include a Unitarian view of God, who has no body or spirit, making it impossible for normal people to comprehend. The five cosmic principles of Intelligence, Soul, Word, Precedent and Follower formed the Spiritual Dignitaries, which were created 343 million years before mankind (Firro 1992: 11). Informants 2 and 23 referred to these Spiritual Dignitaries when they stated that the Druze believe that their religion started with the beginning of the universe and when God created Druze first as the five masters. These five masters were in human form on earth. According to one informant Hamza traveled widely, including China and Europe, to learn about other religions and cultures, and synthesized his beliefs in the 32 Books of Wisdom. Below I examine the Druze religious characteristics described by Druze informants in this study.

One informant describes the idea of God in his own terms:

> We don't believe in this identity of the Holy Spirit. So instead of believing in one god, we believe that God created man in his own image, which means you have the spirit of a God. So that means you know right or wrong. That is why they encourage this way of thinking. It's the same as the God. The idea of God was created, let's say, to put people in the right path, but they encourage that you're the same as God, you know the right path. So you can choose to walk this way or you can choose to do something else, and you will get consequences as well. So the first starter of this religion, instead of going ahead and claiming more land, he collected the books of knowledge, which we call the Table Hedme, Book of Wisdom, which is a series of 32 books according to my knowledge at least. The problem is that we are not allowed to enter so much to our culture till we are 41 years old, married, and other

specifications. So I don't know that much about the religion itself, but I have some ideas and I've been asking and reading a lot as well.

By the way, just for your information, we don't have the original books of knowledge, we only have the translations of someone who read them and his understanding, and that's what they believe in. In my idea this is not correct, because if this person, even if he is a genius, but he might have in his time translated something in his own way. Our culture taught us that we need to question everything. The elderlies don't really appreciate that, but we the young people do. We want to learn anything. So before we actually believe in this kind of stuff we want to see the original. That's why everybody was trying to collect these books of knowledge. (confidential informant)

As seen here, God and man are very similar in the Druze religious perspective, which has a number of implications for the Druze people who are religious. Also, the idea of learning and questioning everything is an important value derived from the religion.

The Druze are divided into three groups religiously. First is the small number of Druze religious leaders, *mohaqs*, who guide Druze religious activities and spirituality. The religious leaders used to be voted upon by the local religious community, but recently it has changed to blood relations, with the spiritual leadership passing down within certain families (informant 2, 23). Reportedly some Druze religious leaders have sided with the regime, while others are seeking neutrality in the conflict (informant 25). The Druze do not have a social norm system like the fatwa, whereby all religious group members must obey the edicts of the religious leaders. Instead, people are permitted to question the writings and rulings of religious leaders, according to informants.

The second group are the common Druze who participate in Druze religious life, making up 30-35% of the Druze population. The religious Druze are often identified by their black clothes and white hats. They are discouraged from drinking alcohol, eating pork or listening to music (informant 23, 2). Hassan (2010) identifies the various halal and haram requirements of the religion, such as food, drink, marriage, drugs, smoking, social norms and heritage. Peace and non-violence are important for this group: "Because a religious man can't do you no harm. Even if you curse him, he can't curse you back. Even if you hit him, he can't hit you back. So they are really nice people. Part of their ideology and thoughts. I think their rules are tough to live by. People think it is easy, but it is really hard to be a religious man. It's not easy to be a peace maker." (informant 23) Most religious Druze are born within religious families, although a materialistic Druze can ask to become religious.

The third group are referred to as the materialistic or normal Druze, who make up 65-70% of the group. These people follow their instincts more and are less likely to follow Druze religious beliefs (informant 2). This group includes "normal people who are not so much into religion but still connected by the ethnic identity of the Druze." (informant 2) Many younger Druze may be breaking away from the traditional Druze religion given their more cosmopolitan interests and higher education (informant 2, 25). However, almost all Druze supposedly identify closely with the basic Druze cultural beliefs, including "certain religious morals and principles," which "affect their identity, and who they are, and the way they communicate with society and community, and each other." (informant 23).

The Druze religion is secret and it is forbidden for Druze to discuss it with

outsiders (Bennett 2006). Informants in this study provided just basic information about

the religion. Group members are not taught the details of the religion until age 40. It is

forbidden for anyone who is not a Druze religious leader to read the Books of Wisdom

(confidential informant). Because the Druze religion is different from Islam and not well

understood by other religious groups, some Druze make jokes when asked what it is

about.

> Usually I joke, I don't explain. Because I can't explain
> such, the typical... The religion is difficult, the others don't
> accept Druze. Not all the others. Muslims don't accept
> Druze. They ask intended to prove that you are not Muslim,
> you are a non-believer. In general they have this position.
> Not all of them of course. I don't like to [generalize].
> Actually it is not new. My mother was suffering them. For
> example, when she was an employee, all her fellows, most
> of them were Muslims. During Ramadan they were treating
> her very badly, because they [she was] were not fasting. I
> think this issue was one of the things that prevented the
> Druze from being more involved in the Syrian nation.
> Because they realized that Muslims think that they are
> unbelievers. And also from the very beginning they granted
> that this revolution would be radical Muslims somehow…
> Also because I don't want to start an argument with them,
> because it's not easy to explain. So I just tell them that we
> worship the cow or something like that for a joke.
> (confidential informant)

The secretive nature of the religion is partly explained by the group's interest in

having group members live a full life prior to immersing themselves in the religion,

according to one informant.

> As I said before you are born a Druze, but then again you
> are not being taught anything about the religion until you
> are forty, which is extreme. I don't understand why they do
> that. But what they believe in, they want the person to live

> his life to the fullest before you could actually understand
> the religion which has been passed out to you. So they want
> you to have experience, they want you to live normally, and
> then they would actually give you the secrets to your
> religion. It's forbidden for us to read the books of
> knowledge, which are really hard to get. (confidential
> informant)

Druze believe in reincarnation - that mankind was formed with a finite number of souls who inhabit physical bodies until the bodies die and then move to a new body. The souls will continue to transmigrate until the mahdi returns, when all will be judged as to how well they followed the Druze religious beliefs (Firro 1992). Bennett (2006) describes three reincarnation cases. As one informant described it, the concepts of reincarnation and the finite number of group members go hand in hand, although he noted that reincarnation only occurs seven times, not an infinite number of times as mentioned by Firro (1992):

> They say that our souls exist as a number and then they are
> reborn, so we believe in a second life and a third life, up till
> number seven which I'm not sure why. But if you think
> about it, this number is a holistic number; the world was
> created in seven days, we have seven skies, this is in
> religion ideas. And then they say that you live seven lives.
> So this is why they don't allow other people to come into
> the religion, they would say people are born in that number
> and the souls don't increase, they just re-incarnate in
> another way. (confidential informant)

The concept of reincarnation significantly impacts Druze social relations, such as marriage and religious converts, since no new people are allowed in the group.

In general the Druze are very open to other religious beliefs and do not evangelize or push their beliefs on others. They are even accepting of atheists from their group. The broader Syrian society is more unaccepting of atheists: "Especially being an atheist in the

Middle East, it's kind of hard. It's generally a religious area and religion really matters to them. If you have different or closet ideas of your own, it makes it hard to fit into the society." (informant 23) This informant was proud of his ability to navigate the religious norms and relationships to build friendships across several groups. As another informant stated: "Even as an atheist. I never liked conflict with anyone or if I shared my opinion about God, they are like, yes sure. That is the thing about religious Druze figures. They don't push you into religion. I think other religious assumptions, basically Sunni, they try to force you in. Have you, I don't like to use that word, have you brainwashed sort of. But such things don't exist in the Druze world, so I was able to grow and mature all my atheist ideas." (informant 23) Here I see the openness of the Druze to other religious beliefs, including atheism. Also, there is no death sentence in the Druze culture (informant 23).

In line with the concept of taqiyya, due to fears from Muslim extremists, some Druze hide their identification and say that they believe in the Prophet Muhammed and other Islamic precepts, however "It's a totally different sect and totally different culture." (confidential informant)

> I think as the Syrian revolution started the people in As Sweida tried to stay neutral. And it wasn't by me. I didn't accept that. I was like we are all Syrians and we should all be involved. But I think the people of As Sweida were a bit frightened of having a strict Sunni president maybe. Because if you are a really strict Sunni, the Druze are like atheist to you and they are like *kafir*, infidels and we should all be slaughtered. They were afraid if we supported the revolution and revolution took a very religious path, that would impact them negatively and cause trouble in As Sweida. I have been under a few cases where I was described or told you are a Druze, so you didn't contribute

much in the Syrian revolution. It was such a sensitive
subject. (confidential informant)

When asked if he thought Sunni Arabs would try to impose their religion on

minorities, the informant explained his perception of Sunni extremist actions at this time.

> Yes, we are seeing this is back in Idleb, and Raqqa and
> Hama and a few other cities, the Christian houses were
> marked. That is the most terrible thing you can see. If you
> are a Christian, they would put the letter N. It stands for
> *nusara*. Nusara means Christians in Arabic. So they, yes,
> would oppose other sects. I don't think they can co-exist
> peacefully with others. They have to generalize their ideas.
> If I pray, you have to pray. You can't like walk away. A
> few of my Muslim friends they say: "We are Muslims and
> we don't tell you to go the mosque." I would say yes, but
> the extremist Sunnis and sharia are kind of like a majority.
> They would impose their ideology on others. That is why I
> was saying earlier the Druze were frightened from this
> point of view. (confidential informant)

One Druze described to one informant the concern and fear of living under a

conservative Muslim society or government, after being held captive by ISIS for a while.

As he put, the hardest part was: "being with a person who is living in another logic and

it's not an ideology." (confidential informant) While ISIS is possibly the most extreme

conservative Muslim ideology, this anecdote highlights the difficulty that Syrian ethnic or

religious minorities would have in communicating with extremist Sunni Arabs.

In summary, the Druze religion is a subsect of the Shia and Ismaeli religious

sects, with aspects of Gnostic, Christian and Jewish religions. The Druze believe their

religion dates back millions of years and involves reincarnation of souls. The concept of

reincarnation affects social relations, such as marriage and religious converts, since no

new people are allowed in the group. In general the Druze are open to other religious

beliefs and do not evangelize or push their beliefs on others. Some Druze are concerned

about living under a conservative Muslim society, which would force them to modify their religious practices. As seen elsewhere, the Druze religion would be considered infidel by conservative Sunni Arabs, justifying a jihad or the elimination of all Druze.

Contested religion: Syrian youth and atheism

One interesting finding that developed in this study is that a number of Syrian informants from different ethnic groups self-identified as atheist. It is likely that the snowball sampling approach compounded this finding, since most of the atheist informants were friends originally from the small rock music community in Aleppo. However, the cognitive process that these informants went through in making the decision to become atheist is very informative of how young Syrian adults view Islam and Christianity in Syria, and sometimes use very deliberative thought processes in determining their personal and group identities.

One example of these thought processes comes from a young Kurd from Aleppo.

> I'm originally a Muslim Sunni, but for me I'm an atheist personally. I abandoned Islam about six years ago, when I was fourteen, and before that I was raised within a relatively conservative… atmosphere regarding my mother's background. Then afterwards, after starting reading [sic] a lot, I concluded that I would drop out from Islam. I started reading into Christianity, Judaism, and went back to our origins, Zoroastrianism, and found out that they are basically all copies of each other. Personally that's my personal opinion eventually. Regarded that atheism suits me since, after reading a lot of writing by Dawkins and other authors, and listening to a lot of podcasts, and understanding that science is the solution eventually. (confidential informant)

Other sources described similar deliberation processes leading to withdrawal from their traditional religious group and becoming atheist. In one case it was Western heavy

metal music that influenced the decision to become atheist (confidential informant). It is a good question as to whether Syrian youth becoming atheist is part of a larger trend, or its opposite, more religious. Given the current armed conflict it would be difficult to assess this issue, although the conflict may be escalating such changes in religiosity, whether towards atheism or religious extremism.

Minority fear of Sunni religious extremism

In this analysis one of the dominant patterns found was a fear of Sunni religious extremism by minority groups, as I documented in the sections on the individual religious groups in this chapter. This fear evolves around the belief that if Sunni Arabs gain power in Syria they will impose their religious beliefs on minority groups. Such fears are partly due to past experiences of prejudice and discrimination by Sunni Arabs of minorities, as well as concern over the extreme radicalism of some Sunni armed groups, such as Jabhat al Nusra/Fateh al Sham and Ahrar al Sham, which seek to install an Islamic state with sharia law. The Alawi may be the most concerned about this problem, with Christians and Druze moderately concerned, and even Sunni Kurds somewhat worried. Other groups like Yazidi Kurds are likely worried as well. In effect, ethnic identification for minority groups is significantly affected by the dominant outgroup.

This finding is problematic because it contradicts statements from Sunni Arab informants who believe that most Sunni Muslims are moderate religiously and would not impose their beliefs on other religious groups. Some Sunni Arab informants recognized that some Sunni Arabs in Syria were very conservative and that some armed groups sought an Islamist state, but do not believe there would ever be severe limitations on

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religious minorities. The divide in perceptions between minority groups and the dominant

Sunni Arab population is significant, yet not recognized by Sunni Arabs. First I explore

some of the Sunni Arab comments, then return to Alawi, Christian, Druze and Kurdish

perceptions.

One Sunni Arab described the situation in Idleb, where the very conservative

Islamist group Jabhat al Nusra enforced strict sharia law on the local community. Even

Sunni Muslims protested such strict social norms. First she noted that minorities do have

freedom to practice their religion in the Syrian society, but then notes the change that

occurred with the increased power of extremist groups like Jabhat al Nusra.

> Well, people have the freedom to practice any religious
> rituals in Syria. So you have the Alawites who go to their
> specific mosques and pray, and Sunnis who go to mosques
> and pray, Christians go to church. So people didn't feel the
> need to have this overall concept of a religious country
> [Islamic form of government]. But I think this concept
> changed after a lot of Islamic groups dominated Syria, and
> having to see how that changed their freedom. My city is
> one example for that, it's controlled by a very strict Islamic
> group at the moment, and a lot of people are not happy with
> that even though they are religious. Like not being able to
> walk without a black dress, or to close your shop during
> prayer times and go praying. So these small daily things
> that affected people's freedom. And I think it made them
> less wanting them. (confidential informant)

In this context, even Sunni Arabs are protesting extremist Muslim social norms.

