

**Sectarianism or Geopolitics?
Framing the 2011 Syrian Conflict**

**by
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Abstract

The Syrian conflict began as an uprising against the Assad regime for political and economic reform. However, as violence escalated between the regime and opposition, the conflict drew in Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, which backed both the regime and opposition with resources. The current conflict is described as sectarian because of the increasingly antagonistic relations between the Shiite/Alawite regime and the Sunni-dominated opposition. This thesis examines how sectarian identity is politicized by investigating the role of key states during the 2011 Syrian conflict. I argue that the Syrian conflict is not essentially sectarian in nature, but rather a multi-layered conflict driven by national and regional actors through the selective deployment of violence and rhetoric. Using frame analysis, I examine Iranian, Turkish, and Saudi Arabian state media coverage of the Syrian conflict to reveal the respective states' political position and interest in Syria. Through process tracing, I further identify three causal mechanisms – strategic framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization – to examine how these states catalyzed sectarianism in the Syrian conflict.

Keywords: sectarianism; primordialism; constructivism; instrumentalism; Syria

Dedication

To my family for their infinite support and faith.

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List of Acronyms

AQI	Al-Qaeda Iraq
FSA	Free Syrian Army
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
ICC	International Crisis Group
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
ISIS	Islamic State of Iran and Syria
JN	Jubhat al-Nusra
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organization
PKK	Partial Karkeren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers Party
QF	Quds Force
CHP	Republican People’s Party
SNC	Syrian National Council
USDOT	U.S. Department of the Treasury

Chapter 1.

Introduction

The 2011 Syrian uprising and the subsequent conflict have led to a new turning point for sectarianism within the Middle East. The term *sectarianism* in Islam tends to imply that the present division between Sunnis and Shiites is a result of an ancient hatred that has supposedly existed since the seventh century, but the reality is more complex. The origins of the Sunni-Shiite division within Islam was a result of question of succession after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. However, it is only over a period of the next 300 years that partisans separated into distinct sects – Sunni and Shiite. Thus, what started as an issue of succession became a question of belief.

For most of the 20th century, the Sunni-Shiite cleavage was not politicized in the way that it is today. According to Vali Nasr, the Sunni-Shiite harmony during that time was due to a common threat to Islam: Western imperialism. However, the 21st century witnessed the re-emergence of the Sunni-Shiite division due to a few major events, such as the Iranian Revolution in 1979, the Iran-Iraq War in 1980-1988, and the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 (Loumi, 2008, p. 9). These events are significant because they shaped the rise of sectarianism in the Middle East. The Iranian Revolution introduced a trend of activism based on Shiism that continues today (Loumi, 2008, p. 9). Authoritarian regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, feared that the Islamic revolution would spread to the Gulf countries, ousting them from power as the Pahlavi monarchy had been. This caused Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to undermine “the power and appeal of the Iranian Revolution, seeking to portray it as a distinctly Shi’a/Persian phenomenon based on a corruption of the Islamic tradition”, which affected the Sunni-Shiite relations (Hashemi & Postel, 2017). Similarly, the Iraq-Iran War resulted in anti-Shiite and anti-Kurd policies, leading to sectarian tensions inside Iraq. It also highlighted the sectarian divisions in the wider Middle East as Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies supported the Sunni Ba’th regime against Iran. Finally, the US-led invasion of Iraq removed the Ba’th regime and brought the Shiite majority into power. This “dramatically affected the regional balance of power” as the new Iraqi state formed an alliance with Iran that solidified Iran’s position in the Middle East (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Loumi, 2008, p. 9). In fact, the war marked “the origin of a

new dimension of power balancing” mainly between the Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East as it empowered Shiite to emerge as a strong political force (Ismail, 2016; Loumi, 2008, pp. 9–10). Recently, the peaceful coexistence again resurfaced as states and political parties belonging to different sects began to form associations. For instance, Iran worked with the Sunni organization, Hamas, while Qatar and Turkey enjoyed good relations with Shiite Iran and Alawite Syria. The Sunni political party in Egypt, Muslim Brotherhood, also had a good relationship with Iran. All these examples show that even when the sectarian difference has resurfaced, its causes and intensity varied (Byman, 2014, p. 88). This pattern suggests that the Sunni-Shiite sectarian identity is elastic. While Sunni-Shiite religious affiliation is important, sectarian identity has coexisted with, or been subsumed by, other labels: regional, national, ethnic, tribal, class, generational, and urban versus rural. Current sectarian conflict is not a result of age-old differences, but a by-product of local and regional political contexts. This begs the question, what explains sectarianism in the Middle East today?

The re-emergence of sectarianism can be attributed to the Arab Spring, which caused the collapse of governments throughout the Middle East, creating a political instability that key political actors exploited for power and influence. Key regional states, such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia, also exacerbated the Sunni-Shiite sectarianism to gain popular support, extend their power, and discredit their rivals. As Aaron Reese (2013) writes:

There is nothing inherent about the conflict between Shi'a and Sunni, and reductive arguments that treat these differences as inevitable or immutable do little to advance an understanding of the situation. Yet these identities work conveniently to create an “us” and “them” to mobilize supporters more easily in politics or in conflict. Sectarian dynamics have been deployed by a variety of actors seeking to draw lines of support and contestation (p. 7).

The Saudi-Iranian rivalry is another important factor when discussing sectarianism in the Middle East. The rivalry is not rooted in sectarianism, but it is, in fact, an enabler of sectarianism. The sectarian cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran is informed by geopolitical strategies. Saudi Arabia and Iran are based on very different visions of regional order, while each claiming legitimacy to Islam. Politically, religious authorities rule Iran, but civilians have a partial say in governance through elections. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, is ruled by the royal family that has effectively depoliticized the clerics and prohibited any form of democracy. The Iranian state wants a Middle East that is free from

the US military and its influence as it has been forming close foreign relations with Russia and China (Saikal, 2016, pp. 169–170; Wehrey, 2014, p. 19). On the other hand, Saudi Arabia has continuously benefited from its strategic friendship with the US, allowing it to act as a check against Iran and Iraq and strengthen its position in the Middle East (Saikal, 2016, p. 165; Wehrey, 2014, p. 19). Another area of contestation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is “for patronage of historically pan-Arab ‘portfolios’ such as the Palestinian cause”. Both view each other’s involvement in this cause as threatening to its domestic and regional legitimacy and influence in the wider region (Wehrey, 2014, p. 19). The ongoing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is for geopolitical gains, which could lead to the use and subsequent exacerbation of the Sunni-Shiite sectarian identity. As the Arab Spring created instability, these two key states have taken advantage of the ongoing power shifts to pursue larger regional goals in order to reinforce their political stance in the region (Kausch, 2015, p. 13).

Prior to the Arab Spring, both Iran and Saudi Arabia generally downplayed sectarianism. Saudi Arabia framed its policies based on Arab and pan-Islamic legitimacy, while Iran focused more on internal issues and foreign relations, such as strengthening its defensive military and friendship with Russia, Hezbollah, and Syria (Saikal, 2016, p. 170; Wehrey, 2014, p. 19). However, the Arab Spring destabilized the Middle East and caused uncertainty, which created room for “a region-wide strategic reconfiguration” (Saikal, 2016, p. 178). By demonizing and denouncing the Other – Shiite and Sunni – the states are competing for regional legitimacy and support. Sectarianism was used to create “a new set of regional dynamics” (Saikal, 2016, p. 178).

Most scholarship views the 2011 Syrian conflict as an ancient struggle between the Sunnis and Shiites. This sectarian narrative is supported by the primordialist approach that argues that sectarian conflicts in the Middle East are a manifestation of the ancient inter-ethnic hatred and struggle between two clearly defined religious sects: Shiite and Sunni. However, this is a reductionist sectarian approach that ignores the complex and multifaceted evolution of the Syrian conflict (Byman, 2014, p. 358). Therefore, to explain the development of the Syrian conflict from a national uprising to a sectarian conflict, this study focuses on the constructivist and instrumentalist theoretical approaches. These two theories are more persuasive in explaining the growing Sunni-Shiite polarization during the Syrian conflict. The constructivist approach emphasizes the importance of identity and non-material factors (ideas, norms, and values) to explain a state’s interests and relations

with other states. Under constructivism, the continuous process of social interaction due to the co-constitution of structure and agents results in sectarianism. Similar to constructivism, instrumentalism argues that sectarianism arises due to the politicization or manipulation of ethnic/sectarian identities for political purposes. The main difference between the two theoretical approaches is that constructivism explores the process while instrumentalism focuses on the intentionality of the actor. In other words, constructivism explores the process of social interaction based on identity, interests, and structures over time that results in sectarian identity. On the other hand, instrumentalism discounts the process as it specifically looks at factors deliberately manipulated by actors for political or economic ends (Hashemi & Postel, 2017; Malvig, 2015, p. 10). These theoretical approaches provide the groundwork to explore the changing dynamic and sectarian polarization in Syria and the Middle East today.

The 2011 Syrian Conflict is an excellent case study for investigating sectarianism in the Middle East. Syria is a multi-religious country where nationality was the principal identity as Syrians lived “without religious or sectarian animosities” (Zuhdi Jasser, 2014, p. 61). The population can be broken down into 74% Sunni of which 14% is Kurdish Sunni, 13% Alawite Shiite, 9% Christians, 3% Druze, and 1% Yezidi (“Syria Population 2017,” 2017). The Syrian conflict did not start as a sectarian conflict; it commenced as a reaction to “decades of serious economic inequalities and the lack of political liberalism and accountability” (Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 107). What began as a peaceful uprising for economic and political liberation transformed into a sectarian conflict as minorities, which were initially neutral, are forced to choose sides.

The 2011 Syrian conflict has drawn in external actors, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, which are the leading regional states in the Middle East. These three states’ external support transformed the revolution for democracy against an authoritarian regime into a protracted armed conflict with a Sunni-Shiite sectarian dynamic. Syria is important given its geostrategic position and its potential as a regional powerbroker. The removal of Assad would shift the balance of power in the Middle East and affect the stability of neighboring actors. The removal of the Assad regime would not only weaken Iran-Hezbollah's alliance, but also constrain Iran's capacity to extend its power into the Arab East; it could also cause post-Assad Syria to form a strategic alliance with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Turkey, thus, breaking the Iran-Hezbollah-Syria axis. On the other hand, for Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Assad's collapse could lead to an Islamist-

dominated successor government willing to side with the GCC and Turkey and impede Iran's regional goals. In this way, the Syrian conflict is not just a sectarian conflict between the Sunni majority and Alawite/Shiite minority, but a multi-layered conflict driven by key political actors in the Middle East. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's role have introduced sectarian divisions into the competition for power in the region. To determine how sectarianism is politicized, this thesis investigates the role of key states in invoking Sunni-Shiite identities during the 2011 Syrian conflict.

I argue that by exploiting sectarian identities through the selective employment of violence and rhetoric, national and regional political actors transformed the national uprising into a power struggle along sectarian lines. I also argue that the Sunni-Shiite sectarianization is a result of identity construction and mobilization influenced by political actors in the region. The main political actors responsible for sectarianizing the conflict are the Assad regime, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the Islamic Republic of Iran.

I assess the role of national and regional states in influencing the Sunni-Shiite sectarian dynamic of the 2011 Syrian conflict by drawing on media coverage and process tracing designs. Media outlets play a vital role in amplifying the sectarian dimension because they act as mouthpieces of states in the Middle East. As such, examining Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran's media coverage of the Syrian conflict should reveal the respective states' political context and interest in Syria. On the other hand, the process tracing design focuses on the factors that actors, internal and external, used to exacerbate the Syrian conflict. The process tracing specifically looks at the factors that transformed the uprising into the current overtly sectarian conflict. Given the emergence of Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in Syria, the aforementioned constructivist and instrumentalism provide the theoretical basis to explore the transformation of the conflict. Altogether, the combination of media coverage and process tracing worked together to show that key political actors constructed and exacerbated the sectarian identity in Syria for political purposes.

Outline of Thesis

Chapter 1 has introduced the 2011 Syrian conflict while giving a brief overview of the Sunni-Shiite division in the Middle East. Chapter 2 provides the theoretical background on the construction and politicization of sectarian identity that transformed the Syrian uprising into a violent conflict. In addition to evaluating the theoretical frameworks, I apply the approaches to the Syrian conflict. The purpose of this chapter is to highlight which theoretical approach is more persuasive in explaining the growing sectarian dichotomy in the Syrian conflict.

Chapter 3 presents the background of the 2011 Syrian conflict and then, proceeds to outline the historical relations between the key regional states and Syria, particularly the Assad regime. The main regional powers, notably Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran, have invested considerable resources in the form of funds, weapons, and military troops in the Syrian conflict. Saudi Arabia and Turkey have become the leading regional anti-Assad states whereas Iran is the principal pro-Assad state. Given the role of sectarianism in the above-mentioned states' interventionist policies in Syria, this chapter concludes by highlighting the strategic use of sectarianism in their national policies as well. The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that confluences and conflicts within and between states are a result of national and regional ambitions, not sectarianism.

Chapter 4 describes the methodology used in the study and the subsequent findings. The method is split into two parts: frame analysis and process tracing. Frame analysis focuses on how the online versions of the Saudi news outlet *Asharq Al-Awsat*, the Iranian *Tehran Times*, and the Turkish *Daily Sabah* framed the Syrian conflict in their news coverage and justified their intervention. The process tracing explores the role of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey in influencing the mobilization processes of the Assad regime and opposition based on the following factors: framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization. This chapter then proceeds to discuss the findings, which argues that the current sectarianism in Syria are driven and reinforced by the struggle for power as well as geopolitical considerations at both national and regional level.

The concluding chapter discusses why the three key states – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – employ sectarianism. I start the chapter by discussing how the frame

analysis and process tracing, together, support the hypothesis that Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey would have different takes on the Syrian conflict. Then, I use constructivism and instrumentalism to analyze the key states' geostrategic reasons for intervening in the Syria conflict. This chapter concludes by outlining the policy implications of interpreting the 2011 Syrian conflict through the lens of Sunni-Shiite sectarianism.

Chapter 2.

Theoretical Framework

The Syrian conflict is situated within a backdrop of an academic debate over the role and nature of sectarian identity in the Middle East. Current literature seeks to explain the contemporary Sunni-Shia sectarianism in the region by drawing upon different approaches of IR, and the approaches provide different explanations on the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict and the Middle East (Loumi, 2008). The main objectives of this chapter are to provide an overview of the main theories – primordialism, constructivism, and instrumentalism – and to show how each theory has been used to explain the Syrian conflict. These theories provide different explanations on the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict and the Middle East. However, none of the theories fully explain the transformation of the Syrian conflict. As such, this paper integrates the different approaches. Primordialism is used to show how the Syrian sectarian conflict is not rooted in ancient hatred between the Sunnis and Shiites, whereas constructivism and instrumentalism are used to explain how the national and external actors influenced the apparent rise of sectarianism in Syria.

The chapter begins by explaining the traditional theory on identity: primordialism. This is important in order to understand how identity can be viewed as ascriptive because ethnic/sectarian membership is assigned at birth and hence, difficult to change; however, the 2011 Syrian conflict portrays the opposite. The chapter then proceeds by explaining the emergent literature of constructivism in explaining the evolution of the Syrian uprising with attempts to connect to insights from instrumentalism. This will help to connect the domestic Syrian conflict with the broader geopolitical dynamic affecting it. Overall, this chapter describes how actors use sectarian rhetoric and violence to influence identity mobilization and structure for political ends.

Primordialism

The primordial approach views identities as biologically determined and each person belongs to one ethnic group in which membership remains fixed until death, and

passed down across generations. According to Kanchan Chandra (2012), primordialism is based on three minimal propositions: “(1) individuals have a single ethnic identity; (2) this ethnic identity is by its nature fixed; and (3) this ethnic identity is exogenous to human process” (p. 19). Therefore, primordialists argue that ethnic/sectarian conflicts arise inevitably from ancient hatreds and a mutual fear of domination, expulsion, or genocide, as the struggle takes the form of Us versus Other. Given this argument, ethnically heterogeneous states will inevitably experience ethnic conflicts (Geertz, 1963, found in Ma’abo Che, 2016). The primordial approach is dominant in public policies and media analysis as it describes ethnic/sectarian conflicts in countries globally – Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq, Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks in the former Yugoslavia, Hutu and Tutsi in Rwanda, Tuaregs and Black Africans in Mali, Tamils and Sinhallas in Sri Lanka, and Malay and Chinese in Malaysia – as ancient hatreds that have always existed and will continue to do so because ethnic attachments are deeply rooted and timeless (Chandra, 2012, p. 2).

Primordialism explains that sectarianism lies at the roots of conflict in the Middle East. According to the primordialist approach, the Shia-Sunni conflict is an ancient struggle “for the soul of Islam, a great war of competing theologies and conceptions of sacred history and a manifestation of tribal wars of ethnicities and identities” (Nasr, 2007, found in Malvig, 2015a, p. 9) that can be traced back to the 7th century when the Sunni-Shiite division happened. Similarly, the 2011 Syrian conflict is a manifestation of the ancient inter-ethnic hatred and struggle between two clearly defined religious sects – Shiite and Sunni. Based on Chandra’s three propositions of primordialism, each Syrian belongs to one ethnic group, Shiite/Alawite or Sunni; this sectarian separation has always existed and will persist, regardless what happens to the country; and it is an ancient struggle for Islam and power. The intent is to gain control over the Other from fear of domination, expulsion, or even elimination; this leads to increasing violence, an “emotionally driven behavior from feelings of fear, hatred, and anxiety” in order to protect the collective identity of the in-group, Us, from the rival Other (Williams, 2015, p. 157).

Given how the current conflict is clearly split between the Shiite minority regime and Sunni-dominated population, the primordial approach views it as a religious sectarian struggle and thus, external intervention is split along those lines. As such, Sunni states, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, support the Sunni-dominated opposition whereas Shiite states, such as Iran, support the Shiite Alawite regime in Syria. Prior to the 2011 Arab

Spring, authoritarian regimes and strong state structures kept ethnic/sectarian identities under control; however, revolution and state collapse, as happened in Syria due to Arab Spring, caused individuals to return to their primary and natural identities, which is sectarian (Malvig, 2015, p. 11). In this way, the primordial approach uses the sectarian cleavage to explain the ongoing Syrian conflict.

Sectarian identities are considered primary or natural that is played out between clearly defined religious sects under the primordial approach; therefore, primordialism fails to analyze overlapping or inter-sectarian identities or relations (Malvig, 2015). For instance, by analyzing the Syrian struggle as a Sunni-Shiite sectarian struggle, primordialism fails to explain the rivalry between Sunni states, such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar or the alliance between Hamas, Hezbollah, Syria, and Iran or even the former friendship between Turkey and Syria. As such, sectarianism alone cannot explain the underlying reasons for the 2011 Syrian conflict or the changing alliance in the wider Middle East. Iran's close alliance with the Alawite Assad regime is not due to the similar sectarian kinship, but due to geostrategic goals and common position on Israel (further discussed later chapters) (Malvig, 2015, p. 11). Furthermore, identities shift among individuals as they redefine the ethnic identity categories that define them. As Chandra (2012) explains, "When large numbers [redefine the ethnic identity categories], the result can be large scale changes in the distribution of identities in the population as a whole. Ethnic categories activated earlier seem to disappear – a phenomenon... of 'genocide by redefinition'" (p. 3). A redefinition of ethnic/sectarian identity occurred during the Syrian conflict as the revolutionary uprising against an autocratic regime transforms into an armed struggle with a sectarian dynamic. The 2011 Syrian Uprising was a result of multiple ethnic/sectarian identities shifting endogenously to political and social processes, which primordialism fails to acknowledge. Therefore, this study focuses on constructivism and instrumentalism that allows the exploration of the processes and reasons used by national and external actors/states to politicize sectarian identities and influence the 2011 Syrian conflict.

Instrumentalism

The instrumentalist approach is necessary to understand the transformation and escalation of the 2011 Syrian uprising into a sectarian armed conflict. The instrumentalist

approach is very similar to the constructivist approach as it emphasizes that ethnic/sectarian identities are political constructs manipulated by agents. Under instrumentalism, ethnic/sectarian conflict emerges due to the politicization or manipulation of ethnic/sectarian identities in order to gain political and socioeconomic advantages for a particular group while depriving the other group(s), leading to frustration and grievances among groups. In other words, this approach revolves around manipulative political elites or states (Souleimanov, 2013, p. 47). This argument is further elaborated by David Brown (2004), who states that “ethnic conflict occurs where competing self-interested elites find it useful to mobilize their respective clientele along communal lines of language, religion, race, or homeland territory” (p. 281). Overall, the instrumentalist approach underlines that ethnicity and/or sectarianism can be (re)defined and adapted depending on the context and changing circumstances because it is essentially a tool to further the ambitions of political leaders and their parties (Nasr, 2000, p. 173).

