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Unravelling Syria's Entno-Sectarian Politics

A thesis

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Estelle Jane Townshend



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Abstract

Goaded by the regional repercussions of the Syrian crisis sectarian tensions are emerging as the key threat to Middle Eastern and Syrian stability. Sectarianism has had a big impact on politics in Syria, it is implicated in the maintenance of authoritarianism, and sectarian dynamics are escalating the intensity of the uprising against the Assad regime. Prior to the civil war communal bonds between regime members and minority sect insecurity were key to the survival of the regime. Political power and control was maintained through fear and this was not just fear of the powerful security forces but also fear of sectarian conflict with the regime highlighting the risk of sectarian conflict, minority persecution and instability should the regime fall. As a result many supported or tolerated the Assads out of fear of the alternative.

This thesis aims to analyse the extent and the manner in which political players in Syria have used religious narratives and manipulated sectarian identities in their pursuit of power. It concludes that sectarian tactics have been intensified within the Syrian uprising by both the regime and within the opposition. Religious narratives for mobilising support have become widespread and an emphasis on dangers from the ‘other’ is prevalent. Given Middle Eastern history of intolerance towards other religious and ethnic groups this emphasis on confessional narratives is intensifying the dangers of sectarian violence within the civil war and creating rifts that will be hard to heal.

The use of religious narratives for political goals is a feature of the religious and political landscape and this is analysed through the lens of Ethnic Conflict Theory. With radical Islam heavily featuring narratives that emphasise opposition to other, an entitlement to dominate and an admiration of religious warrior characteristics alongside the cultural importance of nested communal groups, Islam has served as a readymade construct for mobilising sectarian groups against political foes.

However although many sectarian narratives refer heavily to history the current confessional tensions relate specifically to the present. With Middle Eastern autocratic regimes under threat due to the Arab Spring many groups perceive that political power is up for grabs and are finding it expedient – and religiously

justifiable - to mobilise through the established channels of confessional loyalties and networks particularly along Sunni versus Shia lines. Plus given the importance of religion to the region it is a clear front runner as justification for political and/or armed action.

Advances in communications technology, specifically social media, and the breakdown of regime authority has allowed for voices to be heard from within an autocratic state that had otherwise been silenced, thus providing an unprecedented opportunity to analyse sectarian politics within a civil war.

To my Dad for his endless patience in listening to me discuss my latest ideas and frustrations...

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Abbreviations

CPC	Civilian Protection Commission
FSA	Free Syria Army
JN	Jubhat Nusra
KNC	Kurdish National Council
LCC	Local Coordination Committee
NC	Syrian National Coalition
NCB	National Coordination Body for Democratic Change
PKK	Kurdish Workers' Party
PYD	Democratic Union Party
SKC	Supreme Kurdish Council
SNC	Syrian National Council
SRGC	Syrian Revolution General Commission
UN	United Nations
US	United States of America
USSR	United of Soviet Socialist Republics
WMD	Weaspons of Mass Destruction

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Introduction

Contrary to the openness across borders achieved by globalisation, religious violence and intolerance has asserted itself across the globe with the Middle East leading the stakes for religious tensions (Danin R. M., Religious Restrictions and Violence Growing Globally led by the Middle East, 2012). An exploration of the political culture of the Middle East is in order to ascertain why it is the region with the highest number of religious conflicts.

Sectarianism primarily encompasses religious belonging but it also overlaps with other communal identity indicators such as ethnic and tribal origins. Sectarian issues were complicated in the Middle East after new states were created and independence granted by the West. With the traditional order of the past disrupted, many religious, ethnic and tribal groups competed in the new political environment for political power and control.

New borders and statehood required the formation of a nation, however this was compromised by communal contests for political authority resulting in dominant ethno-sectarian groups basing the emerging national identity and political hierarchy on their own sectarian group. As such the transition from a communal based sense of belonging within a regional sphere to a state identity was only partially achieved. Instead sectarian identity remained important and clashed with the notion of statehood, creating a mosaic of communal groups rather than a unified state. Due to domination and discrimination many sectarian groups seek to regain or achieve dignity by pursuing sectarian advantages thus intensifying and continuing sects as an identifier for confrontation lines within the struggle for power and authority within the state. As such political power is based on alliances that are a complex tapestry of tribal, religious and family connections.

Sectarianism is the deliberate use of religious identities to achieve political or social goals. From 1990 the majority of internal conflicts have had a significant ethnic or sectarian element. Unfortunately it appears that internal armed conflicts

along ethno-sectarian lines are particularly complex and long lasting, with seemingly inhuman brutality. Many of these conflicts emerge from a history of bloodshed with past marginalisation and persecution interwoven into the minds and culture of the communities involved (Scott, 2008, p. 4).

The emergence or intensification of ethno-sectarian conflicts is often caused by a shift in power from one group to another. For instance the fall of an autocratic regime can lead to an explosion of conflict as power is up for grabs and simmering resentments get the chance to express themselves. In the vacuum of power that results communities revert back strongly to their sectarian groups for security and in order to pursue opportunities for power. Leaders co-ordinate their bids for power around their sectarian support base, and groups interested in seizing power converge on the scene from within and without, often using religious or ethnic narratives to legitimise their actions (Scott, 2008, p. 6). As such the breakdown of autocratic leadership does not necessarily lead to pluralistic and tolerant democracies but rather unleashes pent-up ethno-sectarian hatred and an intense identity driven conflict to grab the reins of power.

This thesis researches the premise that a political culture based on opposition to other is at the root of Middle Eastern unrest. It also looks to explain how the links between this political culture and the resulting sectarianism have created politics that focus on power and control at the expense of human rights and the freedom of individuals.

The rise and present weakening of the Syrian regime provides an ideal opportunity to analyse how autocratic regimes use sectarianism to facilitate the establishment of power and control over their citizens and to analyse the mechanisms of sectarianism within an uprising and civil war. In my thesis I answer the question of how this is used by both the opposition, radical Islamists, the people and the regime to debate and struggle over power and control of Syria.

The question of sectarianism and legitimacy is analysed with the breakdown of the Assad regime providing an ideal opportunity to explore the question of legitimacy. The comparative stability of Syria achieved by the al Assad regime prior to the uprising justifies analysis, particularly with regards to the regime's

assertion that it has been able to contain ethno-sectarian conflict. The regime primarily rests its case for legitimacy on this assertion. This enquiry investigates how sectarianism is used to secure autocratic power and control. I outline the power and control mechanisms that autocratic regimes use to control and manipulate their citizens. Within this analysis an investigation is made into whether the Allawites are being used by the Assad regime to capture power and control over Syria or whether Syria is ruled by the Allawite sect.

In order to explore this I have drawn on Ethnic Conflict Theory which clearly describes ethno-sectarian politics. In order to further dissect the sectarian situation in Syria with regards to the ongoing uprising and civil war, Social Movement Theory is applied to separate out communal drives for increased power and status from the popular movement for political change.

Ethnic Conflict Theory proposes that myths, symbols and narratives are used by elites to encourage and direct ethnic violence for political purposes. The political culture of religion in the Middle East makes it a readymade source of mobilising narratives for use in conflict. Mark Juergensmeyer supports this by identifying that religion provides groups with the means to recast their struggle for identity and dignity as a 'cosmic war' in which acts of violence have a symbolic and spiritual significance that they are able to relate to their religious heritage. As Michael Ignatieff states 'today most of the justifying ideologies (for terrorism) are religious'. Military analyst Paulette Oris goes on to state that religion 'is now emerging as the single most important political-ideological default mechanism in global conflict'. Due to the intense emotions evoked by religion, sectarian violence is often more brutal and harder to resolve than secular conflict. Oliver McTernan described that religious extremists can find in the teachings and history of their religion, spiritual justifications for the use of violence 'to protect or promote their own sectarian interests'. As such religion often features heavily in narratives for resistance and rebellions against a dominant group (McCormick, 2006, pp. 144-146).

Importantly there are signs within the Middle East of an emerging shift in the choice of political narratives from the ideology of resistance to the US and Jewish

Israel towards religious conflicts centred on Sunni-Shia rivalry and theological disputes over the interpretations of Islam and the political application of Islam. The concern is that political narratives prominently centring on the more internal Sunni Shia contest for power is casting these tensions within political Islam as the new focus for seeking to establish political power and stability in the Middle East (Abdo, 2013). As a result of the Arab uprisings identities in the Middle East are being reassessed from gender issues to positioning between sectarian groups, as such the emphasis on identity politics is greater than previously (Abdo, Arab Uprisings Have Led to Greater Religious Sectarianism, 2013). The uprisings have created a shift in the political and sectarian balances in the region and the main result is the deepening of the Sunni Shia divide.

Methodology

This section establishes the methodology of this thesis. First the choice of Syria as the country in which to study sectarian issues is justified. Then sources of information are discussed and the theories applied are outlined.