> I would say yes, definitely [there is protest]. Because it has
> been introduced in a very strict way that people didn't
> really appreciate. And the vast majority in Syria are
> moderate Muslims, and they are not very religious. So I
> wouldn't see that appreciation I guess. (confidential
> informant)

This Sunni Arab informant believes that most Sunni Arabs would be opposed to an extremist Islamic state. Another informant also blamed extremist, Muslim armed groups who give a bad reputation to all Syrian Muslims.

> Let me just explain this a little bit: other groups have problems with Sunnis, maybe because they may think that Sunnis means terrorism. Islam means terrorism. No, definitely Islam Sunni means peace. The wrong understanding, because you're focusing on one group who are doing terrorism issues, and they are killing people on behalf of Muslim Sunnis, but they are actually not representing us. (confidential informant)

Another Sunni Arab informant (confident) also thought Christian minorities had nothing to fear from Sunnis, since other countries, like Egypt, had shown that minorities could live with Muslims without fear or problems.

Responses from other Sunni Arabs problematize the perception and control of religious power in Syria. Some Sunnis Arabs believe that other religions should follow Sunni religious norms. When asked what percentage of the Sunni population would support sharia law, one source (confidential informant) stated 70% to 80%. One Sunni informant noted Sunnis would never change their values to accommodate Alawis, if Alawis had power. He first argued that Sunnis wouldn't impose their norms, such as the hijab, on other ethnic groups, but then added: "I will say that your woman should be wearing a veil because sharia says that women should not go out without wearing a veil. Because we believe in sharia and they are right about this point actually." (confidential informant). He was resolute that the Sunni belief in the need for women to wear the hijab was justified. He noted that Sunnis would try to convince minority group members to follow the Sunni rules on the hijab, through advice, logic, options and choices. But in the

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end he said: "If they want to stay in the Sunnis control areas, we would prefer that your wife would wear a veil because of these evidences [sic] from Quran. This is what she will gain if she wears it. So [in a] peaceful way. Not in violence [sic] way. But they are right, they need to wear a veil." (confidential informant) In the words of a confidential informant: "Sunnis are against secularism." He believes that Muslims should control the Syrian government and apply Islam correctly. In his view appropriate social norms consist of women wearing modest clothes and the hijab, no physical contact with strange women, no music, no alcohol, and limits on marriage with outgroups (confidential informant). In his opinion, for the conservative Muslim these issues should be managed through personal relationships with God: it is up to each person to make the right decision. But at the same time, the community would strongly advise and encourage all people to follow conservative norms. And, the state should be Islamic. I see here the conservative Sunni thought processes regarding Sunni Muslim social and religious norms.

These comments provide evidence of the strong social value of a traditional Islamic society held by some Sunni Arabs, and support for sharia social and legal institutions by enough Sunni Arabs to generate the fear among minorities that such a society may be forthcoming if the conservative bloc of Syrian society or extremist Islamist armed groups come to power. As argued by Lewis (1998) and documented in the section on the Sunni Muslim religion, the Sunni Muslim religion is the main identification for many Sunni Arabs. It is a driving force for many Sunnis who see sharia law as a mandate from Allah. It is the possibility of a sharia law mandate for all that

concerns religious minorities. The central problem between groups is the fear of the other group having complete power, and imposing their laws and social norms on one's own group. Minority groups are afraid of Sunni extremists and conservatives who would impose sharia law. Sunnis are afraid Alawis will dominate and demand removal of key Sunni practices, like the hijab (confidential informant).

The stories from the Syrian minority groups of Alawi, Christians, Druze and even Sunni Kurds suggest that many of these concerns and fears exist across ethno-religious groups. One Syrian Christian described the change in intergroup interaction that came about with the beginning of the conflict. While Aleppo was a cosmopolitan city with few conflicts between different groups before 2011, after that people took sides. He was against the regime and the rest of his family supported the regime, leading to conflict within the family. His father, who had always been against the Assad regime, changed his position and starting supporting the Assad regime due to fear of Sunni extremists (confidential informant). In this case fear of Sunni extremists by Christians escalated a family conflict and affected positions of support or opposition to the Assad regime. It became the key issue for the informant's father.

There were subtle actions during the initial uprising in 2011-2012 by Sunni Arabs involving religion that alienated some minority religious group members, as the story below documents.

> As the Syrian revolution started there were all these different demonstrations and what not. I didn't join that because the demonstrations… happen after the Friday prayer. So it was kind of like an extremist for me because all the people were getting out of the mosque and into the demonstration. I think if you are going to start a revolution,

the last thing you need is having a religious background. A
revolution should be a humanitarian revolution. It's about
humanity and equality and other high perspectives and
topics. So the demonstration were called and named
according to Muslim figures…. Yes, I didn't like that name
and I didn't want to go out on a demonstration and yell
Allah al Akbar, because I am an atheist. That is not my idea
or ideology. I would call out for freedom, freedom for your
choice, and other political parties maybe, respect and
diversity. But I wouldn't call out for religious topic. I guess
that's why the different, the other sects didn't really
contribute, the Alawi, the Christians. Because of that
because most of the demonstrations were named that way.
(confidential informant)

In this case the minor decisions of organizing the uprising protests around the

mosque and naming the events after Sunni Muslim figures created symbols that were

anathema to minority groups, driving some away from the protests. It is a small example

of Sunni influence over Syrian social norms.

Theoretical reflections on religious identity

In chapter five I documented the religious concerns of other minorities. Alawis

are the most obvious case. The Alawi/regime identification depends completely on the

othering of and by Sunni Arabs. The othering has become polarized in both breadth and

depth – the vast majority of Alawis fear Sunni Arab domination to such an extreme level

that it transforms into the core aspect their collective identity. These concerns have

escalated into a fear of massacres and genocide, as documented in chapter four. The

Alawi mistrust and fear is specifically connected to the Sunni Islamist armed groups and

extremists. Many Syrian Christians also fear Sunni extremists, although the dynamics

may be more subtle. Many Christians have had experiences of discrimination and

imposition of Muslim norms on Christians. As explained in chapter four on conflict and

cooperation with other groups, Christian informants 1 and 27 clearly stated that they believed they could no longer trust or live with Sunnis due to extremists who want to impose a conservative lifestyle on non-Muslim groups. Christians already feel these limitations with norms on dress and women's interaction with Sunnis. Some Christians believe their only hope is to leave Syria.

Even some Kurds who are Sunni believe that they cannot live under a conservative Sunni Islamist state and society with sharia law. Like Alawis, Kurds have experienced marginalization by Sunni Arabs, providing justification for their concerns and fears, as documented in the section on Kurdish marginalization. The Druze, like the Alawi, have more to fear than Sunni Kurds or Christians from Sunni extremist due to their religions being outside of those accepted by mainstream Muslims. As believers in Gnosticism, reincarnation, Zoroastrianism, and other non-traditional beliefs, many Sunni extremists believe Druze and Alawis are infidels, and it is justifiable to kill them. This Sunni extremism with the Kurdish Yazidis just across the Iraqi border was found in 2015. Informants described the with-us or against-us positions of Sunni Arabs for the Druze. These bits and pieces of stories by various Alawi, Christians, Kurds and Druze provide evidence of a deep, underlying pattern of concern, mistrust, and fear of Sunni extremists and conservatives. Given the tremendous consequences at stake for individual lives and whole ethnic groups, these fears are a significant concern that make up part of their ethnic identity. Their sense of identity is based on threats to their group security, as explained theoretically by Coser's (1956) proposition that conflict with another group defines group structure and reaction to internal conflict and dissent. In effect, concern and fear of Sunni

extremism imposing social norms or even killing religious minorities has become a core

part of the identity of many Syrian Alawi, Christians, Kurds and Druze.

CHAPTER SIX: ETHNIC IDENTITY AS OPPOSITION TO OR SUPPORT FOR THE ASSAD REGIME

> The uprising greatly sharpened identity cleavages along both sectarian and secular-Islamist lines. (Hinnebusch 2015: 369)
>
> Let me tell you something, the more open minded from my family in Hama, they were with the government, while the other ones that really, really hate the Alawis were against the government, and they were also doing demonstration inside Hama and arranging them…. While others were fighting with them. But I don't know what really happened. Last year everybody became against the government. Maybe after the death of my uncle they killed (confidential informant).

In the previous chapter I argued that religious minority group fear of Sunni extremism was a major factor in ethnic group identity in Syria. The second major finding from this study is that ethnic identification for many Syrians depends on their support of or opposition to the Assad regime. As the quote by this informant shows, even individual families may be split in their opposition and support for the regime. In effect, one of the first things people try to ascertain when they meet someone new is whether they support or oppose the Assad regime. And, this position is often represented by their ethnic group, since groups are stereotyped into one of the two camps. All Sunnis are believed to be in the opposition. All Alawis are believed to be Assad regime supporters. Those two groups book end the support/opposition continuum. The model I propose is somewhat similar to that of Khashanah (2014), where he points out that there are three main groups in Syria:

pro-regime, pro-revolt, and a silent middle group. The other minority groups of Kurds, Christians and Druze are perceived differentially by outgroups (Sunnis and Alawis) – usually as not supporting their side. This labeling of others as supporters or opposition has consequences for social relations and peace prospects in Syria. The most identity-impacted ethnic groups are the groups that have done the most fighting – the Sunni Arabs and Alawi. For the other ethnic groups that are in the grey zone for fighting, the Kurds, Christians and Druze, this war has less impact on their sense of ethnic identity salience. This chapter analyzes these issues to support this finding.

This polarization dynamic starts with opposition to the Assad regime and the Alawis who are believed to support the regime. The opposition to the regime stems from the Assad regime propaganda and manipulation of ethnic groups in Syria since the 1970s, as well as the trauma from regime and Alawi torture and killing of anyone considered to be opposition. This is supported by secondary sources and statements by this study's informants. On the other side, support for the regime stems primarily from the same regime propaganda, and past practices of Sunni extremist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which generates fear of Sunni extremists – the same fear which I documented in chapter five. Finally, there are some Syrians caught in the middle of this support/opposition continuum, who fear both the regime and Sunni extremists. I examine these various processes below, with sections on stereotyping, regime propaganda, regime terror, Alawi extremism, opposition extremism and people caught in the middle between the two extremist poles.

The impact of stereotyping

One dynamic underlying the breakdown in Syria is stereotyping and responding to individuals as members of their ethnic or religious group. At its most basic, it's a binary construct – either with or against the regime. So, all Alawites are seen as being pro-regime and all Sunnis seen as anti-regime for example, despite a more complex set of allegiances on the ground. Alawi informant (confidential) described this dynamic well:

> Yes, the idea of supporting the regime or being against the regime. And even if the individual is against or with the regime, the other group that are treating this - for example if Alawite people saw someone Ismaeli, he is against the regime…, they are treating this person as a group and not as an individual who is not supporting the regime. I mean they are treating each other as groups and not as individuals or humans. They don't consider what I'm thinking… We have now two big parts, those who are supporting the regime and those not supporting the regime. And they are fighting each other. And all the minorities are considered supporting the regime, and Sunni people considered as opposition side. And they are fighting each other for this reason….
>
> But I can understand everyone, every ethnic group. Maybe because I grew up within an open-minded family, a free family. So I feel that I can understand all ethnic groups. Each one. How they are thinking. The Sunnis are feeling that they are victims now. They just want to save themselves. And the same thing with the Alawites, because they are feeling that if Sunnis took control, they will be killed… So they are acting in this way to protect themselves. In these cases, all members of an ethnic group are treated the same, depending on who [whether] the group is perceived to be aligned with the government. Furthermore, individuals who are opposed to the majority beliefs of the group are under tremendous pressure by outgroups and in-group members to confirm to the group's beliefs and norms (confidential informant)

This informant explains the stereotyping process in Syria which assigns individuals to their groups and sees groups as unified blocks. It also places negative or

positive values on the groups, depending on whether the other group supports one's own

side. This stereotyping process underlies the binary social construct in Syria.

The power of regime propaganda

Understanding the opposition/support dynamic requires a brief historical analysis

of the **Assad regime's policies to manipulate the various ethnic groups**. In the section

on the larger Syrian identity in chapter three I documented the Ba'ath movement and

Assad regimes' efforts to build a socialist, Ba'athist, Pan-Arab national identity. In

chapter four I provided many examples of regime policies that limited development or

cultural expression of the various groups, whether the Muslim Brotherhood for Sunni

Arabs, Kurds, Christians, Druze or Alawi sub-groups. The effects of regime manipulation

of all groups are described well by Hinnebusch (2015).

> Conditions for democratic transition were not favourable in
> Syria: identity fragmentation and the lack of a class balance
> weakened society, while a robust combination of both
> patrimonial authority and bureaucratic institutions gave the
> regime exceptional resilience. Owing to the cross cutting of
> class inequalities by urban-rural and sectarian cleavages,
> the narrow opportunity structure (weak civil society) and
> the willingness of the loyal military to use violence against
> protestors, mobilization was insufficient to overthrow the
> regime, but enough to deprive it of control over wide parts
> of the country. The soft-liners were marginalized on both
> sides by the regime's use of violence, the maximalist
> demands of the opposition and the identity cleavages
> between regime security forces and the protestors…. The
> uprising greatly sharpened identity cleavages along both
> sectarian and secular-Islamist lines. No cross-class
> democratic coalition was conceivable as the destruction to
> the political economy infrastructure debilitated capitalist
> production relations and generated a parasitic war economy
> that locked Syria into a much-deepened crisis for at least
> the immediate future. (Hinnebusch 2015: 369)

Here Hinnebusch is describing multiple areas, such as patrimonial authority, urban-rural and sectarian divisions, and manipulation of "soft-liners" or people with weak interest positions, where the regime was influencing ethnic groups.