The instrumentalist approach highlights two important factors: economic competition and political opportunity. The first factor emphasizes that competition over resources and wealth can lead to ethnic mobilization if winners and losers are divided by identities or if ethnic/sectarian mobilization can lead to economic gain (Nasr, 2000, pp. 172–173). In simpler words, it is rational for political elites to invoke ethnic/sectarian identities depending on the rewards (Williams, 2015, p. 148). The second factor states that ethnic/sectarian mobilization is “social and political construction... creation of elites who draw upon, distort, and sometimes fabricate materials from the cultures of the groups they wish to represent in order to... gain political and economic advantage” (Nasr, 2000, p. 173). The instrumentalist approach helps to explain the 2011 Syrian conflict because President Assad employed identity construction and mobilization to sustain his regime and retain recognition as the legitimate leader of Syria.

Instrumentalist explanations identify political elites/leaders as the main agents in inciting ethnic/sectarian conflicts. Political leaders’ tactics and strategies to further their political interests and goals are the driving factors for ethnic/sectarian mobilization and conflict. As Vali Nasr (2000) states, “ethnic mobilization is, therefore, a by-product of political leaders’ project for power” (p. 173). For example, ethnic/sectarian conflict is “essentially bargaining demand for increased access to state patronage” (Brown, 2004, p. 281). In order to consolidate power, political elites employ the Us versus Other narrative to incite sectarian fear-mongering to gather state patronage and/or patron-client

relationship; the final purpose is to attain mass mobilization or strong position in regional rivalries (Malvig, 2015, p. 10). This argument can be connected to the constructivist's argument (discussed in the next section) that elite machinations and politicking rely on the selective use of violence and rhetoric and patronage to boost or remain in power, which eventually leads to sectarianism.

The case of 2011 Syrian conflict suggests that regimes can be instrumental in the process of identity mobilization, manipulating other actors, and polarizing sectarian identities. For example, the Assad regime used the sectarian card to portray the conflict as “as a defense of Syria’s religious pluralism against Sunni religious extremism” in order to justify his use of repression against the protesters and scare minority groups into siding with the regime (Wimmen, 2016). This political strategy contributed to identity mobilization along sectarian lines as it manipulated individual Syrians to redefine their identities based on religion. As Nasr (2000) argues, “Identity mobilization here is rooted in the project of the power of state actors, not of an elite or a community” (p. 173). Similarly, the Assad regime’s action itself was responsible for transforming the inclusive, civil orientation of the Syrian uprising into a Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict. States with “limited capabilities are more prone to manipulating cleavages of identity” (Nasr, 2000, p. 174), which is further exacerbating sectarianism in Syria currently. Limited state power and capacity means the Assad government cannot formulate or implement policies and thus, it relies on violence for survival. For example, the presence of the Shiite paramilitary group, Shabiha, increased the percentage of sectarian killings and violence against the Sunni oppositions. Given Assad’s divide and rule strategy to sustain its rule in Syria, it caused the opposition to frame the uprising as “struggle against a regime whose sectarian Alawite character had made it implacably hostile to mainstream Sunni Islam” (Wimmen, 2016). Altogether, political elites’ sectarian identity manipulation and mobilization destroyed the social cohesion as well as state-society relations.

Weak states and regional politics were primary reasons for the exacerbation of the 2011 Syrian conflict. As already discussed, the instrumentalist approach emphasizes that political opportunity structure is one of the two factors that can cause a political system to experience ethnic/sectarian identity mobilization and conflict. Therefore, a state with limited capabilities create opportunities for political actors to take advantage of the vacuum; this was one of the main reasons why leading regional states were able to interfere in the Syrian conflict and intensify the sectarian dynamic. Marc Lynch (2013)

states, “Newly open political arenas, like the war in Syria, have provided new opportunities for the region’s would-be leaders to compete with each other” (p. 9). Thus, the external actors – Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey – then sought to instigate and exploit the sectarian tension to expand their respective geopolitical interests. For instance, political leaders from Saudi Arabia and Iran use the Sunni-Shiite tensions to legitimize their intervention in the 2011 Syrian conflict and delegitimize the political demands of the Other. These regional actors used the Us versus Other narrative in the form of sectarian violence and rhetoric, disseminated via media, social networks, propaganda, and informal interactions, hardened the sectarian divisions and facilitated mobilization for collective action to restore the grievances (Ma’abo Che, 2016). Here, key regional state leaders’ strategies to gain political advantages resulted in sectarian mobilization and conflict. In this way, instrumentalism explains how sectarian conflict is a by-product of political leaders’ projects.

The main issue with instrumentalism is that it discounts the role of sectarianism. As already discussed, instrumentalists look at material power and politics that moves sectarian identity conflict, and at the analytical and political consequences of the conflict. However, as Malvig explains (2015), “to instrumentalists, sectarianism is precisely an ‘ism’, a form of ideology up for grasp alongside other ideologies in the region”, and the conflation of ideology and identity becomes an issue (p. 15). Sectarianism is seen as a “mere expression of continuous universal power struggles” among political elites, and thus, instrumentalists do not take into account “sectarian identity formations or what it means to make sectarian claims” (Malvig, 2015, p. 12). While the Sunni-Shiite identity is not the main reason for the 2011 Syrian conflict, it is still important to understand the transformation and escalation of the 2011 Syrian uprising into a sectarian armed conflict.

Constructivism

The constructivist approach was founded in opposition to the primordial approach, which views identity as single, fixed, and timeless. Unlike primordialism, constructivism places emphasis upon identity and non-material factors, such as social interaction, ideas, norms, and values to explain how the interests of state come into being and why states choose a certain action in the international system. It focuses on the social context and

process involved in the production of state interests and international politics (Hurd, 2008). Alexander Wendt, one of the founders of constructivism in IR, argues that:

The way international politics is conducted is made, not given because identities and interests are constructed and supported by intersubjective practice. The approach revolves around identity, which is construed as more basic than interests. Notions of self and the environment shape interactions and are shaped by interactions. Thereby social reality is created (Zehfuss, 2002).

According to Chandra (2012), individuals have multiple ethnic identities that can shift endogenously to political, social, and economic process (p. 4). For example, the process associated with state – administrative centralization, taxation, language standardization, military and security apparatuses, and religious institutions – can shift ethnic/sectarian divisions that are considered to endanger the state (Chandra, 2012, p. 3). Even violence is one of the key ways to create or change ethnic/sectarian divisions to either prevent the cause of violence or intensify it for political purposes. As a result, “these [identity shifts] can be a product of the very political and economic phenomena that they are used to explain” (Chandra, 2012, p. 3). Therefore, it is important to explore the process through which political, economic, social factors influence ethnic/sectarian identity.

Constructivism is an amorphous theory in the way that it is a label imposed on “a disparate collection of critical insights that shoot down primordialist assumptions” (Chandra, 2012, p. 4). There is a range of disagreement among constructivists, particularly about the source and process of the construction of identity. Chandra proposes an argument based on Figure 1 to show the variants of views within the constructivist approach (and their relation to the primordialist approach):

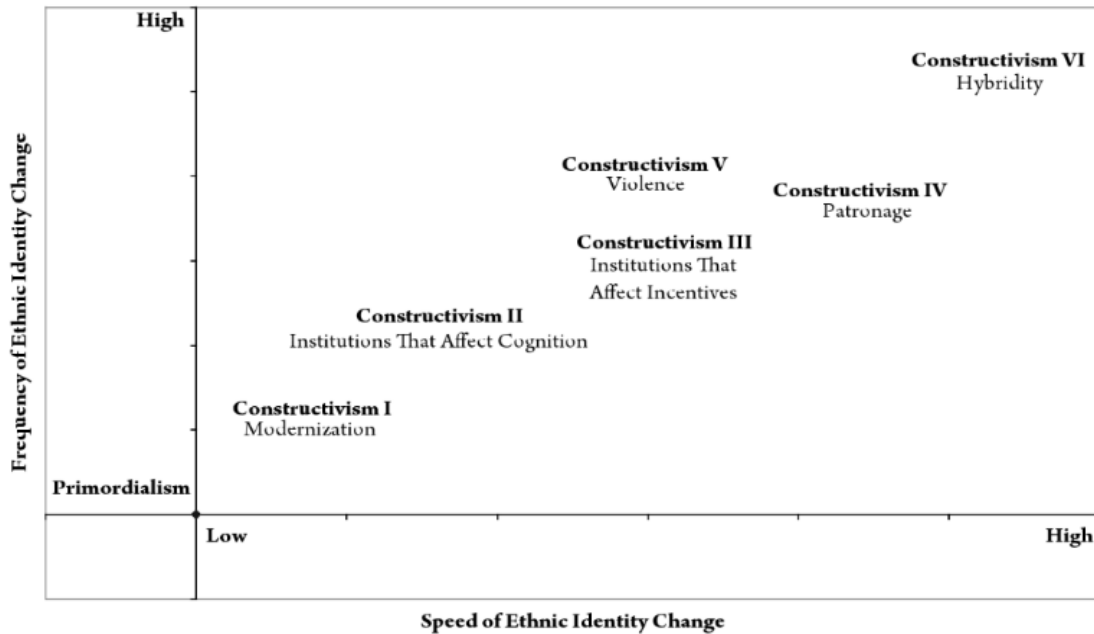


Figure 1. Variants of Constructivism: A Range of Views over the Speed and Frequency of Ethnic Identity Change (Chandra, 2012, p. 20)

In addition to proposing the source and process of the construction of identity and the spectrum of views among constructivists, Figure 1 also illustrates the speed of ethnic/sectarian change (X axis) and the frequency (Y axis). Based on Figure 1, there are six types of sources that can lead to a shift in ethnic/sectarian identity. For example, according to Constructivism I, the source of identity change is variables such as “modernization” where speed and frequency are slow; on the other hand, Constructivism VI locates the source in the “inherent hybridity of ethnic change” when new ethnic categories are activated (Chandra, 2012, p. 3 & 20). However, for this research paper, the middle part is most significant as Constructivism V and IV locates the source of ethnic/sectarian identity change in violence and patronage. Selective employment of violence and patronage are the underlying reasons for rising Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in the 2011 Syrian conflict. Through selective violence and rhetoric, Assad and external states politicized sectarian identities created “categorical opposition” or Us versus Other (Sunni vs. Shia, Sunni vs. minorities) to justify their actions and shape the conflict (Chandra, 2012, p. 370). Similarly, State patronage transformed the 2011 Syrian conflict from a revolution against the authoritarian Assad regime to a Sunni-Shiite armed sectarian struggle.

In order to explore how constructivism can be used to explain the 2011 Syrian conflict, it is vital to understand the main tenets of constructivism:

Identities and Interests

The main tenet of constructivism is that identities are socially constructed because of social categories – membership rules, content, and values – are the products of human action and speech, and thus, they can change over time (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p. 848). In fact, identities of the Self are primarily dependent on the presence and understanding of the Other for their composition and expression. For example, Wendt (1999) explains, “...in the Arab-Israeli conflict, [identities] might not be just a matter of choice that can be easily discarded, but positions forced on actors by the representations of significant Others” (p. 228). As this example shows, the Arab versus Israeli identity was a result of the social interaction between actors and structures that led to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Given the current structure of the conflict and relationship, the states or political leaders cannot abandon the role identities even if it wants to. This collective understanding of Self and the Other, in this case, Arab versus an Israeli, “constitute the structure of the social world” (Wendt, 1999, p. 398).

Similar to identity, interests of the states are endogenous and continuously constructed through social interactions. In fact, while identities shape what actors/agents are, interests shape what actors/agents want. Wendt (1999) argues, “[Interests] designate motivations that help explain behavior... Interests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is, and since identities have varying degrees of cultural content so will interests” (p. 231). The state has a particular identity that motivates its interests and foreign policy and consequent actions. For example, by identifying as a Shiite Alawite state, the Assad regime is automatically perceived as a rival to the Sunni state of Saudi Arabia and as a friend to the Shiite Iranian state. Understanding a state’s interests and strategies require examining the historical construction of “national interests”. Actors, in this case, states “acquire identities — relatively stable, role-specific understandings and expectations about self — by participating in... collective meanings” (Wendt, 1992, p. 397). In simple words, the Syrian state is labeled as a Shiite state given its conception of the Shiite Us compared to the Sunni Other and its participation with the current Tehran state since the 1979 Islamic Revolution (as discussed in the previous chapter). In this way, interests are the product of identities under constructivism.

Actor/state's identities and interests are shaped by "interactions with others and with their social environment" (Hurd, 2008), such as the interaction between regional states – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Syria – involved in the 2011 Syrian conflict.

Structure and Agents

Under the constructivist approach, structure refers to "the institutions and shared meanings that make up the context of international action" and agents refer to "any entity that operates as an actor in that context" (Hurd, 2008). The relationship between agents and structure is that of co-constitution because "institutions are fundamentally cognitive entities that do not exist apart from actors' ideas about how the world works" and that occurs in a historical, social, and cultural context (Wendt, 1992). For instance, the relationship between the US and North Korea is based on a structure of enmity, given which North Korean nuclear weapons are threatening to the US. The notion of the co-constitution of structures and states is important because it shows that the action of states shape the structure and in turn, the structure (re)defines and (re)constructs identities and interests of the state (Hurd, 2008). In this way, the constructivist approach explains a continuous process of social interaction through the co-constitution of structure and agents influence international politics.

Logic of Anarchy

Constructivism also explains that conflict depends on the social interaction between agents, which Wendt refers to as "anarchy is what states make of it". This refers to the idea that the anarchic nature of the international system does not result in conflict, but the conflict is driven by the social construction and politics of identity and interests. When interacting, agents construct a conception of Us versus the Others, which can be perceived as a friend, rival or enemy. Wendt refers to these conceptions as cultures: in the Hobbesian culture, it is "enemy", Lockean is "rival", and Kantian "friend". Each represents a distinct orientation or portrayal of the Self toward the Other with regards to the use of violence and subsequent results in international politics. In Wendt's words (1999),

The posture of enemies is one of threatening adversaries who observe no limits in their violence towards each other; that of rivals is one of the competitors who will use violence to advance their interests but refrain from

killing each other; and that of friends is one of the allies who does not use violence to settle their disputes and work as a team against security threats (p. 258).

This culture or structure of anarchy is indeterminate and varies, resulting in distinct logics, tendencies, and consequences (Wendt, 1999). As a continuum of anarchies is possible, a state can be allied with one state, such as the alliance between Iran and Syria, and be rivals with another, such as between Iran and Saudi Arabia; this is possible because of their shared understanding and identities of the Self and the Other.

Individuals as Agents of Construction

Due to the focus on identity construction in the constructivist approach, James Fearon and David Laitin (2000) propose the argument that individuals act as agents in the construction of identity and interests (p. 853). This understanding is based on the notion that ethnic/sectarian violence occurs when political elites construct antagonistic ethnic/sectarian identities to extend or stay in power; this notion is very similar to the instrumentalist approach (discussed later). This was most apparent in the current Syrian conflict when political agents, such as Bashar al-Assad, played a part in transforming the political, economic, and social uprising to a sectarian armed conflict that was further exploited by individual states, the Islamic Republic, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

Elite machinations and politicking can result in the construction of identities, especially Us versus Other. Here, ethnic/sectarian violence is a means and result of political elites' effort to stay or extend their power and political support. This process ends up creating more "antagonistic identities, which favors more violence" (Brass, 1991; Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p. 853). An example is Wendt's explanation of the Bosnian Civil War when he writes that the "Serbian leadership was able to mobilize its people to respond so aggressively to Croatian and Muslim actions at the start of the conflict" (Wendt, 1999; p. 163). The Serbian political elites were mainly responsible for turning demonstrations over economic reforms into an ethnic war, in 1992. This is a similar strategy that Assad borrowed by fueling the Sunni-Shiite sectarian tensions to hold onto his power in Syria.

Mass compliance strengthens the political agent's framings and rhetoric. Following a failure of constitution negotiation, riots, uprisings, and such when the public does not know which side to blame, they automatically point fingers at the other group or leader,

thereby, reaffirming the Us versus Other dichotomy. Another way to create ethnic/sectarian division is by claiming a security threat. This is possible when leaders take advantage of constitutional and institutional rules by claiming that the group faces a security threat, thus, allowing him/her to centralize power (Fearon & Laitin, 2000, p. 857). To ensure mass compliance, the Assad government exploited minority groups' fears of the Sunni rule. By spreading rumors of Sunni atrocities against Shiite and other minorities and Sunnis' goal to establish a Sunni caliphate, Assad portrayed the conflict as a fight to protect the Shiites and minorities from Sunni jihadists (Jasser, 2014, p. 62). In this way, Assad ensured continued support for his regime.

From a constructivist perspective, violence is an effective way to reinforce the ethnic/sectarian divisions. Ethnic/sectarian riots are the "means through which political parties and political entrepreneurs construct solid ethnic categories, however briefly, for a clear political purpose" (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 361). This is only possible because individuals possess multiple identities that qualify them for membership in various categories based on their environment, as emphasized by constructivism. As a result, to sustain them in power, political entrepreneurs, or agents, can use violence or patronage to persuade individuals to identify themselves with a particular category (Chandra, 2012; Wilkinson, 2012, p. 361). Compared to other means of persuading voters, violence is most utilized because it is cheap in terms of resources. Activating an ethnic/sectarian identity (religion) is less costly than building a coalition that is diverse, such as economic redistribution along the social hierarchy. Also, mass media and rumor networks spread the news about violence very quickly, which is discussed in chapter 4 of this study (Wilkinson, 2012, p. 365).

The transformation of the 2011 Syrian conflict is best informed by the constructivist approach. The conflict was a result of the Arab Spring that heralded ideas of socioeconomic modernization and political liberation that spread through social interaction across the Middle East. Because of the Arab Spring, Syrians witnessed a (re)definition of identity and interests from the identity of the oppressive to a new collective national identity based on modernization. The formation of the new national identity was the first step to change the oppressive structure controlled by the authoritarian regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad (Furlan, 2016; Wimmen, 2016). The early slogans followed chants, such as "Syria for all", highlighting the inclusive, national uprising that demanded changes in the socioeconomic and political structure of Syria. (Diehl, 2011, p. 13). The identity-

transformation redefined the Syrians' interests and behavior with the goal to reform the domestic structure of the authoritarian regime to a democratic one that valued economic participation and economic modernization.

The revolutionary protests introduced a shift not only in identity and interests but also in structures, which meant changing the Syrian state. Under constructivism, "identity-transformations redefine the schedule of state interests" (Chatterjee, 2005, p. 77), indicating that Syria's identity transformations also redefined the state interest. With the possibility of being ousted from power, Assad responded with "violent crackdown on the protests, mixed with vague cosmetic political changes, and a campaign accusing the opposition of takfiri extremism and terrorism in order to rally minorities and other fence-sitters behind the regime" (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 24). In doing so, Assad employed a strategy of fear that created a threatening Other made up of terrorists whose goal was to establish a Sunni state and wipe out minority groups. This new construction of identity – Sunni-dominated "other" versus minority-dominated "us" – again redefined the structure of the revolution/uprising. The regime's increasingly selective use of violence and rhetoric shaped the domestic structure, which in turn, caused the opposition to shift their identity. The anti-Assad opposition that came together under the national Syrian identity soon reconstructed their identities based on religion and sects. Elite machinations and politicking at the national level influenced co-constitution of agents (regime and opposition) and structure, transforming the Syrian uprising into the current sectarian conflict.

Ethnic/sectarian violence and patronage, as proposed by Chandra, also played a part in exacerbating the sectarian dynamic of the conflict. When both sides of the conflict – the Assad regime and opposition – presented the conflict as "a defense of Syria's religious pluralism against Sunni religious extremism", it attracted external actors, particularly Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey (Wimmen, 2016). Conflicting identities and interests in the anarchic nature of the international system explain why Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey have adopted certain behaviors based on friendship, rivalry, or enmity (Furlan, 2016). For example, similar state goals on western imperialism and Israeli influence in the Middle East caused the Islamic Republic and the Assad regime to unite within the structure of friendship. On the other hand, conflicting identities and geopolitical interests caused the Islamic republic and the Saudi state to continue reinforcing their relationship, based on rivalry. Similarly, the relationship between the Saudi state and Assad is based on the structure of enmity, which explains Saudi Arabia's support for the anti-Assad opposition.