- i) Syria was chosen to analyse due to its history of sectarian tensions but also significantly because of its recent history of relative tolerance between the sects under the Assad regime. Additionally the weakening of the regime and the contrasting emergence of outright sectarianism by both the regime and extreme elements within the current uprising provides ample material through which to analyse sectarian politics. Syria's key place in the regional sectarian tensions between the larger and competing sects, Sunni and Shia, is also crucial to this thesis.
- ii) In order to analyse Syria's sectarian politics information has been gathered from a wide range of sources. Extensive use has been made of primary sources such as online YouTube videos posted by opposition groups and Shabbiha, activist blogs, Facebook pages, journalists' interviews, online rhetoric from websites and defectors' opinions, all being important to understanding the sectarian dynamic

within the Syrian uprising. Secondary source investigations of both the Assad regime and the uprising have also been utilised including think tank reports, United Nations (UN) press releases, newspaper and magazine articles and academic analysis. A key limitation of Syria as a case study is the closed and secretive Assad regime and its repression of internal voices other than those officially sanctioned. This is a key problem in studying sectarian based authoritarian regimes. Specifically this has severely reduced the primary sources available for the pre-civil war period. However the weakening of regime repression due to the 2011 initiated uprising has resulted in a huge leap in the amount of voices emerging from Syria and helpfully most are discussing the current crisis. This is extended by the huge international and regional interest in the crisis generating a significant rise in media and academic attention which is providing fascinating study. Social media and the internet has meant that the current Syrian crisis has provided an unprecedented opportunity – the inside story and videos of a civil war in real time from primary sources. This is invaluable in terms of understanding how ethno-sectarian conflicts develop within internal crises. This also explains the chief focus within this thesis on the time period between the start of the uprising to the thesis end date, August 2013.

- iii) Ethnic Conflict Theory, which relates to identity politics and as such extends to the study of sectarian conflict, has been employed in order to provide a framework through which to analyse Syria's sectarian dynamic. An Ethnic Conflict Theory based approach provides an understanding of the sectarian issues exploited by the regime and the sectarian issues underlying the civil war, however it does not provide a means to separate out definitively the social movement component of the opposition from the sectarian dynamics. To clarify this difference Social Movement Theory is also applied to the civil war. This has enabled an accurate assessment of which dynamics are due to sectarianism and which are due to social activism within the uprising.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework: Ethnic Conflict Theory and Social Movement Theory

1.1 Social Identity Theory

In order to examine the nature of Syria's ethnic and sectarian divisions I have used Ethnic Conflict Theory as the theoretical framework. Differences of opinion within Ethnic Conflict Theory exist with primordialists asserting that ethnic groups operate out of a common history, culture and ancestry within communal bonds leading to conflict driven by deep seated communal loyalties. Constructivists believe ethnicity is a 'social construct' and therefore the society system creates ethnic conflict. Instrumentalists describe ethnic conflict as motivated by rational political motives. Most theorists do not hold purely to one rationale for ethnic conflict maintaining instead that the theoretical causes of ethnic conflict overlap (Kaufman, *Ethnic Fears and Ethnic War in Karabagh*, 1998, p. 3). Ethnic Conflict Theories tend to be tied together by an understanding that the ethnic groups involved perceive themselves to be under threat and are attempting to achieve group security.

Social Identity Theory looks at the social-psychological motivations within ethnic conflict as explored by Muzafer Sherif in 1954. This theory suggests that hostility between groups stems from conflicting goals where zero sum competition is employed leading to negative stereotypes and hostility (Wolff, 2009, p. 37).

The most prominent social identity theorists are Donald Horowitz, Michael Billig and Henri Tajfel. Social identity theory proposes that people seek a positive social identity which is based on belonging to a group. Group loyalty is reflected in a tendency for individuals to make social comparisons between their in-group and out-groups which reflects favourably on the in-group, an approach which enhances an individual's self esteem (Wolff, 2009, pp. 38-39). In positively defining one's own group, members often resort to discriminatory descriptions of out-groups (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 141-143). If the group's standing falls and as

such it no longer boosts the self esteem of its members, individuals will either seek to change the group (social change) or change the narrative on which their group identity is based (social creativity) or leave to join another group (social mobility) (Wolff, 2009, pp. 38-39).

Horowitz identifies competition between groups as a major factor within ethnic conflict. Experiments have shown that group loyalty generates a desire to promote the advancement of one's in-group relative to other groups. As such analysts have concluded that humans have an instinct towards belonging to a group and towards achieving a positive self and social identity through this group (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 141-143).

Social Identity Theory also supposes that minority groups often have lower social status than majority groups, thus in order to obtain a positive social identity minority groups must use innovative strategies. If the social system is stable there is generally little opportunity for change and the minority group must accept their status. However opposition to the status quo will rise if the minority group perceives an opening, such as political instability, to improve their status. In response the majority group typically resorts to repression of the minority group to maintain its own position. Additionally if the minority group perceives its status in relation to the majority group is illegitimate, they will reject their lower status and attempt to resolve their social identity accordingly (Wolff, 2009, pp. 38-39).

Horowitz outlines how low status groups must decide whether to emulate out-group behaviour to improve their position through competition or adopt other strategies. Socially and economically disadvantaged groups fear extinction if they are unable to compete and the resulting anxiety contributes to an exaggerated reaction to perceived threats. Under these circumstances self esteem improves when an individual from a disadvantaged group chooses an aggressive stance as self protection against out-group prejudices and threats. The combination of defensiveness and anxiety increases the likelihood that a group will adhere more closely to ethnic and religious bonds for security, as a basis for rationalising group entitlements and as a symbol of social status (Wolff, 2009, pp. 38-39).

Ethnic divisions and conflicts within states have become a global phenomenon since the World Wars. With the struggle for independence from colonial forces over, many new nations have entered into internal struggles for power and resources between domestic ethnic and sectarian groups. The global spread of new ethnical norms such as equality has made the repression of sectarian and ethnic groups illegitimate resulting in an increased number of repressed groups seeking to address the distribution of political power and resources within their nations and as such improve their conditions (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 3-5).

Horowitz identifies that ethnic groups are ranked hierarchically in order of dominance from the ethnic elite towards subordinate and unranked ethnic groups (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 22-23). Uprisings and revolutions, whilst typically associated with class ideology, can also be instigated by ethnic groups wanting to advance by removing social, economic and political barriers, and attempting to force the redistribution of economic and political power in order to change their position within the state's ethno-sectarian hierarchy (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 83-84).

In states where ethnic divisions are pervasive, ethnic concentrations exist across political, economic and military structures creating a situation where ethnic conflict and competition are the prominent political features. Where one ethno-sectarian group holds political power alongside a strong representation within the military and security forces, the security apparatus becomes a tool for the internal repression of challenges from other ethnic groups (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 10-12). In a state where political parties are drawn along ethnic and sectarian lines a situation can develop where one group is never in power and the military, particularly if it comprises of predominantly one ethnic group, may decide it is fairer and safer to seize power (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 83-84).

Horowitz also states that ethnic groups benefit their members as they are a unit of secure solidarity that offers help and support. This unity hardens within ethnically divided and unstable states as the need for visibly belonging to a group intensifies due to the lack of security (Horowitz, 1985, p. 74). He identifies that if a state provided for the security of all its citizens and supplied effective legal

recourse for injustice this would reduce the need for ethnic affiliations with group members instead able to rely on the state to provide for their security concerns (Horowitz, 1985, p. 74).

There is a strong interplay between ethno-sectarian affiliations and kinship. Additionally ethno-sectarian affiliations can create ties between the political bureaucracy and citizens. Again this is particularly relevant where human rights are not adequately protected within a state as in this instance belonging to the same ethno-sectarian group as members of the regime can help provide security. Ethno-sectarian group members who are in positions of political influence and working to protect their communal group's rights contribute markedly to in-group security and prosperity particularly in a system where citizens are vulnerable. Additionally belonging to an ethnic group ensures members do not have to face any new emerging political or social system alone (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 79-81).

Claims are made that history, traditions and tribalism are a major contributors to ethnic violence, however modern ethnic wars show that those groups associated with modernisation such as educated elites, army officers and the urban population are more often at the forefront of ethnic conflicts. Therefore whilst previous conflict and persecution goes some way towards explaining feelings of insecurity and hostility between groups, ethnic conflict tends not to be explained as solely due to the revival of previous disagreements (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 97-99).

Modernisation can contribute to ethnic conflict with populations undergoing 'social mobilisation' as their conditions change due to increased media exposure, urbanisation, a rise in the number of educated citizens, and moves away from traditional agricultural lifestyles. These changes provoke insecurity and therefore can contribute to moves towards the shelter of ethno-sectarian belonging. Social mobilisation rates can differ greatly from assimilation rates therefore competition for the benefits of modernisation can lead elites to turn to the collective support of their communal group to increase their competitiveness (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 99-101). Communal groups that are successful at advancing their social and

economic position are in turn envied, resented and often feared by groups who occupy a lower position in the class system (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 105-113).