Historically, the binary of pro or con for the Assad regime existed since the 1970s. Several sources document the efforts and effectiveness of the work by the Assad regimes to divide and conquer tribal and ethnic groups, often by providing lower level leaders with more power and status (Van Dam 2011; Heydeman 2013; Hinnebusch 2012). Individual sects were played against each other and offered small rewards for their own identities, to ensure their support for the Assad regime. For example, many Syrian Kurds lacked citizenship rights until 2011 when the regime decided to finally provide citizenship to a large number of Kurds to isolate the group from opposition forces. One Kurdish informant reported that as early as the 1970s his father was checked to see if he was a political supporter of Assad, and since he was not, he was barred from getting an advanced education (confidential informant). Also, minor Alawi leaders related to the Assad family were given senior security roles (Batatu 1999). I also documented the marginalization of the Alawi Murshidia tribe in chapter four. In addition, many informants reported Assad regime policies controlled which agricultural products could be grown in each region, enabling more divide and conquer strategies (confidential informant). Another example given by an informant was the regime control over the Druze.

> And during the revolution it increased. The regime didn't
> want the Druze to be part of the Syrian revolution, because
> it wanted to prove that the revolution was Islamic in nature.
> So it increased [the repression on any Druze that spoke

out]. Actually I participated in many demonstrations there
and the security would always follow us. When we start to
say something, they will let us for 5 or 10 minutes and then
they would start beating, and then pulling people to prison.
(confidential informant)

In this case, Druze protests became a space for violent social control by the

regime. The Alawi informants also reported that they their group was a victim of regime

manipulation.

But I'm thinking that the regime was not honest, and
wasn't supporting the Alawite people and giving them
those benefits and improvement because he liked them for
being Alawites, or because he is Alawite. He's not thinking
as an Alawite person. He is doing that to attract [more
power to himself.] Yes….. To do the balance between the
all the ethnic groups. For this time if anything happens like
is happening now, he knows that if because I did that, and I
supported Alawite people and did really good things to
them, I improved their lives, so they will me support if
anything happens, or if Sunni started to make me leave.
(confidential informant)

Here the Alawi informant describes their perception of the Assad regime logic,

whereby it is helping the Alawi people only because it is in its own self-interest to have

the Alawi people supporting the regime in case other Syrian groups revolt and try to the

overthrow the Assad regime. From this perspective Assad doesn't care about the Alawi,

only his own survival. Heydemann notes how identification dynamics affect this

intergroup conflict: "Identity-based military recruitment of Alawi was explicitly designed

to strengthen bonds between the regime and senior officers, to raise the cost of defection,

and to make defending the regime the military's top priority. The result is an almost

entirely Alawite officer corps that is stubbornly loyal to the Assads, willing to use every

weapon possible, and toughened against repeated attempts to persuade key figures to

defect." (2013:66). Also, there is a strong outgroup perception that the regime provided

more opportunities and resources to the Alawi than other groups like Sunni Arabs, Kurds,

Druze or Christians.

> Sunnis were feeling oppression, and injustice, oppression,
> because our government ignored them. And the Kurds as
> well. Because they just supported their group; the Alawites,
> and gave them very good opportunities. So, the war came
> out from this point. Why this is injustice? Why this
> unfairness? Why we feel oppression? As there were no
> equal opportunities, and our government focused on their
> group. And give them very amazing opportunities.
> (confidential informant)

This statement explains the Sunni Arab perception of unfair treatment and

oppression by the regime, which fits with Gurr's (2011) theory of relative deprivation

explaining the causes of violent conflict. Relative deprivation is when a person believes

there is a difference between what they have achieved and what they think they should

achieve. When the perception of relative deprivation is high the potential for collective

violence increases.

In addition to specific actions and policies by the regime to favor one group over

others, regime propaganda plays a major role in creating this binary dynamic of regime

opposition/support. The regime links the most extreme Sunni groups with a fear of

massacres and genocide.

> Official media routinely highlight the prominent role of
> militant Islamists associated with al-Qaeda in opposition
> ranks to reinforce the uprising-as-Sunni-terrorism narrative,
> and tout the regime's commitment to minority protection
> and secularism (its reliance on Iran and Hezbollah
> notwithstanding) to rally its base. (Heydemann 2013:64)

Several informants describe the regime propaganda in more detail. First, an Alawi described the large percentage of media channels that broadcast regime propaganda, which especially affects the less educated, lower class Alawi who are less able to critique such misinformation.

> It's the Arabic, almost 70% of the channels… are either Shia or Alawites provocation. I read the Telegraph and Guardian, so I have these ideas and understand things. But when you look at the average Alawi or Sunni who is in this region, open the TV and you will find propaganda. So naturally his mindset will be directed to oh, they have been oppressing us, and not to the actual problems. (confidential informant)

For Syrians with limited education or critical thinking abilities, these strong messages convince Alawis and regime supporters that they are being oppressed, while avoiding the real problems that exist in Syria according to several informants. According to one informant, these conservative Sunni and Shia messages originate in Saudi Arabia for Sunni audiences and Iran for Shia audiences (confidential informant). In summary, propaganda mainly by the regime by also by conservative Muslim groups is a critical part of the polarization taking place in Syria.

A long history of regime terror

Moving from propaganda to acts of coercion and terror, there is an escalation of efforts to control people in opposition to the Assad regimes. Arrests, imprisonment, torture, disappearances and killing were common threats for anyone who opposed the two Assad regimes. A systematic pattern of these abuses can be seen over the past five decades, which created a deep seated fear of the regime, the security apparatus, and the regime's more extreme Alawi supporters. I look here at several major events that

exemplify the regime's use of violence as well as specific stories from this study's

informants.

The regime massacre in **Hama in 1982**, with from 20,000 to 40,000 people killed,

left a large imprint on the identity of the people of Hama, most of whom are Sunni Arabs.

One Sunni informant (confidential) from Hama described the family's story of how it

affected the family. After one of the female Alawi airborne soldiers was killed in the

fighting, her uncle told a joke about it with friends, one of whom reported it to the

regime. The uncle was arrested and imprisoned for 13 years. Due to the imprisonment,

the family became very poor and the children unable to get good educations. The

extended family has since been radically opposed to the regime. Another uncle who was

repeatedly insulted by an Alawi professor in college had to go into exile. A third uncle

was also disappeared and killed by the regime during that period (confidential informant).

The stories handed down by the Hama Sunni Arabs are telling:

> They [Alawi soldiers] were shooting and knocking on the
> door, because in Hama, as they tell us the stories, the
> Alawis were knocking the doors and shooting each and
> every man, or let's say male, because they shoot even the
> toddlers. Because they [Alawi] used to say they will grow
> and be part of the Brotherhood and Sunnis against the
> government, so you have to kill them all. So whenever
> somebody knocks on your door during that time, 1982,
> there is a big panic in the neighborhood and household. As
> they were trying to open up the door, the father was trying
> to smuggle the children to the neighbors, over the wall. To
> keep them safe. So he was smuggling everyone, throwing
> the babies and girls and everyone. He was the last one. He
> was climbing [over the wall] and he was shot. It was five
> bullets or something. He was killed by the regime.
>
> Now when I call back these stories I think that the hate of
> the Hama Sunnis against the Alawis is because of the

regime. Because of what they saw. But all of the soldiers were not just Alawis, some were from Deir E Zor… fighting for money. They have more mercy than the Alawi for the people in Hama. Even my grandmother used to tell us before she died…. Alawis in Syria they speak a specific accent…. If the Alawi soldiers come… They will definitely kill everyone, even the female, the mother or the sister, if she panicked and lied to them that she was not hiding them in the house, they would even kill her. (confidential informant)

These Sunni experiences in Hama left a strong feeling of anger and mistrust among some Sunni Arabs against both the regime and Alawis. The 1979 **Aleppo massacre** had a similar impact on local identities. When one informant (confidential) was questioned about the different ethnic groups being pushed apart by the regime over the last 40 years, he stated:

That's what I'm saying, especially forty years, and especially after the uprising in 1982. During that uprising, Hama and Aleppo suffered in the killings. I don't know if you heard about the massacre in Aleppo. The 100. They brought them out. It was Eid. A holy day. Of course there was tension, it started in the Aleppo artillery school. The story about how it started, it was 1979. A Muslim Brotherhood officer in the artillery school in Aleppo ordered Alawite officers out of their barracks and killed them. And it started from that. The tensions and everything. (confidential informant)

In this case a Sunni Muslim military officer and extremist committed a massacre against Alawis, which was followed by the killing of 15 Sunni leaders imprisoned in Syria, and widespread suppression and violence against conservative Muslims in Aleppo by the regime. The regime blamed the attack on the Muslim Brotherhood, although it was likely committed by a Sunni extremist group called the Mujahidin that had been assassinating Alawi leaders since 1976, in part since they perceived the Alawi to be

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infidels (Van Dam 2011). In sum, there was ongoing retaliation between the Sunni extremists, and the regime and Alawis. Which side committed more violence here is uncertain – both were widespread.

Moving from the broader events to specific actions that affected families and individuals, I was told other stories by informants of experiences involving regime abuses that significantly affected their opposition to the Assad regimes. Informant 26 noted how the regime violence against his family led to extreme opposition by both grandparents to the regime. Another informant described a group of Alawi who would go to protests after the Arab Spring, invite protesters back to their house afterwards, and then torture and kill them. One friend who had deserted the army was caught by this group. Supposedly the regime knew about the group's torture, but did nothing (confidential informant).

Kurdish informants also provided stories of regime violence and terror against the Kurdish population over the last two or three generations. For brevity's sake I mention just one here that gives rich detail about Kurdish opinions about the Assad regimes.

> Let me explain the relationship between the Kurds and the government. The government was all the time trying to put the Kurds in the corner that you are naughty boy. And showing it to all the Syrian people, this is the naughty boy. That is why till now I am suffering from this.... I am helping the Kurds. But till now there are some friends saying that you are Kurdish and you need [want] to divide the county, because the government was saying all the time you are Kurdish and you want to divide the country, and you want to take part from Syria and make it Kurdistan. And every single Arab knows that. The government was trying to put the Kurds away from the others, there was a distance between us all the time. That's why the Kurds see the government is trying to destroy us, because they changed the demography of the area. They brought Arabs from Raqqa and gave them fields, lands in our area…. They

[Arabs] get benefit from these fields for more than 30 years. And they still living there. And I am out of my country and my region too….

The government arrested many, many of us. They killed many of us. In 2004 the Kurdish revolution happened in Qamishli, the government killed tens of Kurds, arrested hundreds of Kurds and till now nobody knows where they are. All the time there were changing the demography, and changing the life. I mean that is why the Kurds see the government as the devil. They see they used to fight, the regime still fighting till the end of the life. They destroyed our lives. They killed us. So we were fighting the government since a long time ago, and the Arabs are still saying that they [the Kurds] are with the regime….

Many Sunni Arabs feel that the Kurds are allied with the regime and not fighting the regime enough. Part of this is due to the regime propaganda and the fact that the some regime officials are still able to operate in Kurdish areas and the Kurds are not directly fighting the regime. The Kurds see their biggest enemy as ISIS and other extremist Sunni groups. (confidential informant)

As explained by informants, this narrative describes the regime manipulation and oppression of Kurds, the Kurdish struggle against that repression, and the belief of Sunni Arabs in the opposition that Kurds are supporting the regime, since they are not fighting it hard enough. When he is talking about his friends who say Kurds are dividing the country, he is referring to Sunni Arab friends who say Kurds are trying to make their own country, which the Sunnis think is bad for Syria. The regime propaganda broadcasting that Kurds are seeking their own state exacerbates the Sunni beliefs and further divides Kurds and Sunni Arabs. In reality, many Kurds do want their state, but many also identify as Syrians and work closely with other ethnic groups to support Syria. There were similar stories by other Kurdish informant of arrests, torture and killing by the regime. More stories exist for the Druze as well.

I also share one of the more extreme cases to show how the respondent's

experiences with regime's violence creates deep-rooted, long term effects on individuals

and their families. This informant, a Christian woman, described the impact of having a

family member disappeared or killed by the regime. After she mentioned that she had a

brother who was disappeared by the regime, I debated whether to pursue more questions,

since it was clearly an emotional issue that could raise harm for the informant. Since she

could see me squirming with my internal debate, I asked her if it would be ok to ask more

questions about the topic, and told her she could end the discussion whenever she wanted.

I also mentioned why I was interested – because this issue had become a defining event

in her life and for her family, there still was no resolution, and it appeared to be a major

part of her core identity and part of her ethnic identity as well. She agreed to talk more

about it, so I asked her what it was like to deal with a family member detained and

disappeared by the regime for two and a half years. Here is her amazing and informative

story, with my questions and comments in brackets.

> [What's it like to be missing a sibling? To have that
> uncertainty? Your brother has been detained two and a half
> years. And this is one role that you have, of managing the
> situation, trying to have more information about the
> situation.] Paying a lot of money. [Dealing with the
> emotional side of it. So I know this is… The reason I am
> hesitant about this a little bit is because I know it is a
> personal question.] No, it's ok. [But it's probably a big part
> of who you're. part of it is taking care of your mother, part
> of it is missing your brother, right?] Yes.
>
> [Can you talk about that a little bit?] Yes I can. But maybe
> at some point I will cry, but it's fine for me. [That is fine. I
> am feeling a little emotional on this topic too.] The main
> point here is when my brother has been arrested, I was
> starting to Turkey to work here with [an international

NGO]. He was living in Aleppo doing his masters. And at that time, in July 2013, Aleppo was under siege…. And then in July he came and stayed with me for four days, and I was crying to just let him stay here.

And I remember he told me – because when I left Syria, I escaped from a potential detention also. [So you were on the GOS wanted list?] Yes. So he was like: we need to go back to Syria, we need to have this civilian part of Syria stay there. Do you think that you will spend all your life out of Syria? And I was like: no, for sure I want to go back to Syria. But I have to make sure that my safety when I am there. And he said… we need to go back to Syria, this is our country. And he went back. And when he crossed the border…, I didn't hear anything back from him till today.… I spent the first week just crying, and I couldn't share this information with my mother or any other family members. Then after one week when we started to search for him, we knew that it's 90% chance that the Syrian regime got him. Because I had also fears that he could be arrested by JAN or by any Islamic group, but everyone working inside was asking about him, and no one heard about him and no one arrested him. No one of these armed groups. So then I found out that the regime was the party who arrested him.