The social interaction between these states in the Syrian conflict and wider Middle East hardened their identities as either Sunni or Shiite and interests in gaining power in the region.

This chapter provided a review of the constructivist and instrumentalist approaches to explore the role of actors and structures in the social construction of sectarian identity in Syria. The primordialist approach was also studied to illustrate that the current Syrian conflict is not a result of ancient hatreds between the Sunnis and Shiites. Constructivism highlights the significance of the identity mobilization and co-constitution of agents and structural to explain how sectarianism has become a self-fulfilling logic in Syria. On the other hand, instrumentalism identifies political elites as primary agents to use sectarian rhetoric and violence as instruments to reconstruct and redefine sectarian identities. Altogether, these approaches reveal that sectarianization is a process “caused by complex social, economic and political transformations” (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 2).

Chapter 3.

Alliances and Enmities in the Middle East

As the conflict in Syria enters its seventh year, it is necessary to provide a historical context of the conflict. This chapter also highlights the changing historical alliances between the leading regional states – Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – and Syria, particularly the Assad regime. Understanding the ways in which regional alliances and politics shifted in the past is necessary to appreciate the present relations. Currently, regional intervention in Syria is intensifying. While Saudi Arabia and Turkey have become the leading regional anti-Assad states, Iran is the main pro-Assad state. These regional powers have invested considerable resources in the form of funds, weapons, and military troops in the Syrian conflict.

Background of the Syrian Conflict

There was no single cause or group or sect responsible for initiating the 2011 Syrian conflict. Therefore, the conflict cannot be explained or understood just by examining the Sunni-Shiite sectarian division. The current conflict is a result of multi-layered issues. First, anti-regime demonstrations in Syria were due to the Arab Spring that sparked a wave of social and political mobilizations across the Middle East. The Arab Spring removed Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and Tunisian strongman Ben Ali from power after massive protests. NATO had just carried out a military intervention against the Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi on behalf of the rebels fighting the regime (Asher-Schapiro, 2016; Rodgers, Gritten, Offer, & Asare, 2016). On March 2015, a similar wave of demonstrations started in Syria. The initial peaceful demonstrations were against Bashar al-Assad's authoritarian regime, which had ruled through emergency laws, clientelism, and widespread corruption (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 22). As the government launched a full-scale siege and arrested many civilians, the initially peaceful protesters responded by growing and solidifying into an opposition.

The second reason for the initial demonstration was due to the growing social inequalities and bad governance within the country. After becoming the President of Syria,

in July 2000, Bashar al-Assad promised political and economic reforms by modernizing the Syrian political system and economy. He established neoliberal policies aimed at privatizing public assets, liberalizing the finance sector, encouraging private investments, and attracting foreign investments in Syria. These reforms led to economic growth, however, “the move toward the market economy neglected equitable income distribution and social protection, thereby culminating in anti-developmental economic growth” (Matar, 2012, as cited in Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 22). Economic liberalization and subsequent growth did not boost local industrial or agricultural production or employment. Instead, it widened the income inequality between the urban centers and impoverish peripheries (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 22). The impoverished peripheries included people from both the rural and urban – “the have-nots” – who did not benefit from this crony capitalism. Mobilization against the regime crossed socioeconomic lines as individuals – unemployed to engineers and doctors to tech-savvy, university-educated urbanites to farmers – from rural and urban areas joined the opposition (Droz-Vincent, 2014, p. 36). Assad’s policies led to “a new and wider chasm between those close to the regime (“surfing” on the wave of modernization, often as new private entrepreneurs) and the majority of the population...who were left behind” (Droz-Vincent, 2014, pp. 35–36), paving the way for demonstrations.

The third reason for mobilization against the regime was due to growing socio-economic issues in Syria. This affected the living conditions of middle and working class living at the geographical peripheries. Rising inflation, weakening of oil prices, and a decline in subsidies from the capital further worsened the living conditions in these areas. Endemic corruption and bad governance at the local level added to the country-wide deterioration. Nationwide local governments “became the embodiment of a predatory culture in which resources were not redistributed but skimmed off for the benefit of the few” resulting in deterioration at a macro-level (Berti & Paris, 2014, pp. 22–23; Crisis Group, 2011a, p. 14).

Structural, political, and economic factors explain the rise of revolution in Syria. In fact, the “unequal development, corruption, and center-periphery inequality explains the roots of the revolution in Syria and shows parallels between the political demonstration that sparked the [Arab Spring] in Tunisia and the initial cycle of protest in Syria” (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 23). As a result, the Syrian conflict is rooted in a multitude of issues that the Assad regime created. However, at the same time, sectarian fault lines cannot be

discounted. Given that the majority of Syrians are Sunni, the majority of the people who have suffered under Assad are Sunni Muslims too, and that eventually resulted in a Sunni-dominated opposition in the Syrian conflict (Phillips, 2013). It should be noted that sectarian identity has always existed in Syria due to different religious practices; however, it existed at a lower level due to a stronger presence of Syrian Arab nationalism (Phillips, 2013, p. 366). This is because prior to the Syrian conflict, the Assad regime was committed to “an Arab nationalist identity, its hard line on Israel, and its opposition to American Imperialism” (Farouk-Alli, 2014, p. 221). These positions resonated with Syrians and the Arab public in general and maintained an internal cohesion within the country. Therefore, sectarian identity existed at a lower level due to the strong presence of the Syrian national identity and stable state institutions.

Historical Alliances

Turkey-Syria Relations

Turkey and Syria experienced a dynamic relationship prior to the 2011 Syrian conflict. As Raymond Hinnebusch (2013) states, in less than a decade, the two states went from “the brink of war, engaged in a very ‘realist’ power struggle in the late nineties, to amity, even alliance in the 2005-10 period, and then, after 2011, regressed again to enmity” (p. 1).

For most of history, Turkey and Syria were on opposing sides despite being neighbors. By the end of World War I, the Arab Revolt, which included Syria, played a part in defeating the Ottoman Empire. Again, in the Cold War, Turkey and Syria were on different ends with Turkey becoming a member of NATO (the North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and Syria forming an alliance with Russia (Phillips, 2012, p. 2). The tense relationship continued even after Hafez al-Assad took over the Ba’ath Party and became the president of Syria. In fact, under Assad, the relationship further deteriorated over the Turkish province of Hatay, which Syria championed as theirs. The other major problem was over water sharing from the Euphrates River, which runs from Turkey into Syria. Being at the top of the headwaters, Turkey dammed the River in the 1970s, which reduced the supply of water to Syria, leading to drought (Epatko, 2012). In retaliation, Syria supported

the Turkish-Kurdish separatist group PKK (Partial Karkeren Kurdistan – Kurdistan Workers Party) and offered refuge to the Kurdish separatist leader (Epatko, 2012). After the Cold War and a military alliance with Israel in 1996, Turkey became a key player in the Middle East, which it used to its advantage. As a result, in 1998, Turkey gathered its forces on the Syrian border and threatened to attack Syria unless the Assad regime met its demand regarding the PKK (Hinnebusch, 2013, p. 2; Phillips, 2012, p. 2). To resolve the crisis, Hafez al-Assad agreed to Turkey's demands, and on October 20, 1998, Turkey and Syria signed the Adana Accord, which included a crackdown on the PKK bases in Syria and the extradition of PKK fighters and leaders (Phillips, 2012, p. 3). In fact, the Adana Accords paved the way for a long Turkish-Syrian bilateral cooperation (Mufti, 2002). The alliance between the two states began to solidify after Bashar al-Assad succeeded his father in 2000. A major turning point in the Turkey-Syrian relationship was their similar opposition to the 2003 US invasion of Iraq and destruction of Iraq's central government. With the new alliance, both states, gradually, settled the rest of the historical grievances. Bashar al-Assad became the first Syrian leader to visit Ankara in 2004, resolved the dispute about Turkish sovereignty over Hatay in 2005, and reached an agreement on Euphrates water resources in 2008 (Phillips, 2012, p. 3, 2016, p. 36). Also, in 2008, both the states signed a bilateral free trade agreement that strengthened the trade relation as well as the overall association between Turkey and Syria. An example of their strong relationship was when Turkey, Syria, and Iran formed the 'Trilateral Front', in 2008, to prevent the fragmentation of Iraq. Moreover, in 2009, Turkey and Syria launched the first joint military forces; this was an important step as it signaled the growing Turkey-Syrian alliance to the US and Israel (Hinnebusch, 2013, p. 3).

Both Turkey and Syria profited economically, politically, and socially from this mutual relationship. However, the 2011 Syrian uprising interrupted the deepening relationship between the two states. In the wake of the Syrian uprising, Assad opted for violent repression after he rejected Turkey's plea to implement reforms. As tensions between the two states escalated, Turkey came to openly support the Sunni-dominated opposition group seeking to remove the Assad regime from power (Phillips, 2012, p. 2; Semra, 2014, p. 3). The Syrian conflict has immense economic and political implications for Turkey. The continued Syrian uprising led to a spillover of Syrian refugees into neighboring Turkey as well as a potential dissemination of Syrian Kurdish goals to establish an autonomous Kurdish state. In other words, the Erdogan government fears for

their territorial integrity because the Syrian Kurds living in the northwest of Syria might encourage the Turkish Kurds to pursue their ambition for full independence (Ifantis & Galariotis, 2014; Semra, 2014). Because of the Syrian conflict, the relationship had made a 360-degree turn to the enmity of the mid-1900s (Hinnebusch, 2013, p. 3).

Saudi Arabia-Syria Relations

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria is often described as a paradox. While both states disagreed on major policy issues in the Middle East, they also formed an alliance when required (Sunayama, 2007, p. 2). To begin with, in the divide created by the Cold War, Syria sided with the former Soviet Union while Saudi Arabia supported the US and allies; this led both states to develop opposing alliances that still exist. However, Hafez al-Assad's ascendancy to power in 1970 was a turning point in the Saudi-Syrian relationship. After taking power, al-Assad's main mission was to repair relationships with the Arab states in order to end Syria's severe diplomatic isolation since 1966. Similarly, a friendly Syria could be a useful counterweight to Saudi Arabia's radical neighbor, Iraq; as such, Saudi Arabia attracted Syria by offering more than \$1 billion annually as financial aid (Sunayama, 2007, pp. 35, 37). As Sonoko Sunayama (2007) writes, "Both Saudi Arabia and Syria were now ready to play an expanded role in inter-Arab politics of the 1970s which were characterized by an unprecedented level of cooperation and solidarity achieved among the major players" (p. 36). Their alliance led to the formation of the tripartite axis of Damascus-Riyadh-Cairo, which expanded Arab's influence international politics. For example, in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War, Egypt and Syria jointly launched an attack on Israel while Saudi Arabia led the Arab oil embargo to support Egypt and Syria's war efforts (Sunayama, 2007, p. 36). Syria and Saudi Arabia again joined their efforts during the October 1984 Rabat summit that enabled the recognition of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) as the "sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people" (Sunayama, 2007, p. 40). In 1975, both states signed a joint-communiqué in which Syria insisted on Israeli withdrawal from Occupied Territories, guarantees of Palestinian rights, and assisting Lebanon with its political troubles. These developments in the Middle East are a result of the Syrian-Saudi relations in the 1970s (Sunayama, 2007, p. 2).

The Syrian-Saudi alliance disintegrated over the signing of the Camp David Accords in September 1978¹. The Accord broke the Damascus-Riyadh-Cairo trilateral axis as the Egyptian state signed a peace treaty with Israel, which the Saudi state did not oppose (al-Saadi, 2012). The Iraq-Iran War from 1980 to 1988 further deepened the tension between the two states as Syria formed an alliance with Iran while Saudi Arabia allied with Iraq. Syria's new alliance with Iran against shared enemies in Israel and Saddam Hussein's Iraq further deepened the Saudi Arabia-Syrian rift (Phillips, 2016, p. 13).

The 1990s were considered a golden age for Saudi-Syria association as both shared power over Lebanon, following the Lebanese civil war. The Ta'if Accord is another primary example of their cooperation. In October 1989, both states advocated the Ta'if Accord that ended the Lebanese civil war and established the political system in Lebanon. However, the mutual understanding came to an end under Bashar al-Assad's leadership. Assad's alleged involvement in the assassination of Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, an ally of Saudi Arabia, in 2004, affected the relations. Syria was forced into a diplomatic isolation and the Syrian military, stationed in Lebanon since 1976, was removed (al-Saadi, 2012). The tense relationship further deteriorated during the Israel-Lebanon War in 2006 since Syria supported Hezbollah, the Lebanese militia. In contrast, Saudi Arabia and allies hoped that Israel would eliminate Hezbollah, instead Hezbollah won. Israel's inability to defeat Hezbollah enhanced the regional popularity of Syria, reasserted its political influence in Lebanon, and brought Iran and Syria closer (al-Saadi, 2012; Phillips, 2016, p. 15).

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Syria is marked by fluctuation, depending on the political context of the Middle East. For example, fear over Iran's growing influence in the region propelled the Saudi state to reach out to Syria in 2009-10; thus, during that time, leaders of both countries visited each other (Phillips, 2016, p. 34). However, the 2011 Syrian conflict damaged the budding relationship between the two states again since the Saudi state supports the Syrian opposition. To the Saudis, the

¹ On 17 September 1978, Egyptian President Anwar al-Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin signed the Camp David Accords, which established the first formal peace treaty between Israel and an Arab country. This was a key development for Syria as "Egypt's epoch-making decision deprived Syria of the partner with which it had fought wars and allowed Israel to concentrate military forces on its Eastern Front, of which Syria was the most vital component"; this was a challenge to Syria's regional position (Sunayama, 2007, p. 50).

conflict in Syria is a historic opportunity to strengthen its strategic position in the Middle East: to overthrow the Assad government and contain Iran's growing influence. As Christopher Phillips (2016) writes, "The Syrian war helped usher in a more activist Riyadh that is emerging as a more overt regional leader than in the past" (Phillips, 2016, p. 234).

Iran-Syria Relations

Iran and Syria are governed by different ideologies yet they have formed a strong alliance since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Iran's foreign policy choices and alliances are seen as governed by its Islamist revolutionary ideology of Shiite Islam (Akbarzadeh, 2016, p. 127). On the other hand, the Syrian state portrays itself as a secular Arab nation even though it is a minority-dominated authoritarian regime. Daniel Byman (2006) notes that "Syrian President Bashar Assad's father and predecessor, Hafez Assad, gunned down thousands of revolutionary Islamists in the 1970s and early '80s to prevent an Islamic revolution in Syria. Iran's religious elite has often criticized Arab leaders as despots who have turned away from true Islam—a description that could easily apply to Assad's Syria". It is geopolitical goals that brought Iran and Syria together despite the ideological differences (Byman, 2006).

As mentioned, the close alliance between Syria and Iran developed following the 1979 Islamist revolution that disposed of the pro-West Muhammad Reza. In fact, Syria and the former USSR were the first to recognize the new Iranian regime and congratulate them on their success (Sunayama, 2007, p. 63). Since then, Syria has been cultivating a strong alliance with Iran. Initially, the strategic partnership gave Iran an important regional ally against Saddam's Iraq (Von Maltzahn, 2013, p. 2). At that time, Syria needed Iran's partnership because of the growing Riyadh-Baghdad alliance that was isolating Syria. Israel was another common ground. Iran opposed Israel because it stood against their Islamist revolutionary agenda as well as Iran's commitment to the Palestinian cause. Syria opposed Israel because of its humiliating defeat in the 1967 war when it lost Golan Heights to Israel (Byman, 2006; Von Maltzahn, 2013, p. 2). In addition to their anti-Zionist common ground, anti-Imperial attitude against the US foreign policy in the region was another important shared ground for both Tehran and Damascus. Altogether, anti-Zionism and

anti-imperialism that led to a close political alignment, causing Syria and Iran to lead the 'Axis of Resistant' (Von Maltzahn, 2013, pp. 2–3).

The alliance proved very useful during the Iraq-Iran War from 1980-1988. The alliance with Syria gave Iran an Arab ally and prevented the war from transforming into "an all-out Arab- versus-Persian affair" (Von Maltzahn, 2013, p. 28). In exchange for political support and military assistance against Saddam's Iraq, Iran offered economic incentives to Syria. In the second half of the Iraq-Iran war, Syria acted as a mediator between Tehran and Arab Gulf states. (Von Maltzahn, 2013, p. 29). The alliance took a stronger turn in 1982 when Israel invaded Lebanon. Iran and Syria worked together with the Lebanese resistance organization, Hezbollah, to defeat the Israeli invasion (Byman, 2006). Nadia Von Maltzahn (2013) writes, "Iran's interests in the alliance were primarily of a political and military nature (as indicated by the presence of the Revolutionary Guards), Syrian interests were political as well as economic" (p. 30) in the initial period of the alliance.

Over time, bilateral relations only strengthened. In March 1982, the Iranian state and the Assad regime signed a ten-year trade pact that "marked the formal beginning of extensive bilateral relations, as it to some degree constituted the institutionalization of their relationship" (Von Maltzahn, 2013, p. 30). According to this agreement, Iran would supply Syria with crude oil and Damascus would provide phosphates, textiles, glass, barley and other food products to Tehran. The alliance also proved useful in boosting Assad's domestic position against the Islamist opposition, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood. In 1982, when Assad used violent tactics to repress the Brotherhood protesters, Iran supported Assad's action. This is particularly important because Iran criticized an Islamist movement in support of an Arab nationalist leader, given that the Iranian regime itself is an Islamist movement that wanted to spread Iran's Islamic political zeal and agenda.

By 1989, the relations between the two states had deepened, even though in the 1990s their relationship faced problems. For example, the 1990/91 Kuwait crisis was a test in the alliance as Syria joined the US-led multi-national military force against Iraq, while Iran maintained neutrality "by standing on the sidelines without antagonizing either Baghdad or Washington" (Amiri, 2011, p. 191). However, with the vacillating Arab-Israeli peace process in the mid-1990s and the development of a Turkish-Israeli alliance, Syria and Iran reaffirmed their bilateral alliance in the late 1990s (Von Maltzahn, 2013, pp. 37–

38). Following 9/11, Iran and Syria's continued support for militia groups, such as Hezbollah and Hamas, caused the Arab states to distance themselves from "state sponsors of terrorism", labels for Syria and Iran. The US-led occupation of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein redefined the regional power balance and consolidated bilateral relations. In February 2010, Assad states "There is no separating Iran and Syria" (Phillips, 2016, p. 31).

Following the Iranian Revolution, the diplomatic relation rapidly consolidated into an alliance that focused on all levels, political, military, and economic. Given the strong Syrian-Iranian alliance, it was expected that Iran would support Assad against the opposition group in the 2011 Syrian conflict. Throughout the Syrian conflict, Syria has remained a key pillar of Iran's regional policy. Initially, the Iranian state supported the Ba'athist regime with advice and technical expertise to neutralize the opposition. However, as the uprising transformed into an armed struggle, Iran boosted its support for military assistance (forces and weapons) as well as financial resources.

Domestic Constituencies

Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey have been the leading Middle Eastern states influencing the 2011 Syrian conflict. This thesis focuses on how the aforementioned states exploit sectarian identities in Syria to advance their geopolitical ambition. While sectarianism plays a pivotal role in Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey's interventionist policy in Syria, it is important to consider if sectarianism is present in their domestic policies as well, particularly in consolidating national interests. This helps to understand the strategic use of sectarianism by Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey in both their domestic and foreign policies.

Saudi Arabia

Sectarianism plays an integral role in the Saudi state's domestic politics given that the country has been controlled by the authoritarian Al-Saud royal family since 1932 (Al-Rasheed, 2017). Prior to the Syrian conflict, the Saudi state has employed coercive tactics with efforts to accommodate Shiite community leaders in domestic policies in order to minimize sectarianism. However, today anti-Iran and anti-Shiite sentiments visible in

Saudi Arabia's national identity and policies, given that Shiites only make up about 10 to 15% of the population in Saudi Arabia (Jones, 2016). Encouraged by the Arab Spring, the Shiite minority initiated an uprising against the Saudi monarchy for political reform. The Saudi state responded with sectarian rhetoric that portrayed the Shiites as the terrifying Other, influenced by Iran. In fact, the Saudi state "framed everything from domestic protests... in sectarian terms and in the process sought not only to demonize a minority group but also to undermine the appeal of political reform and protests" (Jones, 2016). Through sectarianism, the Saudi monarchy stopped Sunni reformers from siding with the Shiites, suppressed the Shiite minority's claim for political reform, and undermined the broader demands for democracy (Jones, 2016). In fact, anti-Shiite identity mobilization is an effective strategy to reinforce the support of the Sunni majority, suppress dissent, and diminish Iran's influence in Saudi Arabia. It also acts as "a currency in intra-Sunni competition for influence" by bringing regional allies to their side (Lynch, 2016). In this way, the Saudi state uses sectarian identity to advance domestic control as well as regional policies (Lynch, 2016).