Psychoanalytic and Social Dynamic Theory develops group identity further by stating that group self esteem is comprised of symbols, rituals and narratives relating to a groups' successes/failures with borders which clearly differentiate between out and in group inclusion. Minorities can become part of a majority groups' narrative for framing its failures and traumas. This is particularly relevant when the majority group projects responsibility and blame onto the minority group. If the minority historically belonged to a state or nation that inflicted a great trauma on the majority ethnic group and the majority later becomes dominant they may commit mass atrocities as retaliation to redress past injustices (Wolff, 2009, pp. 39-40).

The importance of collective memories and a shared identity embedded within the culture of an ethnic group can help to understand mobilisation within ethnic conflict. In many instances of ethnic conflict elites manipulate communal fears and narratives as a means to recruit an army to promote their leadership and rise to power (Wolff, 2009, p. 41). Social Identity Theory outlines the role communal identities play within conflict situations particularly as this relates to in-group loyalty and out-group hostility.

1.2 Symbolic Politics Theory

Kaufman's Symbolic Politics theory asserts that ethnicity is based on a 'myth symbol complex' and that when hostility towards another ethnic group is an important part of this complex the likelihood of inter group conflict increases (Wolff, 2009, p. 28). Alongside group mythologies that justify hostility towards other ethno-sectarian groups Kaufman outlines two other preconditions that indicate that ethnic conflict is likely, these preconditions being when a group feels that it is facing an existential threat to its survival, and the opportunity to mobilise (Wolff, 2009, pp. 30-31).

Kaufman adds that conditions within the political sphere such as demographic concentrations of an ethnic group, political freedoms, third party involvement, regime losing power due to internal opposition and a base in a neighbouring state also contribute to communal conflict. However in order for the situation to escalate to mass or elite lead violence Kaufman asserts that 'mass hostility, chauvinist political mobilisation and security dilemma' must be present (Wolff, 2009, p. 31).

Sufficient mobilisation to engage in communal conflict is encouraged by emotional appeals to ethnic bonds. As such Symbolic Politics makes the 'central assumption... that people make political choices based on emotion and in response to symbols'. Ethnicity is defined as an 'emotional bond based on kinship feelings' (Kaufman, 2001, p. 29). In order to understand the symbols which work to mobilise a communal group an examination of the myths and prejudices shared by group members is required and this leads to an understanding of 'their greatest collective fears' (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 29-30).

Groups are more likely to engage in ethnic conflict where there is a pre-existing ethnic myth which justifies violence towards specific out-groups. This justification can include a belief that one's own group is superior and more entitled than the target out-group (Kaufman, 2001, p. 30). Additionally a group that admires warrior characteristics and includes this admiration as part of their shared identity increases the likelihood of the group engaging in out-group violence. Opportunistic elites often attempt to mould such myths to support their own aims and to strengthen their legitimacy (Kaufman, 2001, p. 30).

Fear is the driving factor which turns ethno-sectarian tensions to communal war. Extreme fear and insecurity are perceived as justifying violent self defence and can lead to drives for political dominance in order to achieve in-group security. The primary source of group fears is identified as existing within the group's myth symbol complex, particularly when this emphasises feelings of persecution and victimization. Often a dominant group fears revenge whilst a dominated group fears group and thereby individual extinction (Kaufman, 2001, p. 31).

Another precursor to ethnic conflict is the opportunity to mobilise. Political repression can prevent ethnic or sectarian opponents from being able to effectively mobilise ethnically based opposition groups. Consequently a breakdown in state authority within an ethnically divided state can create an opportunity for ethnic groups to violently seek to redress the political balance (Kaufman, 2001, p. 32).

Mass led ethnic movements tend to develop where ethnic myths and fears are strong. Elite lead movements also have their origins in ethnic myths and symbols but in this instance elites are creating narratives from within the group's myth complex in order to intensify fear and insecurity which they in turn use to justify their extremist policies and to support their assertion that their political empowerment is necessary for the protection of the group. Thus the security dilemma is in this case cynically intensified by a predatory elite and again emerges as a dominant cause of ethnic conflict (Kaufman, 2001, p. 34).

Kelman makes the observation that the escalatory and self perpetuating nature of ethnic conflict is also based within the myth complex. As new conflicts and massacres are endured new symbols and myths emerge that incorporate these new traumas, strengthening and hardening existing chauvinistic and hostile attitudes to relevant out-groups. The end result is emotive and dramatic ethnic mythologies that reinforce zero sum politics and make compromise seem like a betrayal of the group's myth complex. This creates a significant barrier to peaceful settlement as it reinforces justifications for aggressive defensive actions and confirms the necessity of further violence to achieve security. Extreme fear, reinforced by ethnic myth complexes and accompanying security dilemmas, pervades ethnic conflicts making them very difficult to resolve (Kaufman, *Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic Wars*, 2006, p. 205 & 215).

1.3 The Security Dilemma and Communal Conflict

In this section I look at Ethnic Conflict Theory with a focus on the more prominent security dilemma explanation for communal violence. Theories based

around the security dilemma draw from realist International Relations theory relating to Kenneth Waltz's 1979 description of an anarchical international system in which in order to become secure states take action, such as acquiring military power, which in turn decreases the security of other states who seek to address this resulting in a subsequent reduction in security of the original state. Inherent anarchy within the international political system means that security is the most significant concern of states (Wolff, 2009, p. 26).

Barry Posen highlighted that the anarchy and lack of central authority inherent in international political system emulates the anarchy that exists when a regime loses control or a state is undergoing regime change. He explains further that two factors in this scenario increase ethnic groups' perceptions of insecurity, one being that communal ties can be used to mobilise an army, the second being that when ethno-sectarian groups are geographically isolated or vulnerable to aggression from radicals they take action to ensure they can defend themselves and often these actions are perceived as offensive rather than defensive to rival groups. Complicating these matters is the tendency of people to refer to history when they lack insight into the plans of competing groups (Wolff, 2009, pp. 26-27). Drawing on the inter-group conflict between Croatians and Serbs in what is now the Republic of Croatia, Posen noted that once the more violent fanatical segments of each group began terrorising the other ethnic group both the ethnic groups as a whole were more likely to pursue violence (Wolff, 2009, p. 27).

Barbara Walter builds on the security explanations for ethnic conflict by extending the conditions that create communal fears to include government breakdown, changing balances of political or demographical power, redistribution of economic and/or military resources and forced or voluntary disarmament. Regional and global political dynamics are also important (Wolff, 2009, pp. 27-28).

Walter asserts that whilst these conditions make ethnic insecurity likely, the actual outbreak of violence is orchestrated by predatory and manipulative elites who develop rhetoric which increases their own ethnic group's fears and offer themselves as a protective source of unity and defence from out-group threats.

Political opportunists are able to find traction for their spread of inflammatory myths within shared communal memories which in turn become the base of emotionally driven decision making within highly charged situations (Wolff, 2009, p. 28).

Furthermore Lake and Rothchild state that information failures and a lack of credibility lead to ethnic groups being unable to reassure out-groups and also unable to bargain effectively as commitments from either side are not perceived as credible. As insecurity intensifies pre-emptive force starts to emerge as the safest defensive option (Wolff, 2009, p. 28).

1.4 Contentious Politics: Social Movement Theory

In order to fully understand the communal conflict within Syria, and particularly within the uprising, analysis needs to extend beyond Ethnic Conflict Theory to include Social Movement Theory so as to separate out communal aspirations from popular activism.

Social Movement Theory outlines three causal factors that lead to social movements. These factors are 'political opportunity, mobilising structures and framing'. Political opportunity presents itself as the grievances and dissatisfaction which leads to the opportunity to take collective action. In order to collectively mobilise structures and resources are needed. Collective action is typically mobilised through established social structures and communicated through existing social networks. In order to motivate and focus collective action, the opposition group frames dissatisfaction into a strategy by outlining grievances and attributing responsibility and blame resulting in a compelling argument for political change (Jackson J. W., 2006, p. v & 4).

McAdams, Tilly and Tarrow elaborated on Social Movement Theory through their contentious politics analysis, asserting that mobilisation through existing social structures went so far as to appropriate existing social structures and turn them into vehicles for mobilisation. This accounts for the ability of opposition

groups to organise effectively despite repression or a lack of resources. Furthermore they went on to state that the framing narrative of the opposition movement was not just a motivational tool used by leading activists but was a construct influenced by narratives of competing groups, opponents, third party groups, the state and the media. As such the narrative of a social movement is contained within the cultural and social restraints of its locality. The manner in which a movement is reported through media, communication channels and the cultural filter of its environment impacts on the movement leaders' attempts to frame the movement. Contentious politics is a dynamic and evolving mechanism that is a function of both itself and its political and social circumstances (McAdams, 2001, p. 44).

In order to analyse the Syrian uprising I will be drawing from the Social Movement Theories described as the Ethnic Communal Mobilisational Model, Resource Mobilisation Theory, Political Process Theory and New Movement Theory. Resource Mobilisation Theory stresses the role of power and power struggle within social movements. It explains that groups can mobilise to address grievances or deprivation when they have the resources to do so. Mobilisation requires the creation of a potential support base, recruitment networks, the motivational framing of issues, removal of barriers to participation and the building of a coherent collective identity. The ability to do this relies heavily on necessary resources such as financial support and resources, political influence, access to media outlets and the necessary workers. Without adequate resources to enable their movement to develop the group is less able to address their grievances (Opp, 2009, pp. 127-160).