And dealing with those emotions, and which level of information I have to share with my family, for until now I can't share everything with my mother. And dealing with everyday updates, and trying to have confidential phone calls with my cousin who's following this with Syria, is really difficult. So first of all, I was telling my mother that we don't have any communication with him, and later on my aunt actually shared with her the information that he was detained. And I started to be aware about which type of information I can share with her. And everyone who comes to our house and who used to be detained, do not mention anything about what happened to you in detention and not to speak about it. And when these photos of people were detainees, I think everyone saw those photos [recently 53,275 photos of Syrian detention center victims were released]. I was worried about which channel she has to watch on TV just to avoid seeing those. I am not sharing this with her. She didn't see them yet. I'm trying to protect her, even from imagining that her son could be one of

them. And I remember when I saw those photos, I was in my bed very close to her, and I was crying, without trying to make her feel anything. Avoiding this information. Hiding this information….

Every day talking with people inside, and every day trying to have information about where he is. So just sharing this much information [holding her fingers close together] with her to make her feel a little more comfortable, but at the same time not raising her expectations. So it's difficult. And managing your emotional, all emotions. To be smiling and supportive to her is not an easy thing. (confidential informant)

Here the trauma suffered by this informant and her family can be seen, as well as the effort required to gather and control information. In addition to the loss of her brother, she also had two cousins detained for 1980s for 15 years for being communists, and her father was under constant threat from Syrian security forces. One security agent threatened to put her father in prison until he became insane, possibly from torture, which forced the family to flee the country (confidential informant). Having a family member detained or disappeared became the defining aspect of her life and her identity. It affected her migration and place of home, beliefs about God and humanity, work, and social relationships. Her case was not an isolated case either – almost every informant had stories of family members who had been detained, tortured, disappeared or killed by the regime over the last five decades. These constant threats from regime security agencies were a shadow over everyday life for most Syrians for 40 years – and became part of the ethnic group identities for each of the five Syrian groups in their own special way.

Polarized Alawi beliefs and extremism

A critical aspect of the polarization in Syria evolves around extremism by a small, but vocal and powerful group of Alawis. This group helps define the extremist narrative

and create the belief structures that guide many people in the larger Alawi ethnic group. Alawi extremism comes in two main forms, through the shabiha gangs and militias and through widespread, polarized views by many Alawis. With the former, the regime has used Alawi gangs called *shabiha* to terrorize opposition groups for many years. The shabiha gangs formed in the 1980s as smugglers and extortionists, operating under regime impunity in Lattakia and Tartous. Later the **shabiha** were transformed into militias under various names, the latest being the National Defense Forces (Heydemann 2013; Phillips 2015). In the latter sub-group, Alawi informants describe common beliefs among Alawi of fear of attack from Sunni extremists and justification for violence against anyone seen as threatening Alawis or the regime. This broader, societal worldview appears to be common among many Alawi adults, especially men, socialized radically into many younger Alawi teens, and visible through daily actions that purport to protect their group and/or eliminate external threats. I examine the shabiha first and then the broader social dynamic in this section.

However, first I note that the role of the Alawi in enabling the survival of the Assad regimes to this point cannot be underestimated, as described well by Heydemann.

> Yet the center (regime) held. It did so because patterns of recruitment into the upper ranks of the military and its elite units were not simply patrimonial, but also sectarian and exclusionary in character. Identity-based recruitment was explicitly designed to strengthen bonds between the regime and senior officers, to raise the cost of defection, and to make defending the regime the military's top priority. The result is an almost entirely Alawite officer corps that is stubbornly loyal to the Assads, willing to use every weapon it can (from cluster bombs and ballistic missiles to helicopter gunships and, reportedly, chemical munitions), and annealed against repeated attempts to persuade key

figures to defect. (Heydemann 2023: 66)

Heydemann notes two key issues: the identity-connection between the regime and the Alawi ethnic group, and concomitant willingness to use any means necessary to protect their own group. Both of these dynamics are at the core of the Alawi ethnic identity, as noted below by one informant who had uncles who were senior military officers.

Historically, the word shabiha means ghost or shadows in Arabic, referring to the name of BMW cars driven by these gangs in Lattakia and Tartous in the last several decades. The shabiha started like a local mafia, as smugglers and extortionists, and then moved into more informal roles supporting the regime through violence. Heydemann describes the development and usage of the shabiha well.

> Prior to the uprising, members of these networks, typically described as shabiha, engaged in officially sanctioned criminal activities, served as regime enforcers, and used violence to protect the privileges and status of regime elites. When protests began in March 2011, the regime recruited these loose networks to brutalize demonstrators. As the opposition militarized, these criminal networks were gradually transformed, first into informal and decentralized paramilitary groups and later into more formally structured armed units that have been integrated into the regime's security apparatus. Almost exclusively Alawite in composition, shabiha forces are responsible for some of the worst atrocities of the civil war. They serve as shock troops, defend Alawite and minority communities against opposition attacks, terrorize and brutalize Sunni communities, assist the regime in controlling army units to prevent desertions and defections, and fight alongside the armed forces in offensives against opposition-held areas. They provide levels of cohesion and loyalty that sustain the regime's capacity to repress far more effectively than it could with ordinary conscripts. (Heydemann 2013: 67)

As noted here, the shabiha/National Defense Forces developed more power over the last five years and moved to the forefront of the regime violence (Phillips 2015). Supposedly the Alawi-dominated NDF have been used as shock troops by the regime, moving from one point to another wherever the fighting is the heaviest, using extreme violence on the civilian population and causing massacres against ethnic opponents (Hughes 2014; Phillips 2015). Alawi were also central in the killing of 550 Muslim Brotherhood members held in the Palmyra prison in 1980, as revenge for the assassination attempt against Hafez Assad (Droz 2014). Informants from this study mentioned suffering from such violence in various stories and places in Syria.

While the shabiha were the most extreme Alawi, many men in the broader Alawi society also held extremist beliefs condoning violence against opposition groups. This broader set of beliefs could arguably be called the Alawi worldview: as I noted in chapter four, it starts with the belief that Alawis have been oppressed and victimized, and continues with the idea that Sunni Arabs are threatening their group's way of life and survival. Threats against the regime are also seen as threats against the Alawi ethnic group. This leads to a justification of violence against these outgroup threats, even Sunni or Druze children. While not all Alawis hold these beliefs, it appears from these interviews that such beliefs are very widespread among Alawis.

Social ties and the regime's propaganda affected such **extremist beliefs**, with both the father and brother of one Alawi informant espousing identical, virulent ideas:

> I disagree with them [her family members] a lot because for
> them everyone who's not an Alawite is either a thief or a
> killer or some bad person who wants to interact with us to
> get some benefit because we are Alawite. They have this

thing in their mind where they say that Sunni people believe that if they harm an Alawite person, they would go to heaven or something like that…. Well this is the thing, it's not the Alawite culture to hate Sunni people or don't interact with them, but people exaggerate a bit.

This gap and hating between Alawites and Sunnis in Syria happened because of the regime. Because what I remember living in an Alawite neighborhood, is that the Alawite army would come and say that Sunni people will come and attack you at any minute, so have guns in your houses. I was there and I wouldn't believe that because I know how they think. And we lived in a very small city, it's like Antakya, so I didn't believe it for one second, but everyone in the neighborhood were suddenly getting guns and bolt action guns. And then a friend of mine, a Sunni, called me one night and said: are you attacking us? [I said] No, they say that you are attacking us. Because my dad and everyone else are getting weapons because they are saying that you will be attacking us. And this is where it started. (confidential informant)

This anecdote describes how historical fears were manipulated at the beginning of the 2011 conflict by Alawi extremists to make moderate Alawis fear Sunni violence. Over time and with increasing community support for this propaganda, such beliefs became more widely held among many Alawis. It also justified violence against other ethnic groups.

Another informant described the level of willingness to harm others in support of the **Alawi** ethnic group or their sense of country, referring to the torture and killing of Druze children in Daraa that set off the Syrian Arab Spring uprising in March 2011.

Our relationship was very good with my father's family until the first day of the revolution, when I started to discuss with my uncle about the revolution and what happened in Dara'a and it's not fair to do that to children, but he said that they deserved it even if they are children, as those children will grow up and do bad things to the country. Also, they need to know who is behind those

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children, because they wouldn't do that by themselves: someone pushed them to do that. And I was against that completely…. And he said: they deserve that because you know we are in danger, and there are many enemies around us. And Syria is always targeted by Israel and many enemies around us. And they have fear of the Islamic state in Syria, the Islamic phobia. And they feel that they are in danger if Bashar Assad left, they will be killed, all Alawites people. So, that's why they started a very violent reaction, because they had this fear that they would be killed all by the radical Muslims. (confidential informant)

This study underscores the justification for violence by Alawis against outgroups due to a fear of various enemies. Another uncle for this informant is a senior Syrian Army officer, who believes more violent measures are needed:

I had one conversation with the other uncle… the one in the army. It was over the phone, and he said: we tried a lot to talk with those people. They are doing a revolution, they consider themselves a revolution, but it's not a revolution. We started with them by talking, but they don't understand talking. So we need to eliminate them to make them understand. That's what he said. (confidential informant)

These anecdotes hint at the level of polarized beliefs about anyone in the opposition among some Alawis, including justifications of killing the children who take part in protests against the Assad regime. It is unclear what percentage of Alawis hold these extreme opinions, but most accounts point to the majority of Alawis. One cause of this mistrust, fear and hatred is the regime propaganda, which has exacerbated the emotional responses and provided justifications for outgroup animosity. Another informant noted how all the TV stations in Lattakia and Tartous are filled with state propaganda denouncing opposition forces as traitors and justifying violence against these enemies.

In exploration of generational differences among the Alawi people, informants

noted that both younger and older Alawi men hold such extremist views. When asked if

the younger generation was more into peace and cooperation, one Alawi informant

stated:

> Unfortunately, no. Younger Alawites are more aggressive.
> There is a group in my neighborhood of 15-16 years old.
> They wouldn't let them join the army and they just get
> guns, I don't know from where. And they [are] just
> standing in the streets and nobody said no to them. I have
> my step-brother, who is 9 years old, and he was saying
> things about Sunni people that I would like to take off my
> ears and not hear those things from a little boy, an Alawite
> boy. (confidential informant)

Here can be seen Alawi youth playing out extremely violent social roles within

the Alawi society. When asked where the boy learns it from, she said both his peers and

the family. In these anecdotes, there are similarities in both younger and older Alawis in

levels of extremism. Many young Alawis have been radicalized to hate Sunni Arabs and

other ethnic groups, led by many older Alawi and the regime. The Alawi share a similar

worldview of ethnic identity that is based on propaganda, oppression and persecution,

leading to mistrust, fear and hatred, which justifies torture, killing and other forms of

violence against certain outgroups, especially Sunni Arabs. On the other hand, there are

some younger and older Alawis who support peace and cooperation with other groups, as

noted in chapter four. Their sense of identity is more tolerant of other groups,

emphasizing the traditional hospitality of the Alawi culture.

Opposition to regime

On the other end of the regime support and opposition continuum are the people

who make up the opposition. While a wide variety of actors from the different ethnic

groups opposed the regime in various ways, the opposition is mainly made up of Sunni Arabs, but includes some Kurds, and smaller numbers of Christians, Druze and even Alawi. The opposition includes more conservative or extremist groups as well as more moderate Syrians.

The more extreme opposition groups include the conservative Sunni Arab groups like Jabhat al Nusra, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and the previously mentioned Mujahidin group. Some of these people follow Salafist beliefs and are supported by Saudi Arabia (Droz 2014; Hinnebusch 2015). These Muslim extremists have their own versions of the history to justify their positions and beliefs, with the massacres and repression against Sunni Muslims by the regime and Alawis. These key events include the 1979 Aleppo violence, 1980 Palmyra massacre, the Hama 1982 massacre, and many more minor actions of arrest, detention, torture, disappearances, and killing by the regime and its Alawi supporters (Droz 2014; Hinnebusch 2015; Hughes 2014).

Many moderate Sunnis and other minorities are also in opposition to the Assad regime for various reasons, such as the repression noted above involving a family member or friend documented in chapters four and five. One example of a moderate opposition person was a Christian female informant who said that her friends were surprised at her participation in the early days of the revolution, given that she had a very good job. However, she felt that it was a Syrian revolution, not just a Muslim revolution. She had been taught by her father that the Syrian National Day, April 17, was a special day for all of Syria, not just another commemoration of the Assad family. It was a day for the Christians to celebrate with all Syrians (confidential informant). Many of the

informants from all the ethnic groups said they had participated in protests, or were supportive of them, at the beginning of the uprising in 2011.

One way to express opposition to the regime was through the sharing of information, often through forbidden books that were passed secretly between friends. Several informants, including Kurdish and Christians, mentioned their fathers bringing home, reading and then sometimes destroying the books (confidential informant). A big part of their ethnic identification was living under the fear of detention, violence and torture, yet responding to it, fighting against it, usually by privately, secretly, sharing information and books, talking with other people, but always with the risk of one word with the wrong person that could get you in jail. That struggle brought with it a sense of pride and formed part of their identity (confidential informant).

While I have not provided as much evidence or details of the opposition characteristics in this section as other sections in this chapter, I have documented the nature of the opposition in other parts of this dissertation, including which groups are more active in the opposition (Sunni Arabs) and less active (Christians and Druze); the causes of the opposition to the regime, due to fear of, and past abuses by, the Assad regimes going back to 1970; and the various ways groups have opposed the regime and Alawis, including the surreptitious sharing of reading materials, protests, assassinations, and armed conflict.

People caught in the middle

There are many Syrians caught in the middle between the two end of the extremist continuum in Syria. For some of them, it is a question of being able to live with Assad or

with ISIS, in which case ISIS loses (confidential informants). In other cases, the discussion examines the split among Sunni Arabs, with some in support and others opposition to the regime. Assad has been able to gather such Sunni support through co-optation, by arguing that he is the only stable force left in Syria and the only one that will guarantee some sense of freedom for all groups (confidential informant). Some Christians see an Alawi-led, Assad government as a lesser of two evils vis a vis Sunni Muslims, emphasizing issues of power and control (confidential informant). One Alawi noted the modernization benefits brought on by Bashar al Assad while acknowledging all the harm he has done as well (confidential informant). Among some of the more conservative Sunni Arab families from Hama, the choice is between ISIS (regime supporters) and Jabhat al Nusra (opposition to the regime) as one informant reported, with some family members of one informant joining each of those groups (confidential informant).