Iran

Iran experienced very few demonstrations following the onset of the Arab Spring. In February and March 2011, there were few protests initiated by exiled Iranians; however, the Iranian security forces successfully suppressed the democratic aspirations of its people and undermined the demonstrations as a foreign machination to oust the Islamic Republic (Cockburn, 2011; Ostovar, 2016). In fact, regarding the rise of Sunni-Shiite sectarian divisions, Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of Iran, stated that "divisions in the Muslim world are not natural, but rather the product of U.S. propaganda and the policies of U.S. allies" to break the global Muslim community (Ostovar, 2016). As Afshon Ostovar (2016) writes, "although the Islamic Republic is a distinctly Shia enterprise, Khomeini discouraged overt Shia sectarianism" even though Shiitism is the only official religion (89% of the population is Shiite Muslims) and the minority Sunnis lack religious freedom. However, unlike Saudi Arabia, the Iranian state does not employ explicit sectarian rhetoric or violence to portray the minorities as the Sunni others; instead, it uses the US and allies as scapegoats. This is done to maintain the Iranian Revolution's themes – Anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism – and pan-Islamic agenda that unified Iran's revolutionary movement. In fact, the state attempts to strengthen its emphasis on pan-Islamic unity and downplay sectarian inclinations by supporting Sunni groups, such as the

Palestinians and Hamas (Ostovar, 2016). While Shiism is central to Iran's domestic policies, it also employs Islamic and Iranian identity as well as state repression to consolidate national interest.

Turkey

Turkey is a secular state even though 99 percent of the population is Muslims, the majority of whom are Sunni and an estimated 10 to 15 million are Shiites. Unlike Saudi Arabia and Iran, Turkey's legal structure and secular tradition prevent it from pursuing a sectarian policy in the country (Cockburn, 2013). For example, the largest opposition party, the Republican People's Party, CHP's "core constituency, as well as most of its MPs, are [Shiite] Alevis" (The Economist, 2016). Moreover, Antakya, recognized for cultural diversity, celebrated "ethnic urban cohabitation" and "cultural differences" in order to prevent ethnoreligious conflicts (Can, 2017, p. 175). However, recently, Turkey witnessed a shift in its secular domestic policies. The 2010 constitutional referendum marked the Erdogan government's first use of sectarian discourse in order to "[consolidate] support by stirring [Shiite] Alevi-phobic impulses" (Tastekin, 2013). Moreover, the state implemented "top-down Islamizing measures and assimilationist policies" to strengthen the Sunni majority's support for the current Erdogan government. This is crucial as it contributed in passing the 2017 constitutional referendum that transformed Turkey's parliamentary system into a presidential one, according substantial power to the president, which is Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (Ekim & Kirisci, 2017; Karakaya-Stump, 2017, p. 12). Another turning point was the 2011 Syrian conflict. In order to consolidate majority support for the interventionist policy in Syria, the Turkish state again resorted to sectarian rhetoric (Tastekin, 2013). As Turkey openly supported the opposition in Syria and sided with the Saudi-led Sunni bloc, the Shiite minority accused the government of sectarianism, which proved futile. Since 2010, the Turkish state has been using sectarian discourse as a political tool to solidify the Sunni base and gain their support for domestic and foreign policies (Letsch, 2013).

Even though the Sunni-Shiite sectarian division has always existed in Syria, it did not define the relationship between the Syrian state and leading regional states of Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. The strategic use of sectarianism is even present in the domestic policies of the leading regional states in order to reinforce the support of the majority. The incentives that shape the strategic alliances and policies of these regional actors are

mostly governed by common interests, geopolitical goals, and social interaction. Prior to the 2011 Syrian conflict, both Turkey and Iran maintained a friendly alliance with the Assad regime, however, that changed after the initial stages of the conflict as both states shifted their support for the anti-Assad opposition. On the other hand, the Iranian state has continued to maintain a close bilateral association with the Assad regime. The fluctuating alliances between the leading regional states illustrate that the present relationship is not a result of ancient hatreds, but a result of current political context.

Chapter 4.

Tracing Sectarianization of the Syrian Conflict

This chapter provides a detailed analysis of the methodological approach to explore how the key regional states politicized sectarian identities in Syria. The methodology has two parts: frame analysis and process tracing. Frame analysis allows me to explore the Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's media coverage of the 2011 Syrian conflict. The goal is to uncover the dominant frame used in the coverage in order to understand how the external states' justification and reasons for intervention changed over time since the onset of the conflict. On the other hand, process tracing allows me to explore how the external states' intervention exacerbated the Sunni-Shiite dynamic through the domestic mobilization processes.

This chapter is broken into two sections. The first section proceeds by describing the role of media in the Middle East, which is important to understand Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey's media coverage of the 2011 Syrian conflict. Then, this section explains the frame analysis, the method used to explore the different print media's coverage, and process tracing approach to study the mobilization of the conflict. The second section of this chapter analyzes the findings of frame analysis and process tracing in order to reveal the construction of sectarian identities in the pursuit of geopolitical power.

Section A: Methodology

Media in the Middle East

To understand Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia's political position and interest in Syria, this paper used frame analysis to examine the respective states' media coverage of the Syrian conflict. According to Tarik Jusić (2009), "the media discourse [can be] both an indicator of and a contributor to the crisis" (p. 21) as it highlights deep existing divisions while helping to redraw boundaries between ethnic/sectarian groups and legitimize the actions of the political actors (Jusić, 2009, p. 21). In other words, print media is a powerful tool that reflects the ideologies and preferences of the speaker/writer as well as of the state (Mirzaee & Gharibeh, 2015, p.68). The news is manufactured through the influence of socioeconomic, political, and ideological factors (Gan, Teo, & Detenber, 2005, p. 442). Teun Adrianus van Dijk (2006) argues that print media tend to express ideologies "in the formation and change of public opinion, in setting the political agenda and influencing the social debate, decision making and other forms of social and political action" (p.2). Media plays a significant role in shaping the public definition of crisis, (Jusić, 2009, p. 21), including the 2011 Syrian conflict.

State media, particularly print media, is highly censored and controlled by the Arab states. In the Middle East, states tend to dominate the media by using them as mouthpieces either through direct pressure or money; thus, journalists are forced to work under self-censorship or state-control (Khazen, 1999, p. 89; Rawan & Imran, 2013, p. 5). An example is a study on the coverage of the Iraq war. In the study, Sean Aday, Steven Livingston, and Maeve Hebert (2005) find that there were significant biases in the coverage among the US and Arab media. Both media constructed the reality based on their respective ideologies, culture, and political context. In a similar manner, the mainstream media in the Middle East "reflect the political interest and ideology of the state while covering the social movements in Arab world" (Rawan & Imran, 2013, p. 5). This is apparent in the print media of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran as *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Daily Sabah* support the opposition and *Tehran Times* supports the Assad regime, thus reflecting the political identities and interests of the respective states (Rawan & Imran, 2013, p. 5).

This study analyzed the English articles of Turkey's *Daily Sabah*, Saudi-owned *Asharq Al-Awsat*, and Iran's *Tehran Times* to see how they covered the Syrian conflict. These newspapers were selected due to their high circulation, subsidization and/or regulation by the states; therefore, the frame analysis revealed the respective states' political context and landscape with regards to the 2011 Syrian conflict.

Frame analysis

A frame analysis was used to explore the different print media's coverage of the Syrian conflict. According to James Tankard (2001), framing is important because it "offers an alternative to the old 'objective and bias' paradigm, it helps us understand mass communication effects" (pp. 95–96). A notable example is the Salvadoran Civil War, which the Reagan administration and the US media framed as a national security issue; however, it could have been framed other ways, such as the inter-state conflict between rich and poor in a state (Tankard, 2001, p. 96). The significance of frame lies in its ability to define the issues and shape the terms of the debate because it presents an event through a particular framework (p. 96), and thus, it can be an important instrument in politics. According to Robert Entman (1993), framing involves "[selecting] some aspects of a perceived reality and [making] them more salient in a communication text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). Frames tend to reflect not only the political and ideological factors of the state or country, it also sets the agenda for public discussion by attracting attention to different issues and understanding (Entman, 1993, pp. 442–444; Strömbäck, Shehata, & Dimitrova, 2008, p. 119). Media is an effective way for governments, particularly authoritarian states, to influence the people and justify its actions; thus, the purpose was to explore how the Persian and Arab media framed the Syrian conflict.

With regards to the theoretical understanding, frame analysis also fits into the constructivist approach. While framing is largely external to the individual, it is rooted in social interaction: "media makers interact with their sources [states] and other actors in the public arena, and the receivers interact with media content and with each other" (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 64). The micro-macro connection between the state, journalists, and

readers/audience is situated in “dynamic social process where social reality is produced, reproduced, and transformed” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 73). This new social reality then influences the public’s understanding and expression of the Self and the Other. In fact, “the potency of frames to influence the public lies in the fact that they are closely linked with familiar cultural frames” (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 73); in this way, framing not only reflects the culture but it works to reproduce that culture.

A comparative frame analysis was used in this research as it explored the key regional states’ media coverage of the Syrian conflict. This frame analysis was based on the framework developed by Robert Entman (2004). Entman proposes that frame analysis should be based on the identification of the event, actor (individuals, groups, nations, states, etc.), and remedy, all of which were used to examine how Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey covered the Syrian conflict. A preliminary analysis of the selected media outlet and dissertations on media discourse allowed me to come up with a list of frames. A 2002 Ph.D. dissertation, *The Role of Media in the Framing of the Afghan Conflict and the Search for Peace* by Roshan Noorzai, from Ohio University was particularly helpful to identify the list of frames explaining the Syrian conflict. For the research, I identified the following media frames: pro-government, human rights, regional interference, and sectarianism frames. The definition of each frame:

- Pro-government frame: whether the article portrays the Assad regime as the legitimate government of Syria by reporting the success of the state and pro-government forces in de-escalating the conflict; indicates that the Syrian conflict was perpetrated by Sunni jihadist groups with external support from Sunni states, such as the Saudi state
- Human rights frame: whether the article reports the conflict as a revolution against an authoritarian repressive regime that caused human casualties and sufferings as well as ethnic/sectarian victimization and fatalities
- Regional interference frame: whether the article attributes the causes for the conflict to key regional states, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey
- Sectarianism frame: whether the article refers to rival states/agents/groups using terms, such as Us versus Other, Sunni versus Shiite when defining the situation in Syria

A Textual analysis² was used to determine what frames dominated the coverage of the Syrian conflict. The predefined frames were coded on a presence/absence basis. The unit of analyses was the textual content of the individual news articles. The data were collected in two ways: first, news articles from *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Tehran Times* were accessed through the LexisNexis Academic English Language database; second, articles from *Daily Sabah* were collected from its online archive. The following keywords were used to search the articles: “Syrian uprising” or “Syrian conflict”. Using the research application, Nvivo 11, the articles were separated according to the states (Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey) and time periods (March 2011, March 2012, March 2013, and March 2014). The month March was chosen because the conflict started on March 15, 2011. This study analyzed and compared what and how frames shifted over the years from March 2011 to March 2014 (just before ISIS came into the picture). The articles were narrowed down and selected for the research based on its relevance to the 2011 Syrian conflict. The articles were deemed relevant if they specifically addressed the 2011 Syrian uprising/conflict or issues directly connected to the conflict; articles that only mentioned the conflict but failed to describe or capture the issues were excluded.

The researcher’s inability to understand or speak the Arabic or Farsi language was a potential limitation of this study. Therefore, only English-language newspapers, instead of Arab and Persian-language newspapers, were selected for investigation. Because the selected print media mainly target English-speaking readers and expatriates in the Middle East, their discourse could be different from that of Arab and Persian print media whose target audience is domestic to the country. The Arabic version is more informative that reflects political alignments and ideological expression; thus, the Arabic version would be more explicit when talking about the Sunni-Shiite sectarian dynamic of the Syrian conflict. For example, Mohammad Abdul-Mageed and Susan Heering carried out a comparative study of the Arabic and English news coverage on Al-Jazeera and found that the Arabic version is more explicit when describing factors, such as religion, ideology, and political alignment of the actor under discussion. On the other hand, the English version tended to be more implicit when covering similar factors in order to “avoid any appearance of ideological bias, including at the expense of being informative” (Abdul-Mageed & Herring,

² Analyzing the words and language of the selected articles allowed a close examination of the 2011 Syrian conflict from the key regional states’ point of view as well as message to the intended audience. Textual analysis was particularly important to analyze and categorize the articles into the predefined frames.

2008, p. 14). As this study investigated the English-language news instead of Arabic/Persian ones, it was evident that the language would be more implicit when covering the key regional states' role in exacerbating the sectarian tensions during the Syrian conflict. As such, this frame analysis would not entirely reflect the sectarian expressions and political alignments of the states involved. Nevertheless, a preliminary analysis of the selected print media – *Tehran Times*, *Asharq Al-Awsat*, and *Daily Sabah* – still revealed the ideology and interests of the respective states. Given this limitation, this research paper also used a process tracing approach.

Process Tracing

Process tracing is a research design used to trace the causal mechanisms based on detailed, within-case empirical analysis of “the pathway of the process by which an effect is produced or a purpose is accomplished” in an actual case (Beach, 2016; Gerring, 2007, p. 178). In order to carry out the process tracing, I identified three causal mechanisms most likely to be affected by the key regional states' supports: strategic framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization (Adamson, 2013; Bakke, 2013). These mechanisms provide a starting point for understanding when and how Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, including the Assad regime, play a causal role in the initiation and exacerbation of sectarianism during the Syrian conflict. As a result, this study moved away from the use of a primordialist approach that views sectarianism as given, and instead, focused on the processes through which sectarianization occurs (Adamson, 2013, pp. 66–67). There are numerous and multiple mechanisms that can influence domestic identity mobilization and the exacerbation of the sectarian conflict, but this study only focuses on the mechanisms outlined below. These mechanisms help to explain the impacts states can have on a conflict, such as the 2011 Syrian one.

First, within the mobilization process, strategic framing refers to the process that influences a movement's ability to organize supporters. Through framing, actors define “what they are fighting for and who they are fighting against, often in binary us-versus-them terms” (Bakke, 2013, p. 36). Kristin Bakke (2013) emphasizes that “it includes mechanisms such as the attribution of threat of, in more clinical terms, diagnosis of the ills that need to be cured and prognosis for the solution, including the (re)stating and

(re)imagining of a legitimate purpose” (p. 36). A shift in the domestic movement’s framing can be a result of the interaction of pressure from external groups, such as states. If and when the new framing resonates with the local population, a wider population, within the nation, adopt the new frame and join the movement. In terms of framing, the Syrian conflict began as a revolutionary struggle against an authoritarian state, but gradually, the uprising transformed into a sectarian conflict between a Shiite government and Sunni-dominated opposition. The key regional states’ interference further affected the framing of the Syrian uprising. In this way, the Syrian conflict witnessed a shift in the domestic movement’s framing of the struggle.

Second, ethnic or sectarian outbidding refers to the “politicization of ethnic differences by elites or political parties” (Adamson, 2013, p. 70). The sectarian outbidding was very apparent in Syria as sectarian identities were manipulated by national and regional players to boost or remain in power and increase legitimacy. Fiona Adamson (2013) argues that outbidding can involve “taking of extreme positions – either rhetorically or through the selective employment of violence” – to show power, mobilize public support, and repress the opposition (p. 70). It is used to draw a distinction between Us versus the Other. The goal was to examine the process of outbidding the national and regional states used to mobilize public support, thus contributing to sectarianism.

Third, resource mobilization refers to the impact of the mobilization of material resources and people on conflicts. Resources refer to fighters, weapons, and finance. Bakke (2013), argues that “more resource-rich movements [are] able to distribute selective incentives that can lure participants to engage in collective action, even risk their lives... coercive resources such as fighters and weapons (and knowing how to use those weapons skillfully) are critical in and of themselves: the more coercive resources the movement possesses, the better it can fight the state” (p. 39). Therefore, when external actors support domestic movements, they bring in troops, weapons, and funds that increase the coercive strength of intrastate conflicts. This was apparent in Syria when there was an increase in resources following the onset of the conflict. While it was not possible to trace the Assad regime or opposition’s cash flow, the evidence for this mechanism was in the form of information gained from news and expert analysis.

To explore how the leading regional states’ support influenced the sectarian dynamic of the Syrian conflict, I consulted a range of sources, both primary and secondary.

The primary documents collected were the news articles as well as policy briefs and media reports and interviews on the Syrian conflict. The secondary documents included a range of materials from scholarly papers, policy papers, press releases and other relevant materials from various sources, including individuals, international organizations, and institutions. Collecting and analyzing a range of documents from different sources allowed me to map the conflict in an objective, unbiased manner, and bring in different perspectives. Both primary and secondary documents were used in this study to increase the trustworthiness of the data (Noorzai, 2012, pp. 112–113). Collecting and analyzing a range of data, primary and secondary, allowed me to present a credible study.

Section B: FINDINGS

Frame Analysis

The online selection of articles from the three different sources yielded a total of 119 stories – 33 from *Tehran Times*, 49 from *Asharq Al-Awsat*, and 37 from *Daily Sabah*. The following predefined frames were used to analyze the articles: pro-government, human rights, regional interference, and sectarianism. Based on the frame analysis, “human rights” and “sectarianism” frames dominated *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Daily Sabah*. The “pro-government” and “regional interference” frames were more prominent in *Tehran Times*.

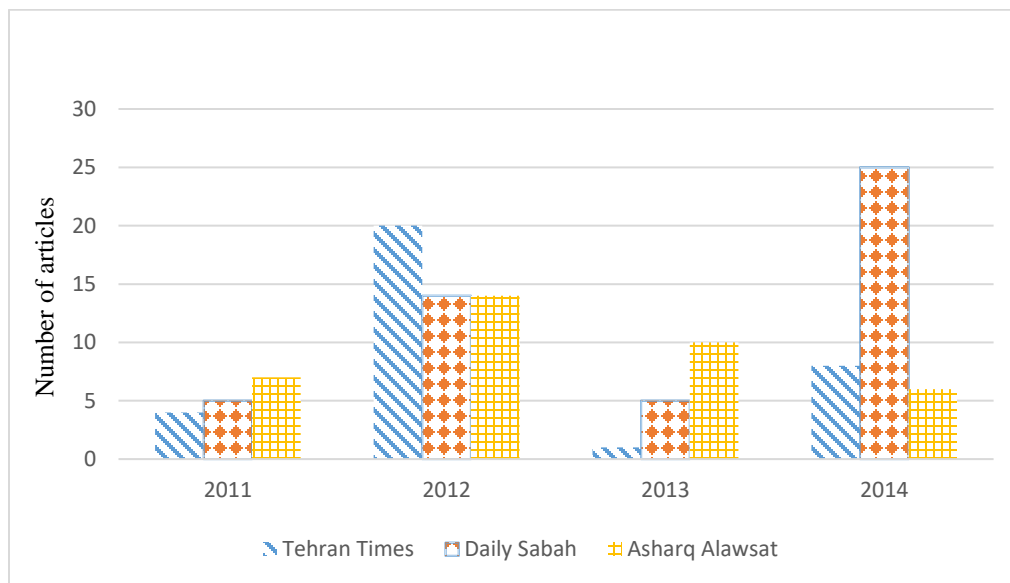


Figure 2: Number of articles about the Syrian conflict published during March 2011, March 2012, March 2013, and March 2014.

Based on Figure 2, Turkish *Daily Sabah* is in the first place with a total of 49 articles during the month of March from 2011 to 2014, Saudi Arabia is in the second position with a total of 37 articles, and Iranian *Tehran Times* is in the third position with a total of 33 articles. Turkey covered the most as there were spillover effects from the Syrian conflict in Turkey due to shared borders. Even though Iran covered the most with 20 articles during March 2012, it decreased to only one article in 2013 because the English LexisNexis database only found one article that focused on the Syrian conflict. This was unexpected

as Iran was actively supporting the Assad government with weapons, troops, and funding. Except for *Daily Sabah*, *Tehran Times* and *Asharq Al-Awsat* only published eight and six articles in 2014, respectively. The emergence of ISIS as one of the main players in the Syrian conflict, in early 2014, diverted the attention of the print media.

