



[THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR]

A historical analysis of the role of Syria's interreligious relations, sectarian politics and regional positioning leading up to the Civil War.

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Abstract

Syria today, is torn by a major civil war and apparently without the prospect of peaceful solution. This civil war is an offshoot of the Arab Spring, the widespread protests which began in Tunisia 2010 and spread across the region. The research for this thesis focuses on the Asad–regime and especially on the regime under current presidency of Bashar al-Asad and its roots in his predecessor’s regime. Through the civil war it became clear that relations between various societal groups, especially religious groups, were under a lot of pressure. A change in interreligious relations can be traced back to 1970, when Hafez al-Asad came to power. Although the Ba’th party aimed towards a secular Syrian state, religious affiliation has a role in Syrian political culture, on an informal or implicit level. The Asad–regime and the development of Syria in politics, economics and in its stance towards the international community, and the impact this had on interreligious relations will be the main focus of this thesis. The main conclusion of this thesis is that the Syrian regime and its development since 1963 can never be intentionally linked to sectarian policies nor can the alliances with Iran and Hezbollah. Sectarian policies are never explicitly or formally executed, it is however, often an implicit result of Syrian formal policies and, especially since 2000, and has become apparent.

Key Words: Syria, civil war, sectarianism, regional alliances, Iran, Hezbollah, Alawi, social media.

Table of contents

1. Introduction: The Syrian Civil War	3
1.1 Research questions	5
1.2 Methods and Sources	6
1.3 Theoretical Framework	7
2. Literature Review	13
2.1 The Ba'th party, the Asad-regime and sectarian politics	13
2.2 The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War	16
2.3 The 'wasted decade' of Bashar al-Asad and regional alliances	18
3. Hafez al-Asad and the Ba'th party: Formal secularity and informal sectarianism	20
3.1 Syria before the Ba'th era	21
3.2 The Ba'th party: Restoring Arab nationalism	23
3.3 Hafez al-Asad 1970 – 2000: "The Sphinx of Damascus"	25
3.4 Formal secularity and informal sectarianism	31
4. A heritage impossible to neglect	34
4.1 Bashar al-Asad: Shy, smart and sly	35
4.2 Bashar al-Asad 2000 – 2011: General political course and vision	36
4.3 Internal politics & sectarian divide	38
4.4 External politics: Isolation & Regional sectarianism	42
4.5 A heritage impossible to shake off	44
5. Sayyida Zaynab: Iran's way of buying their influence in Syria	46
6. The fight for the popular narrative: Sectarianism in the civil war	50
6.1 The civil war	50
6.2 Sectarianism and the civil war	55
6.3 An underestimated level of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict	62
7. Conclusion	63
8. Bibliography	66
9. Appendices	75

1. Introduction: The Syrian civil war

'We're always open to dialogue'

*"We don't kill our people. No government in the world kills its people, unless it's led by a crazy person."*¹

Syria, a country in the heart of the Middle East, has rich history. A country that has influenced other states in the region, and has often played an important role in international affairs. Syria today, is torn by a major civil war and apparently without the prospect of peaceful solution. This civil war is an offshoot of the Arab Spring, the widespread protests which began in Tunisia 2010 and spread across the region. The term Arab Spring, which first entered the discourse in 2012, covers all social unrest leading to protests and revolutions in the Middle East in this time. Syria's 'spring' began as a peaceful protest by the opposition to the regime of president Bashar al-Asad. The Syrian regime responded with intimidation, thus incubating more radical and militant opposition. The Syrian civil war and its causes have been studied by an increasing body of scholars. Questions often studied include: Why was the Syrian civil society so sensitive for unrest and how did the civil war since 2011 develop? Or: what are the impacts of the civil war on the various (religious) communities within the Syrian society? The research conducted by academics such as Sharon Nepstad or Katerina Delacoura² lack a firm historical background. This research is positioned to linked historical research to the contemporary understanding of the situation in Syria, and in doing so add to the current academic debate. This research is in line with scholars such as van Dam or Wedeen and to more contemporary events and research.

Syria's development the last few decades is dominated by the Asad-regime. Hafez al-Asad was elected president in 1970 and his son succeeded him as president in 2000. Both presidents al-Asad have had a great impact on Syria's political environment and on its societal development. Hafez al-Asad came to power through a military coup in 1963, which made him the leader of the Syrian air force, through which he rose to presidency in 1970. Hafez al-Asad was a member of the Ba'th party which in 1963 gained the highest office in Syria. The Ba'th party's ideology is built on socialism, secularism and a unified Arab region. Since 1963, the Ba'th regime aimed for a secular Syrian state with a socialist political system, based on pan-Arabism as its main ideology.³ According to Ba'th

¹ President Bashar al-Asad in an interview With US television network ABC.:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8s8UrZhkJRQ> Accessed on: 02 - 01 - 2014.

² See for articles of these writers: Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Mutiny and non-violence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain and Syria' *Journal of Peace Research* 50:337 (2013) and Katerina Delacoura, 'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications', *International Affairs* 88:1 (2012). For other examples of research to the Syrian civil war see for example the bundle of articles: Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *The Syria Dilemma* (Cambridge 2013).

³ Nikolaos van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria: Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th party* (New York 1996) 17.

ideology, religious affiliations should not have any part in the public political or social environment. The aim to develop into a fully secular state is ambiguous: the elite of the Ba'th party, as well as the security apparatus are mainly from the same religious community, of which both Bashar- and Hafez al-Asad are also part. The Alawi's, a religious community that affiliates with Shi'ite Islam, is a minority community in Syria. Still, the political elite that Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad centered around were mostly from the Alawi community and parts of this community became politically the most important community in Syria. It would be misleading, however, to suggest that there is something resembling an Alawi political agenda at work, it is better to understand the allegiance of the political elite to this community as coincidental.⁴ In 2000 the second son of Hafez al-Asad, Bashar al-Asad succeeded his father, due to the unexpected early death of his first son, Basil al-Asad. At first it seemed as though Bashar al-Asad was going to make important changes towards breaking way from the political course set by his father.⁵ However, during his presidency, Bashar al-Asad lost control of the situation and in that lost his chance to build for a fruitful co-operation, particularly within regime's opposition, both secular and religious.

The research for this thesis focuses on the Asad-regime and especially on the regime under current presidency of Bashar al-Asad and its roots in his predecessor's regime. Through the civil war it became clear that relations between various societal groups, especially religious groups, were under a lot of pressure. A change in interreligious relations can be traced back to 1970, when Hafez al-Asad came to power. Although the Ba'th party aimed towards a secular Syrian state, religious affiliation has a role in Syrian political culture, on an informal or implicit level.⁶ The Syrian sectarian divide as it manifests today is rooted in an unbalanced distribution of power: most of the central positions in the army and security services are occupied by Alawi associates of the president. The regime's ties with Shi'ite Iran and the Lebanese Shi'ite as Hezbollah, strengthens its sectarian outlook.⁷ Moreover, earlier domestic conflicts in the late 1970s and early 1980s has positioned the regime as being violently opposed to political, Sunni, Islam. The Asad-regime and the development of Syria in politics, economics and in its stance towards the international community, and the impact this had on interreligious relations will be the main focus of this thesis. Studying interreligious relations and sectarian politics requires a broader focus. Ties with Iran and Hezbollah will give an

⁴ Nikolaos van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria: Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th party* (New York 1996) 17.

⁵ Inaugural speech Bashar al-Asad, June 2000, <http://www.albab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm> Accessed on: 9 - 02 - 2014. See also the speech of Bashar al-Asad at the University of Damascus at the 6th of January 2013 where he talks a lot about dialogue between different parties: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGeGHVAjG5c> Accessed on: 09 - 02 - 2014.

⁶ van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria: Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th party*, 17.

⁷ Yvette Talhamy, 'The Syrian Muslim Brothers and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship', *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 63 No. 4 (2009) 561 - 580.

extra dimension through which to understand the position of Shi'ite Muslims in Syria.⁸ In current analysis of the situation in Syria, there is something of a tendency to omit the historical dimension. For that reason this thesis takes 1963 as a point of departure, tracking the development of Syria since the start of the regime under the Ba'th party and Hafez al-Asad. The emphasis is on the rule of his heir Bashar al-Asad and how Syria developed under his presidency in the past decade with the civil war as an apotheosis.

1.1 Research questions

The research will revolve around the following question:

To what extent are developments since 1963 and especially in the last three decades in Syria and its position in the broader region related to the emergence of sectarian politics in Syria and the Middle East as a whole, in particular in view of the Ba'th regimes ever closer alliance with Iran and Hezbollah?

The main question will be answered through three sub-questions. The first sub-question focuses on the historical background, mostly in Syrian politics and regional contacts, moreover it focuses on how Syrian society is constituted and what influence Hafez al-Asad had on Syrian society:

To what extent are policies relevant to sectarianism and the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah under Bashar al-Asad rooted in the regime of his father, Hafez al-Asad that started in 1970, in particular in view of regional positioning and interreligious relations?

The second sub-question addresses the development of Syria since Bashar al-Asad's ascendance to the presidency in 2000, and comparing this with policies of his father to give an insight into possible causes for the current civil war:

To what extent did Bashar al Asad's regime depart from the course set by his predecessor up to the start of the civil war in 2011, in particular concerning the issue of power relations?

The third sub-question focuses on Bashar al-Asad's policies in the context of regional sectarianism and how this influenced interreligious relations between the two most important religious groups in Syria, the Shi'ite- and Sunni Muslim communities and how this impacted the civil war:

⁸ Van Dam, *The struggle for power in Syria*, 35 – 38.

To what extent did regional sectarianism and interreligious relations have an impact, especially on relations between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims and the course of the civil war that started in 2011?

1.2 Methods and Sources

The Syrian civil war is still ongoing, a condition which presents scholars of the conflict with a particular set of problems, including difficulties with access to reliable sources and demonstrably appropriate methods. Given the nature of this research, it is necessary to rely on secondary literature complemented with primary sources such as visual footage and, for example, transcripts of Ba'th party meetings. This research makes use of quantitative methods, in its approach to social media.

This thesis is based upon a close reading of secondary literature on the Asad-regime, and in particular the tensions between the secular ideology of the Ba'th party and sectarian tensions within Syria, as well as, literature about international relations in the Middle East and the causes of the Arab Spring. The main secondary literature is discussed in the literature review in chapter two. The main primary sources consist of speeches of both Bashar- and Hafez al-Asad, Ba'th party transcripts, visual footage from outside Syria during the civil war and social media content. On YouTube there is a plethora of available footage, such as the inaugural and other speeches of both presidents. There are also short visual clips of the civil war. These are clips from different militia explaining why they are fighting in this conflict. Also important in examining the different 'players' in the civil war is social media content on Twitter from different militia. Social media is an important source of information in examining the ongoing conflict. In chapter 6 this research makes extensive use of Twitter, this involved searching with a range of key terms, such as 'mar15', 'Sectarianism', 'Bashar al-Asad' etc. In selecting relevant the description of the 'tweeter' was examined, include their number of followers. Twitter users with more followers tend to be a more important stakeholder in this conflict, thus are often better candidates for inclusion in this kind of research. A possible pitfall in using social media is that all parties aim to create their own narrative, an objective eye is difficult to maintain when using social media as a source.

The literature, both primary and secondary generates several problems. First there is the language barrier, literature is translated already, meaning that I have to trust someone else's translation. Mostly these are translations of media or scholars. Second, primary sources are difficult to access in some cases. This research makes use of an interpretative method, and hence the sources used here are included piecemeal based on their deemed relevancy.

Owing to the continuing nature of the Syrian civil war, this research has chosen to use a fixed time frame. The starting point will be 1963, when the Ba'th party came to power and the ending will be the gas attack in Damascus in August 2013. This has been chosen as the end point because the nature of the war shifted following this attack.

1.3 Theoretical Framework

Research into a country as complicated as Syria forces a researcher to delimit different concepts and theories used for this research. Clearly demarcated concepts help to put the argument forward more clearly. This section outlines the limitations and exact use of concepts and theories.

1.3.1 Interreligious Relations

In Syria there are many different religious communities and the dynamics between these communities are determined by how these groups react and behave towards each other. Islamic communities are, in line with, Islamic tradition, expected to be tolerant towards groups with a different religious convictions. Within Islam, this tolerance is less evident. Louay Safi states that the leaders of Islam today are emotionally too attached to their own religious community, which has clouded their view towards other groups.⁹ This, we also see in Syria, especially in the period this research is focusing on, from 1963 until 2013. Within Islam itself, tolerance between different sects decreased significantly in the past few decades, as is also the case in Syria. This research focuses mainly on the Shi'ite - Sunni polarization within Islam. The Syrian civil war has seen a polarization between the Sunni's and Shi'ite's implicitly influenced by the Asad – regime in the decades leading up to the civil war.¹⁰

To understand the polarization between followers of Shi'ite- and of Sunni Islam it is important to know the main differences between these two factions within Islam.¹¹ The main difference is a difference of opinion on leadership, about who is the rightful *caliph* (substitute) of the Prophet. Also, both groups rely on a difference in the interpretation of *hadith*, which is the report of the sayings of the prophet Muhammad. Sunni's believe that Abu Bakr, the father of Aisha who was Muhammad's wife, was the rightful successor, of the prophet and should be the caliph and that he could elect the leaders of Islam, the *imams*. Sunni's elect their leaders, as was the case with Abu Bakr. On the contrary, Shi'ites believe that power should remain within the family of the Prophet, so believe his cousin Ali ibn Abu Talib is his rightful successor. Not everybody recognized Ali as a rightful caliph, a community of the Umayyads wanted the caliphate within their community also to revenge the murdered caliph 'Uthmân. The main difference between the two groups is that Shi'ites do not recognize the elected caliphs over time by the Sunni majority, because of the belief that Imams should be appointed by Allah and should be from within the divine family of Muhammad.¹² The question of

⁹ Louay M. Safi, 'Religious Freedom and Interreligious Relations in Islam: Reflections on Da'wah and Qur'anic Ethics', *The Review of Faith & International Affairs* Vol. 9 Issue 2 (2011) 11.

¹⁰ Volker Perthes, 'The Syrian Solution', *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 85 No. 6 (2006) 34.

¹¹ Note that this is a simplistic image of this polarization, for more information consult for example: *In het huis van de Islam* by Henk Driessen to get a better grip on the actual implications of this polarization.

¹² Wim Raven, 'Ontstaan en verbreiding' en Dick Douwes, 'Richtingen en Stromingen' in Henk Driessen, *In het huis van de Islam* (Nijmegen 1997) 39 – 44, 162 – 163.

succession was a political disagreement which divided these two groups within Islam. Over time, traditions and ideologies started to differ between Sunni's and Shi'ites which exacerbated their differences further.¹³

1.3.2 Religious minorities and the Alawi sect

In general, the Sunni community constitutes in most Arab states the majority, as it is in Syria. The Sunni community constitutes approximately 74% of the Syrian population,¹⁴ while other Muslim communities include (Twelver) Shi'ites and non-mainstream Shi'ites such as the Ismaili, Druze and Alawi's. Syrian society also includes Christian and Jewish communities. The Christians account for about 10% of the populations. The Jewish community has dwindled due to migration to a handful.¹⁵ In Syria religious minorities often live in a certain area or region, in which they are then the majority.¹⁶ In cities and some villages the populations is mixed.

From 1970 onwards there is evidence of the political and military power in parts of the Alawi community because they constitute a large part of the Ba'th party's elite. Until about 1920 the Alawi community was known as the Nusayris, a religious community that affiliates most with Shi'ite Islam. Nusayri became a negative connotation and was used by other Muslim communities to refer to a group that was not really part of the Islamic tradition. Historically Nusayri's are seen as a part of the Islamic tradition, but as an 'outcast', as Friedman remarks after analyzing the following quote of the Fatwā of Ibn Taymiyya about the Nusayri community:

"These people, described [in the Istifta] called Nusayriyya, they and the other kinds of Qaramita, the Batiniyya, are more heretical than the Jews and the Christians, even more so than many polytheists. Their harm to Muhammad's umma (community) is more severe than that of the infidel fighters such as the Turks (i. e. the Mongols) and the Crusaders..."¹⁷

The Nusayri's changed their name, due to this negative connotation, to Alawi, suggesting a belonging to Islam and to state their affiliation with the Shi'ite Islamic tradition. The most important tendency within Shi'ism is twelver Shi'ism, which refers to the belief that there were twelve Imams, and the twelfth imam, Mahdi, will return. It is the largest branch within Shi'ite Islam.¹⁸

¹³ Febe Armanios, 'Islam: Sunnis and Shiites', *CRS Report for Congress* (2004).

¹⁴ <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2006/71432.htm> Accessed on: 17 - 03 - 2014.

¹⁵ Dick Douwes, 'Going Public: minority muslim communities and public space in Syria (prior to the revolt)' in Wim Hofstee & Arie van der Kooij, *Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden & Boston 2013) 71 - 72.

¹⁶ Annika Rabo, 'We are Christians and we are equal citizens': perspectives on particularity and pluralism in contemporary Syria', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23:1 (2012) 81.

¹⁷ Yaron Friedman, 'Ibn Taymiyya's Fatāwā against the Nusayrī-'Alawī Sect', *Der Islam Bd. 82* (2005) 351 - 352.

¹⁸ Febe Armanios, 'Islam: Sunnis and Shiites', *CRS Report for Congress* (2004).

1.3.3 Sectarianism and sectarian politics

Sectarianism and its role in Syrian domestic and foreign politics constitute a big part of the research. The general definition of sectarianism that is used in this research relies on a study by Geneive Abdo: *“Traditionally, sectarianism can be understood as an institutional set of arrangements determining familial, local, regional and even broader kinds of loyalty and affiliation.”*¹⁹ These arrangements and loyalty can lead to misunderstandings between different religious groups which often lead to discrimination, hatred and violence. Violence towards other groups can be based on social standing, ethnicity or religious affiliation which is mostly the case in the Middle East, as it is in Syria. Sectarianism is at work when religion plays an active role in politics, and, according to Makdisi, this emerged in the 19th and 20th century in numerous states in the Middle East. Makdisi sees the emergence of this modern form of sectarianism as a novelty: religious affiliation became the defining factor in public citizenship and in politics. If this religious affiliation is stimulated in any way by a regime, we can see this political course as sectarian.²⁰ In this research sectarianism is exactly as Makdisi defines it: when religion and religious affiliation play an active role in politics and society that political environment is sectarian and causes possible sectarian divide.

Informal sectarianism in Syria evolves mainly around the Sunni – Shi’ite distinction. Sectarian political tactics include intimidation through government, economic sanctions and violence to disobedient groups. This political mechanism of intimidation is, according to Douwes, and others, linked to the fact that *“In Syria difference is primarily perceived as posing a danger to the national unity and the political status quo.”*²¹ According to Lisa Wedeen, the Syrian regime and its political ideology are formally secular. The sectarian character manifests in their informal politics. The greatest opposition to the regime has come from organized religious Muslim groups who do not consider Alawi’s to be authentically Islamic and thus ineligible to hold Syrian political power.²² Dissatisfaction or disappointment is mostly expressed along sectarian lines, which we will also see when examining the current civil war.²³ The sectarian character of the Syrian civil war, according to Abdo, is a result of the collapse of authoritarian rule in the Middle East. Different religious groups want to make their

¹⁹ Geneive Abdo, ‘The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi’a – Sunni Divide’, *The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings Analysis Paper No. 29* (2013) 5.

²⁰ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2000) 1 – 15, 166 – 175.

²¹ Dick Douwes, ‘Going Public: minority muslim communities and public space in Syria (prior to the revolt)’ in Wim Hofstee & Arie van der Kooij, *Religion beyond its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden & Boston 2013)73.

²² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago and London 1999) 9.

²³ Christa Salamandra, ‘Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections’, *Middle East Critique* 22:3 (2013) 304.

interpretation of the Islamic tradition influential and dominant, which partly explains the struggle over political power now going on in Syria and in the rest of the Middle East.²⁴ Sectarianism can, according to Abdo, thus be seen as not a natural state of being, but as something that is actively promoted in some situations and in others actively neglected.

1.3.4 Pan-Arabism and Arab nationalism

The ruling elite, politically connected to the Ba'th party, adopted since the start of its political supremacy a secular ideology. Part of this ideology is called Pan-Arabism and can be seen as a form of Arab nationalism. The aim of the Ba'th party was Arab unity, by which they mean to unify the 'Arab world',²⁵ which includes all Arab countries in the North of Africa up to the Arabian ocean.²⁶ Part of a Pan-Arabic ideology includes the Ba'th regime's adoption of a secular identity, by which every citizen, regardless their religion, participate as equals in Syrian society. This ideology, the ideal of a secular, socialist Arab world with Syria as the thriving center, provided a way for the Ba'th regime to claim legitimacy for their power.²⁷ A pitfall of this ideology was that it discarded religion too easy, causing resentment among Muslim communities such as the Sunni's, but also among Christian and Jewish communities. But because of informal ties of the regime, as explored in chapter three, this resentment was suppressed for quite some time helping the regime to build up their power in Syria. The Ba'th regime tried to, as Benedict Anderson states it, create an '*imagined community*.'²⁸ However, an imagined Arab community with a shared identity of equality and freedom never dawned.