Some of these thoughts are summed up in the story by a Druze informant who described the negatives of extremist groups on both ends of the continuum:

> What I meant is if Syria reaches the point. No one supports the current regime. Bashar is like tyranny about his rule. If I am going to replace that with another extremist government, that's not an option for me. The revolution will continue until we have [a] justice [just] regime and justice system and equal constitution that provides equality for everyone and ensures that everyone is treated [equally], not based on their religious backgrounds…. Democratic. Purely and fully democratic. I don't think Syria can take another crisis such as this one to change. From the start we have to locate and identify a good government and good president.(confidential informant)

This quote exemplifies the quandary for many Syrians who feel neither the regime nor Sunni extremists represent the type of government or society that they wanted to live

in. Even in the conservative city of Idleb, Sunnis protested the social norms being imposed by Jabhat al Nusra, such as more restrictive travel and clothing limitations for women, and closing of shops during prayer time (confidential informant). It is difficult to determine the percentage of the Syrian population who actively support or oppose the regime, or are stuck in middle, although it is likely the middle ground group is quite large.

Theoretical reflections

Similar to chapter five, in this chapter I document the processes by which the binary polarization occurs in Syria, through stereotyping and propaganda, especially by the regime and to a lesser extent opposition and Salafi groups. The widespread use of terror by the regime leads to extensive (widespread) and intensive (deeply felt) fear and/or hatred of the regime by many Syrians. This fear and hatred, combined with conservative religious differences for some Sunnis, underpin and reinforce opposition to the regime by many Syrians from the various ethnic and religious groups (mainly Sunnis, some Kurds, Christians and Druze, and few Alawis). Salafi propaganda and literalist Sunni Muslim religious interpretations, such as sharia law, push opposition beliefs and values towards the contrasting pole. This occurs especially for religious minorities like Alawi, Christians and Druze, but also to a lesser extent for Kurds and moderate Sunnis. The polarized beliefs and deep seated conflict environment increase the visibility and salience of ethnic identity for many Syrians, pushing them towards their ethnic group and generating more commitment towards their ethnic group. Meanwhile, there are many Syrian stuck in the grey zone between the two extremes as well.

Returning to Rotheram and Phinney's (1987:13) definition of ethnic identity as "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership," I find that those people who are the most polarized would likely say that their sense of belonging to the ethnic group is complete and unconditional, and that the majority of their thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior follow from their group affiliation. As Isaacs (1975) would say, they are returning to their Houses of Muumbi to follow their tribal idols. Ethnicity becomes the defining aspect of their identity. How large are these two groups on the extremes, either supporting or opposing the regime, is unclear, but these subgroups are extreme in their views. It may be a relatively small percentage, but they affect many of the people less radicalized within their own ethnic and religious groups by setting the social norms, often through coercion and violence.

For those people closer to the middle of the continuum, their ethnic identity may be one of several identities, à la the multiple identities mentioned by Stryker (1980), with a reduced sense of belonging to the ethnic group. The polarized propaganda and narratives may lead to cognitive reworking of what the ethnic group identity means, changing the person's ideas about the central beliefs, value, norms and imagery that make up the group and their sense of group attachment. For some group members this may lead to partially or fully withdrawing from the group, e.g. group attrition. Ethnic identification involves shades of grey for many Syrians, somewhere on the continuum from no sense of attachment to total commitment. Several informants stated conscious decisions to withdraw or separate from their groups – inclining to the no sense of attachment extreme.

Others stated much stronger commitment, nearing the total commitment limit. For middle ground group members other identities besides the ethnic identity may exist, including the pan-Arab nationalist identity and social (group) identities involving local or regional distinctions.

The polarization dynamics taking place increase the exploration, salience and commitment to identity, in direct relation to the distance to the polar extremes, considering Phinney and Ong's (2007) model. The closer to the poles one gets, the stronger the ethnic group commitment: for example, Alawi extremists 100% in support of the regime also have the strongest commitment to the Alawi ethnic group; Sunni extremists from Jabhat al Nusra and Arhar al Sham (the most committed Sunni religious groups) are the closest to the "ideal type" of Sunni Muslim (extremist) identity in Syria, the opposing pole. Another way to interpret this bipolar dynamic is that the core identity for those people who are polarized is the dominant or salient identity that exists in all situations, applying Turner's model (2012). Their core identity follows the more extreme beliefs, attitudes and values of the ethnic group, and guides their behavior in most social interactions.

Finally, considering Hammack's (2010a) model of salience as a burden or blessing, I find both for Syrians. For those Syrians who are most polarized, supporting or opposing the regime, their ethnic identity provides a strong sense of self, and a clear framework for society and social relations, determining group boundaries and guidance for appropriate behavior for interaction with both in-group and outgroups. It provides self-esteem, and sense of self and community. These are blessings from their perspective.

These strong ethnic identities also are burdens for those group members who seek to deviate from the dominant groups belief norms, as the more extremist group members enforce such norms to maintain the group's identity. For example, the continued and possibly strengthened view on prohibitions on marriage outside the group by many Syrian ethnic groups is an imposition and a burden.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION ON THE TRANSFORMATION OF ETHNIC IDENTITY IN SYRIA

In ending this study I return to the research question to see if and how it has been answered, and explore theoretical implications of this study. Again, the research question is: *How are ethnic or religious identities for Sunni Arab, Christians, Kurds, Alawites and Druze in Syria socially produced, and how does the historical context, opposition to the two Assad regimes, and fear of Sunni extremism affect these group identities?* I start by summarizing the various findings from this study on the similarities and differences of the five ethnic groups, and the findings on fear of Sunni extremists and opposition/support for the Assad regime. Then I briefly explore several theories that help explain the social reproduction and transformation of ethnic and religious identities in Syria. In closing I make a few comments on prospects for intergroup ethnic relations and peace in Syria.

Note that I paint a broad picture here with generalizations about the various ethnic groups: as with any study of ethnic identity, variation exists on opinions and beliefs within such groups. Hence, these generalizations may not apply to all members of each group. Also, it must be noted that this is an exploratory study based on a limited number of interviews from a subset of Syrians who have their own unique characteristics (better educated, higher income humanitarian workers living in Turkey). This study is a first step in examining how the armed conflict and polarization has affected ethnic identification

and group relations in Syria, but considering the current situation, gaining access to a more representative sample is difficult. In sum, the reader must remember that these findings are based on small number of informants, making for limitations on generalizations.

Main findings on ethnic and religious identity in Syria

The two main findings from this study, regarding ethnic identification based on fear of Sunni extremists and opposition/support to the Sunni regime, are novel, with no other social scientists I am aware of making these observations. In addition to these two findings, two additional findings – one on the marginalization and oppression of minority group, and another on intergroup cooperation and conflict -- further explain Syrian ethnic group relations and identities.

The first main finding is that Kurdish, Christian, Druze and Alawite minority group identities are differentiated by their opposition to Sunni Arab extremists who desire a more traditional society based on literalist, Salafi Quranic interpretations, including strict sharia law. Alawites and Druze (and Yazidi) religious minority groups, are considered kafir, not part of the faithful (Muslim, Jewish or Christian), by literal Muslim interpretations. For this reason they fear extreme measures, like massacres or genocide, from Sunni extremists. Those groups as well as some Christians and Sunni Kurds minority group members, also believe their freedom of religion, movement, personal choices, women's rights and/or dress will be drastically curtailed if conservative Sunni Arabs rule Syria. Some moderate Sunni Arabs feel the same way and protested against similar Jabhat al Nusra restrictions in 2015. Concomitantly, the Assad regime argues that

it is the only power that can protect minority groups from Sunni Arab radicalism, further raising religion identity distinctions.

Meanwhile, statements by conservative Sunni Arab informants justify their beliefs of why their religious views and sharia law should govern Syrian society. Salafi propaganda from Saudi Arabia escalates the conservative narrative. The conservative Sunni Arab beliefs and minority perceptions of those beliefs make a complicated picture of the production and reproduction of ethnic identities in Syria. In effect, moderate Sunnis and religious minorities in Syria in part define themselves as being different from the *other* - radical Sunni extremists. Who they are *not* informs who they are, the boundary or unique distinctions that sets them apart from other Syrians. This also informs their future identities, of an ethnic or religious group that seeks moderate societal norms tolerant of diverse beliefs. This religious tension has its roots historically, with the Muslim Brotherhood and other more extreme Sunni conservative groups advocating and fighting for a sharia-governed society since the 1960s. However, it has escalated since 2011 due to extremist Sunni opposition groups like Al Qaeda and Jabhat al Nusra that have gained military power and control over territory, enabling them to impose sharia law on local populations, who often protest such social controls. As the religious and ethnic identities of the conservative Sunni Arabs has strengthened and expanded, concern by religious minorities has increased, providing evidence of the changes and reproduction of these ethnic identities.

The second main finding is that ethnic identification for many Syrians shapes and is shaped by their support or opposition the Bashar al Assad regime. These personal

positions are influenced by family, tribal, regional and ethnic group positions on the legitimacy and worth of the Assad regime. If the group supports or opposes Bashar al Assad, most group members follow suit. Opposition to the Assad regime is based on past social interactions and experiences. The legacy of arrests, torture, disappearances, and killings by both Assad regimes created ethnic group identities of persecution, victimization, struggle and pride for all Syrian ethnic groups, except for the unusual, complicated Alawite-Assad relationship. Those people most opposed to Assad are those who lost family members to regime torture, imprisonment and killing, based on informant interviews. In contrast to those who oppose Assad, some minorities support the regime, seeing it as their only hope for protection from conservative Sunni Arabs. Most Syrian regime supporters are Alawis, and some Shia and other ethnic minorities who mistrust or fear the opposition.[5] The conflict has polarized group identities, increasing pressure on in-group members to support their ethnic group and increasing stereotyping of outgroup members. Christian, Kurd and Druze ethnic groups are generally unified as neutrals, Alawites as pro-Assad, and Sunnis split in their support and opposition. These ethnic identities generally include markers of regime support or opposition. In effect, the revolution is not only about the survival of the brutal Assad regime, but also about the future of opposition ethnic groups in Syria.

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[5] Assad also has a very large amount Russian, Iranian and Hezbollah support from outside of Syria.

These two findings most directly answer my research question of how are ethnic or religious identities in Syria socially produced, and how does the historical context, opposition to the Assad regimes, and fear of Sunni extremism affect these group identities. In both cases ethnic and religious identification is determined more by differences with the outgroup, cases where the group boundary lines become rigid: "We are not like them." It also drives in-group pressure to confirm to the dominant group belief: "You are either with us or against us." The historical context for both the religious or regime conflicts often goes back several generations, generating deep-seated positions, beliefs and norms. Support for two major assumptions in this study further answer the research question.

One major hypothesis developed early in this study was of a historical pattern of marginalization and oppression of minority groups by Sunni Arabs and/or the Assad regime. Minorities responded to this marginalization with secretive or public responses of struggle, rebellion, migration and other actions. These experiences generated in-group solidarity and pride, becoming important characteristics of ethnic identity and intergroup relations. The sense of pride found in this study follows Phinney's (1990) findings on positive feelings that may arise from ethnic identification. Alawi, Kurdish, Druze and Christian informants in this study confirmed this assumption.

Another assumption for this study was that these Syrian ethnic groups had lived together peacefully prior to 2011, with the older generation recognizing the potential for tolerant, cooperative future intergroup relations. This assumption was problematized in different ways. Yes, some people had positive intergroup interactions prior to the

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conflict. But others had little interaction, living in homogenous communities, with little

outside travel or contact. Others had negative experiences with other ethnic or religious

groups. Furthermore, the 2011 conflict seems to have increased inter-group polarization

and segregation: the conflict increased intergroup contact because the huge internal

displacement forced many Syrians to travel to other ethnic areas, even though the

displaced still seek to be among their own ethnic group whether in host communities or

internally displaced persons camps (Salm, 2015b). In effect, ethnic groups were salient

constructs in everyday practice, with segregation and limited intergroup interaction.

While ethnicity may not be the primary source of the intergroup conflict, animosity and

hatred break down along ethnic lines – in this case Alawis versus Sunnis and between

Alawi sub-groups. Other informants also questioned the role of ethnicity between Sunnis

and Alawis, identifying changing attitudes and conflict intensities over time. One Alawi

informant described the lingering mistrust between Sunnis and Alawis, which was often

overcome through personal relations and trust building, such as when two university

students from the two groups would get married. But when increased violence occurred

between the groups, which was often instigated by Hafez or Bashar Assad, such as the

1982 Hama massacre or the current barrel bombing, the conflict escalated again leading

to polarization between the two groups.

The dynamics described in these two hypotheses also respond to the research

question. Both explain significant social processes that continuously affect ethnic group

identity production and reproduction. Issues of group membership, exploration, salience,

commitment, and boundaries are all affected by minority marginalization, and intergroup

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cooperation and conflict. The next set of findings briefly summarize some of the more prominent areas of commonality found across the five Syrian ethnic and religious groups studied here. The following set identifies a few of the more visible and salient characteristics unique to each of the five groups. In both sets of findings below it is possible to see how social interactions and historical contexts affect and produce ethnic identities in Syria.

Shared ethnic group characteristics
The following social or cultural characteristics were issues shared across all or most of the five Syrian ethnic and religious groups in this study. I briefly summarize the main points here.

- Language is a primary differentiator for ethnic identity in Syria, used to identify the ethnic group or geographic location of Syrian speakers. It was also affected by regime policies or ethnic discrimination. Non-Arabic speaking groups like the Kurds and Armenian Christians struggled to maintain their language. It was a defining aspect of some Syrian ethnic groups.
- Names and family reflect differential social status. In some cases family names carry prestige, status and honor, in others names have been controlled or prohibited by the state. Names can be a source of danger and threat.

- *Clan* identification was not found to be a significant source of identity, except for the Alawi and Druze: few Syrians were aware of which clan they belonged to or how the clan affected group identities.

- Gender is a key ethnic identity marker due to the patriarchal Muslim society, and different norms for men and women across most ethnic groups. Men have more legal rights under Syrian law, while women have few legal rights in practice. Social and religious norms on marriage, dress, movement, religious education, inheritance, property ownership and divorce victimize women. Comparatively, Druze, Alawi, Christian and Kurdish groups permit women more freedom of dress and movement than Sunni Arabs. Syrian women demonstrate strong resilience, yet live within a society that generally denies them equality with men. Women play a major role within families and some are working to improve gender equality.