The existence of the necessary resources to mobilise is understood within Political Process Theory however the emphasis here is on the timing of collective action. The emergence of a political opportunity to organise is recognised as being crucial to the instigation of a social movement. Political opportunities can be created by various factors such as the growth of political pluralism, a decline in the effectiveness of state repression, elite disunity with a corresponding decline in regime legitimacy, increased and broadened access to institutions involved in the

political process and the advocating of protest by an elite group looking to expand its organisation and raise its profile (Opp, 2009, pp. 161-165).

Political Process Theory also establishes the political environment as a key determinant of collective action. The political environment is influenced by a number of factors including the nature of the regime's elite, the distribution of skills and status within the population and levels of social disintegration. The political environment plays a key role in either facilitating the development of or the obstruction of social movements (Opp, 2009, pp. 161-165).

Mixed systems where there are some openings for political mobilisation but also repression generate greater numbers of social movements as they have both the grievances and the opportunity, although limited, to mobilise. The limited opportunities for influencing political change increases frustration with protests often the only avenue for voicing grievances. Additionally rising expectations can also sharpen discontent leading to collective action. Furthermore a perception that there is an increased likelihood of a movement's success can increase participation in protests (Opp, 2009, pp. 161-165). This is in line with the King's Dilemma as outlined by Samuel Huntington whereby limited reforms from the top increase rather than decrease demands for more reforms from the bottom. The resulting pressure for additional and more radical reforms imperils the incumbent regime increasing the risk it will be swept from power (Dunn, 2007).

New Movement Theory was constructed to expand understanding of contemporary activism which emphasised cultural reproduction in advanced capitalist societies such as the Green movement and human rights movements. New Movement Theory describes movements that focus on issues relating to symbols, ideology, culture, social consciousness and generalised beliefs and values with key themes being quality of life, self determination and identity. It is theorised that these new movements are a response to communications technology, the influence and plurality of modern urban centres, the fast pace of life, and the constant change within modern civilisations leading to activist themes that are attempting to address the resulting fracturing of personal identities that

this complexity brings. As such these social movements are constantly evolving (Buechler, 1995).

New Movement Theory outlines collective action that focuses not just on initiating instrumental action from the state in relation to highlighted grievances but also focuses on changing the values and behaviours of citizens. New Movements are often grass roots movements and frequently focus on the interests of marginal groups (Buechler, 1995).

New Movement Theory's emphasis on grass roots collective action is reflected in Gene Sharp's political theory outlining an action plan for revolution which was referenced by activists within the Egyptian Arab Spring. Gene Sharp promoted revolution in terms of understanding that dictators are never as powerful as they say they are and that they can be toppled through peaceful means through acts of noncompliance, using symbols to demonstrate opposition unity, highlighting brutal and repressive state actions, creating a movement identity and undermining the regimes' pillars of support (Arrow, 2011). Unfortunately this has not been successful in Syria.

The remaining theory I am aiming to outline, is Ted Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilisational Model which outlines four chief traits which contribute to communal mobilisation. The first trait is the extent of the gap between the aggrieved population and the governing elite, namely the larger the gap the greater the motivation for political mobilisation. Secondly, Gurr identifies that the stronger the groups' identity through common historical experiences, religion, ethnic origin, language and shared locality, the greater the likelihood of communal political mobilisation. Thirdly the stronger the networks and social cohesion within a group the greater the ability to organise political action and fourthly the extent of repression by the dominant group over the subordinate group points to the potential for political mobilisation in that harsh repression makes aggrieved groups reluctant to resort to open violence (Sahliyah, 2001, p. 5).

1.5 Theoretical Framework: Conclusion

Ethnic conflict theory and social movement theory help to shed light on the Syrian sectarian situation. Ethnic conflict theory assists in identifying and analysing sectarian mobilisation. Social movement theory teases out the dynamics that stem from the popular movement and separates them off from the underlying sectarian dynamic. In order to show how these two have overlapped within the revolutionary conditions both theories have been applied simultaneously.

Chapter Two

The Communal Context within Middle Eastern Politics

2.1 Arab Culture and Communalism: Opposition to Other as Political Structure

The Pew Research centres' 2007-2010 research poll revealed that the Middle East eclipses the rest of the world both in terms of tensions between religious groups and with regards to state repression of religion. The poll also showed that religious restrictions and tensions are on the rise across the globe with the increased exposure to outside religions and cultures afforded by globalisation often met with a measure of defensiveness and ethno-sectarian chauvinism (Danin R. M., Religious Restrictions and Violence Growing Globally led by the Middle East, 2012). Given the poll revealed the Middle East as the region with the highest level of religious hostilities it is relevant to investigate the dominant culture and religion in the region, Arab culture and Islam, and assess its impact on the creation of this statistic.

Middle Eastern culture is based on a history of predatory warrior tribalism and identity politics in which individuals belong to a series of nested communal groups from family through to sectarian group. The tribal culture is based on self preservation through out-group hostility which correspondingly reinforces in-group loyalty (Salzman, 2008). Symbolic Politics Theory outlines how ethno-sectarian communities with a warrior mythology and a strong emphasis on 'them and us' engage more readily in ethno-sectarian conflict (Kaufman, Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War, 2001, p. 30). With both these characteristics present within Arab culture this has significantly influenced Middle Eastern politics and the politization of Islam (Salzman, 2008).

The Muhammad ascendancy and the rise of Islam can be attributed to Muhammad's ability to unite the Bedouin tribes into a political and religious collective through which they were able to dominate out-groups and provide in-

group security. As Salzman describes;

Building on the tribal system, Muhammad framed an inclusive structure within which the tribes had a common, God-given identity as Muslims. This imbued the tribes with a common interest and common project. But unification was only possible by extending the basic tribal principle of balanced opposition. This Muhammad did by opposing the Muslim to the infidel, and the *dar al-Islam*, the land of Islam and peace, to the *dar al-harb*, the land of the infidels and conflict. He raised balanced opposition to a higher structural level as the new Muslim tribes unified in the face of the infidel enemy. Bedouin raiding became sanctified as an act of religious duty. With every successful battle against unbelievers, more Bedouin joined the *umma*. Once united, the Bedouin warriors turned outward, teaching the world the meaning of *jihad*, which some academics today say means only struggle but which, in the context of early Islamic writing and theological debates, was understood as holy war (Salzman, 2008).

Symbolic Politics Theory illustrates how the politics of Middle Eastern states are influenced by their myth symbol complexes which encompass their cultural histories. For the majority of Islamic groups their myth symbol complexes clearly denounce out-groups as infidels. Furthermore myths attesting to the divine purpose of Jihad were strengthened by the conquests of the Muslim armies between the 7th and 9th centuries who ‘with Islam as their national religion and war-cry’ successfully challenged the Byzantines in the North and the Persians to the East, going on to conquer Christian and Jewish populations in Egypt, Libya and the Maghreb, and the Hindu population of Northern India (Lewis B. , 1956, pp. 13, 49-63). These conquests were followed by successful invasions into much of Christian Spain, Portugal and Sicily (Salzman, 2008).

Whilst editing primary source descriptions of Jihad Andrew Bostom, an associate professor of medicine at Brown University, discovered lengthy quotes from major ancient Islamic authorities confirming the obligation of Muslims to engage in holy wars against infidels. Modern Jihadi rhetoric reflects this ancient justification for

sectarian violence. This is an extension of a culture in which tribal identity is based on a premise of opposition to 'other' and this flows through to Muslim attitudes to non-Muslim. This attitude is confirmed in the historical persecution and repression of Christian and Jewish peoples in Muslim lands. The persecution of Jews and Christians was based not just on a tribal culture of opposition to other but also on the deeply rooted Muslim belief that Islam was the one true religion and all others were inferior or false, a belief that most religions have at least historically held about themselves. Thus, as Salzman describes 'The theological foundation of the Arab empire was the supremacy of Islam and the obligation of each Muslim to advance its domination. The relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is thus defined by ancient Islamic doctrine as one of superiority versus inferiority and of endless conflict until the successful conquest of the non-Muslim' (Salzman, 2008).

Opposition to other is also reinforced through the importance of honour within Middle Eastern tribal culture with violence against outsiders a common path for those seeking honour (Salzman, 2008). With honour heavily embedded in a warrior's successful confrontation with others, Arab honour is correspondingly challenged by the global spread of Western values and this is perceived as a threat to Islam. In order to find honour in a world politically and economically dominated by Western values as opposed to Islamic values, Islamic honour 'can be found only in resistance' (Salzman, 2008). We can see this dynamic utilised within Syrian politics with the regime's use of the Islamic myth symbol complex in order to cast themselves as the champions of Arab honour and Islam through resistance to the West and Israel.

The regions' zero sum politics and lack of power sharing means that the introduction of human rights and democracy will require a shift in the political paradigm (Symth, Interview: Phillip Symth on Syria, 2013). Secular democracy is part of the modernity paradigm which has affected the globe at varying times and depths. Modernity projects towards the future (Lavoix, 2012). In contrast radical Islam, autocratic leadership and tribalism draws from the past, hence many radicals and leaders quote historical fatwas and/or use religion to legitimise their political choices.