Pan-Arabism is a strategy of the Ba'th regime to create a common goal, which serves as a legitimization of the regime. According to Thomas Hylland Eriksen, nationalism is, not characterized by ethnicity, religion or culture. According to Hylland Eriksen, nationalism is an ideology shared by the majority of the population of a certain state demarcated by clear borders. Ideally a nationalist sentiment ensures social integration within society, but in reality it is caused many conflicts. Eriksen's definition of nationalism provides difficulties for Arab nationalism, which was the aim of Syria's government. The 'Arab World' does not have clearly demarcated borders and Arab nationalism is difficult to spread across the variegated Arab peninsula. Hylland Eriksen states: "*Nationalist strategies are truly successful only when the state simultaneously increases its sphere of influence and responds credibly to popular demands*" and "*...The main threats to national integration are therefore alternative social relationships which*

²⁴ Abdo, 'The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a – Sunni Divide', 5.

²⁵ Eyal Zisser, 'Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition' (New York 2000) 70.

²⁶ <http://www.martinkramer.org/sandbox/reader/archives/arab-nationalism-mistaken-identity/>
Accessed on: 17 – 03 – 2014. See the Appendix for a map of the countries belonging to a unified Arab league.

²⁷ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above* (London and New York 2001) 20, 87 – 88.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London & New York 1991) 1 – 46.

can also satisfy perceived needs.”²⁹ An outcome of this research could be that a sectarian relationship, which is an alternative relationship, satisfied the needs of Syrian inhabitants, instead of the Arab nationalism that the government promoted.

1.3.5 Geopolitics

The next section will make some notes on the role of geopolitics, because the position and development of Syria is better understood with geopolitical analysis or arguments. Geopolitics in general the study of geographical variables, such as physical location, demography, climate, etc. on the international politics and inter – state relations of a country. In the case of Syria these factors are important because this research will track Syria’s political decisions to align with certain allies in the region. Also, because pan-Arabism is such a big factor within Syria’s politics, geopolitical arguments play a role.³⁰

1.3.6 The Syria – Iran – Hezbollah nexus

Syria formed an alliance with Iran after the Iranian revolution in 1979 because it sought a partner to form a counterweight to Iraq, Israel and the United States. Iran, a pan-Islamic state and Syria, a pan-Arab and secular, state form an unusual alliance, albeit not primarily based on religious motives. According to Goodarzi: *“In the Middle East records clearly show that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership, rather than form durable alliances.”*³¹ Although it is true that the alliance is not build upon religious commonalities, this among other reasons, meant that the alliance proved to be fruitful. On a religious basis, it seems that Syria and Iran did not have the same goal, which made it easier for both parties to hold on to their own ideology. In later chapters, however, we will see that Iran did have some impact on Syria’s religious environment, especially on the conversion of Syrian Muslims to Shi’ite Islam.

The alliance with Iran and Hezbollah has a central role because Iran and Hezbollah are both very influential within the politics of Bashar al-Asad and in particular in the civil war. Iran’s goal in participation in the conflict was to shore up Asad’s power or, else to build influence along sectarian lines to remain influential in Syria also after a possible fall of the Asad-regime.³² Both Iran and Hezbollah provide Shi’ite militia to fight along the side of pro-regime forces during the ongoing conflict.

²⁹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, ‘Ethnicity versus Nationalism’, *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 28 No. 3 (1991) 267.

³⁰ Noel Castree, Rob Kitchin and Alisdair Rogers, *‘Oxford Dictionary of Human Geography; ‘Geopolitics’* (2013) <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199599868.001.0001/acref-9780199599868-e-711> Accessed on: 26 – 06 – 2014.

³¹ Goodarzi, ‘Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment’, *Ortadoğu Etütleri, Volume 4 No 2* (2013) 36.

³² Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday & Sam Wyer, ‘Iranian Strategy in Syria’, *A joint report by AEI’s critical threats project & Institute for the study of war* (2013) 6.

1.3.7 Syria's Civil War

Since 2011 Syria finds itself in a state of civil war. What started as peaceful protests against the Asad-regime, developed quickly into a violent conflict that developed into sectarian struggle. This, is not the only reason for the violent character or the emergence of the civil war, but in this research the civil war is understood as an outcome of policies influencing sectarianism that Hafez al-Asad informally facilitated and Bashar al-Asad adopted since the start of their respective presidential periods. Also, the civil war provides opportunity to examine the role of allies, Iran and Hezbollah, and will therefore be the central point of this research. The Arab Spring in Syria takes a slightly different course compared to the course of the revolutions in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, the Bashar al-Asad regime does not control the whole country but maintains a tight command over the most important cities and areas, keeping the regime in power. This resulted in a civil war that seems to be a war where different religious communities are pitted against each other.³³ The trajectory leading up to the civil war in 2011, started in some sense already with Bashar al-Asad becoming president in 2000. This thesis will trace that trajectory which started with the Ba'th party under Hafez al-Asad coming to power from 1970 onwards.

³³ <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2013/05/14/63221/the-structure-and-organization-of-the-syrian-opposition/> Accessed on: 23 - 01 - 2014.

2. Literature review

This chapter will address the main secondary literature which is relevant for my research. It is divided in several sections. First, the Ba'th party and the role of sectarianism in Syria will be discussed. General literature about sectarianism is scarce; the literature that has been used is already discussed in the theoretical framework and will therefore not be discussed in this chapter. Following the first section, will be a discussion of the literature about the civil war in Syria. Subsequently literature about the Syrian interreligious relations and literature about the politics of Bashar al-Asad is examined. Finally, the literature about the relation of Syria with Iran and Hezbollah will be discussed.

2.1 The Ba'th party, the Asad-regime and sectarian policies

This section addresses literature that focuses on the starting years of the Ba'th party and its ideology and literature that addresses the presidency of Hafez al-Asad. Sources on this topic include books on the regime, specifically on its political course and how this is related to sectarianism in Syria and on the role of Hafez al-Asad and literature on the ideology and founders of the Ba'th party, the majority of which was written around the inception of the Ba'th ideology. Literature discussed in this section is part of the historical context on which this research of the current situation in Syria is based, it will mostly be used in answering the first- and second sub-question.

An extensive article by Nabil M. Kaylani, *'The rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940 – 1958: Political success, party failure'*, addresses the roots of the Syrian Ba'th party. Kaylani focusses mostly on the ideological basis on which the Ba'th is built. Kaylani argues that the main goal of the founders of the Ba'th party, Michel Aflaq and Salâh al-Dîn al-Bîtâr, was to unify and free all Arab people and to create a unified Arab world.³⁴ Kaylani distinguishes himself from other scholars researching the roots of the Ba'th party by stating that according to Aflaq and Bîtâr there were three conditions necessary to establish the revolutionary change in Syrian society. First, Syrians needed an awareness of the historical and contemporary realities. Second they needed to feel a responsibility or moral base to 'fight' for Syria, and finally they needed a genuine belief in the feasibility of the cause: creating a unified Arab world.³⁵

An article by Robert Olson, *'The Ba'th in Syria 1947 – 1979: An interpretative historical essay'*, is best understood in complement to the article by Kaylani. It is less focused on the feasibility of Arab unity and more on the effects of the Ba'th ideology in Syria itself. Also first signs of sectarian politics become apparent in this article. The slogan 'Unity, freedom and socialism', which represents the Ba'th ideology, seems to

³⁴ Nabil M. Kaylani, 'The rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940 – 1958: Political success, party failure', *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 3, 4 – 5.

³⁵ Kaylani, 'The rise of the Syrian Ba'th 1940 – 1958', 4.

have been abandoned very quickly when the Ba'th party, came to political power in 1954. From that moment, ethnic minorities in Syria such as the Kurds, were violently harassed by the political actions of the Ba'th party.³⁶ Olson argues that "*Ba'th socialism depends on individual liberty*", according to Ba'th all individuals are equal, apparently rejecting a state led by an absolute dictatorship.³⁷ The development of Syria as an authoritarian state contradicts, the original Ba'th ideology. This paradox has a central role in the third chapter.

The article '*The Ba'th – ideology & practice*' by Gordon H. Torrey argues along the same lines as Kaylani and Olson but adds that the Ba'th party sought a separation between religion and state.³⁸

Fewer articles focus on the Ba'th ideology in its later years. In her article, '*In Search of 'Historical Correctness': The Ba'th Party in Syria*', Ulrike Freitag focuses on Ba'th ideology in its later years. She discusses two Ba'th symposiums, in 1965 and 1977, in which the course and ideology of the Ba'th party was discussed by its members. Guidelines for the Ba'th remained secularism and Arab nationalism and unity. Syrian or Arab history was, however, according to Freitag completely overlooked during the creation of Ba'th ideology in its later years. This, as Freitag states, made their ideology artificial and difficult for the 'normal Syrian citizen' to connect with.³⁹

The book '*The struggle for power in Syria: Politics and society under Asad and the Ba'th party*' by Nikolaos van Dam is a constant reference point throughout this thesis. This book focusses on the Asad regime, the role of the Alawi sect and in contrast to other scholars van Dam focuses on the role of sectarianism in Syrian politics. Van Dam argues that, although Ba'th ideology was based upon secularism; religion and sectarian divide do have a great part in Syrian formal- and even more so in its informal politics. Some critics argue that van Dam's line of argument is too much focused on the role of sectarianism in Syria and neglects other developments. This may be true, but the value of this publication is that other research into Syria and sectarianism and relating this to formal and informal Syrian politics, are few and far between. Next to van Dam, this research utilizes the study '*Syria: Revolution from above*', by Raymond Hinnebusch. He argues that Hafez al-Asad led Syria into a stable period but that one of the costs of this stabilization was that minorities and also the Sunni majority gave up certain political freedoms and adhered to Hafez al-Asad and the Ba'th party.⁴⁰

In addition to literature focused on the formal politics of the regime it is important to focus on the informal ties and politics. Eyal Zisser argues in his book '*Asad's*

³⁶ Robert Olson, 'The Ba'th in Syria 1947 – 1979: An interpretative historical essay', *Oriente Moderno*, Anno 58 Nr. 12 (1978) 645 – 681.

³⁷ Robert Olson, 'The Ba'th in Syria 1947 – 1979: An interpretative historical essay', 649 – 652.

³⁸ Gordon H. Torrey, 'The Ba'th – ideology & practice', *Middle East Journal* Vol. 23 No. 4 (1969) 448 – 449.

³⁹ Ulrike Freitag, 'In Search of 'Historical Correctness': The Ba'th Party in Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies* Vol. 35 No. 1 (1999) 6 – 7.

⁴⁰ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above* (London and New York 2001).

Legacy: Syria in Transition' that the Syria regime is characterized by its informal ruling apparatus, dominated by the Alawi elite. In addition to other authors, who mostly focus on the regime as a whole, Zisser makes the interesting remark that struggle for power existed – and continued to exist - within the regime and within the Alawi elite. Only in the face of external threats, the ranks within the regime tend to close and the internal struggle is temporarily set aside.⁴¹

The literature points to an absence of scholars focusing on how the Asad regime and its policies are perceived by Syrian citizens. The book *'Ambiguities of Domination'* by Lisa Wedeen argues that Syrian citizens do not really adhere to Hafez al-Asad, but they act "as if" they revere their leader. By the use of many primary and oral sources, the book shows how Asad's rule is enhanced by symbols. Wedeen argues that this politics of "as if" isolates Syrians from one another, cluttering public space, which makes the formation of a strong opposition towards the regime of Hafez al-Asad almost impossible.⁴² The book by Wedeen is highly informative because it gives an in depth analysis of primary sources such as interviews, songs, visual sources and Syrian texts. When addressing the informal character of sectarianism in Syria under Hafez al-Asad, this book will be a guideline.

Sectarianism and the role it has in Syrian politics is a main focus in this research. The literature already discussed gives an overview of Syrian politics and the role of sectarianism. In addition this research uses some articles that give a more nuanced view, compared with the works of van Dam or Hinnebusch. Dick Douwes writes in his article *'Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society'* about personal status law that grants most religious communities, including the majority of Sunni Muslims, their own chosen family law in Syria.⁴³ Personal status law will be addressed further in chapter four. Articles by Annika Rabo, who argues that personal status law is only adhered by groups and not only by individuals,⁴⁴ and Thomas Pierret, who mostly writes about the changing position of Syrian Sunni Muslims,⁴⁵ are important for this research when it comes to the regime and sectarianism. Pierret states in his article *'The state management of religion in Syria'* that the Ba'th party neglected religious bureaucracy, because it wanted to neutralize Syria politically.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Eyal Zisser, *'Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition'* (New York 2000) 27 – 33.

⁴² Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago and London 1999) 6.

⁴³ Dick Douwes, 'Going Public: minority muslim communities and public space in Syria (prior to the revolt)' in Wim Hofstee & Arie van der Kooij, *Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden & Boston 2013) 74.

⁴⁴ Annika Rabo, 'We are Christians and we are equal citizens': perspectives on particularity and pluralism in contemporary Syria', *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 23:1 (2012) 84.

⁴⁵ Thomas Pierret, *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama form Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge 2013).

⁴⁶ Thomas Pierret, 'The state management of Religion in Syria', 36.

2.2 The Arab Spring and the Syrian Civil War

The Arab spring started as peaceful protests against regimes in several countries in the Middle East but led to violent uprisings in countries such as Egypt, Tunisia and Libya. In Syria the Arab Spring, led the country into a violent civil war along sectarian ties, without an apparent resolution. Literature on this topic often lacks a historical grounding. Scholars researching the Arab Spring or the Syrian civil war tend to overlook the decades leading up to the current conflict and thereby they tend to conclude too narrowly. This research seeks to address that gap in the literature.

This thesis will use some articles about the causes for the Arab Spring in general. Campante and Chor argue in their article '*Why was the Arab World Posed for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring*' that education became accessible for more people in the Middle East in the years leading up to 2011. However, labor-market options deteriorated, which left more well-educated people unemployed and unsatisfied. According to Campante and Chor, highly educated people living in poor economic circumstances are more likely to engage in political protests, which is one explanation for the Arab Spring.⁴⁷ The accessibility of education is part of a path to modernization in the Middle East. According to Huntington if modernization is not led by the right infrastructure to support the change, modernization can backfire and be a cause for the people to rebel against a regime.⁴⁸ In the article '*Democratic Change in the Arab World, Past and Present*' Eric Chaney does give one rare historical note on the outburst of the Arab Spring. He states that the Arab World struggles with a 'democratic deficit' that can be traced back in history. Chaney concludes his article by stating that the democratic deficit is an outcome of the control and influence that have been developed under the Islamic rulers and regimes in the premodern era.⁴⁹

The Arab Spring in Syria took a different course, than the course of the revolutions in countries such as Egypt and Tunisia. In Syria, the regime under president Bashar al-Asad still holds tightly to important parts of the country, although it lost its power in most of Eastern Syria and parts of Aleppo. So too with the countryside along Damascus, which first was a firm supporter off the Asad-regime, something which is progressively crumbling.⁵⁰ In Syria, the dissatisfaction amongst its population and the policy by the regime, which is the cause for the outburst of the civil war, can be traced back to the start of the first Asad-regime in 1970. A general overview of the implications of the Syrian civil war is the bundle of articles '*The Syria Dilemma*'. It is a collection of

⁴⁷ Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, 'Why was the Arab World Posed for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring', *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2012) 168 – 169.

⁴⁸ Campante and Chor, 'Why was the Arab World Posed for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring', 174 – 179.

⁴⁹ Eric Chaney, 'Democratic Change in the Arab World, Past and Present', *Brookings Papers on Economic Activity* 42 (2012) 363 – 414.

⁵⁰ <http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/security/report/2013/05/14/63221/the-structure-and-organization-of-the-syrian-opposition/> Accessed on: 23 – 01 – 2014.

articles by different authors on the subject, composed by Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel.⁵¹ The authors contributing to this book focus on opportunities for external players to intervene, the incentives for the Asad regime to end the civil war, the humanitarian implications of this conflict and the bonds within the international community that become ever more pressured while the Syrian civil continues. An example of an article from *'The Syria Dilemma'* that was useful for this research is from the authors Asli Bâli and Aziz Rana. They argue that the best way for the Western international community to intervene is to negotiate with the Asad regime to make sure all communities have a future in Syria.⁵² This book focuses on macro – level developments and solutions and focuses less on different religious groups within the Syrian society or on different pressure groups within the international community on a micro-level. It lacks a focus on the inter-state relations within the Middle East and it lacks historical dimension. The book does however provides a good overview on visions on the impact of the Syrian civil war in the Middle East and on the rest of the world.

In the article *'Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain and Syria'* author Sharon Nepstad seeks the cause for the Arab Spring in the way Syrian security forces such as the military are tied to the regime. Nepstad states that civil rebellions have a better chance to overthrow a regime if they convince the security forces to cut the ties with it. Nepstad also states that if religious minority groups are likely to lose privileges with the fall of the regime they are more likely to keep supporting them.⁵³ Nepstad states that in groups maintaining to support the Asad regime has higher moral costs every day that the civil war continues. This is one of the reasons the military is split in two groups. Into a group that remains loyal to Asad and a group that is now sided with the oppositional forces.⁵⁴ Another scholar, Katerina Dalacoura, argues in her article *'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications'*, that the Syrian regime tried to calm certain minorities in 2011 but the unrest continued to spread. Subsequently, the brutality and violence against the opposition by the regime grew, which made support for the regime increasingly unlikely.⁵⁵ Dalacoura does not discuss why the Asad regime is still able to legitimize itself, with so little support from its citizens.

⁵¹ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *The Syria Dilemma* (Cambridge 2013).

⁵² Bâli and Rana, 'Why there is no military solution to the Syrian conflict' in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *The Syria Dilemma*, 36 – 41.

⁵³ Sharon Erickson Nepstad, 'Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring: Exploring military defections and loyalty in Egypt, Bahrain and Syria', *Journal of Peace Research* 50:337 (2013) 337 – 338.

⁵⁴ Nepstad, 'Mutiny and nonviolence in the Arab Spring', 344 – 345.

⁵⁵ Katerina Dalacoura, 'The 2011 uprisings in the Arab Middle East: political change and geopolitical implications', *International Affairs* 88:1 (2012) 16.

2.3 The 'wasted decade' of Bashar al-Asad and regional alliances

The literature discussed does not address the opposition during this civil war or the changing position of different religious groups due to politics of the Asad-regime. Instead it only focuses on general causes, the formal politics of the Asad regime and macro-level developments. The literature discussed here is therefore an addition to the literature already discussed, because it does focus on the missing topics in the previous literature. In the bundle *'The Syrian uprisings – dynamics of an insurgency'* co-author Wieland argues that in the decade Asad has been in power, he missed many chances and had an abundance of political failures. According to Wieland, Asad became the victim of his own modernization policy in Syria.⁵⁶ Also Human Rights reports from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International argue, the political decisions that Syria's developing political environment since 1970, under both presidents Asad, eventually resulted in an unsatisfied, angry Syrian population, divided along sectarian ties.

Looking at the past decade in Syria, books, such as *'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview'* by Shmuel Bar will serve as a guideline to understand president Bashar al-Asad's mode of thinking and main political course.⁵⁷ More important general monographs like Bar's is literature that addresses the political heritage that Bashar al-Asad inherited from his father Hafez al-Asad. Articles such as *'The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria'* from Ghadbian, *'Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession'* by Stacher or *'The Syrian Solution'* by Perthes provide in depth analysis on this topic.⁵⁸ These studies are important because they make a comparison of the presidential period of Hafez al-Asad with the one of Bashar al-Asad, which is discussed in chapter four.

A second line of research is the role of Syria in the Middle Eastern region and the alliances it built since 1970. One of the alliances important for this research is from Iran, from 1979. An important contribution on this alliance is by Jubin M. Goodarzi. He describes the development of this alliance into six different phases, until the start of the civil war of 2011. Goodarzi makes an interesting statement about the nature of the alliance between the two countries: *"In the Middle East records clearly show that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership, rather than form durable alliances."*⁵⁹ With this quote he gives an indirect explanation for the fruitful alliance between Syria and Iran. These countries do not share a common ideology but

⁵⁶ Carsten Wieland, Adam Almqvist & Helena Nassif, *The Syrian Uprisings - Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife 2013) 5 – 6.

⁵⁷ Shmuel Bar, *'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview'* *Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center* (2006).

⁵⁸ Najib Ghadbian, *'The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria'*, *Middle East Journal Vol. 55 No. 4* (2001); Joshua Stacher, *'Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria's Hereditary Succession'*, *Middle East Journal Vol. 65 No. 2* (2011); Volker Perthes, *'The Syrian Solution'* *Foreign Affairs Vol. 85 No. 6* (2006).