Iran

Because of the historical bilateral alliance between Tehran and the Ba'ath Party since 1978, it is logical that Tehran would continue to support the Assad regime in order to keep its strongest regional ally in power. Coincidentally, both belong to the Shiite sect as well. In fact, Phillip Smyth (2015) argues that Iran's support for Assad "a highly organized geostrategic and ideological effort by Iran to protect its ally in Damascus and project power within Syria, Iraq, and across the Middle East" (p. 1). Therefore, Iran painted a favorable picture of Assad and his role in the Syrian conflict, while demonizing Saudi Arabia and Turkey. This study highlighted that *Tehran Times* acted as a mouthpiece of both the Iranian and Assad governments throughout the study period from 2011 to 2014. *Tehran Times* primary theme in covering the Syrian conflict was legitimizing Assad on one hand and delegitimizing the opposition and their supporters, including the West and Arab countries, on the other hand. As Amin and Jallifar (2013) state, "In the eyes of the Iranian press, there are three groups engaged in Syria clashes; Syrian government, opposition armed groups, and the external forces which are exclusively West and Arab powers" (p. 13). This investigation also reflected a similar portrayal.

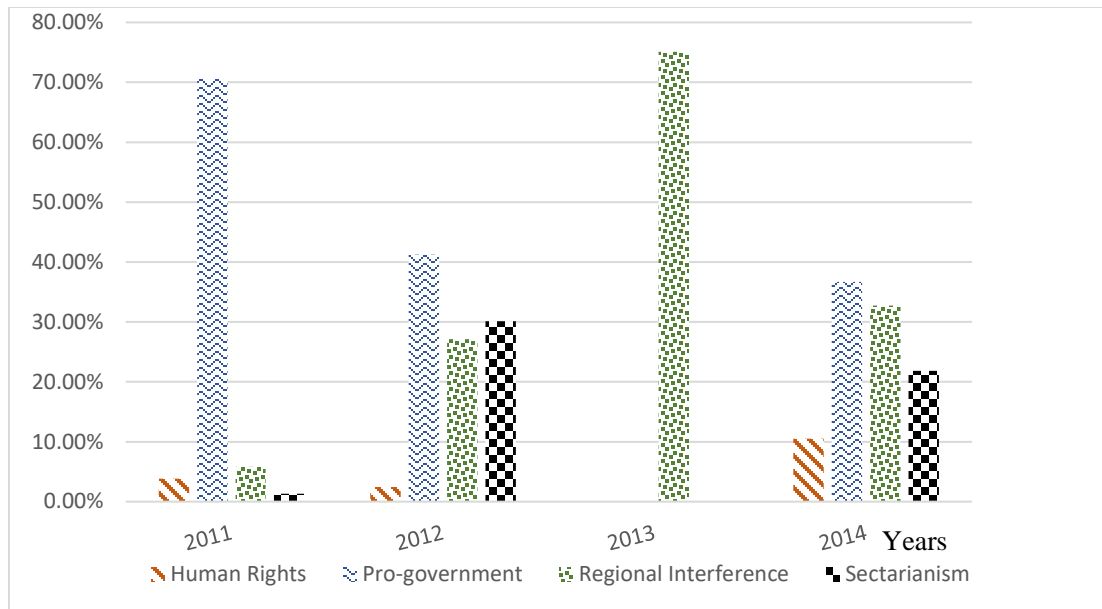


Figure 3: Frames used by *Tehran Times* in covering the Syrian conflict during the month of March in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014

Figure 3 shows that in 2011 and 2012, the “pro-government” frame was the most common (70.53% and 41.22%), in 2013, “regional interference” frame was the most common (75.11%), and in 2014, it was again “pro-government” frame.

The “pro-government” frame portrayed Assad as the sole legitimate government of Syria and the opposition as Islamic terrorists who wants to establish an Islamic state in Syria. For instance, “Damascus blames ‘outlaws, saboteurs, and armed terrorist groups’ for the violence, insisting that it is being orchestrated from abroad” (*Tehran Times*, 2012, March 2); thus, Assad had the monopoly to suppress and prevent this uprising from escalating. One of the principal characteristics of this frame was to highlight the “brotherly relationship” between Tehran and Damascus with a “bright and promising” future (*Tehran Times*, 2011, March 12). For example, “Commenting on the Tehran-Damascus relations, [Syrian Prime Minister Muhammed Naji Otri] said that the Iranian Parliament fully supports every effort aimed at boosting bilateral ties... called the two countries’ relationship exemplary and strong, saying Iran and Syria have the same enemies and both are campaigning against the arrogant powers and Zionists” (*Tehran Times*, 2011, March 12); in this way, this frame brought attention to the strong alliance between the two states as well as their common regional goals. Another apparent characteristic was to compliment the Assad regime’s effort to address the key demands of the protestors: “The state also

announced a series of reforms, including the release of detainees and plans to form new laws on the media and licensing political parties... Assad's government had pledged to review the emergency law and has also released scores of political prisoners” (*Tehran Times*, 2011, March 17). Another characteristic was highlighting the actions of the pro-Assad protestors by highlighting slogans, such as “We want to see reforms, but we want to see Bashar al-Assad stay in power”, “The people want Bashar al-Assad”, and “Bashar al-Assad is the spine of Syria. Without him, our country will be pushed into chaos” (*Tehran Times*, 2011, March 17). Assad and his paramilitary group Shabiha’s actions were portrayed by *Tehran Times* as an attempt to restore law, order, and security. Iran continued to compliment Assad regime’s attempt to implement political reforms even in the face of increasing violence in Syria. For example, *Tehran Times* report President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s statement “I am very glad that Syrian officials are properly handling the affairs with self-confidence and through reliance on the people, and I hope that the situation in Syria would improve day by day... the Syrian president and other Syrian officials will definitely manage the developments in the country properly and will implement any necessary reforms” (*Tehran Times*, 2012, March 27). Through the “pro-government” frame, *Tehran Times* presented the 2011 revolution as an issue of law and order threatened by jihadists that only the Assad government can fix.

Both in 2012 and 2013, “regional interference” frame dominated *Tehran Times* as well. *Tehran Times* used the “regional interference” frame to show that the Syrian conflict was a result of Arab and Western states’ interference. One of the main characteristics was that Arab countries took a “provocative” position by encouraging dissidents to wage an armed conflict against the “popular government”; their intent was to break the current political system in Syria. For example, “the beginning of the Syria crisis, Saudi Arabia and Qatar, backed by Western governments, have done their utmost to topple the country’s popular government” as the Tehran blamed Saudi Arabia and Qatar, not the Assad regime’s oppressive actions, for the growing unrest in Syria (*Tehran Times*, 2012, March 5). Another aspect of this frame was to blame Israel and “foreign conspiracies” carried out by the US, Israel, and Arab states (*Tehran Times*, 2013, March 16). Through the “regional interference” frame, *Tehran Times* again highlighted the strong bilateral alliance between the Iranian state and the Assad government due to their shared goals against Israel and western occupation in the Middle East. By blaming key regional states, particularly Saudi Arabia and Qatar, for the Syrian conflict, the Saudi state legitimized the Assad government

and undermined the revolutionary dynamic of the conflict. The “regional interference” frame externalized the conflict by holding external states to be responsible.

In 2014, “pro-government”, “regional interference”, and “sectarianism” frames dominated *Tehran Times*’s coverage of the 2011 Syrian conflict. Through these frames, *Tehran Times* drew a direct connection between the increasing violence in Syria and rival states, such as the Saudi state and the Erdogan government. For example, “Syria sank into war in March 2011 when pro-reform protests turned into a massive insurgency following the intervention of Western and regional states” (*Tehran Times*, 2014, March 4). It pointed out that, regional states, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were responsible for training these terrorists and arming them with weapons and funding to overthrow the Assad government and gain domination in the Middle East. By Western and regional states, the Iranian state was referring to states, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, that enjoys a close alliance with the West. While blaming key regional states for the violent conflict in Syria, *Tehran Times* continued to portray the Assad regime positively despite its crimes against humanity, such as,

President Bashar al-Assad visited displaced Syrians in the town of Adra on Wednesday, state media said, in a rare public appearance outside the heart of Damascus. State television said Assad inspected a shelter for people displaced by fighting in Adra, which lies about 12 miles northeast of central Damascus and was partly captured by rebels three months ago. A picture on the presidency's Twitter account showed Assad, in a dark jacket and white shirt, talking to a group of women at a building identified as the Dweir shelter. Syrian television said Assad was "listening to their needs" and told them that the state would continue "to secure basic necessities for the displaced until they can return to their homes in Adra and elsewhere" (*Tehran Times*, 2014, March 12).

The sectarianism frame was present when it explicitly used dichotomous terms, such as Us versus Other and Shiite versus Sunni to define the situation in Syria. For example, *Tehran Times* used the sectarianism frame to describe the actions of the opposition, such as “Many residents fled Adra in December when terrorists took over part of the town and killed 28 people in a sectarian attack targeting Druzes, Christians and Alawites - the same sect to which Assad belongs. Adra had a population of about 100,000 including Alawites, Druzes, Christians and Sunni Muslims before the conflict erupted” (*Tehran Times*, 2014, March 13). By emphasizing that the Sunni-dominated opposition was killing Assad’s Alawite sect, *Tehran Times* highlighted the Sunni-Shiite sectarian nature of the conflict. Furthermore, instead of reporting the total number of civilian

casualties, *Tehran Times* emphasized the Alawite/Shiite casualties, such as “The Observatory said that more than 56,000 of the deaths were government forces and their supporters. This number included 332 Hezbollah members and 459 Shias from other countries” (*Tehran Times*, 2014, March 16). By pointing out the number of Shiite casualties, the “sectarianism” frame emphasized not only the Sunni-Shiite division, but it also discredited the Sunni-dominated opposition’s fight against an oppressive authoritarian regime. Both the “regional interference” and “sectarianism” frame worked to show how Shiite Iran and Hezbollah were supporting Assad when Sunni Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar were supporting jihadist groups.

One of the main characteristics that were present in all these frames was dependence on Iranian government sources. The government account was present in most of the articles, but the opposition account was not. In addition to the Iranian government, the Syrian regime was also present in most of the articles. This highlighted how the *Tehran Times* was biased towards the Tehran and Assad regime, even going as far as to act as their spokesperson. *Tehran Time*’s reliance on “pro-government”, “regional interference” and “sectarianism” frames to cover the Syrian conflict from 2011 to 2014 portrayed Assad in a positive image: fighting foreign-sponsored terrorists and western/regional/Zionist influence in Syria with Iran’s backing. Iran justified its role in the Syrian conflict with regards to finding a solution, such as “the Islamic Republic will advocate a political solution to the Syrian issue and will support the Syrian people’s demands, to which the Syrian president has paid due attention” (*Tehran Times*, 2012, March 12). In this way, *Tehran Times* reflected the political interests of Tehran for supporting the Assad regime.

Saudi Arabia

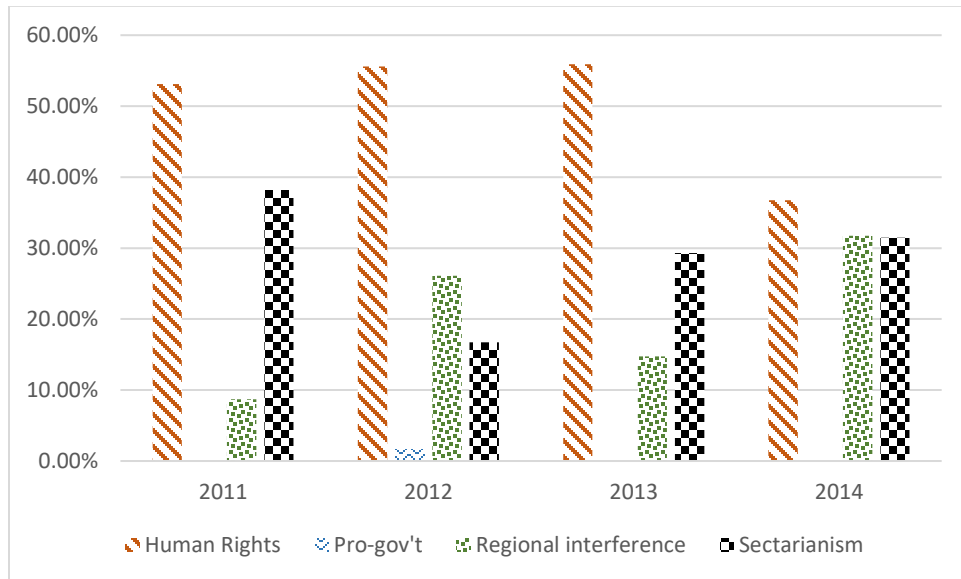


Figure 4: Frames used by *Asharq Al-Awsat* when covering the Syrian conflict during the month of March in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014

Figure 4 shows the frequency of media frames used by the Saudi-owned news *Asharq Al-Awsat* when covering the Syrian conflict from 2011 to 2014. The frames used in *Asharq Al-Awsat* were very different from the frames used by the Iranian *Tehran Times*. The frames with most frequency in *Asharq Al-Awsat* were the “human rights”, “sectarianism”, and “regional interference” frames. Unlike *Tehran Times*, the Saudi newspaper refrained from emphasizing the “pro-government” frame.

“Human rights” frame dominated *Asharq Al-Awsat*’s coverage of the Syrian conflict throughout this study period: 53.12% (2011), 55.57% (2012), 55.92% (2013), and 36.74% (2014). As discussed above, the “human rights” frame refers to casualties and sufferings of civilians in Syria. As one of the deadliest conflict of the 21st century, the human rights frame is the most widely talked about and used by both regional and international actors, including states and organizations, to condemn and demonize the other side and to bring attention to the Syrian conflict. Considering that Saudi Arabia is anti-Assad, it is expected that the human rights frame would dominate *Asharq Al-Awsat*. In addition to focusing on the perpetrators and fatalities, this frame also analyzed the consequences of the conflict on the civilians, such as displacement, social and medical issues.

This frame introduced the Syrian conflict as a revolution against an oppressive government, unlike *Tehran Times*. For example, “all the factors which led to revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, are also present in Syria, from the absence of freedom to the presence of tyranny, corruption, poverty, and unemployment, not to mention the arrest of opposition figures and unfulfilled promises of reform”, highlighting the tyrannical nature of the Assad regime as they continued to wield absolute power over the people in Syria (*Asharq Al-Awsat*. 2011, March 23). Furthermore, articles in *Asharq Al-Awsat* cast doubt upon the Assad government’s ability to handle the growing conflict through writings, such as “What is happening in Syria represents a genuine challenge to the legitimacy of President Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian Baath Party... what is certain is that if violent demonstrations continue, and spread to the capital Damascus, this will only increase the likelihood of the president's departure and regime change” (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2011, March 31). Here, the news article revealed not only the increasingly violent demonstration but also alluded to the possibility of regime change, unlike *Tehran Times*’s steadfast belief in Assad’s legitimacy and capability to handle the Syrian conflict.

Furthermore, *Asharq Al-Awsat* relied on quotes from key regional actors to discredit Assad and his supporters, such as “Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu said “the Syrian regime is committing a crime against humanity every day” adding “after these many massacres and crimes, which have characteristics of war crimes, the Syrian regime closes all doors to dialogue” (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2012, March 3). Here, the article used a key Turkish figure to highlight that Turkey, a former ally of the Assad regime, is one of its biggest critics due to Assad’s continual use of violent tactics against its own people to stay in power. This example emphasizes the propaganda-oriented reporting that favors one side, in this case, the opposition, against the other, the Assad regime, as *Asharq Al-Awsat* is a pro-state newspaper. The Saudi-owned newspaper, in fact, condemned the entire Assad regime as the articles focus on “a brutal history of violence and massacres which stretch back more than 40 years” of Hafez al-Assad the father, or Bashar al-Assad, the son (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2012, March 17).

A principal characteristic of this frame was using quotes, statements, anecdotes from anti-Assad civilians and opposition groups. Because of the focus on individual stories from eyewitness and civilians, this frame made the articles more personal and humane. One of the articles was a story of Kaser Abu Ayyub, a carpenter studying electrical engineering, who joined the fight to protest against Assad’s authoritarian government and

demand for political and socio-economic reforms (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2013, March 18). Another individual was Hajji Marea who revealed that he was one of the first to join the uprising because "[he] thought that Bashar Al-Assad would be like Hosni Mubarak in Egypt... that when he saw that the people didn't want him, he would go. For seven months [they] protested without weapons. But Assad did not go, and Hajji Marea, reluctantly, picked up a gun " (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2013, March 5). By bringing attention to individual stories, the "human rights" frame put a human face on suffering, making the readers more sympathetic towards the plight of the opposition groups fighting the Alawite/Shiite Other. Through the "human rights" frame, *Asharq Al-Awsat* demonized the Assad regime and his allies that portrayed Assad and his Shiite supporters (Iran and Hezbollah) as the Other while the opposition with its Sunni supporters (Saudi Arabia and Turkey) was Us, which helped in the construction of the sectarian identity.

Another dominant frame in *Asharq Al-Awsat* was the "regional interference" and "sectarianism" frame, particularly in 2012, 2013, and 2014. Both these frames refer to the Other state (the Shiite-dominated Iran) as the main perpetrator for the Syrian conflict. For example, "here are members of Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp, and the Mahdi army from Iraq, on the ground in Syria, and they are massacring and torturing the Syrian opposition. We, therefore, call on the sheiks and clerics in Egypt and across the Arab and Islamic world to pray for the people of Deraa and Syria" was a quote from Sheikh Ahmed al-Sayasn, the imam of the Omari Mosque in Deraa (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2012, March 15). Hezbollah, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corp, and the Mahdi army from Iraq belong to the Shiite sect, and by specifying their sectarian affiliation, *Asharq Al-Awsat* reinforced the Sunni-Shiite division in the Syrian conflict. By reiterating how Shiite Iran was working with the "Shi'ite pincer-Hezbollah and Maliki's forces" to keep the Alawite Assad regime in power against the Syrians' demands (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2013, March 10), *Asharq Al-Awsat* specifically labeled the Iran-backed Assad regime as the Shiite.

A textual analysis of these news articles also revealed that the "regional interference" frame was used to focus on the geopolitical strategies of Tehran in supporting the Assad government. For example, Iran was "pushing its allies to intervene militarily now not to defend Al-Assad, but to send a message to the regional powers and the international community that Iran will not stand by idly, and that its primary project—namely to spread the Khomeini revolution and extend Iran's influence in the region will not be destroyed that easily through the overthrow of the Assad regime... In doing so, Iran

has effectively become responsible for the remnants of the Assad regime, the Alawi sect, and anyone who wants to fight the new regime in Syria” (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2013, March 13). This was a very revealing quote that indicated how the external states were using the Sunni-Shiite sect to achieve their geopolitical goals in the Middle East. In fact, the geopolitical ambition to extend its regional power caused the Iranian state to support Assad, according to Saudi Arabia. Demonizing and belittling Iran was one of the principal characteristics of the “regional interference” frame: “the Iranian government must surely realize that its war on Syrian territory, and its defense of a bloody regime which relishes killing its people, is a lost cause even if the war lasts for decades” (*Asharq Al-Awsat*, 2014, March 17). By using language that demonized the Other, *Asharq Al-Awsat* portrayed Iran and the Assad regime as the main perpetrators.

The way *Asharq Al-Awsat* covered the 2011 Syrian conflict gave a road map of the transformation from a revolutionary uprising to a sectarian conflict. Initially, *Asharq Al-Awsat* emphasized the “human rights” frame, but over time, it relied more on “regional interference” and “sectarianism” frames, thus, emphasizing how the uprising for political and civil rights gradually turned into a violent sectarian conflict due to key regional states’ interference.