The political culture of the region, which is based on the suppression of others in order to achieve socio-political goals and dominance, a dynamic particularly noticeable in reference to the lack of gender and sectarian equality, favours the development of autocracy. Both the autocratic secular regimes and the radical Islamists are a direct product of this winner takes all mentality although they are sworn enemies. They are not sworn enemies solely because of their different ideological and religious ideals but also because they are directly competing for the same goal, the right to impose their own needs and wants onto society legitimised either through ideology or religion, through a system secured either by a radical interpretation of Sharia law or by secular use of force, in order to obtain power and privilege.

Middle Eastern sectarianism is based upon the ‘central principle of tribal political organisation’ which frames sectarian in-groups in opposition to out-groups, or more basically ‘us versus them’ (Salzman, 2008). This effectively ensures in-group cohesion and ultimately survival in a harsh and politically competitive reality but it destroys the opportunity for stability based on cooperation and human rights. Political mobilisation within Middle Eastern cultures is usually framed in opposition to a heretic other, this makes for a difficult process from revolution to democracy, secularism and equal sectarian rights. As such the Syrian democratic social movement within the 2011 initiated uprising must withstand the temptation to draw from its own political culture too greatly. It must resist the urge to secure political support along sectarian lines as this will ultimately defeat its aims, reducing support from out-groups such as the religious minorities and making the social cohesion required for a successful democracy difficult.

2.2 Religion, Political Narratives and the Mechanisms of Power and Control

The political culture of ‘us versus them’ translates to sectarianism being available to use as an important part of the imposition of autocratic power and enables the use of religious political narratives in the Middle East and within Syria. Power

and control is achieved through mechanisms that encourage the submission of targets and enforces the psychological dominance of the tyrant. I have outlined in the table below the typical mechanisms used by autocratic regimes to create conditions that strengthen illegitimate political power and control.

Fig. 1 Power and Control		
Physical – Fear	Economic	Psychological

State of Emergency legislation enabling security apparatus to repress citizens	Elite control over resources	Manipulation of ethno-sectarian fears
Corrupt criminal justice system used to imprison political opposition	Regime's patronage systems only way to secure wealth	Regime maintaining divisiveness between ethno-sectarian groups
Security apparatus's internal intelligence means organising internal opposition difficult	Resources primarily distributed to leadership's own ethno-sectarian group or within patronage networks	Conspiracy theories declaring the state is under threat from external sources to distract from internal discontent
Corrupt immunity of security officials from punishment for human rights abuses	Disproportionate allocation of resources to suppressing internal opposition	Minimising of regime deficiencies and failings
People who criticise the regime going missing or receiving beatings	Corrupt acquisition of wealth by regime elite	Denial of regime brutality
Torture of opposition figures	Ability to direct funding within religious organisations	Blaming common enemies for regime failings and/or violence – i.e. Israel ,the US
Incorporation of military into political spheres of	Ownership of media outlets to ensure the dominate	Truth Owning – punishing those who challenge the

power	message is the regimes narrative supporting its rule	state narrative
Symbolic violence – the punishment of loved ones in the stead of concealed opposition figures		Cult of Personality around rulers, naming as Lion, Father of the Nation , forced displays of adoration
State terrorism – violence such as massacres within opposition strongholds to send message to entire population		Using religion to legitimise rule
Assassination of leading internal and external opposition figures		Using religious symbolism to enforce power and devout right to rule of leader
Assassination of leading figures within ethno-sectarian groups		Creating chaos in order to obscure securing rule by force
Assassination of any elites with the potential to challenge leadership from within		Discrediting internal opposition in derogatory language i.e. terrorists, criminal gangs, inciting sectarian hatred
Assassinating politicians in other countries who challenge the Wall of fear		Deflecting blame for internal chaos by claiming victimisation by external mutual enemies i.e. US conspiracy
Terrorising population to install wall of fear whilst claiming legitimacy		Holding mock elections than releasing statements about how much the President is loved

Fear is the base on which autocratic political power and control is constructed. The wall of fear is built around corruption, the criminal justice system, a brutal

security apparatus focused on domestic dominance, media repression, corrupt elite enrichment, exaggerated elite influence, politically inspired narratives, clientism, sectarianism and control of the armed forces.

Due to the social and cultural role of religion and nested identity groups in the Middle East, these bonds represent significant tools for the imposition of power and control. This has its roots in Islamic history. Islam created a psychological change in the people that Muhammad and his successors sought to lead, through unifying tribes and making them more controllable despite being unused to centralised leadership. So it emerged that historically ‘In the Wars of Conquest (Islam) was the symbol of Arab unity and victory’ even though the main aims of the conquests were based in power and resources as opposed to religion (Lewis B. , 1956, p. 56).

Additionally Bernard Lewis describes Islam as being the means through which cause and following were expressed. ‘The faith was the official credo of the established order, the cult the external and divisible symbol of its identity and cohesion, conformity to them, however perfunctory, the token and pledge of loyalty. Orthodoxy meant the acceptance of the existing order, heresy or apostasy its criticism or rejection...in the minds and feelings of men Church and State were indistinguishably fused’ (Lewis B. , 1956, pp. 99-100). Therefore the communal myth symbol complexes as described by Symbolic Politics Theory heavily featured Islam as intrinsically bound within Middle Eastern politics.

In modern history Hafez al Assad, followed by Bashar al Assad, used religious and sectarian strategies to ensure control over the Syrian population. Hafez al Assad sought to gain the trust of the Sunni majority by co-opting Syria’s religious establishment. He gave high ranking Islamic clerics positions in the Peoples’ Assembly and he made large personal donations to Hama religious charities and Homs religious schools. Furthermore he increased the salaries of religious establishment employees and designated extensive funds for the building of new mosques in an attempt to decrease the Sunni majority’s reservations about their President belonging to the Allawite sect. Through the contrasting strategies of co-opting religious leaders and the Ba’ath party’s secular stance Hafez al Assad sought to establish legitimacy (Ziadeh D. R., 2008).

Furthermore Hafez worked to create a cult of personality to reinforce the legitimacy of his rule (Pipes, 1996, p. 15). This included the regime issuing propaganda using religious iconography and depicting the leader imitating divinity in an attempt to subjugate religious and constitutional challenges to an Allawite ruling elite. An example in 1992 occurred upon the death of Hafez's mother Na'isa, when the regime issued a poster featuring Na'isa al Assad with a halo and Hafez bowing at her feet (Pipes, 1996, p. 15) (Wedeen, 1999, p. 13). The lack of mainstream media reports and civilian challenges to the Islamic styled propaganda illustrated the regime's power through their ability to impose their own narrative.

However, although the regime was able to ensure that the majority of its citizens participated in outward displays of admiration of their leader none of this worked towards creating genuine legitimacy or popularity, rather it was his ability to publicly proclaim these things and remain relatively unchallenged which proved and perpetrated his power and control leading to an everyday culture of compliance and fear of the regime. It established a visible dominance whereby the people deemed it was in their own best interests to submit to the, at times religious, slogans and symbols of the non-charismatic regime and in doing so psychologically submit to its power and control over their lives (Wedeen, 1999, pp. 6-7 & 9-11). Essentially forcing the population to put up pictures of al Assad was and is a discipline strategy of the regime (Wedeen, 1999, p. 15).

When he came into power Bashar al Assad also sought to associate himself with Islam through securing the support of key Sunni religious figures in order to co-opt the religious establishment and prevent it mobilising its followers to oppose the regime's power. Given its importance to the Sunni majority, religion forms an important part of the regime's strategy for maintaining power and control over Syria (Ziadeh D. R., 2008).

After a surge of demands followed Bashar al Assad's inauguration in 2000 due to perceptions he was a reformer, the regime swung back towards suppressing internal opposition in 2006. At the same time in recognition of the Islamic revival across Syria and the Middle East, Bashar al Assad sought to further accommodate religious conservatives as a means of broadening his support base. This included

an increased use of references to his Islamic identity within the President's speeches (Slackmen, 2012).

Another method that the regime employed in order to control their population was to deliberately associate the increasing visibility of Sunni Islamic religiousness with Islamic extremists and terrorists. They made use of the West's 'war on terror' post 9-11 and the sectarianism within the Iraqi civil war to help facilitate this association. Additionally when it has felt threatened such as during 2004-2006 the regime highlighted increased Sunni religiousness in order to make the impression that the only alternative to their rule was Sunni majority rule and due to increased Sunni religiousness this would mean the repression of 'heretic' religions within an Islamic state (Alhaj, 2012, pp. 3-4)

In contrast to its highlighting increased Sunni devoutness the Syrian regime did not publicise the rises in Shi'ite religiousness evident in the increasing number of Shi'ite pilgrims visiting holy sites in Syria (Alhaj, 2012, pp. 3-4). Through his greater association with Shia Islam Bashar al Assad has inflamed Islamic defensiveness by departing from the careful balancing act that Hafez al Assad maintained between sectarian groups. This balancing act often entailed absorbing individuals from different sectarian groups into positions within the government that did not entail decision making. This balance has been upset with Bashar al Assad favouring the support of the Neo Shi'ites in line with the regime's foreign alignment with Shia Iran and Hezbollah with criticism regarding this from Sunni Muslims dealt with through the security forces (Alhaj, 2012, pp. 3-4).