⁵⁹ Goodarzi, *'Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment'*, 36.

this strengthens their alliance. According to Goodarzi, among others, the alliance with Iran and the bonds formed with Hezbollah during the intervention in Lebanon played a role in frustrating the policies of their 'common' opponents such as Iraq, Israel and the United States.⁶⁰

A report by Will Fulton, *'Iranian Strategy in Syria'*, addresses Iranian influence in Syria. Important to understand in light of the recent civil war is that Iran desperately wants to keep the Assad regime in power.⁶¹ Iran provides Syria with military supplies and trains Shi'ite militia to fight on the side of the regime. Iraqi Shi'a militants are fighting in Syria on the side of Assad, an indicator of the sectarian character of the conflict.⁶² This remark makes this report an important starting point in this research, because it addresses sectarianism during the civil war. Religious shrine Sayyida Zaynab in the suburbs of Damascus will serve as an example on how Syria's role in the Middle East has changed. Articles such as *'The Shiite Turn in Syria'* about the shrine culture in Syria, but also specifically about the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, by Sindawi shows by addressing the Zaynab shrine that polarization between different religious communities, especially between Sunni's and Shi'ites, increased during Bashar al-Asad's presidency.⁶³

This short literature overview does not address all the literature and sources used in this research. It, however, addressed the most frequently cited literature and showed that, for historical context of the civil war, there are gaps to be addressed. This research will fill the gaps on the lack of historical context and links this context to the recent civil war, which makes my research an addition to the existent literature.

⁶⁰ Goodarzi, 34.

⁶¹ Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday & Sam Wyer, *'Iranian Strategy in Syria', A joint report by AEI's critical threats project & Institute for the study of war* (2013).

⁶² Fulton, *'Iranian Strategy in Syria'*, 7.

⁶³ Khalid Sindawi, *'The Shiite Turn in Syria'* in Hillel Fradkin, Husain Haqqani, Eric Brown and Hassan Mneimneh, *'Current Trends in Islamist Ideology', Hudson Institute Center on Islam Democracy and the Future of the Muslim World Volume 8* (2009)

3. Hafez al-Asad and the Ba'th party: Formal secularity and informal sectarianism.

*"Unity, Freedom and Socialism"*⁶⁴

Syria has always been an area of interest for different European states. Interference of European states, like Russia or France, was the rule rather than the exception in the 19th and 20th century. Given that the Sunni majority was not among the protégées of the European powers, who mainly chose religious minority communities among their protégées, resentment between religious communities developed.⁶⁵ The Arab Spring puts old conflicts between the Sunni's and, in Syria's case, the Shi'ite community back in the political and social arena. Important to note is that in this chapter the Sunni's and Shi'ites, as well as communities like the Alawi's, are sometimes addressed as one homogeneous group. Obviously, this is a simplistic representation of how the situation really was. Not all Alawi's were favored by the regime, just as not all Sunni's critiqued the Asad regime or Ba'th policies.

Divide between religious communities continued after Syria gained its independence from the French Mandate in 1946.⁶⁶ Syria was a 'state', but it lacked nationhood with a shared political ideology or a shared culture among Syrian citizens. The Syrian Ba'th party, which is officially called 'the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party', took up the task from 1963 onwards, to create the 'nation' within the Syrian 'nation-state' with consequences, such as sectarian divide⁶⁷ and a shifting regional position.⁶⁸ As we have seen in the first chapter, Hylland Eriksen states that a characteristic of a 'nation' is a shared ideology that can lead to a shared sentiment of nationalism.⁶⁹ The Ba'th party acted strongly on secularism and socialism, causing certain religious communities to feel threatened in their religious freedom by this ideological course. The goal of the Syrian Ba'th s was to downplay the importance of religion in Syrian public environment. On closer examination, to the more rural areas became the site for greater religious divisions following the Ba'th party's ascension to power. This divide was empowered by Ba'th's favoring of certain communities, such as their own community the Alawis, granting them more wealth and power.⁷⁰ When the Ba'th party came to power in 1963

⁶⁴ Robert Olson, 'The Ba'th in Syria 1947 – 1979: An interpretative historical essay', *Oriente Moderno*, Anno 58 Nr. 12 (1978) 645 – 681.

⁶⁵ Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party* (New York 1996) 3 – 4; Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge 2001).

⁶⁶ 'French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (1923).

⁶⁷ For a description of the term sectarianism, see the theoretical framework in chapter 1 of this thesis.

⁶⁸ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 5.

⁶⁹ Thomas Hylland Eriksen, 'Ethnicity versus Nationalism', *Journal of Peace Research* Vol. 28 No. 3 (1991) 267.

⁷⁰ <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/richardspencer/100204288/was-syria-ever-the-secular-non-sectarian-state-we-are-led-to-believe-it-was/> and

Syria's politics was characterized by secularism. When Hafez al-Asad came to power in 1970, these secular policies softened, but secularism and socialism still remained the guideline for policies under president Asad. This chapter makes a distinction between the Asad-regime, who are the close advisors of Asad and the security apparatus, and the Ba'th party, which is the formal organization around the Asad-regime. The Ba'th party serves mainly as a legitimization apparatus for the Asad-regime. This chapter will provide the historical context of the political environment. In 2000 Bashar al-Asad inherited the presidency. It will give a short overview of the rise of the Ba'th party, after Syrian independence in 1946. Subsequently, the chapter will examine the rule of Hafez al-Asad. Important here are his policies that are relevant to understand sectarianism, implicitly more often than explicitly, and the alliance he built with Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. The question to be answered in this first chapter is: To what extent are policies relevant to sectarianism and the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah under Bashar al-Asad rooted in the regime of his father, Hafez al-Asad that started in 1970, in particular in view of regional positioning and interreligious relations?

3.1 Syria before the Ba'th era

Syrian society faced religious divides long before Hafez al-Asad became president in 1970. In its development towards becoming a modern state, Syria was exposed to foreign interference because European states successfully claimed protecting religious communities to whom they were aligned both religiously as well as commercially. Before 1914 Syria was generally seen as the center of Arabism and with a short break from the development of Arabism during the French Mandate, this continued via the Syrian regime after the French left Syria.⁷¹ Nationalism in Syria was not necessarily directed at Syria as a state, but on the Arab World as a whole. Syria made less of a distinction between groups divided by religious diversity. Arabism, or pan-Arabism, can be seen as a red thread throughout Syrian history.

However, although the ideology of pan-Arabism and secularism aimed to represent Syria as a place where different religious communities could live next to- and with each other, under Asad's rule, this has become a mirage. Syria, before the French Mandate in 1918, and after its independence from 1946 onward, seemed to aim for a state with a variety of religious communities living peacefully next to and with each other. To a certain extent this succeeded, but sectarian divide with the threat of violent outbursts was always present. Stimulated by the protection of European states such as Great-Britain, France or Russia, the distance between religious communities such as the Alawi, Druze, Ismaili or the Christian communities and the Sunni majority increased. This is especially true for the divide between Shi'ites and Sunni's which increased,

<http://www.csmonitor.com/Commentary/Opinion/2010/0713/Syrian-secularism-a-model-for-the-Middle-East> Accessed on: 01 - 07 - 2014.

⁷¹ D.K. Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914 - 1958* (Oxford and New York 2006) 277.

mostly because the regime was corrupt and favored other communities, which left the Sunni majority to feel subordinated. Before 1918 this divide was visible if you look at the area in which different groups were settled in Syria. The Sunnis were a majority in both urban and more accessible areas and in more rural parts. Smaller religious communities mostly lived in less accessible, rural, parts of the country, and not in the cities.⁷² The Druze community, for example, settled in a mountainous, less accessible area in the southwest of Syria, Jebel al-Druze.⁷³ However, Christian- and to a lesser extent Jewish communities did settle in certain urban regions.

In 1918 Syria came under the control of France which in 1923 was legitimized by a mandate supported by the League of Nations. That meant that France held the power over Syria, under the flag of The League of Nations.⁷⁴ For Syria's ruling classes, which were mostly Sunni Muslims at that time, France provided a chance to preserve their status and to maintain its conservative. Although Syria was progressive in being the center of Arab nationalism before the French Mandate, Syrian Sunni elites saw it necessary to co-operate with the French to uphold their elitist and conservative status. Only from some religious communities, whose position was actually threatened by presence of the French, there was some resistance to the decision of 'honorable co-operation' by Syrian notables.⁷⁵ Article 8 of the mandate states:

*"The Mandatory shall ensure to all complete freedom of conscience and the free exercise of all forms of worship which are consonant with public order and morality. No discrimination of any kind shall be made between the inhabitants of Syria and the Lebanon on the ground of differences in race, religion or language."*⁷⁶

The formal goal of the mandate was to prepare Syria for independence. However, indirectly the purpose of the French Mandate was to weaken Arab nationalism, in which Syria would be an obvious starting point, as the center of pan-Arab ideology.⁷⁷ To weaken Arab nationalism in Syria, France sought to divide it into several separate 'states.' Six states were created. In 1920 the states Aleppo, Damascus and Alawis were created and in 1921 the states Jabal Druze, the Sanjak of Alexandretta and the State of Greater Lebanon followed.⁷⁸ The division in different states ended in 1936 when they

⁷² Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 2.

⁷³Used for background information on the Druze community:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Druze#In_Syria Accessed on: 10 - 03 - 2014.

⁷⁴ Fieldhouse, *Western Imperialism in the Middle East 1914 - 1958*, 246.

⁷⁵ Fieldhouse, 302.

⁷⁶ Article 8 in 'French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon', *The American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 17 No. 3 (1923) 179.

⁷⁷ Fieldhouse, 245 - 303 and <http://countrystudies.us/syria/9.htm> Accessed on: 10 - 03 - 2014.

⁷⁸ <http://www.saylor.org/site/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/French-Mandate-of-Syria-and-Lebanon.pdf> Accessed on: 10 - 03 - 2014. See Appendix I, Fig. 1 for a map of the different states, created under the French mandate.

were unified except for Lebanon which became formally independent in 1926, and Sanjak of Alexandretta. The latter became a province of Turkey in 1939. Without being the formal aim of the French Mandate to create divides between different communities, in creating these different states sectarian divides arose. This proved a useful tool for France to weaken Syrian Arab nationalism.

In 1946 Syria declared its independence from France after defeating the colonial troops, with the help of Great Britain. Although the state of Lebanon became independent in the 1920s and the states of Aleppo and Damascus never really became a state as France had intended, the formation of these states by France still proved to be a watershed in Syrian history. It influenced the religious divide and it caused a shift in the position of various religious communities. Due to the French, all states were able to form their own sub-ideology, mostly affiliated with the dominant religious community present in that area. The French Mandate, weakened Arab nationalism for the time it ruled over Syria, but after 1946 this ideology strengthened under guidance of the founders of the Ba'th party which came to political power in 1963. Between the end of the French Mandate in 1946 and 1963 the Syrian Ba'th party became the most notable promoter of Arab nationalism, in the Middle East. The Ba'th party was only part of a bigger entity of nationalist movements aiming for Arab unity. Under Gamal Abdel Nasser, president of Egypt after the Second World War, Arab Nationalism gained traction across the Middle East as a whole. The Ba'th party was only a small faction within this bigger organization of Arab nationalism and Arab unity. The era of French rule between 1918 and 1946, changed the relations between the various religious communities. In dividing Syria into sub-regions, largely similar communities like the Druze and Alawi groups were got deliberately separated.⁷⁹

3.2 The Ba'th party: Restoring Arab nationalism

The Ba'th party, or the Arab Socialist Ba'th Party as it is officially called, is a merger between the Arab Ba'th political party and the Arab Ba'th movement and became an official political party in 1952. Before it became a political party, the Ba'th was in 1916, a conglomeration of people representing common national aspirations of secularism and socialism, instead of a proper political party.⁸⁰ With the decline of the Ottoman Empire at the end of the 19th century, the Ba'th called for a new Syrian national identity.⁸¹ This identity was to be based on secular ideas and a shared history, rather than on religious similarities. The emergence of a new Syrian state, first under the French Mandate,

⁷⁹ Ayse Tekdal Fildis, 'The Troubles in Syria: Spawned by French Divide and Rule', *Middle East Policy Council Vol. XVIII No. 4* (2011).

⁸⁰ Nabil M. Kaylani, 'The rise of the Syrian Ba'th, 1940 – 1958: Political success, party failure' *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 3, 3.

⁸¹ Bruce Masters, *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Arab World: The Roots of Sectarianism* (Cambridge 2001) 169 – 188.

proved to be fruitful to ground this new national identity.⁸² It is not surprising that this ideology of secularism and socialism developed into a shared idea in Syria, so quickly after the French departure.

The founders of the Ba'th party, Michel Aflaq and Salah ed-Din el-Bitar, were part of a young, disillusioned, generation. Both Aflaq and el- Bitar studied for some time in France and were there exposed to the popular European socialist thought. This encouraged them to develop a new way of political action and constituted a new party with an ideology that was a mixture between European socialism and Arab nationalism.⁸³ Note that, as we will see later in this thesis, it seems that a disillusioned young generation often has an impact on the political and socio-economic course that Syria takes. The young generation impacted Syrian development in the constitutional years of the Ba'th around between 1947 and 1963 and also the civil war today is, amongst others, started by an unsatisfied young generation, rebelling against the current regime. With the slogan '*Unity, freedom and socialism*' the Ba'th party focused on getting the Syrian people to believe in the idea of Arab unity.

In 1954 the Ba'th party merged with the more popular Arab Socialist Party founded by Akram al-Haurani, a popular politician in Central Syria, and with that it became a (small) player in the Syrian national political arena. In Syria's first democratic elections, the Arab Socialist Ba'th party, now under the leadership of Al-Haurani and Aflaq, had 22 members, of the 140 available seats, elected in government. The Syrian Ba'th party was only a faction within a greater project, called the United Arab Republic (UAR), which tried to restore Arab nationalism and to unify different states in the Middle East. The UAR was initiated by president Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt, the main driving force for Arab nationalism, and thus for the UAR was economic or commercial gain. In 1958, the Syrian government was forced by regional circumstances to align with Gamal Abdel Nasser and thus the UAR. The Ba'th party became part of the UAR in 1958.⁸⁴ In May 1962 the Ba'th Party's National Command decided to restore the Ba'th party apparatus in Syria, which declined when the Ba'th became part of the UAR, half year after the failure and break-up of the UAR at the end of 1961. On 8 March 1963 the Ba'th party rose to political power, through a military coup. Important in the development of the Ba'th party is that since their departure from the UAR, party members known as Qutriyan or Regionalists remained active, which kept the constituency of the party

⁸² Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above* (London and New York 2001) 18.

⁸³ Robert Olson, 'The Ba'th in Syria 1947 – 1979: An interpretative Historical Essay (Part One) *Oriente Moderno* Anno 58. Nr. 12 (1978) 646.

⁸⁴ Avraham Ben-Tzur, 'The Neo-Ba'th Party of Syria' *Journal of Contemporary History* Vol. 3 No. 3 (1968) 161 – 163. Also used for background information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamal_Abdel_Nasser#United_Arab_Republic and

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michel_Aflaq#Arab_Ba.27ath_Movement:_1940.E2.80.931947 Accessed on: 28 – 03 – 2014.

actively involved on a regional level. Also, they kept close ties with the military Ba'th leaders and made sure there was a support in the various regions.⁸⁵

Important in the early years of the Ba'th party from 1947 until the military coup in 1963 is its secular ideology. Hinnebusch states that Ba'th focused much more than other political factions, on the role of the state, rights for the peasantry and working class, social welfare, etc.⁸⁶ This was a radical break with the past which made the Ba'th party appealing for a large part of Syrian society, in particular in rural Syria. This becomes visible when one analyzes the constitutional documents of the Ba'th of 1959, which came into being during the Ba'th's third constitutional meeting. This constitution declares the early Ba'th ideology, but some points seem to be a radical departure from the initial Ba'th ideology as Aflaq and Bitar set it out to be. For example, article 5 states:

"The Arab Resurrection Socialist Party is populist, believing that dominion belongs to the people, that they alone are the origin of all government and leadership, and that the value of the state derives from the will of the masses, even as its sanctity is in proportion to the extent of their freedom in choosing the government..."⁸⁷

The Ba'th adopted a formal ideology, of secularism, socialism and pan-Arabism that was not to be upheld by the informal politics of the party and its Alawi military elite.

3.3 Hafez al-Asad 1970 – 2000: "The Sphinx of Damascus"⁸⁸

With the coup d'état of 1963 the Ba'th party seized power in Syria, and remains in power today however, much it is challenged today by the civil war. In the course of the decades, following the coup d'état, the regime gradually turned into an absolutist rule with the venerated 'eternal leader' Hafez al-Asad. His rule was rooted in the military and, eventually, in Alawi clan relations. Hafez al-Asad, in 1963, commander of the Syrian Air Force, participated in the coup d'état. In 1966, a second coup took place within the Ba'th party, which toppled some of the old Ba'th leaders and more radical members of the party took control. Although Aflaq remained the ideologue of the party, his leadership was taken over by a radical military faction who led the party in sole leadership of Syria.

Hafez al-Asad came from a rural family; his father had an administrative function in the province Latakia. The Asad-family was well respected among Latakia's locals. To a certain extent the basis for Hafez al-Asad to expand his administrative influence on a national level was built by the administrative experience and respect of his father in Latakia. Lisa Wedeen argues that: *"Asad represents not just the extraordinary individual,*

⁸⁵ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 15 – 17, 22.

⁸⁶ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, 30 – 31.

⁸⁷ 'The Constitution of the Arab Resurrection (Ba'th) Socialist Party of Syria' *Middle East Journal* Vol 13 No. 2 (1959) 197.

⁸⁸ Henry Siegman, 'Being Hafiz al-Asad: Syria's Chilly but Consistent Peace Strategy' *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 79 No. 3 (2000) 3.

*the authoritative "father", the "knight" who can "lead forever." He is also the average Syrian, a "man of the people," a brother among equals: "Asad is no one, but one of you."*⁸⁹ Asad's aim with Syria was to stabilize it economically and socially and to regain its respect in the Arab region. Correcting the political and societal course of Syria was the aim, christening it: the "corrective movement" which was first posed in 1970 by Asad himself, to intimate the exact goal of his policies. Hafez al-Asad had a realist stance towards politics meaning, that he was motivated by Syrian self-interest. Also, in realist politics, power politics is the central pillar. Syrian politics, since 1970, aimed at protecting its own interests by threatening sanctions towards states or parties that threatened Syrian interests.⁹⁰ The main Syrian goal, according to Asad, is Arab unity, or what he calls the "Arab national cause." It meant forming bonds with Arab allies, but taking a hostile stance towards states with an open view towards 'Western' Europe and the US, such as Egypt or Israel.⁹¹ The policies of Hafez al-Asad mostly cannot be linked to sectarianism or religious affiliations. His policies are in general focused on secularism and power politics, but informally the outcome of these policies do have an influence on sectarianism and religious relations in Syria. Moving on, this research looks at Hafez al-Asad policies and how these influenced interreligious relations in Syria. Subsequently the regional positioning, especially the alliances with Iran and Hezbollah are discussed.

3.3.1 Hafez al-Asad: Favoring the Alawi sect?

Hafez al-Asad was a member of the Alawi sect, which quickly made this religious group the most important political community within the Ba'th party and thus within Syria. It is important to note, that the regime never solely consisted of members of the Alawi community. The community was to become the most important because Asad relied and trusted members of this community above others. A reason they became so important was because institutions that were built upon democracy proved to be highly vulnerable. This made it easier for non-democratic formations, such as clan reliance and military organizations, to move in. The Ba'th top ranks were filled with people hand picked based on religious (Alawi) affiliation and socio-economic background, alongside other factors. On top of that, affiliation with the Asad-family played a part, which is a form of nepotism.⁹² When a regime shows signs of nepotism, in this case favoring people based on religious affiliation or based on socio-economic status, it is not normally an indicator for the regime's longevity. The regime's nepotism consisted of a complex system of favoring which was not only focused on the Alawi community. Relationships with other religious communities and urban elites were constituted. At the start in 1970,

⁸⁹ Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago and London 1999) 17.

⁹⁰ Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of International Relations* (Oxford 2008) 131 – 149.

⁹¹ Siegman, 'Being Hafiz al-Asad: Syria's Chilly but Consistent Peace Strategy', 3.

⁹² Eyal Zisser, *Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition* (New York 2000) 29 - 30.

the mostly rural Alawi community felt a strong connection to the regime and did get some favorable treatment, especially in living conditions in rural areas. However, the regime never only favored the Alawi's, it balanced its favors among different religious communities.⁹³ Over time the rural roots with the Alawi community of the regime were more and more neglected by the emergence of relationships with urban elites and other religious communities, causing dissatisfaction and loss of the support in the rural roots of the party. Hafez al-Asad was a great strategist, according to Hinnebusch: "*Asad, after 1970, attained autonomy from each of the groups in his power base by balancing them against each other.*"⁹⁴ Instead of only putting Alawi "barons" in the top of the party and the military Hafez al-Asad balanced it, by also promoting prominent Sunni Muslims top functions in these institutions. This ensured the regime's ties to the Alawi sect but also to the Sunni majority, especially the Damascene Sunni business community, who gave necessary political and economic support for some regime decisions.⁹⁵

Formally the strategic choice to preserve ties with the most important religious and societal groups and giving them formal political power, worked well at Hafez al-Asad's presidency. However, by the end of the 1970s and in the early 1980s, violent protests started to occur mostly sparked by members of the Sunni community, of which the more radical individuals were unified in the Muslim Brotherhood. Alawi barons got the most prominent positions in the military, but also in the regime, which reflected the military. This enforces the image that the regime favored some people based on religious affiliation. It does not mean that the politics the regime adopted can be called sectarian. Sectarian divides was an implicit consequence of other political decisions, formal as well as informal, that in principle had little to do with a religious Alawi, Christian or Muslim agenda.⁹⁶

Late 1970s and early 1980s Hafez al-Asad met with resistance of different religious communities, mainly from the Sunni majority, in the form of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. The relative peaceful early 1970s was the result of a number of factors. First, Asad had a very loyal rural constituency, the Alawi community. Second, it was not the case that only members of the Alawi community profited from the Asad regime. Some members of the Sunni majority gained influential positions within the Ba'th party, preventing this group from rebelling at the start of Asad's regime. Sunni peasants remained passive, because they benefited economically from the Asad-regime. The general image of the Asad regime was that it set out to stabilize Syria, which provided Syrian citizens with less reason to critique it.⁹⁷ On top of that the regime used

⁹³ Leon Goldsmith, 'Syria's Alawite and the Politics of Sectaria Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective', *Ortadoğu Etütleri Vol. 3 No. 1* (2011) 40 - 41.