Turkey

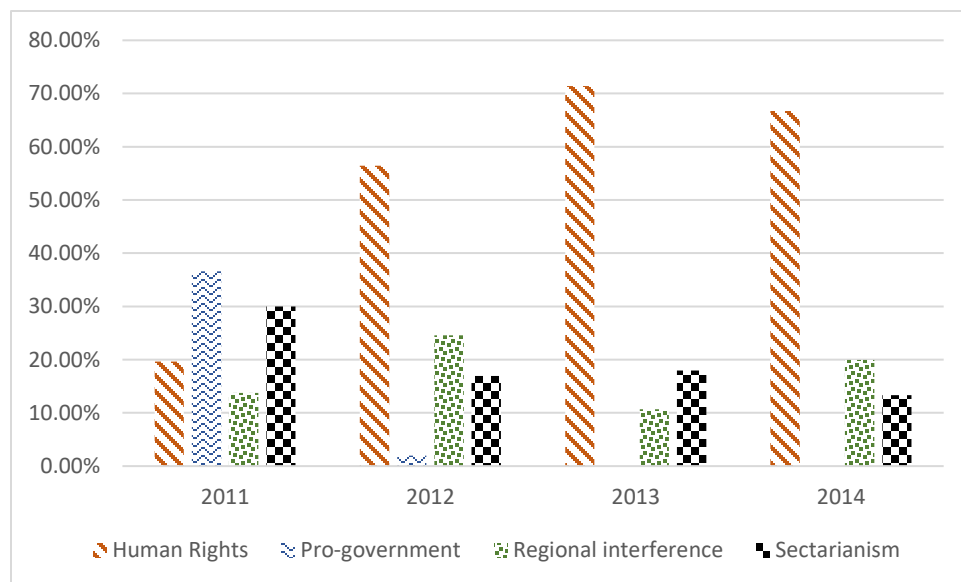


Figure 5: Frames used by *Daily Sabah* when covering the Syrian conflict during the month of March in 2011, 2012, 2013, and 2014

Turkey has a long history with Syria, particularly the Assad regime, as both states enjoyed good relations on the economic and political front, however, that quickly changed as the violence escalated in Syria. As a pro-government print media, *Daily Sabah* reflected the Erdogan government's position regarding the current Syrian conflict.

A textual analysis of *Daily Sabah's* articles revealed a similar pattern to the Saudi-owned *Asharq Al-Awsat* as shown in Figure 4. This was expected as Turkey is part of the "Sunni bloc" (led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey) that has been supporting the Sunni-dominated opposition and using sectarian identities to serve different purposes (Rifai, 2014, p. 496). When covering the Syrian conflict, from 2011 to 2014, *Daily Sabah* used the following frames most frequently: "pro-government" frame in 2011 (36.58%) and "human rights" frame in 2012 to 2014 (56.45%, 71.39%, and 66.72% respectively).

Given Turkey's early support for the Assad government, the "pro-government" frame dominated *Daily Sabah's* initial coverage of the Syrian conflict. For example, "Turkey called on Syria on Friday to make good on promises of economic and social reform as soon as possible in the face of growing unrest" (*Daily Sabah*, 2011, March 27) that clearly showed that Turkey viewed Assad's party as a legitimate government with the ability to meet the opposition's demand for political and socio-economic reforms. In fact, by using "pro-government" and "human rights" frame, *Daily Sabah* presented a broader and real picture of the situation in Syria as it attempted to balance both sides – the Assad regime and Sunni-dominated opposition – of the conflict. It was more focused on how the uprising started, what led to its deterioration, and how the different actors reacted. Initially, *Daily Sabah* reported that social, economic, and political issues started the demonstrations, inspired by Arab Spring in early 2011. For example:

Unrest in Deraa came to a head this week after police detained more than a dozen schoolchildren for writing graffiti inspired by slogans used by pro-democracy demonstrators abroad. Assad had promised on Thursday to consider granting Syrians greater freedoms to defuse the outbreak of popular demands for political freedoms and an end to corruption. He also pledged to look at ending an emergency law in place since 1963 and made an offer of large public pay rises. But demonstrators said they did not believe the promises. (*Daily Sabah*, 2011, March 26).

Another article described how Assad fulfilled one of the key demands of the opposition as he released 260 prisoners (*Daily Sabah*, 2011, March 26). By emphasizing that the Syrian government met the "legitimate demands and expectations" of the

opposition, *Daily Sabah* tried to maintain impartiality in its coverage of the Syrian conflict. This is a reflection of Turkey's "zero problems" policy with neighboring states (Semra, 2014, p. 1). However, mid-March 2011 witnessed a shift in *Daily Sabah's* coverage of the Syrian conflict. The news articles began to take a pro-opposition stance as it relied on the "sectarianism" frame to underline the gradual transformation of the uprising. For example, "Erdogan said he warned Assad it would be dangerous if any social unrest in Syria assumed a sectarian dimension" (*Daily Sabah*, 2011, March 26). Here, President of Turkey Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a key regional actor, highlighted Turkey's negative view on a Sunni-Shiite sectarian dynamic. *Daily Sabah* repeatedly asserted that "Syria was the target of a project to sow sectarian strife" even though "Syrian opposition figures issued a declaration... denouncing sectarianism and committing to nonviolent democratic change" if the government did not meet the political and social demands (*Daily Sabah*, 2011, March 28). In this way, state involvement affected how the Turkish print medium portrayed the Syrian conflict in the initial stages. *Daily Sabah's* initial reporting clearly revealed Turkey's preference to be a bystander who wanted to maintain its status quo with the Syria state. However, gradually, the Erdogan government changed its position from supporting Assad's Alawite regime to supporting the Sunni-led political opposition, which was again reflected in the *Daily Sabah's* coverage.

From 2012 to 2014, "human rights" frame dominated *Daily Sabah's* coverage with occasional use of "sectarianism" and "regional interference" frames. This was a dominant frame used by anti-Assad actors, such as the Saudi state and Erdogan government, to highlight Assad's brutal crackdown on his own citizens. A key characteristic of "human rights" frame was highlighting the fatalities caused by the Assad regime: 57 bodies were found in Homs' Karm el-Zaytoun and Adawiyeh neighborhoods of which 28 were women, 23 were children and six were adult men (*Daily Sabah*, 2012, March 13); 17 people died in the buffer zone between the Turkish Cilvegözü border gate in Hatay and Syria's Bab al-Hawa (*Daily Sabah*, 2013, March 12); and a minimum of 12,813 women were killed by Assad's forces in the last three years of the civil war (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 9). In addition to human casualties, the "human rights" frame also focused on Syrian refugees and internally displaced individuals, portraying Assad regime and his Iranian ally negatively. On the other hand, *Daily Sabah* used the "human rights" frame to portray Turkey positively. For instance, "the camps set up for Syrian refugees forced to flee the unrest in their own nations and to seek shelter in Turkey are being run similar to

metropolitan administrations by way of providing refugees with education, health, infrastructure and religious opportunities that running like a well-oiled machine” (*Daily Sabah*, 2013, March 6); Turkey spent about USD \$2.5 billion on hosting refugees (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 4). By focusing on Assad’s crimes against humanity in juxtaposition to Turkey’s humanitarian actions, the pro-government *Daily Sabah* justified Turkish intervention in the Syrian conflict: to help the victims.

Another main characteristic was the attention on women and children. This is an effective way to further highlight the brutal tactics of the Assad government. For example, “Syria’s ongoing civil war has had an unimaginable impact on the country’s children with over 10,000 young lives lost... At least 1.2 million children have fled the conflict and become refugees in neighboring countries, while another 4.3 million children in Syria are in need of humanitarian assistance” (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 17). *Daily Sabah* further reported that in addition to using chemical weapons, Assad also used women for bartering as well as rape and starvation as weapons. Through the “human rights” frame, *Daily Sabah* not only vilified the Assad government and allies, but it also lauded the Turkish state for its action towards the Syrian refugees and opposition groups fighting Assad. In this way, Turkey justified its support for the opposition fighting Assad.

While the “human rights” frame dominated the coverage, “sectarianism” and “regional interference” frames were also present. *Daily Sabah* used both the “sectarianism” and “regional interference” frame to emphasize how the key regional states support Assad or the opposition based on their respective sectarian identity. In fact, unlike *Tehran Times’* pro-Assad position and *Asharq Al-Awsat’s* anti-Assad stance, *Daily Sabah* tried to maintain the balance as it focused more on how the key regional states’ interference escalated the Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict in Syria. For example, “Ethnic, tribal, local or sectarian grievances increasingly emerged as markers of the conflict in Syria... to overshadow the initial democratic character of the opposition. Again, the cross-border nature of those [Sunni-Shiite] identities exerts yet additional pressure on territorial integrity. Second, popular upheavals led to the erosion of national authority, raising issues of legitimacy and governance” (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 13). Thus, “Turkey and Gulf Arab states have backed the mainly Sunni Muslim against Assad, who is from the minority Alawite sect and is supported by Iran and Shi’ite fighters from Iraq and the Lebanese militia Hezbollah” (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 22). Unlike *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Tehran Times* that vilified and demonized the Other, *Daily Sabah* was more circumspect in its coverage

due to its historical alliance with the Assad regime and to maintain its image as a democratic state. In fact, *Daily Sabah* wrote, “The current picture in Syria is rather frightening. In addition to those killed, 2.5 million people have sought refuge in neighboring countries and 9.3 million people are in need of humanitarian aid. Turkey did not stand idly by as this tragedy close to its borders unfolded and has, in fact, become a part of it... in order to minimize any other possible threats, the Turkish government is aiming to unseat the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad” (*Daily Sabah*, 2014, March 2014). Given the current hostile relationship between Assad and the Erdogan government, Turkey will benefit if Assad is removed from power.

Process Tracing

To understand how the national and key regional actors affected the Syrian conflict, I explored what it is about the conflict that the actors can influence. Consistent with Jeffrey Checkel’s book *Transnational Dynamics of a Civil War*, I investigated three mechanisms of a domestic movement that may change due to interventions by external states – strategic framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization (Checkel, 2014).

Shifts in Strategic Framing

The Syrian conflict grew out of the Syrian nationalist movement within a few months of its onset. There are three reasons that started the uprising initially. First was the anti-regime protests because of the Arab Spring happening in the broader Middle East. In Syria, the uncoordinated and spontaneous demonstrations was a response to Assad’s authoritarian regime that ruled through emergency laws, clientelism/cronyism, and corruption. Secondly, the initial demonstrations were a response to rising social inequalities within Syria, which the government was doing nothing to eliminate. Third, economic issues that contributed to bad living conditions of lower middle and working classes, especially those living in the rural Syria (Berti & Paris, 2014, pp. 22–23).

The initial movement had a national momentum as the people demanded a change in economic, social, and political factors. Early on, protesters rejected sectarian

dimensions. Videos and pictures show nonviolent demonstrations as the people calling for freedom, dignity, and reform. The slogans on the streets were “The Syrian people are one, one, one, the Syrian people are one” and “No Sunni, no Allawi, no Kurd and no Arab, we all want freedom” emphasizing the national drive (Daoudy, 2011). The opposition group appealed to non-violence by reiterating “*Silmiya, silmiya*” (peaceful, peaceful). Protests became more organized as local groups emerged to institutionalize the revolution and mobilize society against the regime. The first institution was The Youth of March 15 (in reference to the second major protest in Deraa) that demanded the removal of Assad, a series of political reforms, the release of political reforms, and a range of socioeconomic measures to address the growing poverty and inequality in the country (Abboud, 2015).

In an attempt to manage the uprising, in late July 2011, the Assad regime created policies that worsened the situation. Bashar’s belated, semi-political reforms led to broader demands, yet his security services responded with violence. The 2012 International Crisis Group reports that the underlying belief within the Assad regime was that excessive leniency was the main issue. The regime’s goal was to “implement tough measures to restore law and order, and then perhaps implement the ‘reforms’”. However, in practice, it was different (Crisis Group, 2012a, p. 3). By trying to force entire communities into submission through violent, unlawful and disorderly repression, the Assad regime pushed the demonstrators in the opposite direction (Daoudy, 2011).

As the protests spread across the country, Assad and his government began to criminalize and primordialize³ the opposition’s view. The growing conflict was framed around terrorist and sectarian terms (Wieland, 2011, p. 52). For example, Assad described the initial peaceful demonstrations as “*al-azma*” (the crisis) or “*al-ahdath*” (the events), when the opposition used terms “*al-thawra*” (the revolution) or “*al-intifada*” (the uprising) (Droz-Vincent, 2014, p. 46). The strategy was to incite fear, rally the minorities behind him, and militarize the conflict “since an authoritarian ruler is usually better equipped to confront violent opposition than to withstand a prolonged nonviolent struggle” (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 24). This is how Assad used elite machinations to distort the truth and identified himself as the legitimate ruler of Syria.

³ In this context, primordialize refers to reduce the reasons and dimension of a conflict to sectarian terms (Wieland, 2011, p. 52).

It was only a coincidence that the Alawites and other minorities made up most of Assad's security services, while Sunnis made up the protestors; thus, when violent demonstrations broke out, it was a Sunni-dominated opposition against the Alawite-heavy regime and security forces (Hof, Hariri, & Simon, 2013, p. 16). Assad labeled the protestors as "primarily foreign Sunni Islamist fanatics, bent on imposing Sharia law and attacking religious pluralism" (Hof et al., 2013, p. 16) that the external regional states incited. Additionally, Assad states that the protests were part of a wider conspiracy with the aim to spread fear and sectarianism. In September 2013 interview with a French newspaper, *Le Figaro*, Assad stated, "We are fighting terrorists...80-90% belong to al-Qaeda. They are not interested in reform or in politics. The only way to deal with them is to annihilate them".

Assad used sectarianism to incite fears among the minority groups in Syria to get them on his side. A policy briefing by The International Crisis Group (ICG) summarizes the strategy of the Assad regime:

[T]he regime in effect took the Alawite minority hostage, linking its fate to its own. It did so deliberately and cynically, not least in order to ensure the loyalty of the security services... As unrest began, the regime staged sectarian incidents in confessionally-mixed areas as a means of bringing to the surface deeply ingrained feelings of insecurity among Alawites who, in centuries past, had been socially marginalized, economically exploited and targets of religious discrimination. To stoke fear, authorities distributed weapons and bags of sand – designed to erect fortifications – to Alawites living in rural areas long before any objective threat existed; security services and official media spread blood-curdling, often exaggerated and sometimes wholly imaginary stories of the protesters' alleged sectarian barbarism (Crisis Group, 2011b, p. 2).

This strategy played on pre-existing fears, confirming the anti-Alawite/Shiite stereotype. In this case, sectarianism became a self-fulfilling logic: minority groups, specifically the Alawites and Shiites, are coming together as they fear Sunni revenge and tyranny if Assad loses. Over time, as repression escalated, most Syrians shifted the blame from Assad to the Alawite community in Syria, leading to a shift in the framing of the Syrian conflict.

In addition to using security services to repress the demonstrators, Assad also employed a paramilitary "self-defense" group, mostly made up of Alawites. The opposition referred to them as Shabiha. The Shabiha was responsible for committing most of the excessive violence against the oppositions in areas where Assad's security services or

military could not reach (Holliday, 2011, p. 10). A United Nations (2012) report, *Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic*, states:

Government forces and militias aligned with the Government have attacked Sunni civilians... [one interviewee] stated that the militia told her that they would kill all Sunnis in the region and that the area belonged to them. Another interviewee stated that he regularly witnessed Sunni commuters being pulled out of their cars and beaten.

Samer Abboud (2016), in the book, *Syria*, notes:

The security apparatus – the army, *mukhabarat* (intelligence services), police, and *Shabiha* – continued to engage in repression, including collective violence against protestors and against individuals participating in protest activity through arbitrary imprisonment, beatings, torture, kidnapping, and murder (p. 58).

The regime was accused of killing along sectarian lines as early as April 2011, when the Shabiha reportedly killed Sunnis (fatalities in parenthesis): Telhelah in April 2011 (40), Kfar Oweid in December 2011 (100); Bab Driad and Karm al Zhoutan in Homs in March 2012 (50); Taftanaz in April 2012 (100); Houla in May 2012 (108); al-Qubayr in June 2012 (78); and Darayya, Damascus in August 2012 (200) (Phillips, 2013, pp. 359–360). By end-2011, the Syrian security apparatus was reported to kill over 100,000 people in random killing operations (Abbas, 2011).

On the other hand, the opposition also incited sectarianism. As the Assad government increasingly employed greater levels of force to repress an initially peaceful uprising, the opposition responded in a similar manner (Hof et al., 2013). By mid-2011, military defectors from the Syrian army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), headed by Riad Al-Asaad, a former Syrian army colonel (Beck, 2015). By August 2011, the Syrian National Council (SNC), a coalition of groups in and outside of Syria, was formed in Istanbul to oppose the Ba'ath Party (Beck, 2015). A December 2013 UN report states that similar to the Assad regime and *Shabiha*, the opposition also targeted and imprisoned Sunni government troops while executing the Alawites (Hof et al., 2013, p. 16). Bombing in Alawite neighborhoods and towns and Shiite religious shrines were reported as well. Sunni villages continued to expel Alawite families and in return, the Shiites refrained from going near Sunni villages in fear of being killed (Holliday, 2011, p. 17). While the Assad supporters shouted, "God, Syria, Bashar and nothing else," or "Assad [for president] or we will burn this country", the Sunni-dominated opposition chanted

"Traitors, traitors, traitors! The Syrian army is traitors" demanding the removal of Assad (Crisis Group, 2012, p. 4-5). The sectarian dynamic of the conflict resulted in the rise of a radical Islamist dynamic within the opposition.

In addition to local revolutionaries, radical Islamists or jihadists took a center stage in the conflict as well. Their rise was further encouraged and perpetuated by regional intervention. For example, an Islamist rebel group within the opposition is the Suqour al-Sham & its Brothers in Arms, fighting under the umbrella group of FSA, but with an explicitly Islamist Agenda (O' Bagy, 2012, p. 19). Ahrar al-sham Brigades, located in northern Syria, is another example of cooperation between the FSA and a Salafist group to overthrow Assad (O' Bagy, 2012, p. 27). Jubhat al-Nusra (JN), also known as al-Qaeda in Syria, is another such Sunni Islamist terrorist group in Northwestern Syria working within the opposition. Altogether, the Sunni-Syrian opposition with secular, nationalistic goals transformed as thousands of Sunni Syrians joined rebel groups with anti-Shiite rhetoric and violence (Abdo et al., 2016).

The Syrian conflict has attracted many foreign fighters with the aim to establish a Sunni caliphate in the region. Few examples are Salafi-jihadists, including members of al-Qaeda Iraq (AQI) and its affiliate the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), the Abdullah Azzam Brigades led by Saudi Majid bin Muhammad al-Majid, and a number of prominent Jordanian Salafi-jihadists (O' Bagy, 2012, p. 19). In a similar manner, thousands of Syrian Alawites and Shiites joined Iran-backed militaria group, National Defense Force, with anti-Sunni rhetoric, fighting for Assad. The conflict also invited Shiite military groups, most notably Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq-backed Asaib Ahl al-Haq and Kata'ib Hezbollah (Abdo et al., 2016). Both sides of the conflict brought in radical militant groups as well as fighters, which was further exacerbated by regional intervention.

Ethnic/sectarian Outbidding

Ethnic or sectarian outbidding is apparent in Syria, mainly between the Shia Alawites and Sunnis. Following the start of the Syrian war, sectarianism was embedded in Middle East politics. The Sunni-Shiite split has always mattered in Islam; however, sectarian identity has coexisted or subsumed by other forms of identities, such as national,

regional, tribal, ethnic, class, generational, and urban versus rural. As Frederik M. Wehrey (2013) states, "Often what seems to be a religious or doctrinal difference is more accurately a byproduct of political repression, provincial marginalization, or uneven access to economic resources. The local context matters enormously in this regard: Sectarian dynamics in Bahrain, for instance, are vastly different from those in Lebanon or Syria".

As the conflict gradually evolved into a Sunni-Shia division, both sides have drawn in several narratives rooted in sectarian rhetoric. These narratives were used to demonize the Other by employing the "Us versus Other" rhetoric. The regime established anti-Sunni rhetoric and actions to demonize the Sunnis Other in two ways: intimidation carried out by the *Shabiha* and intimidation by the state-owned media or allied-owned media. Intimidation by military and *Shabiha* was carried out through burglaries, tortures, etc., indiscriminate killings, assassination, and summary-style executions (Abbas, 2011). The intent of employing sectarian violence was to demonize the protestors, especially the Sunni Other and link them to traditional perpetrators: foreign conspiracy and Islamic Salafism (Abbas, 2011).

Shiite Islamists operating in Syria carried out sectarian killings as well to gain support from Shiite Iran or Hezbollah, an example of sectarian outbidding. Video clips released on YouTube show one such group capturing and executing Sunni Syrian rebels while chanting, "We are performing our *taklif* (religious order) and we are not seeking personal vengeance" (Zelin & Smyth, 2014). In addition to sectarian violence, the regime and its allies used sectarian rhetoric to demonize the Sunni Others. Syrian state television played a big role portraying the Sunni-dominated opposition as terrorists. For example, April 2012 Crisis Group reports anti-rebel propaganda that Assad regime used to gain Alawite and other minority group's loyalty while demonizing the Other in this conflict:

Security services circulated stories (and even a video) of a woman in Homs who not only drank the blood of Alawites brought to her by armed groups, but also dismembered their bodies and dispersed their parts; systematically portrayed protesters as Salafist extremists establishing Islamic emirates in regions of Syria they controlled; and broadcast purported evidence of foreign involvement, such as wads of Israeli shekels found in insurgent hideouts in Baba Amro. At the same time, they recruited Alawites into the *shabbiha*, armed them for self-defense and allowed them to form a militia. (Crisis Group, 2012b).