However the most visible and significant illustration of religion as political propaganda has been seen within the uprising. This highlights the continued importance of religion as a mobilising force and has resulted in a battle to establish religious legitimacy. For example many Free Syria Army (FSA) units are becoming increasingly identifiable as predominantly Sunni Muslims due to brigade names that draw on Sunni Islamic myths and figures (O'Bagy E. , Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 18 & 21). The regime and its supporters are also seeking to create religious legitimacy for their cause through slogans such as 'God, Syria and Bashar' (Khodr, Inside Syria's Sectarian Divide, 2012).

The Supreme Iftaa council, whose leader is Sunni cleric Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun, issued a statement in which the regime's fight for survival was described as religiously sanctioned, stating that 'we implore our people in Syria to stand shoulder to shoulder with our Syrian Arab army and our armed forces and we call on our sons to fulfil the religious duty of joining the Syrian Arab army for the defence of our homeland which the heavens have blessed and which the Imam of the prophets [i.e. Mohammed] called to him.' It went on to reference the Zionist conspiracy theory and the regime's identification of itself as a front of resistance to Zionist aggression and North American hegemony with 'The country that has remained lofty through the ages of time in the face of Zionist aggression and its policies of expansionism ' (Al-Tamimi, 2013).

Bashar al Assad's image has been marketed more extensively through a religious lens since the uprising. Widespread public portraits accord him holy status with slogans under his image such as 'God Protects Syria', 'We have God in the Sky and Bashar on Earth' and 'God to be Praised and Bashar to be Followed'. Given Allawites were rescued from marginalisation to a large extent by the Al Assads and now perceive they face an existential threat from retribution at the hands of Sunni Muslims it is easy to see how the hero worship of Bashar al Assad as their protector has developed within the insecurity of the uprising and in face of rising sectarianism. However these portraits offend many Sunni Muslims (Syria, 2013).

Opposition rhetoric encouraging mobilisation is also reinforced by religious references, expressing frustration and anger at the regime with comments such as 'God curse you O Bashar' posted on the Syrian Revolution Facebook page (Syrian Revolution Facebook Page, 2011).

Fig.2 Bashar Al Assad Facebook Page Visual (1)



Facebook visuals posted by loyalists and the regime, such as the one above, reference Syria's rhetoric in defence of its rule as a resistance force against Zionism and the US (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012). A further posting described the actions of the FSA as 'impure terrorism' (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012). Here the regime is reinforcing its conspiracy argument in which the uprising represents Islamic terrorism instigated by Zionists and the US in an attempt to ignite Syrian patriotism to 'protect the homeland' (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012). Highlighting the Islamist presence in the uprising also works to discourage Western intervention through reinforcing fears that they may be intervening on behalf of their enemies, Islamic terrorists. However the rhetoric is primarily aimed at the regime's main constituents, minority sectarian groups, who are fearful of the revolution installing a radical Sunni Islamic regime.

Visuals that are most likely dishonest are posted onto the Bashar al Assad Facebook page to drum up religious fears such as the visual and post 'Egyptian Farhat Ramadan, founder of the Salafist Call in Kafer Al-Sheikh in Egypt, has joined the terrorist Jabhet Al-Nusra in Syria' (fig. 3) (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012).

Fig. 3 Bashar al Assad Facebook Page Visual (2)



Clearly it would be highly unusual for an Islamic terrorist leader to appear looking jolly when their preferred look is severely taciturn, casting serious doubt on the authenticity of this image. However reading comments below the image it appears to have struck a chord with some loyalists who posted the following,

many with religious references: ‘The faces of demons...God damn them all’, ‘Look at their faces. They are of European origin were Mossad agents’ and ‘these enemies of Islam and Peace’ (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012). Conspiracy theories that distort and distract from the truth are a key ploy of regimes and political religious movements in the Middle East (Pipes, *The Hidden Hand: Middle Eastern Fears of Conspiracy*, 1996).

On 11 December 2012 Bashar al Assad’s Facebook page also declared that a Wahhabi fatwa was issued to support militant Islamic units in Syria encouraging temporary marriages between Jihadi women and soldiers in order to raise morale. Comments posted again reflected a sectarian bias against Jews in order to discredit those involved in the uprising, with claims that temporary marriages represented ‘the same opinion as the rabbis of Zion’ (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012).

The conspiracy theory using Israel as the protagonist for the uprising reflects the Middle Eastern use of Israeli Jews as the common enemy or ‘other’ which ‘true’ Arabs oppose. Although there are likely to be sincere political motivations behind opposition to the state of Israel, Israel is cynically used within political narratives to resonate with Islamic prejudices and fears by corrupt Middle Eastern regimes including the Assad regime and radical groups. This draws on the Middle Eastern myth symbol complex in which honour is based in tribal and religious systems and thus reflects Jewish Israel as a challenge to Muslim Arab honour, ensuring that the Syrian regime appears honourable in its resistance to the Israeli state. According to Salzman this particularly resonates with the Muslim belief that Jews, as well as all other religions outside Islam, are followers of a false religion therefore the establishment of a Jewish state on Arab Muslim territory is intolerable (Salzman, 2008). Not all Syrians accept the state’s political narratives which is evident in the comment, also with religious references, posted on 11 December 2012 in reference to a Syrian TV documentary and unrelated to the Israel narrative ‘To be honest they lost confidence in public information and media from the time of Adam and Eve’ (Bashar al Assad Facebook Page, 2012).

With both the regime and the opposition using religious rhetoric, including both sides referring to their dead as martyrs, it is evident that both resisting and

engaging in the uprising is being portrayed as a religious cause intensifying the feelings of citizens on both sides. This is intensifying the risk that the civil war will degenerate into a zero sum sectarian contest.

2.3 Conclusion: The Communal Context within Middle Eastern Politics

The myth symbol complexes of sectarian groups in Syria significantly influences current political narratives and strategies for enforcing political power and control. With Islam historically embedded in politics and emerging from within tribalism, traditionally it has placed significant emphasis on opposition to other, honour, the supremacy of the Islamic religion and warrior characteristics making it the ideal religion for mobilising a sectarian group within a conflict situation. As a result religion features strongly within mobilising narratives of the diverse groups within the opposition, particularly radical Islamic groups, and also within the rhetoric of the Assad regime.

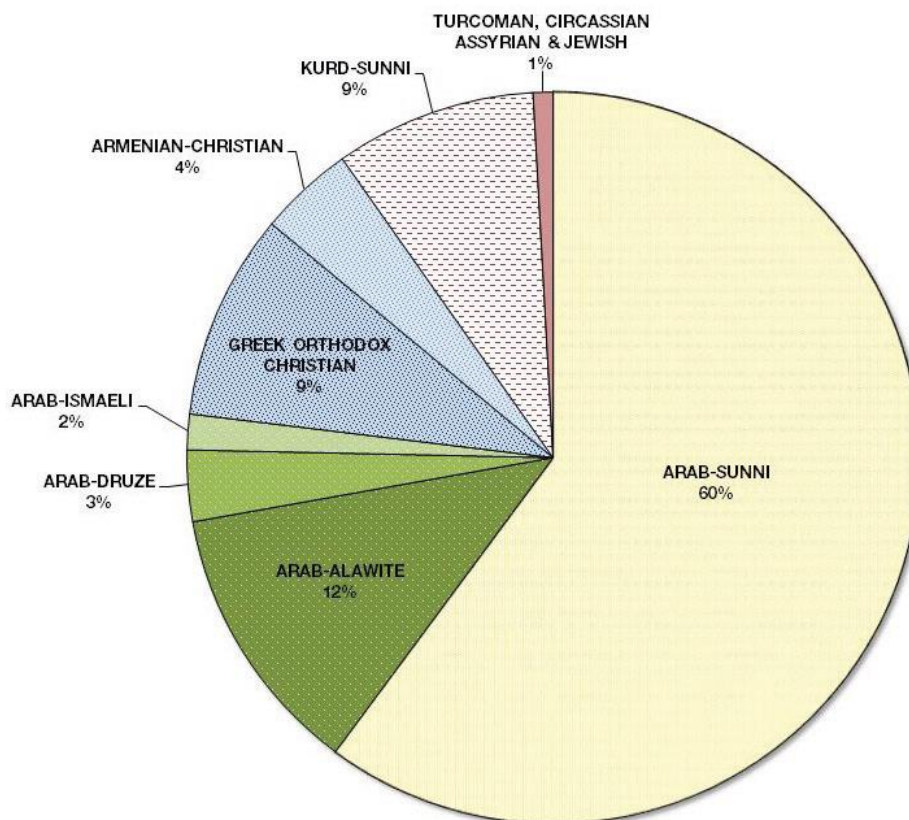
Chapter Three

The Allawite Ousting of Sunni Power

3.1 The Origins of Sectarianism under the Assad Regime

Sectarianism has been a significant feature of the political landscape in Syria since its creation in 1916. Prior to the introduction of the Western state system to the Middle East which spurred the conception of Arab nationalism, sect was the key identifier within the region that became Syria (Dam N. v., 2011, p. 2). Sectarianism was both the historical cause of Allawite misery, the motivation to organise politically and the means by which the Allawite elite secured political power.