⁹⁴ Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above*, 67.

⁹⁵ Hinnebusch, 70 - 71.

⁹⁶ Zisser, '*Asad's Legacy: Syria in Transition*', 32.

⁹⁷ Thomas Pierret, 'The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance', *Middle East Brief No. 77* (2014) 2.

intimidating rhetoric and sometimes even military force to make the Syrian people more inclined to stay in line. This made opposition in the early 1970s very difficult. Although there was resistance from different groups, an intimidating party apparatus, regime and military forced Syrian citizens to adhere to the system. The Syrian nation was exemplified as a “mother”, which meant the secular and socialist ideology and Asad was the “father”, the safeguard of the ideology of the nation. Asad was the president who citizens should trust, but should fear.⁹⁸ It is important to note that the rhetoric created compliance, rather than legitimacy. Wedeen argues that citizens act “as if” they support Asad, but in reality this was mostly a façade.⁹⁹ Obviously there was opposition, which in the late 1970s and early 1980s became more pressing. Wedeen’s fieldwork on which her theory of acting “as if” is based was done in the 1980s. The “as if” politics of the early 1980s made sure that most people adhered to the regime and its leader. Only more radical organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood that played a big part in the later 1970s and early 1980s, were able to break free from acting “as if” and to oppose the regime. In later years of the presidency of Hafez al-Asad the remainder of the support, especially in rural areas, started to erode across all levels of society.

3.3.2. Sectarianism despite a secular ideology

As we have seen, the initial aim of the Ba’th party was to build a secular Syrian. When Hafez al-Asad became president in 1970 secularism remained important but was softened, while Pan-Arabism gained prominence. Hafez al-Asad’s religious policies consisted of three pillars. First, there was a strong suppression of Islamic militants, for example from the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood. Second, religious unity was the goal. It was, for example, prohibited to focus attention on one single religious community by writers or by the media.¹⁰⁰ Third, Hafez al-Asad emphasized mystic Islam, also called Sufism. This is a branch of Islam that has its focus on the religious belief on an individual level, on individual growth and faith. This is also an indicator that the aim was to ban religious affiliation from public life.¹⁰¹

Despite the formal participation of some elitist Sunni Muslims in Syrian politics, the polarization between Sunni and Shi’ite Muslims increased after 1970, implicitly influenced by the Ba’th party and by their religious policies. The Ba’th party restricted, religious Islamic education. This caused resentment among the Sunni community, because it was perceived that the regime and Syria as state, should represent Islamic values, also in education. On top of the fact that the regime adopted secularism as the

⁹⁸ Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 49 – 58.

⁹⁹ Wedeen, 6 – 7.

¹⁰⁰ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 35 – 38.

¹⁰¹ <http://dialoguetalk.org/seyyed-hossein-nasr/sufism/> Accessed on: 04 – 07 – 2014. Also Lisa Wedeen states these three points about the religious politics of Hafez al-Asad, especially in the second chapter of her book: Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*, 33 – 49.

formal ideology and tried to ban religion from the public sphere, causing the Sunni majority to lose the little faith they had in the regime whatsoever, causing to isolate themselves. From the late 1970s onwards, Syria developed an environment in which a large part of the Sunni majority became isolated from other religious communities because of their resentment towards the regime and their polarization from the Shi'ite community, with whom the Alawi's affiliate.¹⁰² Though sectarianism was not part of Ba'th ideology and not at the basis of the politics of Hafez al-Asad, it was the order of the day. Corruption, a strong Alawi representation in the regime, nepotism and an increasing Sunni – Shi'ite polarization, caused Syria's political environment to have an implicit sectarian character. Also, the active emphasis on banning religion from public life is an indicator that implicitly sectarianism did play a role. Although part of the Sunni community was indifferent to their changing position under the Ba'th regime, part of the Sunni majority, did not agree with Syria adopting a secular ideology, pitting this small Sunni sub-group against the fraction of the Alawi community that ruled Syria.¹⁰³

The outcome of the explicit non-sectarian policies of Hafez al-Asad becomes clear when one looks at the radical change in the Muslim Brotherhood late 1970s. The Muslim Brotherhood came to prominence around the same time the Ba'th party came to power in Syria. In the period between the end of the French Mandate and the Ba'th coup of 1963 the Brotherhood was a substantial part of the Syrian political system. After the Ba'th coup the Muslim Brotherhood tried not to adopt any violent measures against the Ba'th throughout the 1960s and early 1970s. As we have seen, sectarian political consequences of the Asad-regime's policies caused parts of the Sunni community to feel increasingly excluded. Within the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood there was struggle too, mostly on how to defend their Islamic, religious standpoints within a socialist and secular regime and on how to preserve their position with increasing pressure on their position in Syria. In the late 1960s, at the beginning of the first Asad regime, a new activist generation took hold of the Muslim Brotherhood. They saw it as their task to take a more radical stance towards the Asad-regime. According to Liad Porat: "*They accused the Syrian regime of tyranny, corruption and heresy, regarding it as "an enemy of Islam."*"¹⁰⁴ The activist, radical stance of the Muslim Brotherhood increased in the late 1970s and was explicitly pitted towards the Asad regime.¹⁰⁵ This clash between the Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad regime reached its climax in 1982. On June 26th 1982 the Brotherhood attempted to assassinate Hafez al-Asad, to the fury of the regime. In response the regime and a furious Alawi community killed 550 Brotherhood prisoners in the Palmyra prison. In 1982 the regime reacted with violence against the Muslim

¹⁰² Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 36.

¹⁰³ Van Dam, 102 – 104.

¹⁰⁴ Liad Porat, 'The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Asad Regime', *Middle East Brief No. 47* (2010) 2.

¹⁰⁵ Yvette Talhamy, 'The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship', *Middle East Journal Vol. 63, No. 4* (2009) 565 – 569.

Brotherhood, revolting in the city of Hama. The special forces of the regime attacked Hama, in which supposedly many Islamic fundamentalists resided, there were between 10000 and 40000 victims.¹⁰⁶

The radicalization of the Muslim Brotherhood is an example that shows that secularism caused resentment among certain religious communities. Although the regime adopted a formally secular ideology, in policies and rhetoric, from 1980 onwards it became incontestable that Hafez al-Asad implicitly influenced religious divide in Syria in a negative manner, because these groups, such as a radical part of the Sunni community, contested the secular stance of the regime. From the early 1980s, the religious divide became more exaggerated by the regime. Speeches of Hafez al-Asad focused more on religious divide and were meant to discredit part of the Sunni majority: *“Nothing more dangerous to Islam than to distort its meaning and its contents while wearing Islam’s robe....”*¹⁰⁷ is Asad’s statement on the “criminal” Muslim Brotherhood. To undermine the Brotherhood on sectarian grounds, isolating them from Syrian society and pit them against other religious minorities, who according to Asad wear the *“true robe of Islam.”*

3.3.3 Regional positioning: Alliances with Iran and Hezbollah

In choosing Pan-Arabism to be at the core of the state ideology, as was the case in the period between 1970 and 2000, it is impossible to focus inward, on domestic issues. Building strong alliances was necessary and grew out of a sentiment of anti-imperialism, mainly to form a powerful front against forces such as the US and Israel. Especially during the 1990s Syria saw international development, especially in the West, becoming a threat. Although Syria’s relation with regional neighbors such as Iraq and Egypt were often problematic,¹⁰⁸ cooperation within the region, strengthening the Arab world was, according to Hafez al-Asad, the only way to prepare Syria to threatening circumstances.

Syrian domestic policies were based upon the Ba’th secular and socialist ideology. In external relations, Asad chose Realpolitik as his main strategy.¹⁰⁹ Realpolitik is a political course based on power and power relations. Ideological considerations do not play a role in Realpolitik. It does not focus on ethnic divide, religious affiliation or other cultural differences.¹¹⁰ Adopting Realpolitik is an example of active anti-sectarian policies by Hafez al-Asad because it is a political course that distances itself from cultural differences. Actively distancing itself from sectarian politics indicates that

¹⁰⁶ Van Dam, 105 – 111.

¹⁰⁷ Speech of Hafez al-Asad on the Muslim Brotherhood, 1982, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DldRkALa6Is> Accessed on: 03 – 04 – 2014.

¹⁰⁸ <http://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/interactive/2013/08/201383111193558894.html> Accessed on: 02 – 07 – 2014.

¹⁰⁹ Zisser, *‘Asad’s Legacy: Syria in Transition’*, 69.

¹¹⁰ <http://www.princeton.edu/~achaney/tmve/wiki100k/docs/Realpolitik.html> Accessed on: 03 – 04 – 2014.

sectarianism did play a role in Syrian society. Threatening circumstances came in the 90s, amongst others, from the front between the US, Israel and Egypt. Because of these external threats, Syria sought allies in the Arab region and beyond. Asad found, paradoxically, an ally in the pan-Islamic state of Iran. The alliance started after the Iranian Revolution, after the start of their war with Iraq between 1980 and 1988, in 1979 and was formalized in 1982. Iran is an Islamic state dominated by Twelver Shi'ism. Syria's regime is marked by secularism, which contrasts with the religious ideology of Iran. A similarity though is that Alawi's affiliate with Shi'ism.¹¹¹ Also, according to Goodarzi: *"In the Middle East records clearly show that states sharing a common ideology compete for the mantle of leadership rather than from durable alliances."*¹¹² Common goals such as anti-imperialism and anti-Zionism made this alliance durable for both parties, a common overarching ideology proved unnecessary. Throughout the 1990s and during the era of the presidency of Bashar al-Asad, the Syria-Iran alliance remained intact. Mainly to form a power front against the US and Iraq, under Saddam Hussein, and for Syria the alliance helped to promote its interest in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Golan Heights, part of Syria's territory, is occupied by Israel, so there is always a force field between the two.¹¹³ Also Iran supported the Syrian government suppression of the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood, who still were active after their violent defeat in Hama in 1982, although from an expelled position.

Syria's pan-Arabic ideology kept them from trying to regain footing in Lebanon, which it claimed as being part of the 'official' Syrian state. In 1976, Syria intervened with Christian factions in Lebanon, asking for Syria's help because they were being repressed in Lebanon. A few years later, Syria's position towards the Shi'ite activist Lebanese faction Hezbollah shifted, as they saw that regaining power in Lebanon. As such, the Syrian government sought to build a durable alliance with this organization. This militant but also emancipatory political faction has anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiments but stood for the deprived, which made it an appealing ally for Syria. For Hafez al-Asad, Hezbollah proved to be a useful militant organization which helped him set foot in Lebanon again after bonds with Lebanese Christian factions diminished. Hezbollah helped reinforce Syria's military in its own territory and to form a block against Israel. Hezbollah formed a "bargaining chip"¹¹⁴ in the conflict with Israel that both Syria and Iran were confronted with. This Middle Eastern situation in the 1980s and 1990s ensured a durable alliance between Syria, Iran and Hezbollah.

¹¹¹ Yvette Talhamy, 'The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Syrian-Iranian Relationship', 570.

¹¹² Goodarzi, 'Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment', *Ortadoğu Etütleri*, Volume 4 No 2 (2013) 6.

¹¹³ Goodarzi, 'Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment', 16.

¹¹⁴ http://www.stratfor.com/weekly/20101013_syria_hezbollah_iran_alliance_flux Accessed on: 03 - 04 - 2014.

3.4 Formal secularity and informal sectarianism

In concluding this chapter, it is meaningful to return to the question around which the chapter evolved: To what extent are policies relevant to sectarianism and the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah under Bashar al-Asad rooted in the regime of his father, Hafez al-Asad that started in 1970, in particular in view of regional positioning and interreligious relations?

We have seen that, since 1970, there is a distinctive division between formal politics and informal politics. This is something explored further in the coming chapters. Political outcomes relevant to sectarianism are visible on an informal level, on a micro-level, whereas formal politics evolve around the secular, pan-Arab ideology of the Ba'th party. When the Ba'th party came to power, especially when Hafez al-Asad became president, sectarianism and the divide between religious groups became apparent through favorable treatments and corruption. But the presence of sectarianism became even clearer in the way the Asad-regime chose to adopt anti-sectarian policies such as Realpolitik or secularism. This indicates that apparently active policies were necessary to suppress sectarianism in Syria. Important for Asad's informal politics is that he made Syrian population accessory to the regimes politics. The Syrian population learned to act "as if" and to agree with sectarian political consequences they experienced. The group that endured the most was the Sunni majority, partially owing to the Muslim Brotherhood. In refusing to act "as if" and to adhere to the great "father" of Syrian society, Asad, the Sunni population suffered. Sectarianism and isolation towards groups, different from the Alawi's, was a consequence of non-sectarian politics, corruption, the favoring of Alawi's in elitist functions and got enforced due to a strong opposition from the Muslim Brotherhood.

On a Syrian micro-level, sectarianism was front and center, for example in religious education. Secularity was the aim, but Hafez al-Asad deliberately used sectarian ties to influence the people and to alienate various groups from each other. Strategically, this was an astute choice, because this way these groups were not able to form a united opposition against the Asad-regime. Syria chose its allies with care, but this was not without its problems. Aligning with Hezbollah and Iran set bad blood among other Arab states such as Egypt or Iraq. By positioning itself regionally like this, Syria failed to put their pan-Arab strategy fully into practice.

When Bashar al-Asad became president in 2000, he inherited a country where sectarianism was present, albeit implicitly, influenced by policies of his father. Syrian society was divided into various religious groups that did not all have the power or the will to align and form a meaningful opposition to the regime. Even within the Ba'th party and the government, clannish ties were used to keep order, so for president Asad to retained his power. Most policies of the regime were non-sectarian or even anti-sectarian such as the bonds it builds with the Sunni businessmen in Damascus and Aleppo and the external political course Syria took. The alliances build under the regime

of Hafez al-Asad proved fruitful for Bashar al-Asad, as we will see in next chapters. Bashar al-Asad inherited a country where isolation, acting “as if”, corruption and intimidation were at the order of the day which impacted upon the growing sectarian divide.

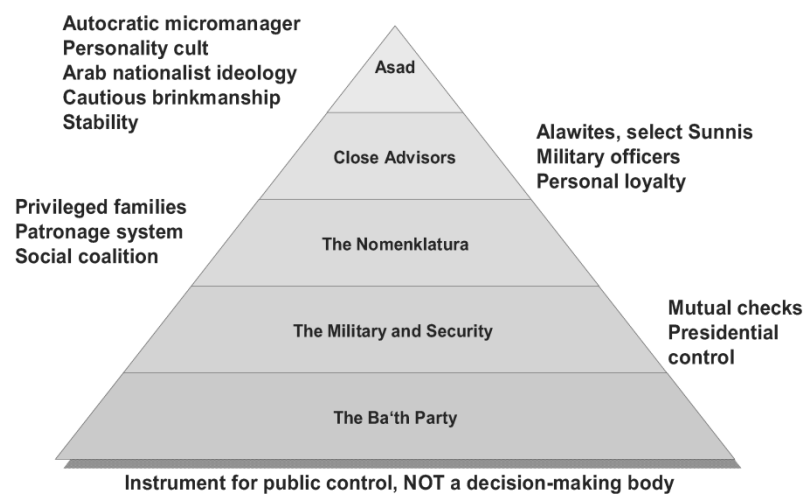
4. A heritage impossible to neglect

"We are always open to dialogue"

Hafez al-Asad died on June 10th 2000 paving the way for his son, Bashar al-Asad, the seemingly shy eye-doctor living in London. The year 2000 could have been a new start for Syria. It could have seen Syria transformed into a democratic society in which sectarian ties, corruption and nepotism would not be so apparent. This seemed to be the course that Bashar al-Asad wanted to take; according to his inaugural speech that he gave shortly after the death of his father. In it, he promised modernization and democracy. However, president Bashar al-Asad led Syria, after a short-lived prospect of the revival of democracy and freedom of speech, into an era with authoritarian rule and corruption.

Syrian society and its political system was made by and for Hafez al-Asad, which is also visible in this diagram.¹¹⁵ Hafez al-Asad made the Ba'th party the basis of his supporting 'house' in politics and made sure the people with actual influence were his own chosen confidant. These advisors are mostly from the Alawi community, but it is important to note that some Sunni's were among his close advisors. Partially, this was a strategic move: the Sunni majority was never the actual decision-making elite, but Asad tried to keep them involved in the regime to make sure they would not rebel. On the other hand, Sunni's that had ties with the Asad-regime were not seen by their community as representatives of their group. They were part of the regime and Syria's elite and got the same privileges as representatives of the Alawi's. This chapter will build on this model for public control that Hafez al-Asad installed. This chapter will seek to establish how policies of Bashar al-Asad came across in Syrian society in the decade leading up to the civil war in 2011. First this chapter examines some short biographical data of Bashar al-Asad. Subsequently, this chapter compares his policies with those of his father. Finally this chapter elaborates on policies of Bashar al-Asad related to sectarianism, his stance towards parts of the Sunni majority and his stance towards the alliances with Iran and Hezbollah. The main question of this chapter is: To what extent did Bashar al Asad's

The House that Hafez Built



¹¹⁵ Shmuel Bar, 'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview' *Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center* (2006) 356.

regime depart from the course set by his predecessor up to the start of the civil war in 2011, in particular concerning the issue of power relations?

4.1 Bashar al-Asad: Shy, smart and sly.

According to Syrian propaganda, Hafez al-Asad was born to lead Syria. He created a strong public image as a “father figure” and of a “strong leader.” He was strategic in his decisions and had a good sense on how to balance different groups against each other so that they would support him. Also, he created a strong and reliable military and security system, through which opposition was put down immediately when unrest arose. The ‘predestined’ successor of Hafez al-Asad was his oldest son: Bassel al-Asad. Bassel al-Asad, born in 1962, was trained to become his father’s successor. He received military training and built a career in the army. The Syrian media propagated an image of Bassel al-Asad as the good-looking, friendly and smart oldest son of Hafez al-Asad. The media staged him in the early 90s as a possible candidate for the presidency. His death in a car accident on January 21st 1994 came as a shock to the Syrian people, to the regime and to the Asad-family.¹¹⁶

After Bassel al-Asad died, the next son in line, Bashar al-Asad was summoned from London to prepare to succeed his father as president of Syria. Bashar al-Asad, who had only limited experience in the Syrian military as a doctor, studied in London to become an ophthalmologist, but he had to cut this postgraduate study short to become a candidate for Syrian presidency. Hafez al-Asad first focused on gaining support of the military and security apparatus for Bashar al-Asad as his successor. The top ranks of the Asad-regime, among them the army and security commanders, parts of the nomenclature and some close advisors¹¹⁷ were skeptical about Bashar al-Asad becoming president. Despite this skepticism, the choice of Hafez al-Asad for Bashar al-Asad as his successor was widely accepted, although with little enthusiasm.¹¹⁸

As we have seen, Hafez al-Asad established his own group of trustees; the close advisors, the nomenclature and the military elite or the security apparatus (see diagram). The top layer, the actual Asad-regime, mostly acted without any consultation of the rest of the party; the military especially.¹¹⁹ The outcome of this mechanism of influence can be seen in the way Bashar al-Asad was put forward as heir to his father. The senior elite were anything but enthusiastic about Bashar al-Asad succession of Hafez al-Asad. But only a week after Hafez al-Asad’s death the same elite closed ranks

¹¹⁶ Najib Ghadbian, ‘The New Asad: Dynamics of Continuity and Change in Syria’, *Middle East Journal* Vol. 55 No. 4 (2001) 625; <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/syria-mourns-death-of-a-golden-son-basil-asads-fatal-car-crash-throws-open-the-question-of-who-will-succeed-the-president-writes-robert-fisk-in-beirut-1408555.html> Accessed on: 22 – 05 - 2014.

¹¹⁷ Shmuel Bar, ‘Bashar’s Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview’, *Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) Comparative Strategy* 25 (2006) 357.

¹¹⁸ Eyal Zisser, ‘Asad’s Legacy: Syria in Transition’ (New York 2000) 160 – 162.