- Dress is one example of gender and social control, with different norms on wearing the hijab for various Syrian ethnic groups. Whether to wear the hijab appears to a personal choice for women in theory. While men have some limits on dress in public, Syrian women have significant social pressure to wear the hijab. The simplest explanation for why women must wear the hijab is to stop men from becoming tempted or aroused by a woman's beauty or hair. Wearing the hijab was easier than not wearing it in some places, more of a cultural than religious practice.

The social pressure to wear the hijab or niqab can be very intense for some Syrian women.

- Marriage is the *litmus test* of what types of social interactions are allowed between ethnic groups: working relationships and friendships are permissible, but not marriage. Syrian women generally can only marry within their groups upon pain of serious consequences. Divorce carries social stigma, limitations and sexual abuse for divorced women.

- Honor and respect are significant values in Syria. Syrians often monitor their behavior to limit criticism of bad behavior which would reflect on their family or ethnic group. Breaking social norms on the hijab, sexual relations or drinking alcohol could bring shame to the family or group. Honor is important in everyday life and restored through violence in some cases.

- Geographical and urban/rural differences affect ethnic identities. The identification of ethnic groups is often based on place of birth. Geographic location affects homogenous communities and diversity of relationships. And rural areas often are more conservative than urban areas.

- Among some Syrians there is affinity for a larger Syrian identity, based on either a pan-Arab or humanist identity, but this affinity is limited due to much stronger ethnic identities and mistrust between groups. A number of the Druze, Kurdish, Alawi and Christian informants described

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themselves as *humanist*. For the younger adult generation of Syrians, humanist or human being means an inclusive group identification that emphasizes the similarities for all people, and rejects boundaries and discrimination between groups. This humanist identification may be unique to the humanitarian aid worker population interviewed in this study or possibly more representative of a larger subset of youth.

- A subtle, yet pervasive mistrust and fear of other ethnic and religious groups exists in much of Syria today, making outgroup ascriptions of group identities as relevant as in-group characterizations. Some of this mistrust is due to historical relations and some generated by the armed conflict since 2011.

- Age matters, with younger generations across all Syrian ethnic groups often questioning and rebelling against traditional social norms, such as in-group marriage, drinking, dress, and technology for example. In some cases, social norms are changing, in others, tradition continues to rule. The exception to age matters occurs in cases of greater extremism, where polarized beliefs outweigh generational differences.

These characteristics that I just summarized were shared across most or all of the five Syrian ethnic groups studied here. Each issue has its own history and trajectory as part of the social reproduction of ethnic identities in Syria. In some cases there was agreement across Syrian ethnic groups on the issues, while in other cases the issue was a point of contention between groups. However, individuals from multiple ethnic or

religious groups identified these issues as part of their ethnic identity. The viewpoints and salience of these issues varies across informants and ethnic groups, but these issues help define key aspects of the narrative on Syrian ethnic and religious identity.

Unique ethnic group characteristics

The next set of characteristics were unique for each of the five ethnic groups. I highlight just a few of the more salient characteristics of each group here for brevity's sake. I must note that there is considerable internal variation within ethnic groups which limits these generalizations.

For the Sunni Arab identity, even though they are the largest demographic group at 59% or 12 million members, the identity is the most nebulous and taken for granted. Sunni Arabs have considerable pride in their identity. While there is variation socio-economically among Sunni Arabs, generally they have been the business and land owners in Syrian society. The Sunni Muslim religion is central for the Sunni Arab identity, guiding everyday behavior for many Sunni Arabs, although it struggles to keep up with modernity, and the tension between its individualistic and collective aspects. Women have few rights in areas governed by the conservative Sunni Arab culture, with limitations on dress, movement and marriage. Many Sunni Arabs believe their social and religious norms provide space for minority religious beliefs and social norms and should govern Syrian society. A few conservative Sunni Arabs are more extremist and believe religious minorities should convert or be removed from Syria through jihad, for those who are kafir. Some extremist Sunni Arabs are completely opposed to Alawis due to the Alawi/Assad association and violence by Alawis against Sunnis. As can be seen, there

are different priorities for diverse Sunni Arabs, with some making strong commitments to socio-economic aspects in their ethnic identity, and others to religious (jihad) or outgroup opposition (anti-Alawi) issues. For many Sunni Arabs ethnic identity is less salient with lower levels of exploration and commitment.

With 11.8% of the total Syrian population, or 2.36 million, most Alawi live in Tartous and Lattakia governorates along the Mediterranean Sea. The Alawi ethnic identity involves mistrust and fear of other ethnic groups, in part due to marginalization by Sunni Arabs. Historically many Alawi were farmers under the moraba system, which created a connection to the mountainous land where they are from and a sense of injustice at the socio-economic structures. The Alawi culture is based more on clan than religious institutions, with conflict between the Klaziya and Haydariya clans. Since the Assad family is a Klaziya clan, its members benefited more from regime largesse and corruption. When confronted by outgroup pressures, in-group cohesion is high for Alawis, but when outgroup influences are absent, in-group conflict may be high, with limited support between Alawi families. The Alawi culture is much more open and festive, with music, drinking and dance, than for other Syrian groups. On the surface Alawi women have considerable freedom and independence, but at a deeper level there is significant gender inequality. Ethnic identity for most Alawi is tied to the Assad regime, seeing it as a source of pride and protection for the group. The Alawi religion involves reincarnation and other special aspects, but is a small part of the visible ethnic identity since it is secretive and hidden from outsiders. Only men are able to participate in the religion, while women are made to fear it. Since 1970 many Alawi men were military or

security officers, with a pride in fighting for Syria. The Alawi ethnic identity is closely linked with the Assad regime. These characteristics make for a distinct ethnic identity for the Alawi in Syria, with some similarities to other minority groups like the Druze and Kurds, but unique aspects in other areas. The level of salience and commitment appears to be high for most Alawis, although exploration is low to moderate.

With a population of about two million, the Christian community represents several different Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches. Christians identities in Syria vary by Christian sect, yet share commonalities due to histories of persecution and oppression, and efforts to maintain ethnic identities. Stories of genocide and forced marches live in the collective memory. Religion is a fundamental part of the Christian identity, with many activities evolving around the church. Many social institutions like education, Scouts, marriage and group boundaries exist to rebuild the group's size and distinctive cultural aspects, such as language, music and the arts. Christian women have considerable freedom as women. Politically many Christians support the Assad regime, though primarily out of fear of Sunni Muslim extremists. Socio-economically, most Christians appear to be better off than other groups, with strong social capital and networks. There is a mix of conflict and cooperation between Christians and other ethnicities in Syria, as well as between Christian sub-groups. The Armenian Christians are a relatively prosperous and close knit community, with the historical legacy from the Armenian genocide part of their ethnic identity, as stories of genocide and forced marches five generations ago are kept alive in the collective memory. Identity salience, exploration and commitment may be high for many Syrian Christians.

With a population of about 1.9 million, Syrian Kurds mainly live in northern Syria in Afrin, Talia Abad, and Hasakeh, with some living in Aleppo. Most Kurds are Sunni Muslim, with some Yazidi, Christian and Alawi as well, making it the only group on this study that is split across religious groups. This diversity also underscores the sense of tolerance that exists among the Kurdish people. Marginalization and oppression are part of their ethnic history, having suffered in various ways from the Assad regimes, including through lack of development and citizenship, threats of imprisonment and torture, restrictions on language, and loss of land. In response Kurds have surreptitiously shared materials on Kurdish history, culture and politics, and advocated and fought for more rights and equality. The extensive diversity in their areas and globalization dynamics, such as German guest worker and Soviet communist experiences, have affected their social, cultural and economic beliefs. The Kurdish people value family, education, hard work, marriage with similar people, independence, safety and support for the Kurdish community, while being competitive with other Kurds at the societal level. The aggregation of these experiences have led to a strong sense of pride. Key events, especially the 2011 uprising, enabled Syrian Kurds to develop their own strong military capability to the extent that they have de facto control over their territory and are able to implement policies in support of their culture, such as language and education policies. This ensemble of experiences, values, beliefs and practices represent the Kurdish ethnic identity in Syria. There may be a particularistic or individualistic social dynamic for Kurds, with a strong independence and competitive drive: socially and politically Kurds may support each other, but economically Kurds fight to get ahead.

With a population in Syria of about 350,000 to 640,000 the Druze are the smallest ethnic group studied here. The Druze identity is defined by strong solidarity and warmth within the group as well as by social prohibitions against marrying outside the group, and a general fear of Muslims, politics, and other threats. As a small, marginalized minority group, the Druze strive to maintain their ethnic identity and live peacefully with other Syrian ethnic groups. They have a sectarian, traditional culture, with a strong sense of community and support for in-group members. The group is organized around the family thaluns, a traditional, patriarchal leadership practice. Druze values and beliefs include family, honor, understanding, respect for others, solidarity, strong social norms and restrictions, gender equality and a humanist worldview. The Druze try to do good things to keep the group's honor clean, like speaking good about others, doing good deeds and helping others. The Druze have a strong sense of pride in their religion and history, especially their role in the 1920s Syrian independence. The Druze religion is somewhat secretive and unique, with Ismailism, Judaism, Christianity, Gnosticism and other beliefs, including reincarnation. Economically, the Druze experience comprises a combination of lack of opportunities at home, good education and skills, migration to other countries for work, and sending remittances home or returning home after several years. Druze men used to make up the majority of the Syrian military, but now mainly work in agriculture and other technical industries. The small group size and lack of power means the Druze must adapt to Sunni Arab social norms, and policies and persecution of the Assad regime. In general the Druze people have considerable salience and commitment to their ethnic identity, with varying levels of exploration and knowledge. Both the Alawi and Druze

practice *taqiyya*, concealing their beliefs to blend in with dominant social groups, in part because they are considered *kafir* by conservative Sunni Arabs.

These findings here align with much of the literature cited in chapter two about the various ethnic groups, but also provide additional insight into the five ethnic cultures and identities.

Both the shared and unique aspects of ethnic group cultures and identities for the Sunni Arabs, Alawis, Kurds, Christians and Druze provide evidence responding to my research question of *how are ethnic or religious identities in Syria socially produced, and how does the historical context, opposition to the Assad regimes, and fear of Sunni extremism affect these group identities.* Of special importance is the role of intergroup social relations and interactions in the formation and maintenance of the ethnic identities for each group. Notwithstanding the relatively homogeneous communities that existed for each of the groups and limited intergroup interaction, there was still sufficient and significant social interaction to help demarcate boundaries between groups. A wide range of social and ethnic dynamics are active in the reproduction of ethnic identities for Sunni Arabs, Alawis, Kurds, Christians and Druze, including status differences, marginalization, oppression, missing or tortured family members, historical events, employment, economic opportunities, education opportunities and discrimination, university interactions, internal and external migration, intergroup friendships, marriage, to name a few of the more dominant forces at work. All these issues affect group membership, exploration, salience, commitment, and boundaries.

General comments on theoretical implications on ethnic identity in Syria

There are a number of theoretical implications from this research. First I briefly return to some of the theoretical models mentioned in the literature review in chapter two, and then propose several models that may help to explain ethnic identity formation and reproduction in societies marked by historical repression, religious conflict, and social movements seeking democratic change and human rights.

One lesson learned from this study is the theoretical messiness and complexity the concepts of ethnicity and ethnic identity. Returning to Rotheram and Phinney's definition of ethnic identity as being "one's sense of belonging to an ethnic group and the part of one's thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior that is due to ethnic group membership" (1987:13), I identify two main problems. First is the difficulty for many Syrians of identifying their ethnic identity. The abstractness of the concepts of ethnicity and identity make it difficult for many people to describe who they are. For example, few Syrians could identify the clans they belong to or the distinctive characteristics of their ethnic group. It required a lot of indirect questioning and teasing out to bring into the open. Looking at my interview transcripts I find a winding path with considerable ambiguity and occasional bursts of clarity. This makes finding themes and patterns that much more difficult as well.

This is where the second problem comes into play: ethnicity and ethnic identity are messy and complex. They entail everything covered in sociology and other humanities: culture, social norms, values, beliefs, socialization, language, education, religion, family, health, work, trade, gender, stratification, political power, human rights,

urban/rural issues, globalization and migration, to name the most obvious factors. For different people and different groups, any one or more of these factors may affect their sense of what is special about their ethnic group, as well as their thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior related to membership in that ethnic group. For many Syrian informants it was language, religion, family, work, connection to the land, or gender roles. For others, it was discrimination, the disappearance of loved ones, or a sense of lost power and prestige. For each person these salient experiences or issues help define their core or personal identity, albeit via an interpretive process, and when multiple people from the ethnic group have similar experiences, as often happens within families and homogenous local communities, then it starts to become part of the ethnic group identity. This assumption of a core identity does not disregard Erving Gofffman's (1959) argument that the concept of core self is challenged by the way people change identities depending on the social situation. But I believe that even when people change roles in different situations a central aspect of who they are continues across such situations. This may be the master status of the person, or significant values or beliefs that are likely to be both achieved and ascribed. My text from the end of chapter four supports this conclusion.

The individual narratives from Druze, Kurds, Alawis, Sunni Arabs, and Christians highlight the fact that each person often has a life changing event that affects their world view and personal identity, and depending on the context and consequences, their commitment to their ethnic group identity. For some it was war related: a specific bombing that killed 100 people, or the disappearance of a family member or friend. For

others, a search for God or a higher power, or the listening to heavy metal music. However, these individual stories and paths combine at the group level to form the group's sense of identity, which is often fluid, with group members on continuum of salience, exploration and commitment. For some Syrians, ethnic identification is strong and affects many aspects of daily lives. For others, much less so, or only in certain spaces and times, such as when interacting with outgroups. Overall, ethnic identity is a major social identifier, with many Syrians having strong stereotypes about other groups and seeking information about other ethnicity as a means to categorize others and guide social interaction.