Fig. 4 Syrian Ethno-Sectarian Groups

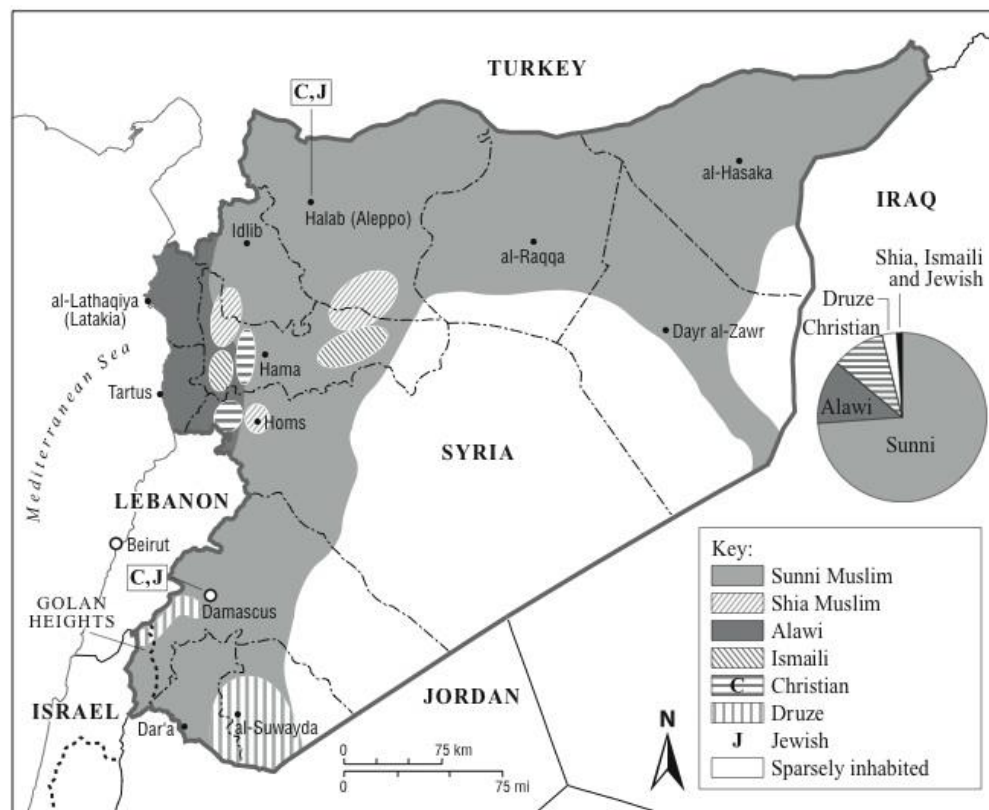


SYRIAN ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS

(Holliday, 2011, p. 10)

In 2010 the Syrian population numbered 22 million, and although accurate figures do not exist estimates place Arab Sunni at approximately 60%, Shi'ites, Ismailis and Druze 5%, Allawites make up 12%, Christians 13%, Sunni Kurds 9% and Turcoman, Circassian, Assyrian and Jewish at 1% (fig. 4). Just over 30% of the population are non-Muslim or heterodox Muslim (Holliday, 2011, p. 10). Ethnically the population is approximately 90% Arab and 10% other ethnic groups such as Kurds and Armenians. Syria also has a large number of refugees with 1.5 million Palestinian and 1 million Iraqis (Bar S. , 2006, p. 359). Many of these figures are in flux given the exodus of refugees from Syria due to the civil war.

Fig 5 Distribution of Ethno-sectarian Groups within Syria



7.1

(Kaplan, 2012)

The Latakia region is the traditional homeland of the Allawite sect (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 134). Whilst the Alawi, Druze and Ismailis are compact minorities

concentrated in districts, Christians and Sunni live throughout the country (Dam, Spring, 1978, p. 201). The sectarian distribution within Syria is illustrated within figure 5.

On the surface communal identities seemed comparatively less pronounced in Syria than the rest of the Middle East however rather than a social phenomenon this was a reflection of the regime's co-option of key parties and repression of sectarian tensions through such means as preventing expressions of communal identity through media channels (Worren, 2007, pp. 3-4). Sunni Arabs, Kurds and Turks displayed comparative tolerance of each other, however less tolerance was extended towards heterodox Muslims such as the Druze, Ismailis, Allawites and Shia. Generally however ethno-sectarian fault lines remained strong, cemented throughout Syria's history by invasions, localism due to a pre Assad lack of a strong central authority and the geographical isolation of the Jabal al Druze and the Allawite sects (Dam N. v., 1979, p. 16).

The Druze community was and is primarily located within the Southern al-Suwayda' province where, unlike the Allawite Latakia region, the Druze constituted both the traditional elite and the populace, creating in a strong sense of regional identification. As a result when either the Ottoman rulers or governments in Damascus have sought to increase their influence within the al-uwayda' region they have come up against solid sectarian cohesion (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'ath Party*, 2011, pp. 10-11).

Ismailis are concentrated in the Hama province where 80% of their population reside with most living in the rural districts of Salamiyah and Masyaf. Salamiyah was the centre of Ismaili influence in the ninth and tenth centuries, a period of time where the Ismailis were feared by other sectarian groups. In the eleventh century they fled to the Latakia region but encountered resentment from the Allawites contributing to many returning to Salamiya after the Ottoman empire granted them local territory in 1845 (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, pp. 11-12).

Notwithstanding Christianity's low profile domestically, Syria is the birthplace of the Christian faith. The faith was named Christian for the first time at the Turkish city of Antioch and it was travelling to Damascus that Saint Paul converted to Christianity. Syrian Christians, in particular the Orthodox Greek branch, are aware that they are the heirs to ancient Christianity. However a significant proportion of Syrian Christians are newer arrivals including refugees from World War 1 who were deported and/or escaped the massacres in Turkey. These refugees are typically Armenian Orthodox (112,000), Armenian Catholics (25,000), the Syrian Orthodox (89,000) and Syrian Catholics, with additional 17,000 Assyrian Christians and 7,000 Chaldean Catholic refugees who escaped violence in 1933 from newly independent Iraq (Mouawad, *Disappearing Christians of the Middle East*, 2001). Iraq's recent civil war also saw an influx of Christian refugees into Syria however many Christians are now fleeing Syria.

Although the Sunni represent the majority sectarian group the Sunni community is split on significant issues such as religious jurisprudence, political position relative to the Assad regime and discords over religious family of origin (Donker, 2010). Divides also exist across a spectrum from secular to fundamentalist, this divide often reflects the parallel divide between urban and rural Sunni (Kaplan, 2012).

The Kurds represent the largest non-Arab ethnic minority within Syria and possess their own language and culture (Human Rights Watch, 2009). The Kurds are significantly marginalised in Syria (Human Rights Watch, 2009). Sunni non Arabs such as the Kurds, Turkomans and Circassians tend to be less orthodox than Arab Sunni (Bar S. , 2006, p. 359) contributing to the ethnic divide between these groups.

Little is known of the Allawite sect given their history of quietism in order to avoid persecution, their historical geographical isolation in Northwest Syria's mountainous expanses and the secretive nature of the sect. In the Middle Ages the Allawites moved towards an Arab identity adopting the Arabic language and linking their religion specifically to the Islamic Ismailiyyah sect before re-emerging as a separate sect (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 134).

The Allawite's low social status marked them for economic exploitation and discrimination by other sectarian groups in particular the regionally dominant Sunni Arabs. This historical discrimination and subsequent communal separateness was reinforced by Ottoman rule which governed groups according to their sectarian and tribal divisions. A person's sectarian extraction was the most important indicator of identity and social status (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 138).

Albert Hourani described Syria during the Ottoman Empire as under a system of localised tribal communities from the same sectarian group where the groups operated as 'closed communities...each looked at the rest with suspicion even hatred' (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, pp. 17-18). This reflects Social Identity Theory's proposition that individuals make comparisons that reflect positively on their in-group and display discriminatory attitudes towards out-groups (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 141-143).

The emphasis on sectarian origins was deepened by competing Western states at the beginning of the eighteenth century who sought to establish sponsor type arrangements with Syrian sectarian groups, particularly during the gradual demise of the Ottoman Empire. The French looked to protect the Lebanese Maronite Christians, the English pursued ties within the Druze community, and the Russians made overtures towards the Greek Orthodox sect (Eddin, 1998, p. 238).