¹¹⁹ Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria: Revolution from above* (London and New York 2001) 86 – 87.

and supported Bashar al-Asad. During the party congress Bashar was named *“leader of the party and people”* and a few weeks later he was voted in as president with 97 percent of the votes.¹²⁰ Bashar al-Asad becoming president was definitely not a result of his overwhelming power and influence. It can be seen as proof of the power and influence of the late president Hafez al-Asad. As the then Minister of Defense Mustafa Tlas stated before congress:

*“With Asad’s death we began to think that either I or Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam were worthy of filling the shoes of the dead president. However, in view of the fact that all of us were past seventy years of age, we were afraid of a situation in which every year we would have to change the country’s leader ... We reached the conclusion that Bashar was indeed worthy of succeeding his father: after all, that had been the will of his father, Hafiz al-Asad, to whom Syria owes so much.”*¹²¹

The choice the Asad-regime made is a strategic one. Their own position including the position of the elitist part of the Alawi’s within the regime would be compromised if they started an internal struggle for power. In most of the literature, and as Stacher points out, the elite is represented as *“faceless and voiceless”*¹²² in this hereditary question. It is a strategic choice, partially to convey to the will of the deceased president, because he still enjoyed power and influence among the Syrian society. More importantly, to follow his wish to vote Bashar al-Asad in as president, they ensured their own interests and the nepotistic system would remain in place.

4.2 Bashar al-Asad 2000 – 2011: General political course and vision

A month after the death of Hafez al-Asad, Bashar al-Asad held his first inaugural speech in which he accepted his election as Syrian president. This was the first time Bashar al-Asad spoke publicly about his plans for Syria. Naturally, he could not speak negatively about his father or his period of reign:

*“These tasks are very easy because the great leader, Hafez al-Asad has prepared for us a firm ground, solid basis and a great heritage of values and principles which he defended and adhered to till he parted with us and moved to the afterlife.”*¹²³

In passages like these Bashar al-Asad shows his deep respect for his father. This was necessary in public speeches in order to emphasize Bashar al-Asad’s legitimacy as

¹²⁰ Joshua Stacher, ‘Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria’s Hereditary Succession’, *Middle East Journal* Vol. 65 No. 2 (2011) 203 – 205.

¹²¹ Stacher, ‘Reinterpreting Authoritarian Power: Syria’s Hereditary Succession’ 210 – 211.

¹²² Stacher, 205.

¹²³ First Inaugural Speech Bashar al-Asad, <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm> Accessed on: 15 – 04 – 2014.

president. However, this first inaugural speech also shows that Bashar al-Asad aimed for a different, more modern, course with Syria. He calls for participation from the people:

*"Thus society will not develop, improve or prosper if it were to depend only on one sect or one party or one group; rather, it has to depend on the work of all citizens in the entire society."*¹²⁴

Note that in this quote he states that society should not rely on one sect, party or group. Bashar al-Asad implied to move away from implicit policies which balanced different groups against each other. Also he implied that he wanted to get rid of the one party construction domination of one community, in allusion to the Alawi's. All citizens should be able to influence the political and societal course of Syria. In this first speech Bashar al-Asad had a clear vision for his country:

*"I shall try my very best to lead our country towards a future that fulfills the hopes and legitimate ambitions of our people."*¹²⁵

Other important general remarks are made, for example about institutionalism and democracy:

"As the democratic and institutional thinking are linked, and I am not saying identical, administration is bound to be influenced by them."

Also Bashar al-Asad wants to start with:

"...spreading education and knowledge..."

This is important because a highly educated group of Syrian people were responsible for initiating the Arab Spring in Syria, with peaceful demonstrations against the Asad-regime. From the start of the presidency of Bashar al-Asad we see the importance of a group of critical intellectuals. They have been very critical on the regime since 2000, which partially resulted in the civil war of 2011.

The first inaugural speech of 2000 can be seen as a start of a period of relative openness from the regime and some shifts towards freedom of speech for critical opponents of the regime. This openness, according to Human Rights Watch, came to an abrupt end on 29 January 2011, although why remains a matter of speculation. According to Wieland, Bashar al-Asad had plenty of opportunities to change the course

¹²⁴ First Inaugural Speech Bashar al-Asad, <http://www.al-bab.com/arab/countries/syria/bashar00a.htm> Accessed on: 15 - 04 - 2014.

¹²⁵ <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/28/world/meast/syria-Asad-profile/> Accessed on: 15 - 04 - 2014.

of Syria and move towards a modern, democratic state as he set out to do in his inaugural speech of 2000. One potential reason is Bashar al-Asad's continued relationship with the Ba'th party and more importantly to the Alawi dominated security apparatus, which provided the legitimacy for his presidency. The democracy that Bashar had called upon did not mean, according to Wieland, that the regime's elite would be ready to give up their absolute power.¹²⁶ The choice to stick to the Ba'th party and to stick to the safety of the house that Hafez al-Asad build, weakened the Ba'th party itself, and it weakened the reputation of president Bashar al-Asad among Syrian citizens.¹²⁷

4.3 Internal politics & sectarian divide

Bashar al-Asad first focused mostly on domestic issues. According to him, all citizens should be able to influence policy. A pan-Arab democracy became the goal to which the new, modern Syria should head. This kind of democracy, he argued, differed from the Western concept of democracy. Asad did try to give a democratic voice to the people but he ruled as an authoritarian. Sectarianism was institutionalized within the Syrian political system and society at large. Informal sectarianism was visible in the military organization in which power relations and structure was mostly determined by "personal alliances." Military functions were mostly granted by sectarian, regional and tribal connections, which led to an overrepresentation of the Alawi community in the security apparatus and can be seen as a form of implicit sectarian policies.¹²⁸ Although both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad always denied the sectarian nature of the regime, informal sectarian ties, such as the ones in the military, did influence the formal policies of the regime. This can also be seen in policies on religion itself which are actively focused on banning it from public life, an indicator that the Asad regime did recognize the sectarian nature of Syria and actively tried to deny and repress it. Bashar al-Asad envisioned a more modern Syria, but despite of his vision and attempts to modernize Syrian society, the implicit sectarianism in the security apparatus for example, slowed modernizing policies down. Sectarianism under Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad never took the form of sectarianism as defined by Makdisi; the form where religious affiliation is actively linked to formal policies.¹²⁹ But informally, religious affiliation played a role in institutions such as the security apparatus, stalling change and modernization. Sectarianism was not formally a strategy, but on an informal level it caused Syrian institutions to behave differently. This caused dissatisfaction in Syrian society, especially

¹²⁶Carsten Wieland, 'Asad's Decade of Lost Chances' in Carsten Wieland, Adam Almqvist & Helena Nassif, *The Syrian Uprising: Dynamics of an Insurgency* (Fife 2013) 13.

¹²⁷ Wieland, 'Asad's Decade of Lost Chances', 12.

¹²⁸ Van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria*, 38 – 40.

¹²⁹ Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History, and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London 2000) 1 – 15, 166 – 175. See for a full description of sectarianism the theoretical framework of chapter 1.

in the well-educated group. Critique increased with an ultimate outburst during the civil war in 2011, also sparked by uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt.

So what did exactly backfire for Bashar between 2000 and 2011? This thesis presents the idea that Bashar al-Asad mistakenly pursued the best of both “worlds.” The Asad-regime wanted to remain authoritarian, while moving towards better levels of education, improved an improved economy, and ultimately a more modern and democratic state. As Syria developed into this “modern” age, it became clear that Syria did not perform outstandingly on an economic level. Syrian citizens, especially men from urban areas such as Damascus, Aleppo and Homs, had access to higher education but because of poor labor market options, remained unemployed.¹³⁰ Poor labor market options, made Syrian citizens more willing to engage in a political debate and to be critical about their leader and the regime.¹³¹

In the first years of Bashar’s presidency critical remarks, by highly educated Syrians, were pitted against the Ba’th party as a whole, the ruling Alawi community and the supporting house that Bashar inherited from his father. Bashar al-Asad kept receiving the support he needed to be able to remain president, from Syrian citizens as well as from external allies such as Hezbollah, explored later in this chapter.¹³² The civil support and the external alliances are the most important bequeaths that Bashar al-Asad received from his father and it is the reason why he could become and would remain president. Hafez al-Asad made the Syrian people accessory to his policies and the most of the Syrian citizens moving into Bashar’s ruling era were not able and willing to criticize the regime and the Asad-family. When we take another look at religious affiliation we see that this was formally banned from public life but was sometimes implicitly promoted by the Asad-regime under both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad. For example, Pierret states that through stimulating privatized religious education, the government kept ties with several religious communities. This provided legitimacy for the regime from these communities because they were able to practice their religion informally, also it provided a legitimization for the regimes formal religious policies, and it prevented unrest.¹³³ On a formal, explicit level and to the outside world, Syria was seen as “*a showcase of sectarian toleration.*”¹³⁴ Secular policies instead of sectarian policies kept on being the main formal political course of Syria.

¹³⁰ <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/sy.html#Econ> Accessed on: 22 - 04 - 2014.

¹³¹ Filipe R. Campante and Davin Chor, ‘Why was the Arab World Posed for Revolution? Schooling, Economic Opportunities, and the Arab Spring’, *The Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (2012) 174 - 178.

¹³² Anders Strindberg, ‘Syria under Pressure’ *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 33 No. 4 (2004) 61.

¹³³ Thomas Pierret, ‘The State Management of Religion in Syria; The End of “Indirect Rule”?’ in Steven Heydemann and Reinoud Leenders, *Middle East Authoritarianisms: Governance, Contestation, and Regime Resilience in Syria and Iran* (Stanford 2013) 93 - 95.

¹³⁴ Volker Perthes, ‘The Syrian Solution’ *Foreign Affairs* Vol. 85 No. 6 (2006) 35.

Two domestic developments under Bashar al-Asad are important to note, to understand sectarianism in Syria under his presidency: First, as we have already seen, economic circumstances did not improve during Bashar al-Asad's first decade as president. More than 50% of the country lived below the poverty line and labor market options did not increase. Poverty led to migration from the Syrian countryside to urban areas of Damascus or Homs.¹³⁵ This fueled sectarian divides, because various communities now lived together in cities, whereas under Hafez al-Asad these groups were geographically divided. In short, under Bashar al-Asad economic circumstances deteriorated in rural areas which indirectly caused migration to urban areas leading increased interaction between different religious communities. Poor economic circumstances fueled dissatisfaction among the Syrian people, which are according to Salamandra, was "expressed through sectarian idioms."¹³⁶ An example of this is the growing resentment towards the Alawi community who, according many Sunni's are "all connected to power".¹³⁷ The increased expression of dissatisfaction, due to increased interaction between various communities was mostly directed at the elite of the Alawi's. Critique came mainly from Sunni's, and is thus an expression of unrest that is linked to religious affiliation indicating a growing role of sectarianism. Another reason Syrian citizens migrated to the main cities, was because of several periods of severe drought in the country. This led to an agricultural crisis, leaving middle class farmers without their livelihoods. This manifested in rebellions on the countryside and resulted in the Ba'th party to losing one of their original strongholds. Cities such as Dar'a and Homs, that used to be pro-regime became, especially after the draughts of 2006, more anti-regime and are during the civil war even partially in hands of the oppositional forces.¹³⁸

As we have seen both under Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad religious affiliation does play a role in Syrian society. Another example comes with personal status law, granting different groups their own space in society, which remains a part of Syrian law. Personal status law was established in 1953, replacing Ottoman status law. These laws made it possible for religious minorities such as Christians, Druze and the Sunni majority to live according to their own rules and accommodations. This caused different groups to remain focused. Personal status law caused sectarian divide to increase and the Syrian regime kept this law in action for this reason.¹³⁹ For the Asad-regime, the sectarian

¹³⁵ <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/overview> Accessed on: 23 - 04 - 2014.

¹³⁶ Christa Salamandra, 'Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections', *Middle East Critique* 22:3 (2013) 304.

¹³⁷ Christa Salamandra, 'Reflections on Sectarianism in Syria,' *Anthropology News* (2012).
<http://www.anthropology-news.org/index.php/2013/06/20/reflections-on-sectarianism-in-syria/>
Accessed on: 03 - 06 - 2014.

¹³⁸ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/wonkblog/wp/2013/09/10/drought-helped-caused-syrias-war-will-climate-change-bring-more-like-it/> Accessed on: 28 - 04 - 2014.

¹³⁹ Dick Douwes, 'Going Public: minority muslim communities and public space in Syria (prior to the revolt)' in Wim Hofstee & Arie van der Kooij, *Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden & Boston 2013) 71 - 72.

divide was beneficial because that divide meant balancing different groups against each other was simpler, so that they were not able to form one block against the regime. Due to the relative openness of Bashar al-Asad's presidency in the early 2000s, the religious divide vanished for a time, causing different groups to get involved with each other. This did not only happen because the regime allowed freedom of speech. Also modern media such as mobile telephone, television and later social media became accessible for Syrian citizens. After that first year of relative openness, due to economic circumstances and informal relations, sectarian divide continued to grow implicitly. Bashar al-Asad's formal statement about sectarianism is always that Syria adheres to secularism. This, according to him, brings unity and prosperity. Personal status law was upheld to ban religion from public life as much as possible, granting the different religious communities their own place in society leading to less religious showing off in the public sphere. Secularism was promoted as the overarching Syrian, public ideology to create one overarching identity: *"When we live in the same territory, but have different identities, we are already a divided country, because each group isolates itself from the rest."*¹⁴⁰

A second development was an increase in conversion to Shi'ism under president Bashar al-Asad. The ruling elite affiliated mostly with Shi'ism. Also, Syria maintained good relationships with Shi'ite states such as Iran, causing Shi'ism to be the more accepted branch of Islam in Syria. Shi'ism was informally promoted by the regime and its allies, in for example education funded by ally Iran, as 'state religion' which stands in sharp contrast with the formal secular politics of the Asad-regime. It is an indicator that informally influencing religious ties was rampant. Growing conversion to Shi'ism caused Sunni's to feel increasingly neglected by the Syrian regime and to polarize them from the Shi'ite branch. Since 2000, the Sunni elite complained at the growing Shi'ite influence in Syria, as was the case under Hafez al-Asad, where the Muslim Brotherhood was part of the opposition. With the brutal defeat in Hama in 1982 the Brotherhood, consisting of Sunni opposition, were exiled from Syrian territory. With the polarization between Shi'ites and Sunni's the Brotherhood negotiated a return to Syria, which started in the late 1990s. Slowly, some returned to Syria from exile and joined local initiatives to force Bashar al-Asad and his regime to take in account the Sunni majority. From their exile structures, build after 1982, were increasing ties with different oppositional forces outside of Syria, leading to an increased influence on opposition in Syria.^{141,142} Hafez al-Asad was able to defeat the Sunni opposition in conflicts such as in Hama in 1982, because of a loyal, mainly Alawi security apparatus, as well because the main part of the

140 Bashar al-Asad in an interview with state newspaper Al-Thawra (2003)
<http://www.globalresearch.ca/bashar-al-Asad-interview-on-political-islam-the-egyptian-crisis-and-foreign-intervention/5341856> Accessed on: 24 - 04 - 2014.

141 Sami Moubayed, 'Syria's Ba'thists loosen the reins' *Agence Global* (2010)
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/GD26Ak04.html Accessed on: 24 - 04 - 2014.

142 Petra Becker, 'Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Still a Crucial Actor: Inclusivity the Order of the Day in Dealings with Syria's Opposition', *SWP Comments 34* (2013) 4.

Sunni community was passive in criticizing the Asad-regime. According to Pierret, the Muslim Brotherhood was only a small group with little influence, because they did not represent the Sunni majority.¹⁴³ After the short-lived period of political openness, the Brotherhood was still not welcome in Syria.¹⁴⁴ What the Brotherhood stood for opposed the ideology of the Asad-regime directly. Where Asad wanted a semi-democratic state, the Brotherhood called for more democracy and where the main ideology was secularity, the Brotherhood called for installing more Sharia or religious politics in Syria.¹⁴⁵

4.4 External Politics: Isolation & Regional Sectarianism

The first chapter showed that the ideology of the Ba'th party was based upon Pan-Arabism, socialism and secularity. In reality, as we have seen, sectarianism was always present, although implicitly. Pan-Arabism was the official ideology of the Ba'th party and during the reign of both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad. The aim was to unite Arab states and to build a strong conglomerate of states as a block against the West. According to Shmuel Bar: *"The Ba'th concept of freedom refers not to individual freedoms or civil rights, but to the liberation of the Arab nation as a collective from the domination of the West."*¹⁴⁶ This ideology was a central pillar in the politics of Hafez al-Asad. When his son became president, pan-Arabism at first remained the leading ideology. But after a few years under Bashar al-Asad, Syria became internationally more isolated with dwindling allies: Hezbollah and Islamic Iran. This isolation was mostly due to punishments of the US, for aligning with Hezbollah. A Ba'th state official says about this stance of the US: *"What they call the Syrian occupation of Lebanon, which guarantees stability and calm, is being punished by sanctions, while the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza ... is being rewarded with loan guarantees and aid."*¹⁴⁷ So although Bashar al-Asad wanted to follow his father's path to build a strong Arabic region, Pan-Arabism became impossible due to isolation and sanctions from the West, leaving Syria to focus inward instead of forming external bonds.

Isolation led to a necessity of allies that would support Asad and that would back him in his struggle with Western powers such as the US. Hafez al-Asad already build such durable external relations and Bashar al-Asad maintained these relations. The alliance with Iran, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, is not build upon a common ideology. Under Hafez al-Asad both Iran and Syria had common interests, but

¹⁴³ Thomas Pierret, 'The Syrian Baath Party and Sunni Islam: Conflicts and Connivance', Middle East Brief No. 77 (2014) 2.

¹⁴⁴ Wieland, 'Asad's Decade of Lost Chances', 12.

¹⁴⁵ Becker, 'Syrian Muslim Brotherhood Still a Crucial Actor: Inclusivity the Order of the Day in Dealings with Syria's Opposition', 4.

¹⁴⁶ Shmuel Bar, 'Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview' *Institute for Policy and Strategy Interdisciplinary Center* (2006) 365.

¹⁴⁷ Anders Strindberg, 'Syria under Pressure' *Journal of Palestine Studies* Vol. 33 No. 4 (2004) 60.

under his son the alliance turned into being a “*marriage of convenience*.”¹⁴⁸ It being a mere marriage of convenience does not mean that it did not impact on Syrian society. With sectarian issues on the rise in the first presidential decade of Bashar al-Asad, the influence of Iran only stimulated sectarian divide. Iran aligned with the Shi’ite community in Syria, and created their own Shi’ite modalities and pilgrimage in- and towards Syria. Iran funded and promoted different Shi’ite religious shrines, monuments, institutions and practices in Syria, resulting in an increased visibility of Shi’ism in Syria which caused resentment among the Sunni majority. External alliances under Bashar al-Asad thus also influenced greater religious polarization in Syria. The next chapter elaborates this argument with a case of the Shi’ite shrine Sayyida Zaynab in Damascus, which is sustained with Iranian funds.

Another important alliance is with the Lebanese movement Hezbollah. Syria developed an interest in Lebanon together with the development of a pan-Arabic ideology. The common opinion among Arab nationalists under the French Mandate and of the Ba’th party was that Lebanon should have been a part of Syria. Lebanon did not become a part of Syria, but this common opinion in Syria first led to an alliance with the Maronite community, a Christian community residing in Lebanon mostly at the border with Syria. This alliance occurred during the French occupation and was built upon similar independence aspirations and nationalist feelings. Syrian alliances are thus not always based upon religious affiliation; similar political goals can be an even greater reason to align with certain communities.¹⁴⁹

Hezbollah, established around 1980, is a Shi’ite led political faction. Within Lebanon they are a political organization, which also participate in the government. Externally, in particular in the West, Hezbollah is often seen as a terrorist organization because of their violent stance towards Israel and the US, which they regard as the invader of their country.¹⁵⁰ This, for Hezbollah, is a reason to align with Syria, who had a similar stance towards Israel and the US. In 2006, the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah came to its climax with an Israeli attack on Lebanon as a reaction on the kidnapping of two Israeli soldiers by Hezbollah.¹⁵¹ This led to the decline of Hezbollah because it received much internal critique. Critics stated that Hezbollah was too much of a resistance group instead of a political, non-violent, party. Although after 2006 Hezbollah declined and became isolated, it got the support of Syria together with Iran and thus it remained a force in Lebanon.¹⁵² The alliance with Hezbollah provided Hafez

¹⁴⁸ Volker Perthes, ‘The Syrian Solution’, *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 85 No. 6 (2006) 38.

¹⁴⁹ Youssef Chaitani, *Post – Colonial Syria and Lebanon; The Decline of Arab Nationalism and the Triumph of the State* (London & New York 2007) x, 5 – 6.

¹⁵⁰ Rola El Hussein, ‘Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria’, *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 31 No. 05 (2010) 804.

¹⁵¹ El Hussein, ‘Hezbollah and the Axis of Refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria’, 808.