Ethnicity and ethnic identity are messy. There is no easy way to identify and differentiate the unique characteristics of ethnic identity in a comparative study. As I explore below, some concepts and models help, but this messiness may always exist for ethnic identity. Like Brubaker and Cooper (2000) note, weaker conceptualizations of identity cover a wide variety of issues. In this sense it is chaotic or complicated with many possible identity formulations which are continuously changing. Such identities are messy because of the complexity of societies, social life and other identity attachments: different roles, groups, cultural facets, social norms, and environmental conditions all affect ethnic identification.

A brief comment on other types of identities is necessary as well. The concept of personal identities (Stryker 1980) and identity theory's social role model (McCall and Simmons 1978) seemed appropriate for many Syrians. Possibly the easiest questions to answer for informants were those inquiring about their social roles, eliciting common

responses of worker, humanitarian, spouse/significant other, man, woman, or parent. For many Syrians, their social roles are the most visible or conscious aspect of their everyday lives. However, what these roles mean to each person may ethnically inflected. The challenge for the researcher is to find the patterns – of similarity or exception – in these individual accounts. It is possible, but challenging. The social identity model (Tajfel 1979; Stets and Burke 2000) was more complicated: once respondents had examples of social groups, they could identify the types of social groups they belonged to, such as family or friends, but it wasn't easy. Very few could accurately describe what was special about their ethnic group without considerable assistance from myself. I don't think many of my informants could satisfactorily express their core identities, as theorized by Turner (2012) with the unique attributes and goals of the person that would be salient in most or all social situations, without considerable assistance. Aside from these models, ascriptive identities were important, as we saw with the Alawi visual identity in chapter four: many groups held strong stereotypes of outgroups which affected those groups' definitions of who they were.

Just a brief comment on the role of geography and ethnic identity is needed, in part addressing Lewis' (1998) theories on regionalism. Coming into this study I expected geography to affect ethnic identities and relations to some degree, but found that the level of development in Syria, being mainly pastoral with some industrial society features, elevated the importance of geography in promoting ethnic homogeneity, segregation, and socioeconomic class. As I noted in chapter three, Syrians are often closely associated with their place of birth and specific places have their own unique cultures. The Druze

inhabit Druze Mountain, the Alawi are in the Alawite or Nusayriyah Mountains in Tartous and Lattakia, and Kurds in the hilly areas of Afrin and Hasakeh. Geography also impacts the frequency and types of interactions with other ethnic groups, with many rural people rarely intermingling with out-groups and even limited intergroup interactions in some urban areas. The historical importance of geography was problematized by the armed conflict, which has forced about 6.5 million Syrians to become displaced, many multiple times. This has led to much more forced intergroup interaction, although displaced Syrians still gravitate towards their in-group.

Like geography, Syrian history (van Dam 2011; Phillips 2015; Lewis 1998) played a much greater role in ethnic identities than I expected, with many informants describing formative events for their ethnic groups that occurred one, two or even five generations ago. When I started this study I was hoping to stay in the present or near past, but the longer term history mentioned by informants kept pulling me farther back. The present for me was March 2011, with the start of the uprising. My assumption that the armed conflict experiences since 2011 significantly affected ethnic identities holds true, as I have supported previously. However, I found that the near past, stretching back to the 1970s and rise to power of the Assad regime, was a significant historical period as well for Syrian ethnic identity formation and reproduction, due to the intense relationship between regime marginalization and oppression, and ethnic group responses to that oppression, as evidenced in chapter six.

Returning to the work of Brubaker and Cooper (2000), a note is needed about *weak* identity conceptualizations, essentialism and this study. Due to the need to make

clear statements about findings and arguments, sometimes findings are more black and white in this study than they should be. In reality, there is more grey area in the middle. The finding on fear of Sunni extremists is an example of that – while some patterns were found among minority groups of such mistrust and fears, and examples of massacres that justify them having such fears, it can easily be seen as essentialist – a dominant characteristic of all Syrian minority identities, when in fact it is more subtle than that, more likely a part of multiple, sometimes competing identities. Hence, the findings posited here should be seen as potential markers for further study for ethnic identity and identification, not essentialist statements of incontrovertible fact.

In the next section I attempt to create a model that incorporates all these factors and the messiness found with ethnic identity formation and social reproduction in Syria.

An integrative, change-accommodating model of ethnic identity reproduction

Building on the work of other social science theorists, especially in the ethnic identity field, I propose the following models of ethnic identity formation and social reproduction. I provide two models here: the first is a general model that explains many intricacies of ethnic identity reproduction and what happens to ethnic identification when ethnic groups are under pressure from extreme threats such as massacres or genocide, i.e., adding violent oppression to the generic ethnic identity model. The second is a simple model of ethnic identity differences in Syria within the current armed conflict and social contexts.

In model 1 below I show the main factors necessary for ethnic identity formation, reproduction and change. To start with we have all the messy factors that I mentioned

earlier which can potentially affect ethnic group identities: these are represented in the table with the underlying dynamics at the bottom of the page. In any given situation for an ethnic group, these factors (or social structures) interact, affect and make up the group's sense of *who we are*. These underlying dynamics become relevant for the ethnic group identity through the prism of the ethnic identity change process. This change process starts with the existing (i.e. traditional) macro-level, ethnic group characteristics which normally guide social interactions, a la Mead's social interaction process (Blumer 1966) and Gidden's (1984) structuration process. However, human agency by individuals may lead to micro-level changes in those social structures/ethnic group characteristics. Such micro-actions are seen by others, historically by family and peers and now increasingly through social networks via social media, often leading to changes in others' thinking, perceptions, feelings and behavior. Once a critical mass is reached, the macro-level ethnic identity structures change with the old beliefs discarded and new structures guiding social interaction. This process helps explain the process of continuity of ethnic identification, whereby the most valued characteristics continue to be salient for individuals for longer periods of time. In this study the discussion of changes desired by youth on issues like marriage and gender equality were examples of such ethnic identity change processes.

Model 1 also differentiates between *us* and *them*, the group *self* and the *other*. Ethnic groups interact with other ethnic groups along a continuum of cooperation and conflict. My assumption is that most such interaction is cooperative and peaceful, since our world is generally a peaceful system. However, in some cases there is conflict

between individuals or groups. This is where the diverse work of such social scientists as

Georg Simmel (1955), Gordon Allport (1958), Ralf Dahrendorf (1959), Lewis Coser

(1964), Randall Collins (1975), Harold Isaacs (1975), John Stone (1986) and others

studying group conflict comes into play. As part of the intergroup interaction process,

ethnic groups generate ascribed group identities, which affect perceptions by one's own

group of the *other* group, future interactions with that group, and that group's

characterization of their own identity (we are not *y* as they say, but *x*).

As part of this interaction process and due to a need to differentiate one's own

group from others, the concept of group boundaries comes into play (Barth 1969). As

Barth argues below, ethnic group boundaries are critical features of group identity in
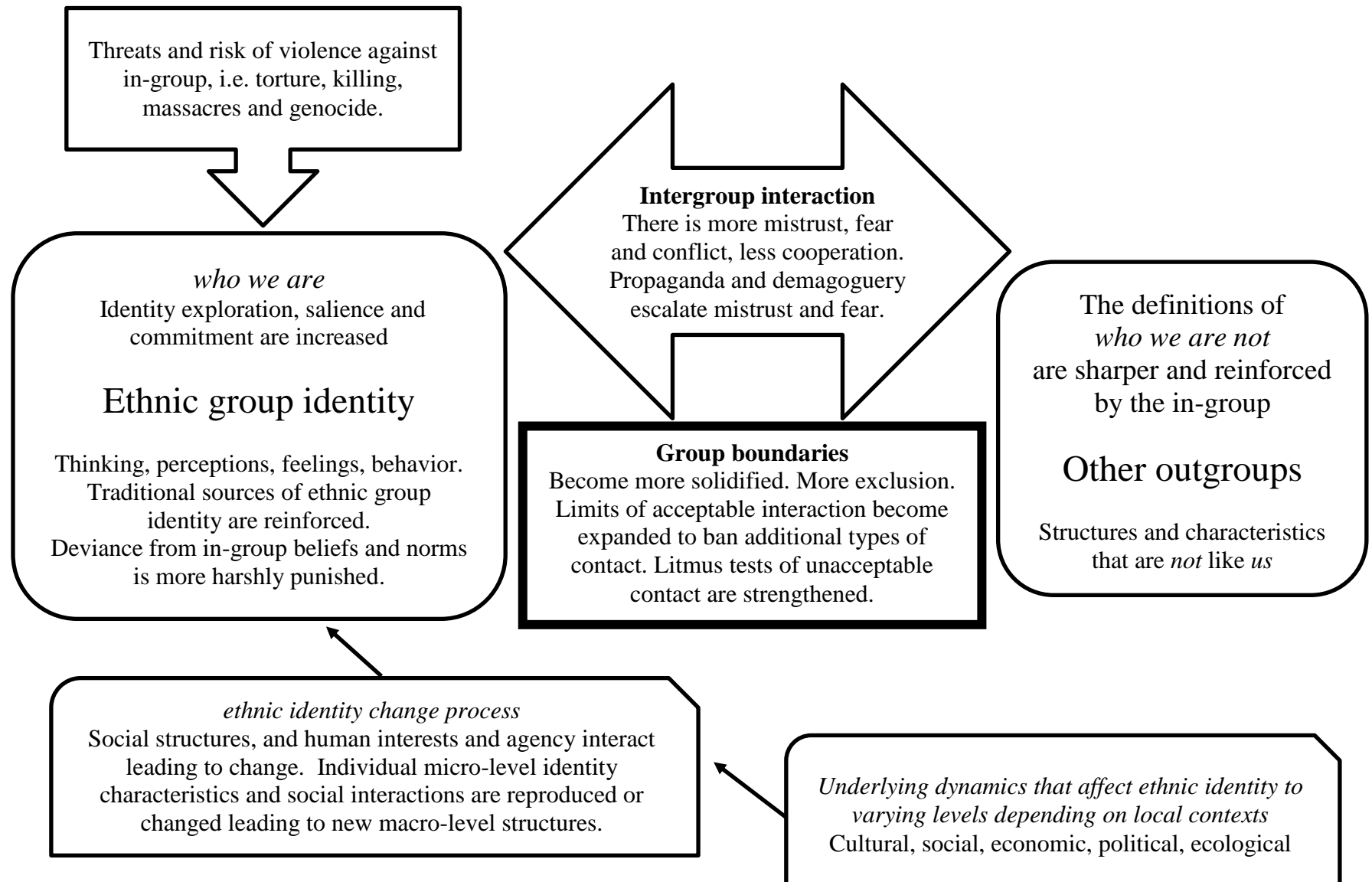
today's modern societies.

> First, it is clear that boundaries persist despite a flow of
> personnel across them. In other words, categorical ethnic
> distinctions do not depend on an absence of mobility,
> contact and information, but do entail social processes of
> exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are
> maintained despite changing participation and membership
> in the course of individual life histories. Secondly, one
> finds that stable, persisting, and often vitally important
> social relations are maintained across such boundaries, and
> are frequently based precisely on the dichotomized ethnic
> statuses. In other words, ethnic distinctions do not depend
> on an absence of social interaction and acceptance, but are
> quite to the contrary often the very foundations on which
> embracing social systems are built. Interaction in such a
> social system does not lead to its liquidation through
> change and acculturation; cultural differences can persist
> despite inter-ethnic contact and interdependence. (Barth
> 1969: no page)

In ethnic intergroup situations both contact and isolation types of interaction

contain aspects of group boundary dynamics such as inclusion and exclusion of certain

members. Important intergroup social interactions depend on such group boundaries. In my study here, marriage was the clear litmus test of group boundaries, yet other types of intergroup interactions still continued regardless of that clear boundary.

Next in model one I show what happens in cases where oppression and violence threaten an ethnic group and its identity, as we have in Syria. This helps explain such dynamics as situations between victimized and oppressor groups. I start with the external threats and risks of violence, such as arrests, torture, killing, massacres and genocide. These forces impact in-group dynamics and in-group thinking, perceptions, feelings, and behavior. Most notably, traditional sources of ethnic group identity are reinforced, and deviance from in-group beliefs and norms more harshly punished. Regarding intergroup interaction, there is more mistrust, fear and conflict, and less cooperation between the two groups. Practices like demagoguery and propaganda affect such mistrust and beliefs about the outgroup. Due to in-group pressure, group boundaries become more salient and solidified. It is more difficult to enter the in-group and more imperative to follow the group's norms. Additional types of social interaction between the two groups may be banned and litmus test exclusions reinforced even more. Next, outgroup definitions become sharper, more intensely describing how the in-group and outgroup are dissimilar. The in-group reinforces these ascribed differences to distinguish the good values of the in-group from the bad ones of the outgroup.
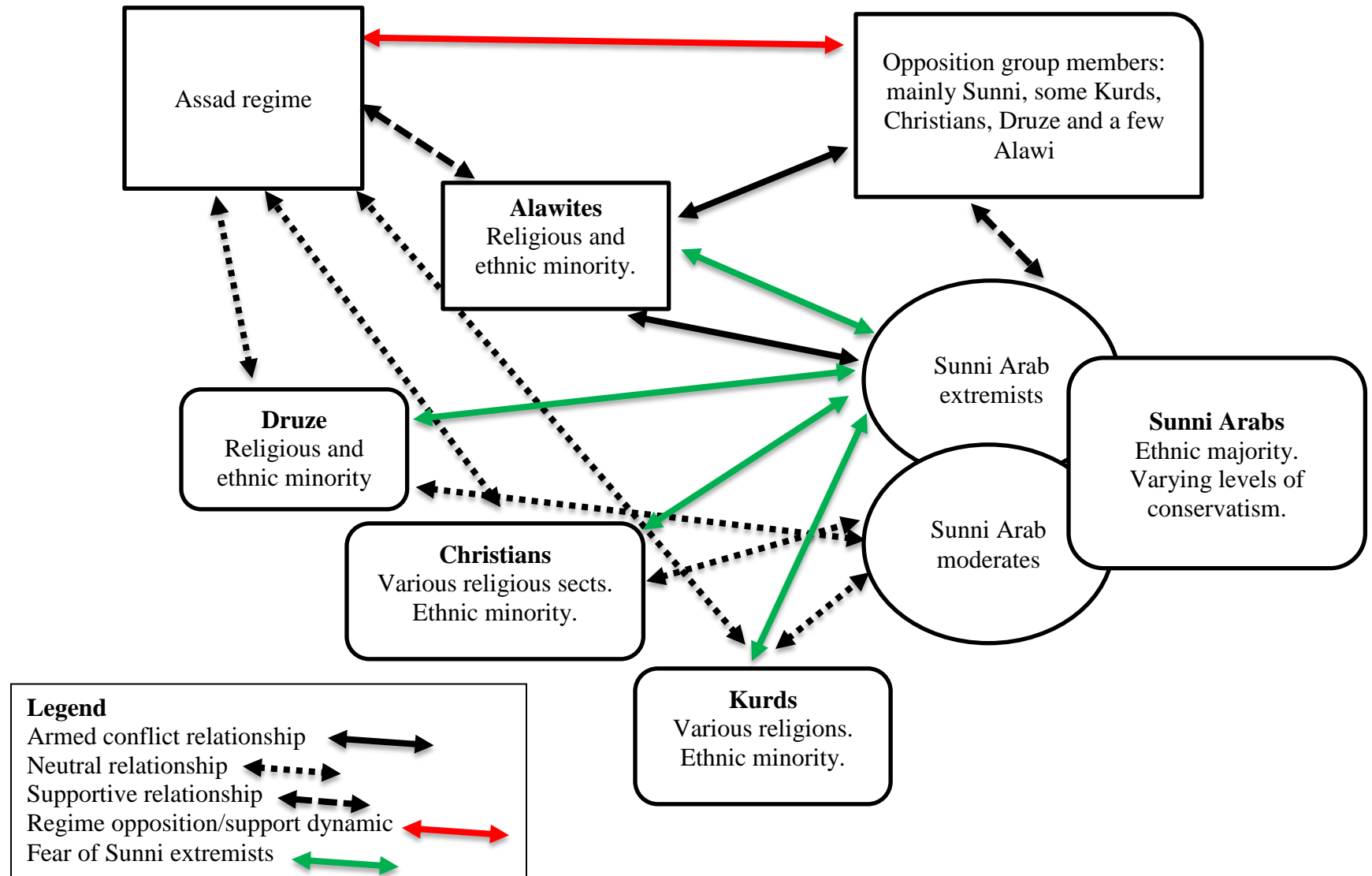
Model 1: Ethnic identity model with threats of violence and group extermination