The initial justification for Tehran and its allies' involvement in the Syrian conflict was to protect Shiite sacred or religious shrines, such as the golden-domed Sayyeda Zainab shrine, in southern Damascus. (One can also argue that the shrine's location was most important as it was near the international airport in Syria.) The shrine's importance was further highlighted when Shiite rebels chanted "*Labayk ya Zainab!*" (At your service, O Zainab!) to commemorate Shiite fighters killed in the conflict. Tehran-backed Iraqi Shiite organizations and Hezbollah fighters used propaganda songs in the Syrian conflict as well. In addition to propaganda songs, Shiite social media sites, especially Facebook, used phrases, such as "*Labayk ya Zainab*" to promote the narrative that Shiite militants are fighting in Syria to defend their sectarian identity (Smyth, 2015, pp. 4–5).

Tehran-backed radical groups, including the Shiite Hezbollah, was employing sectarian bidding to legitimize their support for Assad while outbidding to discredit the rival Sunnis. Hezbollah chief Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah used terms, such as "*Nasabi*"⁴ (used to describe Sunni enemies) and "*takfir*"⁵ to describe the Sunnis as non-Muslims in order to send sectarian messages to the opposition (Zelin & Smyth, 2014). Furthermore, Shiite Islamists fighting in Syria claim that they are following *fatwas* after Iranian-backed clerics, such as Grand Ayatollah Haeri, on November 5, 2013, issued the *fatwa* "to cast Syrian rebels as 'infidels' and called on followers to fight them in a *jihad*" (Zelin & Smyth, 2014). On May 25, 2013, Hezbollah announced that their force would engage in *jihad* in Syria against the Sunni opposition (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 30). Shiite Islamists described the Sunni opposition as "*Wahabis*"⁶ as well. This term is a negative term that "brand all of their Sunni foes as little more than schismatic ideological proxies of Riyadh", which is made more explicit with direct Saudi and Iranian involvement in the Syrian Conflict. The perpetuation of these anti-Sunni narratives was used to stoke sectarian tensions, demonize, and dehumanize the enemies, and gain legitimacy for violence (Zelin & Smyth, 2014). This is an example of "ethnic or sectarian outbidding" because the intent is not only

4 Also known as Nawasib. Shiite Islam researcher Christoph Marcinkowski explains that those labelled as Nawasibs "are considered non-Muslims", which Sunni Islamists would disagree with (Zelin & Smyth, 2014).

5 Used by a Muslim to cast another Muslim as "infidel" with the intent to kill the accused (Zelin & Smyth, 2014).

6 "Wahabism" refers to the teachings of Sunni Salafi Muhammad Ibn Abd al-Wahhab, the main theologian, whose teachings have been established across the Gulf states, primarily Saudi Arabia (Zelin & Smyth, 2014).

to win the Syrian conflict and keep Assad in power, but also to protect the Shiites in the Middle East.

On the other hand, Sunni Islamists used anti-Shiite rhetoric and violence to portray the Iran-backed Assad as the Other. Human Rights Watch reports that the opposition carried out crimes against humanity specifically against Alawite civilians as early as 2013 as a counter-violence. As mentioned, the peaceful demonstrations turned into a civil war when the opposition started to defend themselves (Abbas, 2011). When the presence of Hezbollah and Iranian Quds became public, in June 2013, the World ‘Ulama Council gathered in Cairo, attended by Sunni *‘ulama* from Arab, Gulf, and North African countries “declared the need for jihad against the Syrian regime and its allies. Jihad was urged in the context of “*Jihad bil-nafs*” (with soul), “*Jihad bil-mal*” (with wealth), and “*Jihad bil-Silah*” (with weapons)” (Ismail, 2016, p. 93). Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia was also in attendance (Ismail, 2016, p. 93). The Sunnis saw the involvement of Shiite Hezbollah and Iran in a civil conflict as a war against all Sunnis.

The Sunni Islamists also used certain terminologies to dehumanize the Shiite Other. The term *Nusayri*⁷ was a widely used term among many supporters of the FSA because it painted “the Alawite religion as following a man and not God and therefore not divinely inspired” (Zelin & Smyth, 2014). One of the common Sunni rhetoric was branding Arab Shiite as *Safawis*, which framed the Shiites, including the Assad regime, as Iranian agents from the Safavid empire and as such, traitors to the Arab cause. Some other historical terms used to describe the Shiites were *rafidha* (individuals who reject the faith), *majus* (Zoroastrian or crypto Persian), etc. all of which branded Shiite Muslims as infidels and heretics (Abdo et al., 2016). In addition, religious leaders and revolutionary *ulama* used anti-Shiite rhetoric to gain support for the opposition (Pierret, 2014, p. 5). One such example is a Sunni cleric and televangelist Yusuf Qaradawi who stoked sectarianism by encouraging all Sunnis to join the jihad against Assad (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 18). Similar to Shiite leaders and authorities, Sunni leaders and authorities used parallel language to demonize the Sunnis whose sole purpose was to destroy Sunnis and Islam.

Prior to the Syrian Conflict, the Shiite-Sunni sectarian dynamic was not a marker of identity. The Syrian conflict caused this sectarian identity to resurface as the Assad

⁷ Refers to the Alawite religion, founded by Abu Shuayb Muhammad Ibn Nusayr during the 8th century.

regime used sectarian rhetoric as political instruments to hold on to power. The sectarian cleavage was further strengthened by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their interventions in the Syrian conflict. Geneive Abdo (2015), from the Brookings Institution, writes:

The rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, with the Saudis using sectarianism to advance their own agenda, certainly has affected public perceptions, particularly through the media... the Sunnis believe Iran has expansionist ambitions based upon its activity in Iraq and Syria, where Tehran is directly involved in keeping Assad in power. All of these conditions came together around the time of the Arab uprisings, causing the Shi'a-Sunni divide to deepen and eventually to rupture into outright conflict (p. 18).

Resource Mobilization

This section looks at how the key regional actors, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, funded the ongoing Syrian conflict since its onset. Religiously oriented Gulf and other states in the Middle East, including Islamist networks, play a vital role in continuing the Syrian conflict by arming and supporting one or the other – Assad regime or the opposition, leading to increased sectarianism. In the Istanbul conference of “Friends of Syria”, 31st March to 1st April, various nations from the Middle East “pledged to provide financial assistance to pay rebel armed forces as well as communication equipment” (Crisis Group, 2012c), proving the regional actors’ role in the conflict.

Saudi Arabia

Since the onset of the conflict, Saudi Arabia pledged to provide weapons to the opposition. The goal was to shift the focus of the war away from the north to the south of the capital, Damascus, which is Assad’s stronghold. However, there was a secrecy surrounding the effort and as such, even those receiving the weaponry are not certain of the source (Sly & DeYoung, 2013).

Saudi Arabia supplied the Syrian opposition with weapons, ranging from ammunition to anti-tanks. Videos on YouTube of the Syrian opposition shows “the appearance, in rebel hands, of new weapons that almost certainly could not have been captured from government arsenals. They include M-79 anti-tank weapons and M-60

recoilless rifles dating back to the existence of Yugoslavia in the 1980s that the Syrian government does not possess” (Sly & DeYoung, 2013). British blogger, Higgins, first noticed the Yugoslav weapons in early January in clashes in the Deraa region, and by February 2013, he saw them in videos posted by rebels fighting in the Hama, Idlib, and Aleppo regions of Syria (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013). *The New York Times* adds that “Officials familiar with the transfers said the arms were part of an undeclared surplus in Croatia remaining from the 1990s Balkan wars. One Western official said the shipments included ‘thousands of rifles and hundreds of machine guns’ and an unknown quantity of ammunition” (Chivers & Schmitt, 2013). In addition to that, Ukrainian-made rifle cartridges and Swiss-made hand grenades purchased by the Saudi state were found in rebel possession. U.S.-made TOW missiles, supplied by Saudi Arabia, were also found in the rebel areas, in the Sahl al-Ghab region. With Moscow and Tehran’s escalating support for Assad, Saudi foreign minister announced on October 31, 2015, that Saudi Arabia would intensify its support of the rebels with “more lethal weapons” (Bassam & Perry, 2015). In this way, the Saudi state has been supporting the Syrian rebels fighting Assad.

On October 31, *Reuters* published a report stating that with help from the US and Qatar, Saudi Arabia supplied weapons to more rebel groups, mainly moderate Sunni groups. In fact, with the Russia-Iran-Assad Alliance, Gulf countries, with Saudi Arabia in the lead, have increased their supply of weapons to the opposition. Groups receiving aids mostly include Western-backed groups such as the FSA and Jaysh al-Fatah, with ties to the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Nusra Front (Kutsch, 2015). Julian Barnes-Dacey (2015) writes, “[Russia’s military campaign in Syria] will almost certainly provoke counter-escalation by regional states – namely Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar – who remain absolutely committed to ensuring Assad’s demise”. Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict gained momentum once the Shiite-dominated Iran entered the Syrian conflict.

Iran

In Syria, Iran intervened early to support the Assad regime. As Karim Sadjadpour and Behnam Ben Taleblu (2015) highlight, “The increased vulnerability of Assad and Hezbollah has made them more reliant on Tehran for financial support and protection, giving Iran unprecedented influence (and burdens) in the Levant”. Commander, Qassem Soleimani of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC-QF) was reported saying “We’re not like the Americans. We don’t abandon our friends” which

indicates the Iranian state's staunch support for Assad (Sadjadpour & Taleblu, 2015, p. 37).

Given the lack of transparency of the Iranian government and covert nature of supporting local proxies, it was not feasible to evaluate the nature and scope of Tehran's involvement in the Syrian conflict. However, since 2011, Iran's political-ideological army, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and its elite Quds Force unit have been fighting for Assad and Iran's regional policies, in Syria. *Mashregh News* reports that the IRGC's share of the country's official defense budget increased to almost 62%, in 2015 and 2016, which indicated the IRGC's increasing presence in Syria. However, unofficial numbers greatly exceeded the numbers given by the Iranian budget that lacks transparency (Sadjadpour & Taleblu, 2015, p. 39-40). According to a report (2015), published by Foundation for International Relations and Foreign Dialogue (FRIDE), a European think tank:

Amidst reports of lines of credit in the low billions to the Syrian government, United Nations Special Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura allegedly stated that the Islamic Republic was providing Syria with up to US\$35 billion annually. And while exact figures about Iranian financial support to Hezbollah are also elusive, appraisals of Iranian aid have ranged between US\$20032 to US\$500 million dollars annually.

According to the U.S. Department of the Treasury (USDOT), IRGC-QF Commander Major General Qassem Suleimani and Operations and Training Commander Mohsen Chizari led the fights against the Syrian oppositions. After his defection, former Syrian Prime Minister Riad Hijab was reported to say in a news conference that "Syria is occupied by the Iranian regime. The person who runs the country is not Bashar al-Assad but Qassem Suleimani, the head of Iranian regime's Quds Force" (Fullton, Holliday, & Wyer, 2013, p. 10). The USDOT further reported that Iran Air and YAS Air was used to transport military personnel and equipment, including missile and rocket components, to Hezbollah and Syrian officials (Sadjadpour & Taleblu, 2015).

Assad also benefitted from intelligence support from Iran. A series of USDOT designations since mid-2011 showed that a range of Iranian organizations was involved in the conflict, from Law Enforcement Forces (LEF) and the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS) to defense contractor Iran Electronics Industries (IEI) (Fullton et al., 2013, p. 12). A 2013 report by the Institute for the Study of War, states that "the presence of

LEF, IRGC, Quds Force and other Iranian organizations in Syria is a clear example of how Iran's support of Assad is a whole-of-government strategy directly controlled by the Supreme Leader of Iran".

Together, Iran and Hezbollah helped create a pro-regime Syrian paramilitary group called Jaish al-Sha'abi to fight the opposition. The Ba'ath Party acknowledged the Jaysh al-Sha'abi as its institutional paramilitary group with more than 100,000 members as of 2011. In August 2012, IRGC Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari acknowledged that "there is no need for external support in order to preserve the security in Syria, since 50,000 popular forces called Jaysh al-Sha'abi are fighting alongside the Syrian military" (Fullton et al., 2013, p. 19). Even Washington reported that IRGC-QF provided the militia group with not only training, weapons, and strategies, but also with millions of dollars of funding. In addition to supporting the Assad government and his paramilitary group with various resources, Iran also trained Syrian militants in guerrilla combat training at a secret base in Iran (Solomon & Elgood, 2013). *Reuters*, in April 2013, published interviews that describe Syrian militants receiving training in "urban warfare" in Iran. This effort points to the notion that Iran has been devising a way to establish militant proxy groups in Syria to pursue Iranian interests if Assad loses the Syrian conflict (Fullton et al., 2013, p. 19-21).

The extent of Iran's involvement in the sustenance of Assad's leadership is an example of the geopolitical strategy. Even though precise numbers showing the total number of Iranian troops in Syria lacks, it was estimated that the total figures are thousands, and each year, there is a substantial increase in the quantity of direct military support. This only prolonged the duration of the conflict and "deepen[ed] sectarianization, embolden[ed] the Assad regime, reduc[ed] prospects for a negotiated political transition process, and increas[ed] the likelihood of Balkanization based on Iran's and Hezbollah's assurances of support for a breakaway Alawite entity once the regime loses Damascus" (Heydemann, 2013, p. 9).

Turkey

Turkey has been a leading front-line supporter of the Syrian opposition since the conflict started. Turkey played a key role in supporting the FSA, especially in the initial stages. *The Guardian* reports, "Turkey trained army dissidents on its territory and a group of them announced the birth of the Free Syrian Army under the supervision of Turkish

military intelligence” (Manna, 2012). In fact, the FSA headquarters and founder, Colonel Riad al-Assad, resides in Antakya in southern Turkey, from where he supervises the FSA in Syria (Bar’ el, 2016). In August 2012, *BBC* reports that the Turkish military was operating a special training program at secret camps in Adana, Turkey, that recruited Syrians to train them in the military. Saudi Arabia supported these secret camps by providing military aids and communications to the opposition (Galpin, 2012). Another report further corroborated Turkey’s involvement in training FSA members when opposition forces revealed that they have been “called to meetings with foreigners in Istanbul in recent weeks to discuss recruiting volunteers from different cities in Syria to staff an "operation room" in Turkey” (Galpin, 2012). In addition to providing direct support, Turkey also acted as a middleman between Saudi Arabia and Qatar. In June 2012, *Times* reports that “a secretive group operates something like a command center in Istanbul, directing the distribution of vital military supplies believed to be provided by Saudi Arabia and Qatar and transported with the help of Turkish intelligence to the Syrian border and then to the rebels”.

Turkey also funded the FSA with money and weapons. Even though Turkey never officially approved sending military aid to Syrian rebels, *BBC* reports suggest that it played a key role in increasing arms shipments to the opposition groups since late 2012. In 2013, *New York Times* reports that “The Turkish authorities had oversight over much of the airlift of weapons from Croatia, "down to affixing transponders to trucks ferrying the military goods through Turkey so it might monitor shipments as they move by land into Syria” (“Who is supplying weapons to the warring sides in Syria? ” 2013). Court testimony from gendarmerie officers revealed that throughout 2013 and 2014, Turkey's state intelligence organization delivered weapons, rocket parts, ammunition and semi-finished mortar shells, to parts of Syria under Islamist oppositions (Pamuk & Tattersall, 2015). A FRIDE report states, Turkey also “facilitate[d] the rise of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood as a relevant political actor” (Özel & Özkan, 2015, p. 94).

While aiding the FSA with finance and arms, Turkey reached out to radical Islamist rebel groups as well. Even though Turkey denied arming Syrian rebels at any point during the conflict, Turkey’s Western allies suggested that to remove President Bashar al-Assad quickly, Turkey allowed fighters and weapons over the border, some of which ended up in the hands of radical Islamist rebel groups (Pamuk & Tattersall, 2015). According to Soli Özel and Behlül Özkan (2015), “In its haste to oust the Syrian regime, the [Ankara] government chose to turn a blind eye to the activities of radical, dangerous Jihadist

elements that crossed the border unimpeded. These militants typically moved into Syria via the Turkish-Syrian border, a route is popularly known as the ‘Jihadi Highway’” (p. 95). This caused Turkey to become part of the rising sectarian tension in the Syrian conflict as it was labeled a Sunni supporter.

As described in this chapter, the process tracing of the causal mechanisms – strategic framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization – showed that national and external states played a role in initiating and exacerbating the sectarian polarization in the 2011 Syrian conflict. The process tracing revealed how the current political actors from Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran influenced the Sunni-Shiite identity mobilization in Syria for geopolitical gains. The leading regional states’ political strategies were possible because the Assad regime initiated the political opportunity structure for sectarian identity construction. By employing selective violence and rhetoric against the Sunni-dominated opposition, the Assad government caused a shift in the framing and structure of the Syrian conflict from a national uprising to a Sunni-Shiite sectarian conflict. As the anti-Assad opposition no longer identified as Syrians, they began to identify themselves as the Sunni and the Others as the Shiites/Alawites. State patronage encouraged different opposition factions to compete among each other by adopting more sectarian factors to gain momentum (Phillips, 2015, p. 370). Instead of uniting the opposition groups against the Assad government, selective violence and state patronage led to the opposition group’s fragmentation and the creation of numerous radical groups in the Syrian conflict. Thus, the Syrian conflict is no longer in the hands of the Syrians, and instead, became a space for proxy wars between powerful states. As Steven Heydemann (2013) writes, “The way in which intervention is unfolding reflects broader patterns in regional politics” (p. 7), particularly between Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran.

Chapter 5.

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the question of how the Assad regime and the leading regional actors – Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – influenced the 2011 Syrian conflict through the Sunni-Shiite sectarian division. While Assad manipulated sectarianism to stay in power, the above-mentioned regional actors politicized the sectarian identity for geopolitical purposes. This paper used frame analysis and process tracing approach to explore the transformation of the Syrian conflict. IR theories also played a significant role in explaining the Syrian conflict. Primordialism was used to highlight that the sectarian conflict was not a result of ancient hatred between the Sunnis and Shiites, whereas constructivism and instrumentalism were used to explain that the leading regional actors constructed and redefined the sectarian identity, contributing to the rise of sectarianism in Syria. After six years, it is not a revolution anymore between those supporting Assad and those against him. It has become a sectarian conflict, pitching the country's Sunni majority against the Shiite minority, and a proxy war featuring Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey.

This study investigated how *Asharq Al-Awsat*, *Tehran Times*, and *Daily Sabah* framed the Syrian conflict during the month of March, from 2011 to 2014. While the frame analysis did not reveal the pronounced sectarian rhetoric used by the regional actors, it highlighted how the states justified their support for either Assad or the opposition and their role in the Syrian conflict.

Initially, it was hypothesized that frames supporting the Assad regime would dominate the *Tehran Times*, while frames supporting the Sunni-dominated opposition would dominate *Asharq Al-Awsat* and *Daily Sabah*. In fact, the analysis proved the hypothesis that the “pro-government” and “regional interference” frames would dominate *Tehran Times*. These frames portrayed Assad as the legitimate leader of Syria who was fighting foreign-sponsored Sunni jihadist groups. The “regional interference” frame indicated that Western allies, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, were responsible for exacerbating the Syrian conflict. This frame reflected Assad's narrative that the Syrian conflict is a result of a foreign conspiracy directed towards the state and people in order to establish a Sunni caliphate in Syria (Lundgren-Jörum, 2012, p. 30). On the other hand,

Asharq Al-Awsat and *Daily Sabah* emphasized the “human rights” and “sectarianism” frame. The “human rights” frame highlighted the human rights violation and crimes committed by the Assad regime and allies, and the “sectarianism” frame showed the gradual transformation of the Syrian uprising due to the selective employment of violence and rhetoric. By relying on “human rights” and “sectarianism” frame, the Saudi state and Erdogan government highlighted the revolutionary nature of the initial uprising that Assad and allies suppressed by inciting sectarian tensions.