¹⁵² Jubin M. Goodarzi, ‘Syria and Iran: Alliance Cooperation in a Changing Regional Environment’, *Ortadoğu Etütleri* Vol. 4 No. 2 (2013) 47 – 49.

al-Asad's regime with the legitimacy it needed for their anti-imperialist stance. Under Hafez al-Asad, Syria was always the stronger party, Hezbollah was accepting of this inequality because it needed Syria in combination with Iran for financial support and for arms and military training. The military supplies came from Iran; Syria was needed for the conduit of these supplies. Bashar al-Asad wanted to move to a more equal relationship with Hezbollah and Lebanon.¹⁵³ However, according to Rola el Hussein, it became an alliance of strategic interdependence: *"Syria needs Hezbollah's support to remain its relevance in the region and to keep its fingers on the Lebanese political pulse and Hezbollah relies on Syrian permission for the transit of weapons."*¹⁵⁴ Both presidents Asad tried to downplay the possible sectarian character of this alliance, stating that it simply is an alliance out of strategic interest and common political goals. However, in later years especially in the decade leading up to the civil war, religious affiliation, a common Shi'ite conviction did become apparent. Shi'ite pilgrimage from Lebanon to Syria was very common. Also from 2011 onwards Hezbollah fighters fought on the side of the regime because, amongst others, they felt aligned on religious bases.¹⁵⁵ The next two chapters will elaborate on respectively the pilgrimage from, among others, Lebanon to Syria and on the Shi'ite shrine culture in Syria and the civil war that started in 2011. The involvement of both Iran and Hezbollah will also be discussed there.

4.5 A heritage impossible to shake off

To what extent departed the regime of Bashar al-Asad since the start of his presidency up until the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011, from the heritage of his father Hafez al-Asad, in particular concerning the issue of power relations?

This chapter has showed that from 2000 onwards, Bashar al-Asad had the intention to rule in a remarkably manner different than his father. This did not mean that he did not agree with the policies and decisions of Hafez al-Asad, instead, it meant that Bashar al-Asad realized the only way to move forward and to keep the legitimacy of his regime was to provide more openness and to move into a more modern era where democracy and involvement of citizens were key. As we have seen this period of relative openness only lasted a year, from 2001 onward Bashar al-Asad's regime bore more similarity to his father's regime. Hafez al-Asad had left such a strong political legacy which proved to be impossible to shake off. Democratizing Syria in the way Bashar al-Asad envisioned had failed. Freedom of speech was easily established but eventually, this liberty caused the regime to react harshly against critics, imprisoning them, often without any charges. Modern media democratized Syria, despite the efforts of the regime to undermine this development. Modernization stalled due to a poor labor market, worsening economic circumstances and corruption. Worsening economic

¹⁵³ Perthes, 'The Syrian Solution', 36.

¹⁵⁴ El Hussein, 811.

¹⁵⁵ El Hussein, 810.

circumstances and the severe drought on the countryside caused a great number of people to leave their villages and migrate to the main cities. Externally Bashar al-Asad chose to keep the alliances that Hafez al-Asad built, with Iran and Hezbollah. Sustaining these alliances proved ever more that he did not take such a different political course than his father. Bashar al-Asad took over a country of his father and all the changes he tried to make failed, which is proof that Hafez al-Asad's heritage was strong enough to survive and outlive the presidency of his son.

5. Sayyida Zaynab: Iran's way of buying their influence in Syria

This chapter briefly addressed the position of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, located in the Southern suburbs of the Syrian city of Damascus, in the current crisis. It is an interesting case because it gives an example of the role of sectarianism, or at least of religious particularism, in Syrian policies since 1970. Subsequently this chapter serves as a transitioning chapter moving to examining interreligious relations and interregional alliances during the Syrian civil war in the next chapter. Sayyida Zaynab is also important the current conflict.

The shrine of Sayyida Zaynab is located in the southern suburbs of the Syrian capital Damascus. The shrine is dedicated to Zaynab who was the daughter of the first Shia Imam, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and the granddaughter of the prophet Mohammed. Ali is often seen as the second convertor after the Prophet to convert to Islam, after Mohammed's wife Khadija.¹⁵⁶ At the Sayyida Zaynab shrine, with the vagueness around the person the shrine dedicated to, namely: Ali and his daughter Zaynab, discussion about their succession seemed to increase since the development of the modern definition of sectarianism.¹⁵⁷ The discussion about the order of conversion to Islam is also the basis of the differences between Sunni's and Shi'ites.¹⁵⁸ According to the Shi'ite sect of Islam, Zaynab was buried in this shrine in Damascus, so for a long time the shrine also attracted many Sunni pilgrims.¹⁵⁹ Pilgrims from all over the Middle East come to this shrine to pay their respect to Zaynab, but in the past few decades it is also a meeting place for members of the same community, mostly for Shi'ites.¹⁶⁰ That this shrine is such an attractive place for religious pilgrimage makes it interesting for this research. Shi'ite pilgrimage and Shi'ite influence on the management and protection of the shrine increased in the past three decades which shows that sectarian ties do play a role in every day interactions in Syria.

Since Hafez al-Asad came to power in 1970, he sought to legitimize his power. The political elite of the Alawi community was constantly under pressure of parts of the Sunni majority. The Asad-regime chose to promote Shi'ism and to build alliances, as we

156 Gleave, Robert M.. "Alī b. Abī Ṭālib." Encyclopaedia of Islam, three. Edited by: Gudrun Krämer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rowson. Brill Online, 2014.

http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/ali-b-abi-talib-COM_26324?s.num=0&s.f.s2_parent=s.f.book.encyclopaedia-of-islam-3&s.q=Ali+Ibn+Abi+Talib#d63230487e701 Accessed on: 09 - 06 - 2014.

¹⁵⁷ Modern definition of sectarianism, from theoretical framework in chapter 1: "We speak of sectarianism when religion plays an active role in politics, and, according to Makdisi, this emerged in the 19th and 20th century in numerous states in the Middle East. Makdisi sees the emergence of this modern form of sectarianism as a novelty: religious affiliation became the defining factor in public citizenship and in politics. If this religious affiliation is stimulated in any way by a regime, we can see this political course as sectarian."

¹⁵⁸ See for a closer examination of this difference between Sunni's and Shi'ites the theoretical framework.

¹⁵⁹ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/> Accessed on 02 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GtuKLtrWS24> Accessed on 02 - 05 - 2014.

have seen, with Shi'ite ally Iran and Shi'ite political faction Hezbollah. These two parties, especially Iran, funded and managed the Sayyida Zaynab shrine and thereby facilitated Shi'ite pilgrimage to Syria. Around 1980, Hafez al-Asad approached two religious Shi'ite leaders: Musa al-Sadr the Lebanese-Iranian cleric; and Hasan al-Shirazi a descendant from a Shia religious family. They recognized the Syrian Alawi sect as Shi'ite in exchange for regime patronage. Building Shi'ite ties by shrines like these and such religious leaders and promoting Shi'ism, thus provided legitimacy for the Syrian regime from outside of Syria.¹⁶¹ Although the shrine was already a place for pilgrims from all over the region since the end of the French Mandate in 1945, from the 1980s Sayyida Zaynab became a place of mass Shi'ite pilgrimage from Iran, because due to the Iran-Iraq war that started in 1980 shrines in Iraq became less accessible. The Sayyida Zaynab shrine is, in the eyes of Shi'ites, definitely not the holiest place to go to. Iraq houses shrines that are in the eyes of the Shi'ite sect, much holier; such as the shrine around of the Imam Ali in Najaf. Before the war, Iran was much involved in the shrine culture in Iraq, by funding it and promoting Shi'ite pilgrimage to these shrines. From the 1980s, Shi'ite Iranians were no longer welcome in Iraq, causing an increase to other Shi'ite shrines across the region, such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus.¹⁶² Also, this caused the Iranian government to start funding and promoting shrines in Syria, implicitly also causing an increase to Shi'ite promotion and conversion in Syria, since they already had ties with the Syrian regime.

According to Edith Szanto the shrine can be defined as a "*state of exception*."¹⁶³ This concept, similar to a state of emergency, meant that the rule of law could be changed so that, in this case, the shrine was able to accompany all pilgrims, providing them with a safe place to stay. Around 1980 around the tomb of Zaynab a large shrine was built, which was finished in 1990. This was funded with Iranian financial support. Syrian citizens, however, almost never went to this shrine. They saw it as a 'foreign' place within their own Syrian territory.¹⁶⁴ So as we have seen, under Hafez al-Asad, the Sayyida Zaynab shrine developed into a pilgrimage for Shi'ites and other religious refugees from all over the Middle East. It was funded and managed by Iran, which strengthened the bond with the Syrian regime and by which Hafez al-Asad also lent more legitimacy to its regime.

Under Hafez al-Asad Shi'ite pilgrims were welcome at the Sayyida Zaynab shrine. This, among others, provided an image of Syria as a tolerant state in which various groups with a different nationality had a place. For example, from 1991 onwards many

¹⁶¹ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/> Accessed on: 02 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁶² <http://www.meforum.org/3682/iraqi-shiite-challenge-iran> Accessed on: 09 - 06 - 2014.

¹⁶³ Edith Szanto, 'Sayyida Zaynab in the state of exception: Shi'I sainthood as "qualified life" in contemporary Syria', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 44 (2012) 295.

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/> Accessed on: 02 - 05 - 2014.

Iraqi Shia settled around Sayyida Zaynab, because of the failed Shia uprising in Iraq. In previous chapters we have seen that this religious tolerance was a facade. In reality, the incoming of Shi'ite pilgrims ascertained that the polarization between the Sunni majority and Shi'ite minority grew. Especially when Bashar al-Asad came to power in 2000, this sectarianism influenced by religious intermingling from Iran and Hezbollah became apparent. Sectarianism, amongst others, is driven by competition over group identity. The Sunni majority in Syria, but also non-Shi'ite religious communities, felt like their position in public life was threatened. The alliance with Iran, caused an increase in conversion to- and visibility of Shi'ism. The Iranian funding of the Sayyida Zaynab shrine is an example on how such an alliance influenced sectarian divide within Syria.

The political course that Syria took by building alliances based shared interests and realist politics with Iran and Hezbollah, was continued by Bashar al-Asad when he became president in 2000. The regime promoted Shi'ism through education, as we have seen in the previous chapter, but also through building and preserving large Shi'ite shrines, such as Sayyida Zaynab, with the help of their allies. Maintaining these shrines as a Shi'ite regional pilgrimage place provided the regime with regional legitimacy. Sunni organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood saw this foreign religious activity in their country as proof that Syria was 'teaming up' with Iran and Hezbollah, and trying to convert the Syrian population. This only strengthened sectarian idioms in Syria. The funding of religious places such as the Zaynab shrine, did not change under Bashar al-Asad. For him it was convenient that these processes were already in place. When dissatisfaction among the Sunni and well-educated Syrian citizens grew, however, the visibility of foreign Shi'ite influence and religious activity encouraged protests and critique on the course of the regime.

Although the Sayyida Zaynab shrine is only an example on how the influence of the allies of the Syrian government plays out, it is a relevant micro-level example on how these small-scale sectarian divisions play out in conflicts such as the civil war. The shrine became a place where the regime gained its legitimacy from. This is reflected in the pictures of Bashar al-Asad, Iranian president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and



Hezbollah leader Sheikh Hassan Nasrallah, that got greater presence at the shrine since Bashar al-Asad became president in 2000.¹⁶⁵ Nasrallah and his organization Hezbollah gained more prominence in protecting the shrine from attacks from Sunni protesters, since 2000. Since the 2011 civil war, Hezbollah, Iraqi and Iranian militia come to Syria to protect religious Shi'ite places with importance for the Asad regime.¹⁶⁶ In several short clips brigades such as the Abul Fadhl al-Abbas Brigade are visible protecting the Zaynab shrine. This brigade, as many anti-regime brigades in the civil war, is named after an important figure in Shi'ite Islam, Al-'Abbās ibn 'Ali, son of Ali Ibn Abi Talib.¹⁶⁷ Since, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, first Imam and father of Zaynab the namesake of the shrine in Damascus the link of this brigade and the shrine becomes clear immediately. This is also the reason why this brigade is present in protecting the shrine during the civil war since 2011. In this clip the leader of the Brigade states: *"The Abul Fadhl al-Abbas Brigade was formed to protect the sacred sites, which they [the extremists] are targeting."*¹⁶⁸ Although it is known that brigades like these are built on members from the Shia sect,¹⁶⁹ the leader states: *"In the Abul Fadhl al-Abbas brigade, we are from all the various sects. Let them not think that the Brigade is solely from the shia sect."*¹⁷⁰ This might be true, but the extremists he was talking about in the first quote are in their eyes from the Sunni sect. Sectarian ties and conflict is the basis of the emergence of brigades like this. Sectarian ties become clear when one looks at the namesake of the brigade again: Al-'Abbās ibn 'Ali who is an important figure within the Shi'ite sect. This is important because it is an expression that shows the sectarian character of the conflict now going on in Syria, since the oppositional groups clearly refer to sectarian ties. Syria may have looked from the outside to be a secular state. The reality is that sectarian idioms were stimulated by the regime in the choice of alliances, in the acceptance of Shi'ite pilgrims and refugees and in the coming of Shi'ite foreign militia to fight in Syria.¹⁷¹ It also stimulated Sunni resistance, not only from within Syria. Sunni dominated states such as Qatar and Saudi-Arabia also helped to resist Shi'ite influences in Syria, which we will return to in the next chapter.

¹⁶⁵ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/> Picture of the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine in 2006.

¹⁶⁶ Shia fighters protecting shrines such as Sayyida Zaynab consist out of Lebanese (Hezbollah), Iraqi and Iranian militia. This is visible in several visual sources such as these two short clips:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bF9a-TwygwI> and

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxD2ogFRClw> Accessed on: 05 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁶⁷ http://www.sibtayn.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2640&Itemid=440
Accessed on: 09 – 06 – 2014.

¹⁶⁸ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxD2ogFRClw> at minute 1:02, accessed on: 05 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁶⁹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/04/syria-islamic-sunni-shia-shrines-volunteers>
Accessed on: 05 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁷⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AxD2ogFRClw> at minute 1:34, accessed on: 05 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁷¹ <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/zaynabs-guardians-the-emergence-of-shia-militias-in-syria>
Accessed on: 05 – 05 – 2014.

6. The fight for the popular narrative: Sectarianism in the civil war.

"The Revolution Will Not Be Televised. It Will Be YouTubised #Syria #mar15"¹⁷²

Previous chapters showed the complexity in Syria: Complexity in regime, in societal ties, in religious relations, in politics and in regional positioning. Chapter 4 elaborated on the first decade of Bashar al-Asad presidency. We have seen flaws and mistakes. Also we have seen authoritarianism and characteristics of dictatorship. The historical context and analysis of Asad's family rule is important in this chapter in which the final sub question is addressed: To what extent did regional sectarianism and interreligious relations have an impact, especially on relations between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims and the course of the civil war that started in 2011?

The central theme of this last chapter will be the civil war that started in 2011. First this chapter addressed the civil war itself: its course, impact and the composition of different parties. This part is mainly built upon the book *'The Syria Dilemma'* and on the narratives that are constructed on social media such as Twitter. In the first part of this chapter Bashar al-Asad's stance on this conflict is addressed. Subsequently the chapter will move on to the discussion of the role of regional sectarianism and interreligious relations on this civil war. As we have seen in previous chapters, the relationship between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims was already under pressure before Hafez al-Asad became president in 1970. This pressure dissolved in violent outbursts between the two groups, such as in 1982 in the town of Hama. Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims were already divided by implicit sectarian politics for quite some time and this polarization increased even more during the recent civil war. The Sunni – Shi'ite schism has a central role in this chapter, in the discussion of interreligious relations. Finally the role of long term allies such as Iran and Hezbollah are discussed. Did these alliances change due to the civil war and did it change the course of the war? What are Iran's and Hezbollah's interest in sending or withdrawing help to the Syrian regime? Also other regional players, that are aligned more with Sunni Muslims and thus not with the Syrian regime, such as Saudi – Arabia, are discussed.

6.1 The Civil War

As already stated in the theoretical framework, the civil war started in 2011 as peaceful protests by those unsatisfied by the regime's education policies, Syria's social welfare and about the regime as a whole and its open corruption. Note that the dissatisfaction is about domestic problems and about interreligious relations between different groups or about Syria's regional position. However, the civil war did have an influence on these two issues. The conflict effected not only domestic political problems, it also influenced

¹⁷² Tweet from Arabic Journalist Dima Khatib (@Dima_Khatib, 275000 followers) on May 28th 2011, Accessed on: 18 – 05 – 2014 with search term #mar15 on twitter.

interregional bonds with for example Iran, Saudi – Arabia, Hezbollah and Israel.¹⁷³ Also, although interreligious relations were not a cause for the protests in 2011, the conflict is now fought along sectarian lines.¹⁷⁴ These two topics, interreligious relations in the civil war and interregional relations, are addressed more specifically later in this chapter. First, this chapter addresses the main communication channel during this conflict: social media, which turned out to be catalysis for the conflict and a means for foreign media to stay fully informed about the events in Syria, since it was almost impossible to be on Syrian soil anymore.¹⁷⁵

6.1.1 Social Media in Syria: ‘Creating a convenient narrative’

Social media is a 21st century invention. On a domestic and external level social media, such as YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and personal blogs, became a catalysis for all kinds of conflicts.¹⁷⁶ The civil war in Syria came into a series of rapid developments through intensive use of social media by all parties. Even before the violent outbursts in 2011, activists dissatisfied with the Asad-regime tried to mobilize their support, internally and externally, through social media. In 2011 the civil war started and the activists tried to create a similar media hype as in Egypt during their Arab Spring. By creating a hashtag on twitter, ‘#mar15,’ and creating a slogan “the people want to overthrow the regime” the activists tried push their uprising viral, similar to what happened in Egypt and Tunisia. Tweets with #mar15, referred to protests in Palestine that day. In Syria the hashtag was used to call for demonstrations, which came to fruition on March 18th. The hashtag is used throughout the whole civil war, mainly by people that oppose the regime, examples of such tweets are:¹⁷⁷

Pres. Asad is wearing 2 faces right now; Asad the reformer in front of media & Asad the dictator in front of his own people. #Syria #Mar15¹⁷⁸ (@IbaaAfana)

URGENT: #Syrian regime tend to wash off blood marks of streets prior to expected visits of humanitarian organizations to #Daraa #Mar15¹⁷⁹(@DaraaNow)

¹⁷³ Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, ‘Why Syria Matters’ in Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, *The Syria Dilemma* (Cambridge 2013) 3 – 14.

¹⁷⁴ Christa Salamandra, ‘Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological Reflections’, *Middle East Critique* 22:3 (2013) 304.

¹⁷⁵ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon and Sean Aday, ‘Syria’s Socially Mediated Civil War: Blogs and Bullets III’, *Peaceworks* no. 91 (2014) 5 -6.

¹⁷⁶ Alex Comminos, ‘The Role of Social Media and User-generated Content in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding’, *The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank* (2013); Clay Shirky, ‘The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, the Public Sphere, And Political Change’, *Foreign Affairs* (2011).

¹⁷⁷ For more selected relevant tweets with #mar15 as search term, see the Appendix.

¹⁷⁸ Tweet from Syrian dentist Ibaa Afana (@IbaaAfana, 4374 followers) on April 20th 2011, Accessed on: 18 – 05 – 2014 with search term #mar15 on twitter.

¹⁷⁹ Tweet from twitter platform Dar’a Now (@Dar’aNow, 11700 followers) on May 5 2011. Accessed on: 18 – 05 – 2014 with search term #mar15 on twitter.

In tweets and Facebook posts from 2011 there are many references to independent blogs of Syrians describing the civil war first hand. Because these messages come from an individual perspective, there is a difficulty in verifying their veracity. Further, the opposition and the regime both use social media to create their own narrative. A tweet such as the one about the killings in Dar'a, by 'Dar'a Now,' is a message in which the ultimate goal is to shed light on the Syrian regime. Dar'a Now is an oppositional Twitter platform. Note that the platform for this kind of narrative building was provided by Bashar al-Asad himself when he started to modernize Syria from the start of his presidency in 2000. Access to social media backfired in a way that the Asad-regime could not have predicted. With every social media message, the question should be: To what narrative does this message belong? And what are the main goals of the message?¹⁸⁰ Since the main media such as CNN and BBC reporting about the civil war make use of social media content, there are always multiple narratives emerging.

In 1982, when the social media channels of today did not exist, nobody knew what was going on, the city of Hama was totally shut off from the rest of Syria and the world. In 2011, the regime also shut off a Syrian town from the outside world; this time the small Syrian town of Dar'a, where the first violent repression of demonstrations by the regime's security forces took place. Dar'a, in the South of Syria, was the first Syrian town where large protests took place due to the arrest of fifteen children of families critical of the regime. When protests against these arrests arose, Dar'a was completely isolated by the regime and military forces were sent to violently suppress the uprising in Dar'a. No journalist could come close to Dar'a but through social media it became clear that the regime was deliberately killing peaceful demonstrators. Dar'a is therefore a good example of how a narrative is created through social media. Although some argue that the use of social media could lead to a less violent character of conflicts,¹⁸¹ the Syrian civil war shows that this is not always the case. In this instance, it actually pitted more groups against each other trying to get their own narrative out to the world. The use of social media in this conflict by all parties did not lead up to a less violent character of the conflict, not to peace talks and not to intervention by the United Nations. However, since conditions in Syria are dangerous for journalists, it is impossible not to rely on social media coverage.

6.1.2 Position of the Asad-regime

The Ba'th party has always been the basis on which both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad have built. The party apparatus did not always agree with the presidents, but when matters

¹⁸⁰ Marc Lynch, Deen Freelon and Sean Aday, 'Syria's Socially Mediated Civil War: Blogs and Bullets III', *Peaceworks* no. 91 (2014) 8.