Threats and risk of violence against in-group, i.e. torture, killing, massacres and genocide.

who we are
Identity exploration, salience and commitment are increased

Ethnic group identity

Thinking, perceptions, feelings, behavior.
Traditional sources of ethnic group identity are reinforced.
Deviance from in-group beliefs and norms is more harshly punished.

Intergroup interaction
There is more mistrust, fear and conflict, less cooperation. Propaganda and demagoguery escalate mistrust and fear.

Group boundaries
Become more solidified. More exclusion. Limits of acceptable interaction become expanded to ban additional types of contact. Litmus tests of unacceptable contact are strengthened.

The definitions of
who we are not
are sharper and reinforced by the in-group

Other outgroups

Structures and characteristics that are *not* like *us*

ethnic identity change process
Social structures, and human interests and agency interact leading to change. Individual micro-level identity characteristics and social interactions are reproduced or changed leading to new macro-level structures.

Underlying dynamics that affect ethnic identity to varying levels depending on local contexts
Cultural, social, economic, political, ecological

In the model two below I lay out a visual representation of the current ethnic group identity dynamics in Syria, for the five groups studied here: Sunni Arabs, Alawis, Kurds, Christians and Druze. Overall, this model visualizes how the ethnic groups relate to each other in the larger armed conflict since 2011. The main antagonists are the regime, with Alawi support, against the opposition, who are mainly Sunni Arabs, especially Sunni extremists, as marked by the red line.

Following the two main findings from this study, first we can see the fear by minority groups of Sunni extremists. The green lines show this relationship between Sunni religious extremists and the Alawi, Kurdish, Christian, and Druze minorities. Secondly, we can see the regime as support/opposition polarization dynamic, with the red line between the Assad regime and the various ethnic and religious groups that oppose it. I acknowledge that this model is a simplification of the dynamics examined in this study, but it does start to visually show the complexity of the relationships between the various ethnic groups in Syria studied here.

Model 2: Ethnic identity dynamics for five Syrian ethnic groups

Assad regime

Opposition group members: mainly Sunni, some Kurds, Christians, Druze and a few Alawi

Alawites
Religious and ethnic minority.

Sunni Arab extremists

Sunni Arabs
Ethnic majority. Varying levels of conservatism.

Sunni Arab moderates

Druze
Religious and ethnic minority

Christians
Various religious sects. Ethnic minority.

Kurds
Various religions. Ethnic minority.

Legend
Armed conflict relationship
Neutral relationship
Supportive relationship
Regime opposition/support dynamic
Fear of Sunni extremists

Prospects for future ethnic relations and peace in Syria

This study highlights the significant polarization and fear between Syria ethnic groups, as well as core beliefs and values in this complex ethnic conflict. In my opinion both the fear of Sunni extremists and the regime support/opposition dynamics are deep-rooted, affecting core values and beliefs of the various ethnic groups. In other words, their group identities are central in these two conflicts: religion in one case and political survival in the other. For these reasons I believe future relations between the groups will be tense for considerable time to come. Peace prospects are very unlikely, since there are few options to resolve the core issues underlying these conflicts. Unfortunately, I believe this conflict will continue for considerable time to come.

APPENDIX

Appendix A: Qualitative interview questionnaire

Hello. My name is Randy Salm and I am conducting this research as part of my sociology studies at George Mason University. The purpose is to better understand identity and ethnic group relations in Syria. This interview may take several hours over several days. There are no direct benefits that may come to you from this interview. All information will be kept confidential. Would it be ok to tape record this interview?

Q1. Can you tell me about yourself? Age, where you are from, family, etc.?

Q2. If I asked you, *who are you*, how would you describe yourself?
How do you describe your social roles? What social groups do you belong to?
What things are really important to you?
Do you have a core sense of identity? How do you describe it?
What values, beliefs or customs are important to you personally?

Q3. How do you describe your ethnic group?
What are the main values, beliefs, customs and roles of your ethnic group?
What are the major events that define your ethnic group?
Who are the leaders that define or guide your ethnic group?
How much does your ethnic group influence decisions of group members?
How much solidarity is there in the group?
Are members proud of the group identity?

Q4. How would you describe your ethnic identity?
What values, beliefs or customs from your ethnic group are most important to you?
What is your role within the ethnic group? What groups do you belong to that are part of your ethnic group?
Have you <u>explored</u> or tried to learn more about your ethnic group? How?
How <u>visible</u>, prominent or salient is your ethnic group identity in your life?
How <u>committed</u> are you to your ethnic group? What do you do for the group?
Is there a larger Syrian identity? What is it?

Q5. How has your ethnic group identity changed in recent years?
Has your group's identities changed from the past, to the present and into the future?
How have your group members changed the way they describe your group?

How have other groups changed how they describe your group?
How have the values, beliefs, and customs of your ethnic group changed since 2011?
Has the modern way of life affected your group's ethnic identity?

Q6. How are relations between your ethnic group and other ethnic groups now?
How many friends from other groups did you have before 2011 and how many now?
What interactions did you have with other ethnic groups before 2011 versus now?
What kinds of interactions are permitted between your group and other groups? Friends?
Marriage? Work together? What consequences exist for breaking the rules?
What boundaries exist between the groups?
How do you describe other ethnic groups? Can you tell the difference between people of different groups? How? What stereotypes exist of other groups?
Is there a difference between the older and younger generation's opinions on relations between your group and other ethnic groups? Specifically, opinions on having peace and cooperation between groups versus protecting your own group and maybe revenge for past abuses?

Thank you for your time and sharing this information.

Appendix B: Syria Ethnic Identity Survey

Survey questionnaire for Syrian adults [text in English/Arabic]
Hello. My name is Randy Salm and I am conducting this research as part of my sociology studies at George Mason University. The purpose is to better understand identity and ethnic group relations in Syria. This survey should take about 10 minutes. There are no direct benefits that may come to you from this survey. All information will be kept confidential.

مرحبا،اسمي رندي سالم و انا انظم هذا البحث كجزء من دراستيي في علم الإجتماع في جامعة جورج ماسن. الغرض هو
تحسين فهم الهوية و العلاقات بين الجماعة العرقية. هذا الاستطلاع يأخذ حوالي 10 دقائق
كل المعلومات سيتم التعامل معها بسرية كاملة. لن يكون هنالك اي فوائد مباشرة من وراء هذا الإستبيان

[survey consent form text]   هذا النص استمارة الموافقة

Inclusion criteria: Are you over age 18? Yes/No. If no, end of survey.
تضمين المعايير: هل عمرك فوق 18 سنة   نعم/ لا. إذا لا، ينتهي الإستبيان

Q1. What is your ethnic group?   ما هي مجموعتك العرقية ؟
Sunni Arab   سني عربي
Shiite Arab   شيعي عربي
Alawite   علوي
Kurdish   كردي
Druze   درزي
Ismaili   الاسماعلي
Assyrian   اشوري
Other   اخر

Please circle the response that best shows how much you agree or disagree with each statement.
ضع دائرة أمام الجواب اللذي يبين اذا كنت موافق أو غير موافق على العبارة اعلاه

Q2. I have spent time trying to find out more about my ethnic group, such as its history, traditions, and customs.
لقد قضيت وقتا أبحث عن عرقي عن التاريخ و العادات و التقاليد الخاصة بي

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q3. I have a strong sense of belonging to my own ethnic group.
لدي شعور قوي بالانتماء إلى مجموعتي العرقية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q4. I understand pretty well what my ethnic group membership means to me.

أنا أفهم جيدا ما يعنيه لي ان اكون عضوا في مجموعتي العرقية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q5. I have often done things that will help me understand my ethnic background better.

لقد فعلت كثير الأشياء لمساعدتي على فهم خلفيتي العرقية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q6. I have often talked to other people in order to learn more about my ethnic group.

لقد تحدثت إلى أشخاص آخرين لمعرفة المزيد عن مجموعتي العرقية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q7. I feel a strong attachment towards my own ethnic group.

أشعر بارتباط قوي تجاه مجموعتي العرقية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q8. I believe that ethnic identities have become more important because of the Syrian conflict.

أعتقد أن الهويات العرقية أصبحت ذات أهمية أكثر بسبب النزاع السوري

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q9. I believe the armed conflict has created more conflict between Syrian ethnic groups.

أعتقد أن النزاع المسلح خلق المزيد من الصراع بين المجموعات العرقية السورية

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q10. I have fewer friends from other Syrian ethnic groups than I did before 2011.

لدي أقل اصدقاء من المجموعات العرقية السورية الأخرى مما كان لدي قبل عام 2011

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q11. I believe there is a common national identity for most Syrians.

أعتقد أن هناك هوية وطنية مشتركة لمعظم السوريين

Strongly disagree لا أوافق بشدة	Disagree غير موافق	Neutral محايد	Agree موافق	Strongly Agree موافق بشدة

Q12. If you believe there is a strong national identity, what are the main aspects of that identity?

إذا كنت تعتقد أن هناك هوية وطنية قوية ما هي الجوانب الرئيسية لتلك الهوية ؟

Pan-Arab identity   الهوية القومية العربية

Conservative Muslim and Arab identity   المسلم المحافظ و الهوية عربية

Democratic, multi-ethnic identity   ديمقراطي، هوية متعددة الأعراق

Other [please explain]   آخر يرجى توضيح

Q13. If you believe there is not a common national identity, what are the main reasons that limit such an identity?

إذا كنت تعتقد أن هناك ليست هوية وطنية مشتركة ، ما هي الأسباب الرئيسية التي تحد من هذه الهوية ؟

Please explain: _   لتوضيح

Q14. Age   العمر

Q15. Gender male   female   الجنس ذكر أنثى

Q16. Religion   الدين

Sunni Muslim   مسلم سني

Shia Muslim   مسلم شيعي

Christian   مسيحي

Druze   درزي

Other religion   دين آخر

Q17 Place of origin   مكان المنشأ

Quneitra	القنيطرة
As-Sweida	السويداء
Dar'a	درعا
Ar-Raqqa	الرقة
Tartous	طرطوس
Deir-ez-Zor	دير الزور
Al- Hasakeh	الحسكة
Idleb	إدلب
Lattakia	اللاذقية
Hama	حماة
Homs	حمص
Rural Damascus	ريف دمشق
Aleppo	حلب
Damascus	مدينة دمشق

Thank you for your participation.   أشكركم على مشاركتكم

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BIOGRAPHY

Over the last 25 years, Randall Salm has worked as a sociology and conflict resolution professor, education for peacebuilding specialist, social science researcher, USAID conciliation specialist, juvenile justice trainer and exploitive child labor specialist. Since 1990 he has taught sociology, conflict resolution and juvenile justice, and written reports on conflict resolution, peace education and child labor. From 1995 to 2002 he led conflict resolution and human rights training in Colombia and wrote a program manual on conflict resolution in schools, *La Solución de Conflictos en la Escuela*. Since 2002 he has led juvenile justice training with the Fairfax County, Virginia juvenile court; supervised six U.S. Department of Labor exploitative child labor cooperative agreements; and supported numerous social research projects using surveys, in-depth interviews and focus groups. For UNICEF's Peacebuilding, Education and Advocacy program Randall and a colleague conducted a literature review on evaluation models and developed recommendations for the PBEA evaluability assessment in 2012. He also supported the PBEA evaluability assessment in 2013. In 2014 he conducted a conflict analysis of the education sector in Rakhine State, Myanmar in preparation for the UNICEF Myanmar PBEA program design. He designed the research methodology, conducted a desk review, interviews and focus groups with diverse stakeholders, led feedback sessions, and completed report writing for the UNICEF Myanmar office. In 2015 he led a research unit for the NGO Forum in Antakya, Turkey, conducting primary research on the Syrian affected population, leading to six reports addressing a wide variety of issues, including displacement, protection, and humanitarian access. Randall has a bachelor's degree in history, masters' degrees in Conflict Analysis and Resolution, and in Business Administration and a Ph.D. in Sociology, focusing on ethnic identity in Syria. His research interests are in armed conflict, child soldiers, identity, socialization, and vulnerable populations.