The process tracing approach was used to explore if and how the mechanisms – strategic framing, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, and resource mobilization – influenced the Sunni-Shiite sectarian cleavages due to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey’s interference in the Syrian conflict. Strategic framing emphasized how elites used political strategies to affect the structure of the uprising. The initial domestic movement had a national momentum as the people demanded democracy, economic modernization, and political liberation. However, Assad manipulated the identities of Syrians for political gains. In order to justify his brutal tactics to repress an initially peaceful uprising, Assad constructed an identity of Us versus Other through sectarian fear-mongering to garner mass mobilization. The government implemented this strategy by reframing the revolution around terrorist and sectarian terms. The anti-Assad protesters were no longer Syrians fighting the oppressive regime, but the Other “foreign Sunni Islamist fanatics, bent on imposing Sharia law and attacking religious pluralism” (Hof et al., 2013, p. 16). The emphasis on Us versus the Other dichotomy to describe the relationship between Shiite and Sunnis created a self-fulfilling logic. As the Assad regime increasingly employed violence to repress an initially peaceful uprising, the opposition responded in a similar manner (Hof et al., 2013), thus, resulting in the reframing of the 2011 Syrian conflict.

The mechanism, ethnic/sectarian outbidding, highlighted the exacerbation of sectarian differences by political actors. Prior to the conflict, sectarian identities coexisted with other forms of identities, such as national, class, or tribal. However, through the “Us versus Other” rhetoric, both sides of the conflict took part in a competition of “sectarian outbidding” through propaganda and derogatory rhetoric to demonize and discredit the Other. Ethnic/sectarian outbidding also brought in patronage and strengthened patron-client relationships. For example, the Assad regime and allies, particularly Tehran and Hezbollah, used the sectarian outbidding to label the Syrian conflict as a fight against the Sunnis, allowing them to become main actors and legitimize their support for Assad. In a

similar manner, the opposition used sectarian outbidding to attract patronages, such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and other Sunni Islamist groups. By using sectarian outbidding, opposition leaders and allies dehumanized the Shiite Other (Assad and allies); this was done to portray the members of the out-group as perpetrators whose goal was to destroy mainstream Islam. In fact, state media and social networks were a big part of expressing sectarian solidarity by emphasizing “the suffering of ‘our victims’ and the brutality of the ‘other’” (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 7). Such othering and solidarities spread across borders and constructed a new identity and community that was based on religion and sects (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 7). In addition, elite machinations and politicking were largely responsible for driving sectarianism as both Assad and opposition, with Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey’s help, attempted to outdo each other, thus, leading to a cycle of polarization that contributed to the co-constitution of structure and agents. As actors employed sectarian outbidding to change the structure of the Syrian uprising, in return, the new structure reconstructed and redefined the interests and identities of the actors, particularly the Assad regime and opposition, leading to a cycle of polarization that fueled sectarianism in Syria. By participating in a competition of “sectarian outbidding”, the Assad regime and opposition, reaffirmed their sectarian identities and interests and positioned themselves as the antagonistic Other.

Similar to the aforementioned mechanisms, resource mobilization also highlighted the pathway by which key regional states directly affected the Sunni-Shiite sectarianism during the 2011 Syrian conflict. Resource mobilization revealed that the Saudi Arabia and Turkey supported the anti-Assad Sunni opposition groups, whereas Iran supported the Alawite/Shiite Assad government. By supporting the different sides with weapons, funds, and troops, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey used violence and patronage to “[consolidate] sectarian identities, [maximize] feelings of hatred and victimhood, [consolidate] communal boundaries and [legitimize] radicals as the ‘protectors’ of a group’s identity and survivability” (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 7). Resource mobilization resulted in more physical violence and accompanied by sectarian outbidding, further dehumanized and vilified the Other. As frame analysis highlighted, resource mobilization and sectarian outbidding were backed and justified by state media in Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran.

My findings emphasized how national and regional actors used the Sunni-Shiite sectarian dynamic to further their respective interests and geopolitical goals. While the Assad regime exploited sectarian solidarity to maintain its support base, leading regional

states –Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey – exacerbated and perpetuated the Sunni-Shiite polarization. For example, Zuhdi Jasser (2014) argues, “By introducing the element of armed conflict [and sectarianism], the regime’s actions brought in foreign fighters who fuel the sectarian fires of the conflict. Members of the regime, and to a lesser extent the opposition, are supported by foreign military aid and training” from Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey (p. 60). Both Wendt and Chandra emphasize that violence is a means to construct sectarian identities, which Assad and allies used through sectarian violence; however, this strategy backfired when the opposition obtained support from Saudi Arabia and Turkey as well. This caused the revolution to morph into a struggle between the Shiite and Sunni for power. The Shiite (consisting of the Iran and Assad) backs the Syrian regime, and the Sunni bloc (led mainly by Saudi Arabia and Turkey) supports the Sunni-dominated opposition. As the process tracing design revealed, the regional actor’s intervention in the conflict was not due to humanitarian issues because they provided funding, weapons, and troops, causing more violence. Instead of supporting the FSA’s attempts to create a united armed moderate opposition to remove Assad from power, Turkey and Saudi Arabia split the group by aligning with different groups (e.g. Jubhat al-Nusra and Salafist Islamic Front respectively) within the opposition (Phillips, 2015, p. 370). In brief, Assad manipulated religious and sectarian divisions to regain his legitimacy and power, which the regional actors took advantage of for geopolitical power, leading to radicalization (Droz-Vincent, 2014, pp. 54–55; Nasr, 2000, p. 174).

As this study repeatedly discussed, sectarianism did not cause rivalry among the regional actors involved, but the actors used sectarianism to “influence the Islamic world”. Given their non-secular states, Saudi Arabia and Iran are sectarian at home because of the emphasis on Sunni-Wahabi (by the Saudi state) and Shiitism (by the Iranian state); therefore, it stands to reason that these two states employed sectarianism to drive their foreign policies (Gause III, 2014; Keynoush, 2016b, p. 16). The boundaries between the state and religious establishment can blur when faced with regional security or geopolitical issues. When radical religion/sectarian identities and constituencies enter foreign policies, the Shiite-Sunni dichotomy tends to take over (Keynoush, 2016a). “Riyadh and Tehran are playing a balance of power game. They are using sectarianism in that game, yet their motivations are not centuries-long religious disputes but a simple contest for regional influence” (Gause III, 2014, p. 6). As such, the Sunni-Shiite dichotomy “is activated at certain times” when presented with factors, such as “regional and transnational events

and developments” (Gasper, 2016, p. 777). Thus, proving that the Sunni-Shiite sectarianism in the Syrian conflict is a fluid identity that was constructed to spread their respective power in the Middle East.

The relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia is based on the “Hobbesian culture” in which the Other is an enemy. Wendt describes this as the culture of “enmity”, which is based on four premises: 1) “[The Saudi state and Iranian state]...will try to destroy or conquer them” through sectarian violence as witnessed in the Syrian conflict; 2) “decision-making will tend to... be oriented toward the worst case”, such as the possibility of Iran becoming a leading power in the Middle East. 3) “relative military capabilities will be seen as crucial” because “power becomes the key to survival”; in this stance, by removing Assad from power, the Saudi state would be able to limit Iran’s growing influence in the region. 4) “... states will fight on the enemy’s perceived terms... [by] observing no limits on their own violence...” as observed in the Syrian conflict. Both sides used paramilitary groups and extremists to kill the Other under the banner of sectarianism (Diehl, 2011; Wendt, 1999, p. 262). Power politics here refers to the perception of the Self and the Other (Sunni and Shiite) “constituted by actors being in the same position simultaneously” (Wendt, 1999, p. 263). States are not enemies or pose “existential threats to each other”, but once enmity (for whatever reason) is introduced, “states will behave in a way that *makes* them existential threats” (Wendt, 1999, p. 263). As such, both Iran and Saudi Arabia are not enemies, it is their behavior itself which created the problem, leading to a cycle of sectarian enmity.

Being a minority in the Middle East, Iran aims to change the current status quo by building a Shiite alliance to dominate the region. Historically, politically motivated religious leaders “such as Khomeini in Iran, Mohammed Baqir al-Sadr in Iraq, and Mousa al-Sadr in Lebanon invented new versions of political Shiism both as a philosophy and a movement” in order to challenge the status quo in the Middle East (Al-Qarawee, 2013, pp. 7–8). Thus, political Shiism played a role in the rise of Iran and the empowerment of the Shiite group in Iraq, which in turn, contributed to the rise of pan-Shiite in the Middle East (Loumi, 2008, p. 17). Therefore, whenever Iran appears threatening, Iranian power and Shiite hegemony are conflated (Byman, 2014, p. 89). These factors brought the Shiite sect at the forefront, which in turn, Tehran exploited to secure its interests. Sadjadpur and Taleblue (2015) write, “Tehran spreads its influence by 1) creating and cultivating nonstate actors and militant groups; 2) exploiting the fears and grievances of religious minorities,

namely Shiite Arabs; 3) fanning anger against America and Israel” (p. 36). This explains why the Iranian state is so intent on the survival of the Assad regime. Berti and Paris argue that the relationship between Iran and Assad is based not on an Alawite-Shiite sectarian kinship, but only on “skin-deep sectarian links” (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 2; Malvig, 2015, p. 10). Only 37% of Shiite Iranians actually support Tehran’s military and financial support to Assad (Berti & Paris, 2014, p. 27). Tehran’s close alliance with the Assad government is based on geostrategic interests and common position on Israel and Western occupation in the Middle East (Malvig, 2015, p. 10). Given Tehran’s close alliance with the Assad government, a change in leadership in Damascus would weaken Tehran’s position, and strengthen the Arab states’ position in the Middle East. For its own benefit, Tehran supports the Assad regime by strengthening and radicalizing the Shiite identity.

In opposition to Iran, Saudi Arabia’s goal is to weaken or destroy President Assad’s government in Damascus (Lund, 2015). Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict is a result of Assad’s alliance with rival Iran. Assad’s victory in the Syrian conflict means victory and expansion of Iranian power in the Middle East, which is a threat to Saudi Arabia’s national security. The U.S.-backed deal that lifted sanctions against Iran further made the Saudi state weary of Iran and its allies (Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 117; Taylor, 2016). In order to contain Tehran’s growing influence in the region, there was a “rise of Sunni consciousness and its sectarian posturing” that both the Saudi state and religious figures constructed and encouraged (Nasr, 2004, p. 10); the intent was to “reduce Tehran’s appeal or “soft power” to a narrower, mostly Shia, audience” (Phillips, 2017, p. 43). Moreover, Saudi Arabia employed pan-Islamic and pan-Arabism⁸ discourse in their foreign policy and pan-Sunni discourse in its unofficial foreign policy to offset Tehran’s growing power (Loumi, 2008, p. 16-7). To carry out this strategy, Saudi Arabia, work[ed] closely with Wahhabi ulama to build a network of seminaries, mosques, educational institutions, preachers, activists, writers, journalists, and academics that would articulate and emphasize Sunni identity, push that identity throughout the greater Middle East in the direction of Wahhabism and militancy, draw a clear wedge between Sunni and Shi’a Islam, and eliminate Iran’s ideological influence (V. Nasr, 2004, p. 14, 2007).

⁸ Pan-Arabism refers to the “general sense of belonging to the Arab nation” that exists even in Syria (Khashanah, 2014, p. 10).

This resurgence of pan-Islamic and pan-Sunni discourse became apparent in the Saudi state's rhetoric when describing the Syrian conflict (Gause, 2007; Loumi, 2008, p. 32). This study shows that it is not the Sunnis, but the political elites in Riyadh, who imposed sectarianism in Syria. Steven Wilkinson argues, "ethnic conflicts [in this case sectarianism] are provoked by political entrepreneurs to mobilize constituents around one ethnic identity rather than another" (cited in Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 112). By removing the Assad regime from power, the Saudi regime hopes to countermobilize Iran's position in the region through sectarianism.

In addition to Saudi Arabia, Turkey is another leading player in the Syrian conflict as it provides military and financial support to the opposition. Prior to the 2011 Syrian conflict, both Turkey and Syria enjoyed a mutually beneficial alliance as both sides profited economically, politically, and socially. However, following the onset of the uprising, the Erdogan government made a "180-degree turn in less than three years" when it went from supporting Assad to criticizing his regime and then, to support the opposition (Semra, 2014, p. 1). In particular, "After Assad rejected Turkey's pleas to democratize in the wake of the uprising that began in 2011, opting instead for violent repression", the bilateral relationship between the two states declined (Phillips, 2012, p. 2). Tensions between the two states escalated when the Assad regime shot down a Turkish army jet in the Mediterranean in June 2012. Turkey retaliated by shooting down a Syrian helicopter in its airspace in September 2013. In fact, Turkey is one of the main regional players in the Syrian conflict "because it provides a safe haven and operational space for the Syrian opposition and has over [million] refugees" (Semra, 2014, p. 1). Syria is also important to Turkey because of the Kurds living in the northwest of Syria (Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 111; Semra, 2014). Syrian Kurds have established a de facto autonomous region (Rojava) in Syria due to the failure of state authority in Syria. Thus, "across the region, Kurds seem to sense that their moment has arrived" invoking fears in Turkey for their territorial integrity (Gunes & Lowe, 2015, pp. 2–3). Istanbul fears that Syrian Kurds might encourage the Turkish Kurds to pursue "their ambitions for full independence" (Ifantis & Galariotis, 2014; Semra, 2014). In this way, the Syrian conflict has immense implications for Turkish politics. To continue remaining "one of the most ambitious players in the Middle East", Turkey "adopted a policy in keeping with the sectarian showdown" (Diehl, 2011, p. 11). Turkey's intervention in the Syrian conflict was more to do with national state interests rather than sectarianism.

This study successfully shows how leading regional states fueled the exploitation of the Sunni-Shiite sectarianism that the Assad regime constructed. Using constructivist and instrumentalist theoretical approaches, this study has explored how “identity politics became the dominant trope through which the struggle for power on both a national and [regional] level is carried out” (Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 115). The 2011 Syrian conflict is no longer an uprising against the authoritarian Assad regime that demanded socioeconomic modernization, democracy, and political liberation. Instead, the current conflict has become a proxy war between regional states: Shiite versus Sunni, Iran, and Syria versus Turkey and Saudi Arabia, and Arab versus Turkic versus Persian geopolitical goals (Nasser-Eddine, 2016, p. 118). Thus, the sectarian divide in Syria is a by-product of regional states’ geopolitical ambitions.

Global Actors: Russia, the US, and Qatar

The 2011 Syrian conflict has drawn in major global actors supporting the Assad regime or the opposition. In addition to Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey, Russia, the US, and Qatar are major powers involved in the ongoing Syrian conflict as well. Russia is the Assad regime’s most powerful international ally to the extent that it has become crucial for the regime’s survival. For example, Russia has vetoed numerous resolutions within the UN Security Council that condemned the Assad government and has provided the regime with critical military resources and financial support regardless of international criticism (BBC, 2013; Heydemann, 2013, p. 5). In fact, Russia has continued to back Assad even when evidence showed that the regime deployed chemical weapons against its civilians (Heydemann, 2013, p. 16). According to *BBC*, Syria is crucial for Russia because of “a key naval facility which it leases at the Syrian port of Tartus, which serves as Russia's sole Mediterranean base for its Black Sea fleet, and has an air force base in Latakia, President Assad's Shia Alawite heartland” (BBC, 2013). Russia’s goal is to keep the Assad government in power because the removal of the regime would weaken its regional allies (such as Iran) and interests in the Middle East.

While Russia is a long-term strategic ally of Syria, the US is the long-term adversary. In fact, the US designated Syria as one of the ‘state sponsors of terrorism’ in December 1979 (Heydemann, 2013, p. 3). Following the onset of the Syrian uprising in

2011, the US has supported Syria's main opposition groups by providing military resources to "moderate" factions within the opposition. At the same time, the US also provided humanitarian assistance and non-lethal support to the opposition "in the hope that this would... enhance its legitimacy with and authority over [Assad's] fighters" (Kerry, 2013, cited in Heydemann, 2013, p. 4). Since 2014, US has supervised an international coalition to conduct air strikes on ISIS in Syria (BBC, 2013). Even though the Obama administration avoided direct military clashes with the Assad regime, recently the Trump administration launched missiles at a regime base in western Syria where the chemical weapons attack originated. The missile strikes are portrayed as "a contained response to a specific atrocity, intended as a deterrent to further chemical weapons use" (Graham-Harrison, 2017). At the same time, the Trump administration stated that the Syrian people would decide Assad's status as the long-term president (Park, 2017).

It is also important to recognize that Qatar is another leading Middle Eastern state involved in the 2011 Syrian conflict, in addition to Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran. Qatar has been one of the main sponsors of the opposition by funding and arming them in order to overthrow the Assad regime (Al-Khalidi & Perry, 2017). Qatar also encouraged religious charities and private organizations to raise money for the Sunni-dominated opposition groups, even though these operations were shut down later. Similar to Turkey and Saudi Arabia, Qatar initially backed the FSA, but gradually, it started to support more radical groups with pronounced sectarian elements (Phillips, 2013, p. 370). Qatar mostly provided aids to more Islamist groups that are closer to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is considered to be an "anathema to Saudi Arabia" (Al-Khalidi & Perry, 2017). Through the 2011 Syrian conflict, Qatar is competing with Saudi Arabia for influence in Syria and the Middle East. Qatar also contributed to the sectarian dynamic of the conflict through transnational media. For example, the Qatari TV station, Al-Jazeera, became more sectarian when covering the Syrian conflict, for example, by broadcasting Yusuf al-Qaradawi in 2013: "The leader of the party of the Satan [Hezbollah] comes to fight the Sunnis...Now we know what the Iranians want...continued massacres to kill Sunnis" (cited in Phillips, 2015, p. 370). As Phillips writes, the satellite media "[added] another layer reproducing and reinforcing sectarianism" (Phillips, 2015, p. 370). Qatar's aim is to oust the Assad regime and create the opportunity for an Islamist-dominated successor government that is friendly to Qatar and the GCC on regional issues (Heydemann, 2013, p. 3). In this way, Russia, the US, and Qatar are involved in the 2011 Syrian conflict.

Policy Implications

The current Syrian conflict is in its seventh year. Over 400,000 people have been killed, 6.3 million people are displaced internally, and more than 5 million people have fled the country (CNN Library, 2017). In internal conflicts that experience the sectarianization of identities, such as the case of Syria, solutions are either partitioning the country into political/administrative entities or forming a government based on authoritarianism. The territorial division will result in the breakup of the country into sectarian entities to allow for greater homogeneity, such as Bosnia and Herzegovina (Wimmen, 2016). This policy promotes the notion that homogeneity will result in long-term stability. Instead, territorial division has the potential to result in sectarian power sharing, which will “replace the dictatorship of one person with that of several” as leaders can use their military status, gained during the conflict, to dominate institutions and resources in their territory under the guise of representing one community or the other (Wimmen, 2016). In fact, the territorial division will only deepen the religious fault lines and/or result in more dictatorships and thus, the state would become more prone to conflicts (Collier, 33). Similarly, attempts to end the conflict with a new government can just result in another authoritarian regime characterized by sectarian identities, such as Iraq after the 2003 US-led invasion. In fact, relying on authoritarian regimes to maintain stability in societies with sectarian tensions might seem like a good prospect to keep sectarian identities in check (Malvig, 2015, p. 10; Wimmen, 2016). However, when challenged, authoritarian regimes will resort to manipulating, politicizing, and mobilizing sectarian identities to sustain their power (Wimmen, 2016). These above-mentioned solutions are based on the primordialist theory that sectarian identities are natural and conflict is a result of inevitable, ancient hatred between the Sunnis and Shiites, which is not the case in Syria.

Because the Sunni-Shiite sectarianization is a result of identity construction and mobilization by political actors for power, the conflict should be viewed through the lens of instrumentalist and constructivist approaches. Even though sectarianization of identities in Syria might “have long-lasting social and political effects, this does not mean that Syrian society will be forever trapped in the logic of sectarianism”. (Nader & Postel, 2017). Paulo Gabriel Hilu Pinto (2017) argues that at the core it is not a sectarian conflict as many Syrians have resisted and rejected sectarianism. As a result, Syrian actors and the international community should focus on possibilities of “reinventing forms of coexistence among the various religious groups within the social and political body” (Paulo Gabriel Hilu

Pinto, 2017). This will require dismantling the current political structure and security apparatus, and ending the regional intervention in Syria. The next step should be creating structures and institutions that are capable of reintegrating all sects and maintaining inclusivity and pluralism in Syria (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 10). An attempt to end the current Syrian conflict will require the construction of a strong national identity that will prioritize Syrian identity over sectarian identities.

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