¹⁸¹ Alex Comminos, 'The Role of Social Media and User-generated Content in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding', *The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank* (2013) 9. Comminos refers to a statement of Gordon Brown, who believes the use of social media can prevent violence.

got tough, the Ba'ath party closed ranks and supported their leader. As we have seen in the previous chapter, from 2000 onwards critique was vented by an increased number of intellectuals; this critique was pitted towards the Asad-regime as a whole, not so much to Bashar al-Asad individually. The violent response of the regime against peaceful protests a decade later caused harsh criticism and provoked various groups to take up arms against the regime. These uprisings were unexpected for most Syrians, but also for external Syria observers. Michael Gunning argues in his blog about the revolution that almost all Syrians supported al-Asad to some extent and whatever issues they had with the regime could be solved without aggression.¹⁸² This is something this thesis has tried to convey. However, in February 2011 this support evaporated. After a violent outburst by the Syrian police to a local shop owner in Damascus many, at that time still peaceful, protests took place. The main slogan of these protests: *"The Syrian people will not be humiliated"* as you can hear and see in several videos of these protests.¹⁸³ As many as the Syrian people supported Bashar al-Asad as their president, the anger about the violent repression by the Asad-regime's security apparatus in combination with several crises in the agricultural sector due to draught and poor economic circumstances proved to be an explosive situation to develop. In March 2011 the city of Dar'a became the center of protests. A group of teenagers were arrested in the beginning of March because they were openly critical towards the regime. From 15 March onwards, the protests sparked by these arrests as well as by the violent outbursts of the security forces in the whole country came to clashes between protesters and the Syrian regime's security apparatus. In Dar'a, these clashes led to the first victims of the uprisings, causing more anger and protest. Syria entered a vicious cycle in which the regime violently tried to suppress protests, generating more aggression from the protestors. The conflict was not about the few events that were protested against initially, but it became a conflict fought between some hundred oppositional groups, the regime and even external regional players and international Islamic organizations such as ISIS and Al-Nusra.¹⁸⁴

In the few interviews Bashar al-Asad gave since 2000, he has always denied oppressing the Syrian people. Even when oppositional voices got stronger, Asad stood by his policy, denying his citizens their rights on a free voice in Syria. Bashar al-Asad's view on the civil war becomes apparent in several speeches he gave during the three years the conflict is on its way. These quotes are from his speech on January 6th 2013 at the Baath University of Damascus:¹⁸⁵

¹⁸² <https://nplusonemag.com/online-only/online-only/background-to-a-revolution/> Accessed on: 19 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁸³ Syrian Crowd chanting "The Syrian people will not be humiliated" in a protest on 15 March 2011 in Damascus. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFmM2o5OrwQ&feature=mfu_in_order&list=UL Accessed on: 19 - 05 - 2014. Also on Twitter this chant is repeatedly used by twitter users: <https://twitter.com/search?q=the%20syrian%20people%20will%20not%20be%20humiliated&src=typd> Accessed on: 19 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁸⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NND2kacY2TY#t=142> Accessed on: 09 - 07 - 2014.

¹⁸⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGeGHVAjG5c> Accessed on: 19 - 05 - 2014.

“They call it a revolution; however it has nothing to do with revolutions from any way whatsoever. A revolution needs intellectuals, revolutions are based on ideas, where are the intellectuals, who is the thinker of this revolution? Revolutions need leaders, who knows the leader of this revolution? Revolutions are also based on education and thinking, not on ignorance. Revolutions are based on pushing the country forwards, not taking the country back centuries. Revolution is for the people, not from people from outside the country ... So is this really a revolution?”

“There is no other solution then to defend the nation with security forces” ... “For a political solution a partner is needed, we never rejected a political solution.” ... “We need a dialogue, the partner in this dialogue is not yet found.”

The position of the regime, especially that of Bashar al-Asad, have come into an apparently untenable position, however, Asad remains in power. This seems paradoxical because the regime has not announced any firm political changes. He did announce some governmental changes and introduced a slightly more open election system. This provides opposition groups with the symbolic opportunity to oppose Asad in elections and to gain political power. However, Asad knows very well that the oppositional forces are fragmented, and incapable of forming a unified political force that is able to oppose the Asad regime.¹⁸⁶ Asad also addressed this in his speech *“...Revolutions need leaders, who knows the leader of this revolution?”* The oppositional forces are not well-organized. All so called ‘political reforms’ by the regime are based on that fact; reform is only announced to keep up the appearance of more openness. Further, in his speech Bashar al-Asad denies the ‘spontaneous’ character of this protests, which in his eyes does not make this civil war a real revolution.

“Real revolutions are intrinsic, spontaneous, and are led by intellectual and ideological elites.”¹⁸⁷

Thus, the initial stance of the regime towards this civil war was to deny it, to ridicule it and to ensure that the Syrian citizens would understand that this was not a real revolution. When the civil war got out of hand, the stance of the regime towards the conflict changed. At the end of 2011, when the civil war had almost entered its second year, preparations for a speech of Asad show his concerns about the course the war has

¹⁸⁶ <http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle East/GD26Ak04.html> Accessed on: 20 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁸⁷ Interview with Bashar al-Asad in the Syrian al-Thawra daily, *‘Bashar Al Asad Interview on Political Islam, The Egyptian Crisis and Foreign Intervention’*, 6 - 07 - 2013. Accessed on: 22 - 05 - 2014.

taken. In private emails, revealed by British newspaper the Guardian, notes on a speech are shown.¹⁸⁸ For example, one of the notes on Asad's speech:

"It is important to confirm the patriotism of the entire Syrian people and that people's demands are righteous and the state will exert all its efforts to respond to them; and that he who commits a wrong deed against his country is deluded because people and specially the opposition are very furious of the language of treason."

"Invite widely the families of the martyrs, to make the speech appear like a celebration."

So instead of belittling the revolution, the regime shifted towards placating the rebels and to show respect to all who have fallen. However, this shift did not lead up to an end of the civil war.

"#ICC must hold #BasharalAsad accountable Rt defining moment. Killing continues, but suppression of protests has failed"

6.2 Sectarianism and the civil war

Sectarianism and sectarian divide as a factor in the civil war will be examined in this section. First there will be a short overview of the most important points on this subject from previous chapters. Subsequently, these factors will be linked to sectarianism and to the civil war and try to show how domestic sectarian politics influenced the civil war. This section will only address Syria's domestic politics; the next section will address the international alliances of Syria and the role these played in the civil war.

6.2.1 Interreligious relations leading up to the civil war

In the previous chapters we have seen that sectarianism was present in Syrian politics, but only as an implicit outcome of formal policies that were not necessarily linked to religious identity. Hafez al-Asad, proved to be a master in implicitly pitting different communities against each other, including various religious communities. Hafez al-Asad constituted his regime partially strategically, granting a small fraction of trusted Sunni's powerful positions in the regime. The real power, however, was always in hands of a small elite dominated by Alawis, which is evident when one looks at the security apparatus, dominated by that small elitist fraction of Alawi's. We have also seen that Hafez al-Asad received support from the, mostly Sunni, business community in Damascus, Aleppo and other big cities. This business – regime relation flourished after the Muslim Brotherhood was defeated in Hama in 1982. The regime provided the

¹⁸⁸ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/mar/14/bashar-al-Asad-syria15> Accessed on: 22 – 05 – 2014.

businessmen with privileges and in return they got their undivided support. However, under Bashar al-Asad this business relationship started to crumble. The Sunni character of this business group was diminishing, causing an increasing number of, mainly Alawi, businessmen, most with family ties to the core of the regime, to be privileged. This did not only cause a societal gap in income and region between the business elite and the rest of the population. It also caused the Sunni – Shi’ite polarization to increase under Bashar al-Asad.¹⁸⁹ Other factors under Bashar al-Asad also influenced this polarization. Poor economic circumstances, migration to rural areas, a changed personal status law, an increase in conversion to Shi’ism and more modern technique all contributed to an increase in polarization between the Sunni and Shi’ite communities.

According to the constitution of Syria the president should be a Muslim. Although both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad are Muslim and present themselves as such,¹⁹⁰ in their policies we see that religious identity is mostly not linked to formal policies. Part of the regime’s formal religious policies was to try to neutralize it in public life and to ban all religious excesses by suppressing Islamic militants.¹⁹¹ A formal law that influences religious identity and religious group isolation is the Syrian personal status law. Formally speaking this personal status law shows toleration, granting most religious communities its particular regulations. These laws led to sectarian divide and religious segregation. Importantly, the personal status law also creates inequality because not all religious communities have been granted their own regulations. The communities that have their own version of the personal status law include Sunni Muslims, Druzes, Christians and Jews, but excluded are the Alawis, Ismailis, Twelver Shiites and Yazidis. The latter all resort under Sunni Muslim regulations in family affairs.

Within the Alawi community, which is seen by many Sunni Muslims as a deviant community, attempts were made to emancipate the community by establishing ties with Twelver Shi’ite authorities in Lebanon and Iran. The increased visibility of Twelver Shi’ite Islam was frowned upon by many Sunni Muslims but helped little to actually promote the Alawi religious cause. Hardly any Alawi converted to Twelver Shi’ism and the great majority of this highly secularized community is critical to any sort of political Islam. Moreover, Sunni Islam remained the ‘state religion’.¹⁹² However, the Shi’ite community did receive more political rights, especially under Bashar al-Asad, which led to two things. First, as we have already seen, it led to an increase in conversion to Shi’ism. Second, more important, it led to an increase in sectarian divides and a heightened feeling of unease among other religious communities, especially under the

¹⁸⁹ <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/syrian-regimes-business-backbone> Accessed on: 25 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁹⁰ Constitution of the Arab Resurrection (Ba’th) Socialist Party of Syria’ *Middle East Journal* Vol 13 No. 2 (1959).

¹⁹¹ See for a description of Hafez al-Asad’s religious policies page 28 - 29 in the third chapter.

¹⁹² Douwes, Dick, ‘Going Public: minority muslim communities and public space in Syria (prior to the revolt)’ in Wim Hofstee & Arie van der Kooij, *Religion Beyond its Private Role in Modern Society* (Leiden & Boston 2013).

Sunni Syrian majority. The promotion of Shi'ism was also influenced by the meddling of Iran in running and restoring religious sites, such as the Sayyida Zaynab shrine in Damascus. Although implicitly sectarianism had a role in Syria, it is not the cause of the civil war. However, the conflict has increased sectarianism when it escalated in 2011. The regime has always denied being sectarian, but the civil war unravels that during the conflict sectarian sentiments also increased on their side, which we will see later in this chapter.

6.2.2 *How interreligious relations changed the face of the civil war*

During the decade leading to the civil war, interreligious relations within Syria changed, among others, due to migration of people to cities from rural areas. These migratory flows caused increased contacts which led to increased tensions and isolation of various communities. Eventually this partially explains the later radicalization of the Sunni majority, which is visible given their share in oppositional forces in the current civil war.¹⁹³ Sunnis constitute a large part of the opposing forces in the civil war, which is obvious given they are the majority in Syria. This, however, does not mean that we should see the oppositional forces as a homogeneous group. Homogeneity is not a characteristic of the Syrian opposition, given the many different oppositional forces, with different interests that are agitating for a regime change.¹⁹⁴

The sectarian character of this conflict comes across when you examine the language used by different forces in reference to each other. The Sunni opposition use words such as 'Nusayri,' 'Safawi' or 'Rafidha' to refer to their Shi'ite opponents or to the regime.¹⁹⁵ The pro-regime forces also use descriptions such as 'Nasabi' or 'Takfiri' to refer to the Sunni opposition. All of these words have a negative connotation and refer to the other party wanting to reject 'true' Islam and being infidels. Since the only punishment for this is death, the violent character of the conflict is sparked by the sectarian language used by both parties.¹⁹⁶ An example of a Sunni rebel referring with the term 'Nusayri':

"What is happening in Syria is that the country has been ruled by a Nusayri idea, a Shi'a group that came to power and started discriminating against the Sunni people. They prevented them from practicing their religion and painted a picture of Islam that is far

¹⁹³ Thomas Pierret, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict', *Peacebrief* 162 (2013) 1.

¹⁹⁴ See for an overview of Syria's opposition: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-24403003> Accessed on: 25 - 05 - 2014.

¹⁹⁵ See for a description of the term 'Nusayri' paragraph 1.3.2 in chapter 1.

¹⁹⁶ http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/29/the_vocabulary_of_sectarianism?wp_login_redirect=0 Accessed on: 26 - 05 - 2014.

from what Islam is, with traditions and practices that are not Islamic at all. It wanted to wipe true Islam from the country.”¹⁹⁷

This ‘sectarian language’ is hardened the sectarian character of the conflict. From 2012 onwards, social media also demonstrates an increase in the use of this sectarian language, which indicates an increase in the sectarian character of the conflict. See the graphic in the Appendix, which shows that there is a sharp increase in sectarian language, which is a clear indicator of the increase in sectarianism in this conflict:

“Hard to talk about sectarianism in #Syria in 140 characters. But count posts with words like “nusayri” in them & U know it's increasing.”¹⁹⁸

The pressure on interreligious relations was not at the core of the conflict. We have seen that poor economic circumstances, migratory flows to urban centers, corruption and authoritarian rule led to the start of peaceful protests. When the regime responded with violent attacks on protestors, the Sunni majority became more radicalized and active in a violent matter. This led to an increased pressure on interreligious relations between the Sunni and Alawi communities, already polarized by the regime. Many protestors started to accuse the regime off inflaming sectarianism, by favoring parts of certain religious communities.¹⁹⁹ Another indicator of the increasing sectarian character of the conflict is that parts of the Christian community of Syria the Alawi regime is seen as the best of all other options, causing a great part of this community to actively support the Asad-regime.²⁰⁰ Although sectarian divide was not the cause of the conflict, it was present among society. Sectarianism, in combination with the absence of democratic mechanisms and the shattered support base of the Asad-regime is part of the cause of the violent turn the conflict. In the increase in sectarian language on Twitter, we also see an increase in violence in the conflict.²⁰¹ From July 2012, there was an increase in sectarian language on media such as Twitter; with that in July 2012 we also see an increase in violence.²⁰² The pressure that the civil war has put on Syrian interreligious

¹⁹⁷Quote from an interview with Hassan Aboud, leader of Ahrar al-Sham; Islamic’s Front’s strongest faction, from June 2013 with Al Jazeera Arabic.

http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/29/the_vocabulary_of_sectarianism?wp_login_redirect=0 Accessed on: 26 – 05 – 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Tweet from Human Rights Watch Deputy Director Nadim Houry (@nadimhoury, 12500 followers) on April 26th 2012, Accessed on: 26 – 05 – 2014 with search term #nusayri on twitter. See Appendix for an overview of all tweets with term “Nusayri.”

¹⁹⁹<http://www.syria-tribune.com/e/> “The Syrian Dialogue Project: For a United, Democratic and Secular Syria’ 14 – 15.

²⁰⁰ Dennis Pastoor, ‘Vulnerability Assessment of Syria’s Christians’ *World Watch Unit, Open Doors International* (2013) 2.

²⁰¹ See the Appendix for the analysis of the tweets and the graphic.

²⁰² Megan Price, Jeff Klingner, and Patrick Ball, ‘Preliminary Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic’ *The Benetech Human Rights Program* (2013). See the appendix for a graphical comparison of the increase of violence and the increase in sectarian language.

relations and on the regime makes a peaceful solution, or even starting a dialogue between all parties, difficult, if not impossible for the time being.

6.2.3 Regional sectarianism: Iran & Hezbollah

We have seen that the polarization between Sunni's and Alawi's increased during the civil war and also that this caused more violence in the civil war. Another factor that influenced the sectarian character of the conflict was the alliance with Iran and Hezbollah. These alliances were already formed before 2011. It seems only logical that these allies would meddle in a conflict of which the character was already sectarian to begin with. The meddling of Iran and Hezbollah increased the sectarian character of the civil war and with that also the violent character of the conflict. Moreover, it linked the conflict to sectarian tensions in the wider region, in particular in the Gulf area and Iraq.

First, the role of Iran in the Syrian conflict will be discussed. The case of Sayyida Zaynab showed that Iran, by funding and managing such a shrine, Shi'ite Islam became more visible, sparking dissatisfaction among parts of the Sunni majority. With funding such religious activities in Syria, the influence of allies became more visible for the Syrian population.²⁰³ This, on top of other factors already mentioned, sparked isolation and divide among religious communities, causing an assembly against the regime. One of such 'brigades' is the Free Syrian Army, who similar to other brigades propagate themselves as a movement for all Syrians. The radicalization of the conflict lies, on top of the involvement of brigades such as the FSA, in the participation of many foreign jihadists that are taking part in Syria's conflict.²⁰⁴ These foreign militants fight mostly for the opposition and are fighting under the flag of Islamic extremist organizations such as ISIS, who wants to establish an Islamic caliphate and therefore gain power in Syria, or Al-Nusra, who are opposed any regime, and thus also opposed the Asad regime.²⁰⁵

Iran's role in this civil war is twofold. First, while portraying themselves as a non-sectarian state which kept the Sunni majority quiet, they informally promoted Shi'ism in Syria and the rest of the region, by funding a shrine like Sayyida Zaynab. Second, on a more practical level Iran trained Alawi fighters in their territory to fight on the side of the Asad-regime.²⁰⁶ Iran also actively supported pro-regime paramilitary organizations in Syria and Iran has got some military forces of their own revolutionary guard fighting on the side of the Syrian regime.²⁰⁷ Iran's goal to meddle in Syria's conflict is to retain the Asad-regime in power. However, if the Asad-regime were toppled, Iran wants to

²⁰³ <http://www.nybooks.com/blogs/nyrblog/2013/jun/12/syria-inventing-religious-war/> Accessed on: 29 - 05 - 2014.

²⁰⁴ <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=53811> Accessed on: 03 - 07 - 2014.

²⁰⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NND2kacY2TY#t=142> Accessed on: 09 - 07 - 2014.

²⁰⁶ Thomas Pierret, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict', *Peacebrief* 162 (2013) 2.

²⁰⁷ Will Fulton, Joseph Holliday & Sam Wyer, 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', *A joint report by AEI's critical threats project & Institute for the study of war* (2013) 19.

assure their influence in the country, hence the major effort by the Iranian regime to influence the course of this civil war.

Where Iran operates more in the background, as some sort of puppet master pulling at least some of the strings of the Asad-regime in this conflict, the Lebanese political faction Hezbollah takes a much more active role in the conflict. Hezbollah provides the Syrian regime with well-trained military forces, supporting the pro-regime fighters in Syria actively.²⁰⁸ The reason for Hezbollah to participate in this conflict is to protect their support base and their weapon supply chains in which both Syria and Iran are key players. If this, due to a failing regime in Syria, collapses, Hezbollah would lose a great part of their political and military dominance in Lebanon and in the Middle Eastern region.²⁰⁹

In his article 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict' Thomas Pierret states correctly that: *"It is illusory to seek the causes of (and possible solutions to) sectarian radicalization in Syria in the strategies of external actors."*²¹⁰ Obviously, the influence of external allies such as Iran and Hezbollah should not be underestimated. However, as also Pierret suggests, it is a step too far to state that these external players are the cause of the sectarian character of the conflict. As this thesis has argued, Syrian society was already torn by sectarian divides. However, this sectarian divide in the decade leading up to the civil war was influenced by Iran and Hezbollah by, for example, funding Shi'ite shrines and education. Thus, Pierret is right in stating both allies were not the primary cause for the sectarian radicalization of the Syrian civil war because the conflict was already highly sectarian. However, they both certainly influenced the sectarian character of the conflict looking at their historical involvement in Syria, which is also mostly based upon sectarian ties, especially for Iran this is the case. Also by sending and training Alawi military troops that are sent to fight on the side of the regime in Syria, the involvement of both Iran and Hezbollah makes the sectarian character of the conflict more visible.²¹¹ Thus, these allies are not the primary cause of the sectarian character of the conflict, but their influence definitely increases it.

6.2.4 Regional Sectarianism: Other external players

Hezbollah and Iran are important allies for the regime in the conflict. These alliances were built in the decades before the civil war. During the conflict other allies stood up that aligned with the Syrian regime for strategic reasons. Russia and China have always been "silent allies" of the Syrian regime. Their support never needed to be public, since the socialist ideology of the Syrian regime always leaned towards a form of communism

²⁰⁸ Fulton, Holliday & Wyer, 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', 6; <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J5uyjH5b498>
Accessed on: 29 – 05 – 2014.

²⁰⁹ Fulton, Holliday & Wyer, 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', 21.

²¹⁰ Pierret, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict', 1.

²¹¹ Fulton, Holliday & Wyer, 'Iranian Strategy in Syria', 7.

which makes Russia and China excellent partners. President Asad offers these countries his admiration:

*"We offer our thanks first and foremost to Russia and China and Iran and all of the countries that stood in support of Syria against any attempts to intervene in internal affairs. These countries need admiration; we owe it to them; thanks, we recognize what they have done for us."*²¹²

Neither Russia nor China have any influence on the interreligious relations and the sectarian character of the Syrian conflict. Their role in this conflict is to block attempts of the United States to influence the region. Also on economic basis, Russia is the largest arms supplier of Syria, China's role is more subtle, they do oppose the regime on the violent outbursts such as the gas attack but they also voted against sanctions against the Syrian regime in the UN security council. China has a lot of financial ties with Syria, which is the reason for China to subtly support the Asad-regime.²¹³

The last external player I want to discuss is Saudi-Arabia. This country has interfered in the conflict below the radar, however they did enforce the sectarian character of the Syrian civil war. The Saudi-Arabian goal to intrude in the conflict and to prevent Syria from moving more towards Shi'ism, and more importantly preventing Syria from becoming a puppet of Iran. The Sunni regime of Saudi-Arabia and the Shi'ite Islamic regime of Iran always stood against each other, which is now a conflict that is partly fought over the heads of the Syrian opposition and pro-regime forces. Anti-Shi'ism is a great incentive for Saudi-Arabia to interfere in this conflict.²¹⁴ Saudi-Arabia's role included taking in of parts of Syrian Sunni refugees and arming opposition forces. Thomas Pierret states in his article that: *"pro-opposition state actors in the conflict has at times followed a sectarian pattern, but it was never as part of an overall sectarian strategy."*²¹⁵ Pierret is right in stating that both pro-opposition and counter-opposition players try to influence sectarian ties. An example of influencing sectarian ties can be seen in the oppositional forces that Saudi-Arabia chose to support, mainly with a Sunni background, by providing them with the tools to fight the regime.²¹⁶ However, this thesis would posit that it was never part of a sectarian strategy, in the case of Saudi-Arabia and Iran. These states have a very deliberate strategy in the conflict, namely forming a counter-force towards the religious influence of each other in Syria. It increases the Sunni-Shi'ite polarization, and this polarization is not just a side-effect. Polarization

²¹² <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JGeGHVAjG5c> Accessed on: 29 - 05 - 2014.

²¹³ <http://edition.cnn.com/2013/08/29/world/meast/syria-iran-china-russia-supporters/> Accessed on: 29 - 05 - 2014.

²¹⁴ Toby, Matthiesen, *Sectarian Gulf: Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the Arab Spring that wasn't* (Stanford 2013) 73.

²¹⁵ Pierret, 'The Reluctant Sectarianism of Foreign States in the Syrian Conflict', 3.

²¹⁶ Pierret, 2 - 3.

between these two religious groups is a deliberate goal and one of the causes of the interference of both Iran and Saudi-Arabia in the Syrian conflict.

6.3 An underestimated level of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict

On a concluding note to which this thesis returns the central question of this last chapter: To what extent impacted regional sectarianism and interreligious relations, especially relations between Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims the course of the civil war that started in 2011?

In this chapter the main goal was to show that sectarianism, both on an internal and external level, and interreligious relations are at the basis of why the civil war took such a violent turn in the second half of 2011. Of course it is true that poor economic circumstances, migratory flows, regime corruption and a higher educated population led to a more self-aware opposition. On top of that we have seen that formal policies often led to a more divided Syrian population, divided mostly along religious lines. The polarization between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims increased and became one of the reasons why the civil war escalated so quickly.

In the speeches about the events in his country since 2011, Bashar al-Asad never officially acknowledged the sectarian character of the conflict. Late in the conflict, in 2013, he did not acknowledge the conflict to be a real revolution, according to the quotes from his speech earlier in this chapter. This evolves into a 'shady' sectarian character of the conflict. The sectarian nature was not publically acknowledged. So the sectarian character of the conflict is paradoxical: The official parties try to retain sectarian divide. The oppositional parties try to actively address the sectarian character, providing the media with their own narrative. The polarization between sects is present though, in both parties language, using for example the term 'Nusayri.' Interregional players reinforce the sectarian character of the conflict even more. Iran and Hezbollah on the one side and Saudi-Arabia on the other side start to fight their Sunni – Shi'ite battle over the backs of the Syrian people. Within Syria this also heightened the tensions between Sunni and Shi'ite parties.

7. Conclusion

We have seen that Syria has gone through immense changes on a social, political and cultural level since Hafez al-Asad became president in 1970. This concluding chapter will answer the central question of this master's thesis: *To what extent are developments since 1963 and especially in the last three decades in Syria and its position in the broader region related to the emergence of sectarian politics in Syria and the Middle East as a whole, in particular in view of the Ba'th regimes ever closer alliance with Iran and Hezbollah?* This will be addressed in two sections. Firstly, through a concise summary of the previous chapters and secondly through drawing conclusion from the research as a whole.

We have seen in the introduction that research to the recent phenomenon of the civil war lacked a historical ground. This is why, in the first chapters, this chapter provided a firm historical background of Syria in general, of the role of implicit sectarianism and the pressure put on interreligious relations. From 1970 onwards we have seen Syria moving towards becoming a more modern state, but with an authoritarian character. Pan-Arabism, socialism and secularism were the main formal ideologies of the Ba'th-regime under both Hafez al-Asad and Bashar al-Asad.

If we take a closer look at the role of sectarianism and interreligious relations, some important arguments are made in the third and fourth chapters: First it is important to note that sectarianism was always only implicitly present in Syria. Second, important for the development of the Syrian regime was that the core elite never fully consisted out of members of the Alawi community. Some members of the Sunni elite who were close to Hafez al-Asad also had a place within the regimes core elite, however they did not have any executive power and their role within the government was ideological. The regime of Hafez al-Asad also maintained ties with the Damascene Sunni business community. Thus, parts of the Sunni majority had some influence on Syrian politics. However, it was parts of the Sunni Muslim majority that caused the most trouble for the Asad-regime from the late 1970s onwards. This is because of the implicit sectarian consequences of formal non-sectarian policies on, for example, education and social welfare. We have also seen that the Asad-regime, when Hafez al-Asad became president, actively distancing himself from religion in public life and sectarian policies. This indicates the slumbering sectarian character of Syrian society. If sectarianism was not implicitly present, the regime did not have to actively distance itself from sectarianism. Third, the regime not only experienced opposition from parts of the Sunni majority. Within the core elite of the regime both presidents Asad also experienced struggle. There was a never-ending struggle for power within the Asad-regime and the power of both Hafez- and Bashar al-Asad was always contested. The core Alawi elite, however, did close ranks and stood behind their president when external threat

prevailed. Also Bashar al-Asad proved to be helpful in maintaining the regime as it was, nepotism included, which made the regime more willing to stand behind him.

Under Bashar al-Asad three factors influenced sectarianism in Syria. First, although Bashar al-Asad promised in his first inaugural speech to improve Syria's economy, economic circumstance did not improve. This, as well as the draught of 2006, caused a migration from rural areas to cities such as Damascus, which increased tensions between various (religious) communities and it caused isolation of these communities. Second, the regime kept personal status law in place, which provided some religious groups with their own part in society, causing religious groups to remain isolated. The third and most influential factor, is Bashar al-Asad's campaign to modernize Syria. Modern technology such as the mobile phones and the internet, was a step towards modernization, but with an unexpected result, in that it gave the Syrian masses a voice. It, thus, allowed the opposition to recruit and to put their arguments forward easily. Also policies on modernizing education, making it accessible for more people backfired for the Asad-regime. Education helped the Syrian people to become more self-reflective and reflective of Syrian society. On top of that, because of the poor labor market, highly educated people became dissatisfied with the regime. Also, education was used as a tool to promote certain religious preferences. Shi'ism was implicitly promoted through education, by for example the funding of private Shi'ite education by the regime. This caused resentment among other religious communities, especially among the Sunni majority, causing the Sunni – Shi'ite polarization to grow. An important conclusion of Bashar al-Asad's presidency is that it was never a formal policy of the Syrian regime to promote sectarianism or to implement sectarian politics. Sectarianism was always an implicit, unintentional result of Syrian policies, which we also saw under Hafez al-Asad.

It was not only domestic policies that were influenced in Syria along sectarian lines. Syria's regional positioning within the Middle East contributed to this, perhaps even more than domestic politics did. Syria found its main allies in Iran and Hezbollah. Together these allies reinforced each other and legitimized each other. For Hafez al-Asad the alliance with Iran proved to be a fruitful alliance to form a power block against Western forces such as the United States or Israel. When Bashar al-Asad was elected president in 2000 the alliances with both Iran and Hezbollah remained intact. The alliance with Iran was a matter of convenience, but Syria and Hezbollah actually proved to be in need of each other to gain their own political goals, which made it an alliance of strategic interdependence. Both alliances influenced Syria's implicit sectarian character. Iran implicitly forced the regime to promote Shi'ism, through for example education.

Another influence from outside of Syria was the Iranian financial as well as interferential influence on religious monuments such as Shi'ite mosques and shrines. We have seen that Iran, especially when the Iraq – Iran war started in 1980, started to seek more religious influence in Syria. By promoting Shi'ism at such a public level: funding

and managing religious Syrian monuments, Iran had a direct influence on the escalation of religious relations and the pitting of especially Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims against each other.

Implicit sectarianism that developed since 1963 and is one of the causes of the civil war and its a violent turn. We have seen that the increase in terms referring to religious sects, such as 'Nusayri', go hand in hand with an increase in the violent character of the conflict. Also, when the violence of the conflict started to increase an increase in the rise of brigades referring in their names to their religious ties, such as the Abul Fadhl al-Abbas brigade, indicating a form of sectarianism, is evident. Without the support of Syria's external allies, the Asad-regime would have not been able to remain in power for such a long time.

To answer the main question of this thesis, the Syrian regime and its development since 1963 can never be intentionally linked to sectarian policies nor can the alliances with Iran and Hezbollah. Sectarian policies are never explicitly or formally executed, it is however, often an implicit result of Syrian formal policies and, especially since 2000, and has become apparent. The main sectarian divide that impacted Syrian development the most is the Sunni – Shi'ite polarization that started to grow since Hafez al-Asad became president in 1970. Paradoxically this sectarian polarization increased because of the non-sectarian formal politics of the Syrian regime. But under both Asad-presidents you see that, by favoring Shi'ism, this polarization is actively upheld. The developments since 1963 that impacted Syrian society the most was the promotion of Shi'ism in education by the regime under force of Iran, its closest ally. Another development that has been influential was the fact that the Asad-regime favored the parts of the Alawi sect and executed a far reaching form of nepotism. This caused resentment among some religious communities, especially in parts of the Sunni community. Concluding, we can see that informal decisions, favoring certain religious groups and formal politics all resulted in a society fragmented along sectarian lines, which eventually led up to the violent civil war that started in 2011.

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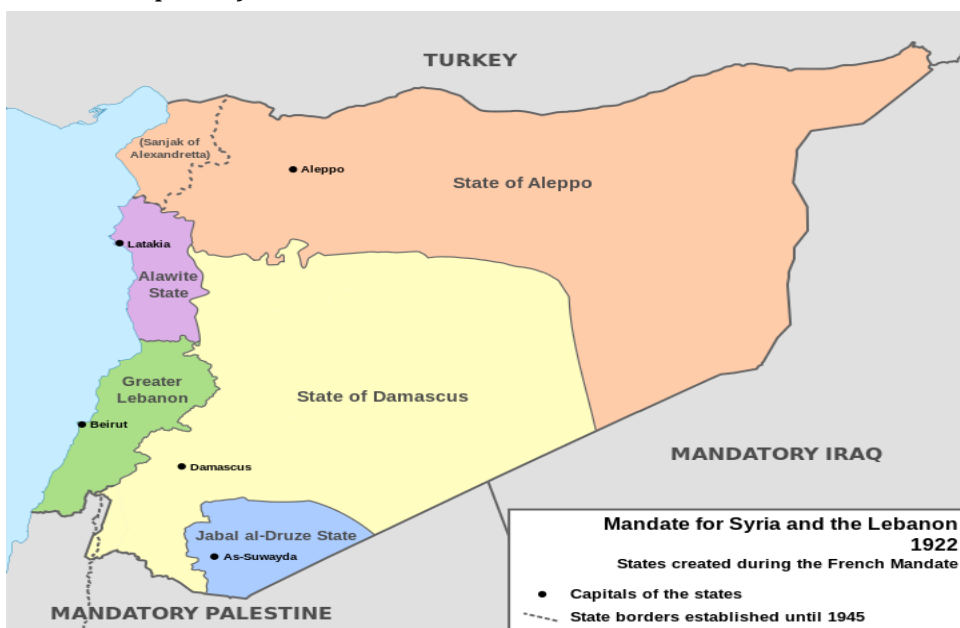
http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2014/01/29/the_vocabulary_of_sectarianism?wp_login_redirect=0

9. Appendices

- Pan – Arabism (Accompanies ‘pan Arabism’ in Theoretical Framework in Chapter 1):²¹⁷



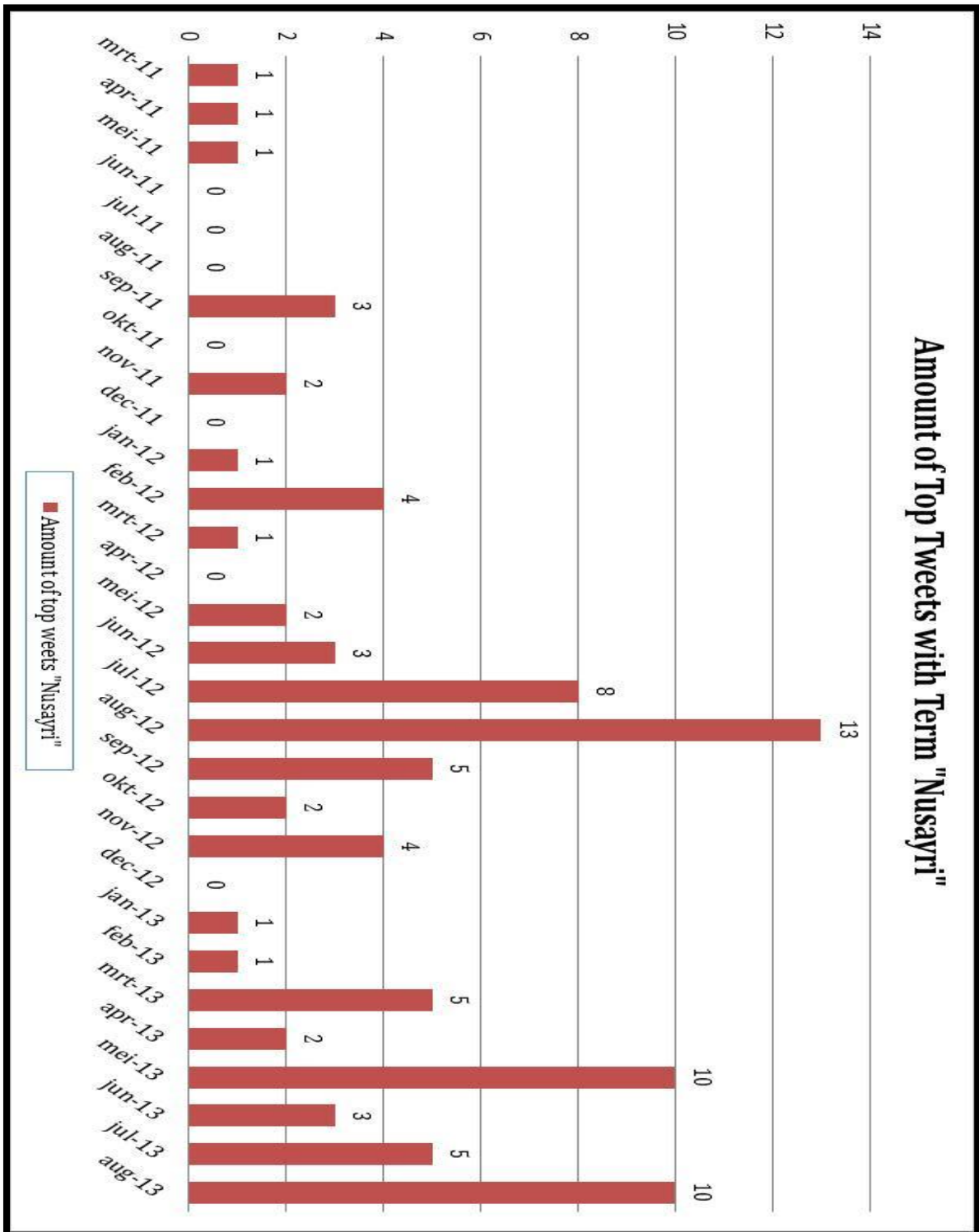
- Map of Syria under the French Mandate (Accompanies ‘French Mandate in Chapter 3):²¹⁸



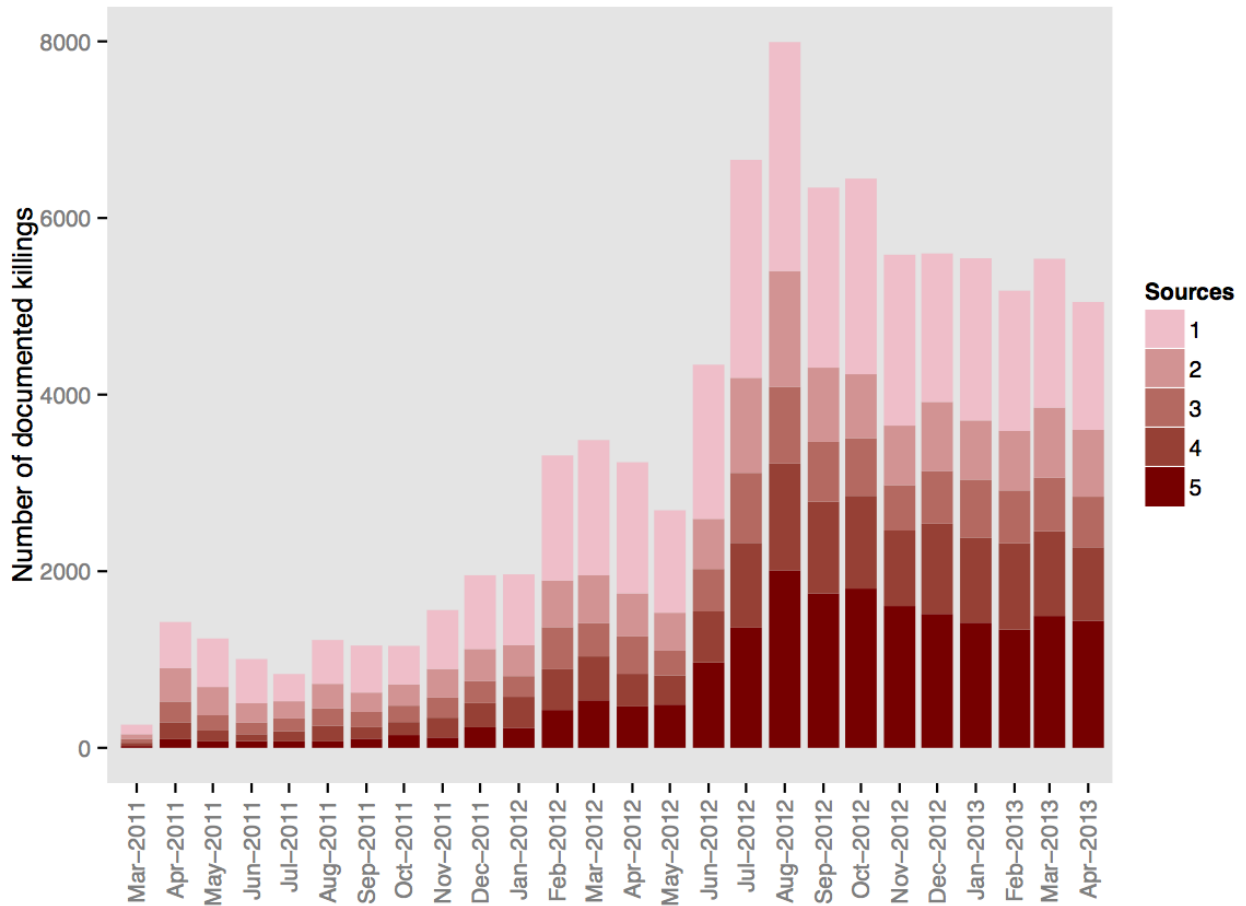
²¹⁷ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pan-Arabism#mediaviewer/File:League_of_Arab_States.png

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- Graphic from amount of “top tweets” with the term “Nusayri” in it from march 2011 until August 2013 on Twitter. This graphic shows an increase in sectarian language on Twitter from 2012 onwards and accompanies the argument about the increase of violence with the increase of sectarianism, made in chapter 6:



- This graphic from The Benetech Human Rights Program shows that there is an increase in documented killings from July 2012 onwards. In tweets with the term “Nusayri” we also see an increase around this time. Which is an indicator that an increase in violence is linked with an increase of sectarian terms in how both parties refer to each other. We can thus say that an increase in the sectarian character of the conflict lead to an increase in violence.²¹⁹



²¹⁹ Megan Price, Jeff Klingner, and Patrick Ball, 'Preliminary Statistical Analysis of Documentation of Killings in the Syrian Arab Republic' *The Benetech Human Rights Program* (2013). This is the additional graphic, from the website: <https://hrdag.org/counting-casualties-in-syria/> See for an explanation of the different sources of the number of documented killings page 2 and 3 of the report.