Although the different sects were generally reluctant to accept foreign involvement in their affairs as the Ottoman Empire declined they began to seek outside protection from the increasingly corrupt central authorities and other sectarian groups (Eddin, 1998, pp. 238-239). The Europeans' establishment of ties on a sectarian basis strengthened the political mobilisation of sects, it also contributed to Sunni hostility towards the minorities who were perceived to be clients of Christian Europe and thereby a threat to the Islamic sphere (Dam N. v., 1979, pp. 17-18). Later the Cold War and the strategies of big power rivalry would also intensify the sectarian divisions and conflicts within the Middle East (Eddin, 1998, pp. 238-239). This culture of sectarian competition was the grounding for Allawite fears of Sunni power and their historical marginalisation

meant that they very motivated to make use of the opportunities presented to them to move into positions of power and to reduce Sunni authority.

During the French administration of Syria after World War I the religious leadership who had dominated during the Ottoman rule aligned with the urban elite Sunni families with this alliance maintaining authority within what continued to be a largely feudal society. The French, looking to make political use of sectarian divisions, encouraged the empowerment of minority groups in an effort to weaken the Sunni elite. This opportunity was taken up strongly by the most disadvantaged group, the Allawites, who quickly moved into careers within the army, civil service and education (Worren, 2007, p. 42).

An argument was made by nationalists for Arab unity across the Middle East as a means to mobilise political will in opposition to Western influence (Worren, 2007, p. 41). In response the French extended use of their sectarian strategies to weaken emerging Arab nationalism, awarding two of the five states created under the French mandate to the Druze and Allawite minority sects. Additionally North Eastern Kurdish political mobilisation was encouraged although the French stopped short of granting them autonomy (Dam N. v., 1979, p. 18).

The 1925 revolt against the French mandate was a civilian rather than elite lead resistance movement. The French emphasised a sectarian element to the uprisings in order to discredit it as sectarian chaos, however later analysis suggests that many sects were united in their opposition to the French mandate. The French attempted to appeal to minority sect fears through stating that their political administrative role in Syria was necessary for the protection of Christians (Oztan, 2011) a claim to legitimacy later used by the Assad regime.

The Syrian political elite from 1928 to 1934 were primarily occupied with the formation of political parties that opposed the French mandate. The Ba'ath party was founded in 1940s on the principles of Arab nationalism, Arab unity, freedom from colonialism and imperialism, socialism and secular non-sectarianism. The non-sectarian secular stance was a reflection of the sectarian concerns of the founders who were typically non-Muslim (Bar S. , 2006, pp. 359-360).

Before World War II four of the states were combined to form Syria with the fifth, Alexandretta, ceding to Turkey when independence was granted in 1946 (Dam N. v., 1979, p. 18). The Allawites were considerably anxious about the merger of their region into Syria due to the Sunni majority in the new State. In 1936 this led to six Allawites, including the Grandfather of the current President, sending a letter to the French Prime Minister Leon Blum in which they stated 'The spirit of hatred and fanaticism embedded in the hearts of the Arab Muslims against everything that is non-Muslim has been perpetually nurtured by the Islamic religion. There is no hope that the situation will ever change. Therefore, the abolition of the Mandate will expose the minorities in Syria to the dangers of death and annihilation, irrespective of the fact that such abolition will annihilate the freedom of thought and belief'. Despite Allawite fears the creation of the modern Syrian state went ahead as originally planned (MacKey, 2011).

From 1936 to 1939 Allawite religious leaders issued pamphlets that declared the Allawi faith was a Muslim religion and stated that any community members who did not consider themselves Muslim or accept the Koran as the holy book would not be deemed Allawi (MacKey, 2011). This seems to be a move towards asserting a stronger identification as Muslim in order to avoid Sunni religious chauvinism.

The minority groups sided with Arab nationalism due to its policies of equality and secularism (Worren, 2007, p. 42). The traditional Sunni elite were also heavily invested in Arab nationalism however, suspicious of their influence, rival nationalists strains notably within the Ba'ath party developed a more radical nationalism which focused its ideals around class politics including economic and social justice and a redistribution of power away from the existing Sunni elite (Worren, 2007, pp. 41-42).

Syria achieved independence in 1946 however it was difficult for post-colonial states to create a sense of national identity as the colonial drawing up of state boundaries was not in line with the existing ethno-sectarian territories (Wedeen, 1999, p. 16). Thus communal groups felt threatened by dominant sects within the colonial borders. In line with Ethnic Conflict Theory, past persecution added to this insecurity, as a result colonial borders intensified ethnic and sectarian tensions

with citizens seeking security through a renewed emphasis on the unity and safety of communal groups.

Therefore by the 1940s there had been little change in ethno-sectarian communities attitudes towards each other with Jacques Weulersse stating 'each gesture by a neighbouring community appear a menace or challenge to one's own and which unifies each collectivity in its entirety at the least outrage committed against any one of its members' (Dam N. v., 1979, pp. 18-20). It appears that Syrian communal groups possess myth symbol complexes which include significant hostility towards out-groups, greatly increasing the likelihood of inter-group hostility (Wolff, 2009, p. 28). This attitude was projected into national politics where compromise was not a motivation, alternatively politics was conducted in pursuit of zero sum aims that reflected local political struggles. Therefore political parties and organisations focused on local issues and commanded strong loyalty from within their own ethno-sectarian communities whilst ignoring or suppressing the aims and aspirations of other groups (Dam N. v., 1979, pp. 18-20).

The Allawites did not hold political influence in the post-independence era due to their lack of participation in the independence struggle and the removal of Allawite autonomy (Landis, 1998). In the 1950s the Allawites were at the bottom social stratum in Syria, they were the least educated Syrian sect and suffered extreme poverty within their region of Latakia in North Western Syria. It was typical for upper class Syrian's to have Allawite domestic servants and this contributed to their being treated with contempt by Sunni Muslims (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 133). Historically subject to discrimination, the isolation of the mountainous Allawite region both reinforced Allawite sectarian cohesiveness and served to protect them from persecution (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 138).

In the years of political instability that followed independence the military became increasingly involved in politics with the Ba'ath party seizing power in a coup d'état in 1963 beginning the change from a parliamentary, democratic system to closed authoritarian one party rule (Ziadeh, 2011).

Prior coups tended to be led by Sunni officers however the regimes following the Ba'ath coup were socialist and secular, bringing in radical policies such as the

nationalisation of sectors of the economy which removed the traditional Sunni leaders from power (Worren, 2007, pp. 41-42) (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 27). A group of largely Sunni Nasserists led an abortive coup later in 1963 which was suppressed by Allawi officers causing Sunni opposition figures to seek to discredit the regime by claiming that the regime was sectarian which increased the Sunni distrust of the Ba'ath regime (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 33).

Ba'ath party policies of land expropriation and redistribution improved the lot of Allawite rural poor but their social mobility was still limited with the sect largely continuing to occupy the lowest socio-economic group. In attempts to move out of this position younger more educated Allawites found that army and security apparatus careers were open to them. This became an important form of social mobility for Allawites with Allawite numbers in the upper ranks continuing to rise (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 136).

Patronage along sectarian lines was evident following the Ba'ath party's land reforms as part of its introduction of socialism, with Ayoub Agha describing the situation as 'supposed to create a more equal society, [however] the Ba'ath Party favoured members of their sect; hordes of Alawites from the North flooded Damascus and land was distributed amongst friends and families of the government' (Lababedi, 2008, pp. 41-42).

After the Ba'ath coup a battle for supremacy over the Allawite community and Syria erupted between the three Allawite ringleaders of the Military Committee, Hafez al Assad, Salah al Jadid and Muhammad 'Umrān. The conflict was overlaid with tribal and familial rivalries with al Assad belonging to the Kalbiyya tribe, Jadid the Haddadin and 'Umrān from the Khayyatīn (Worren, 2007, pp. 41-42).

In 1965 Salah al Jadid and al Assad united to oust Muhammad 'Umrān exiling him to Lebanon and finally Assad ordered him assassinated in 1972 (Zisser, *Commanding Syria*, 2006, p. 7). In light of increased tensions between Assad and Jadid that followed the ousting of Muhammad 'Umrān, the Ba'ath party

developed a rift between two distinct factions, the civil lead by Jadid and the military lead by Assad (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, pp. 63-65).

One of the men involved in the Ba'ath coup in 1963 was Druze Salim Hatum who after a later failed takeover accused Salah al Jadid and Hafez al Assad of favouring Allawites and tribal connections stating 'sectarian spirit is spread in a shameful way in Syria, particularly in the Army...the (filling of) powerful places in the state and its institutions is limited to a specific class of the Syrian people (i.e. the Allawis)' (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, pp. 56-57). Opposition to the regime during this period tended to stress the sectarian nature of the regime as a means to try and mobilise the majority Sunni and other groups against its rule.

The two remaining leaders vied for dominance until 1970 by which time Assad's officers faction had almost monopolised political power, creating an opportunity for Assad who staged a corrective revolution and put Jadid in jail where he remained until his death in 1993. The Minister of Defence, Hafez al Assad, installed himself as President in 1971 ending the Syrian tradition of Sunni Presidents. His brand of socialist politics was less radical than the preceding President and instead he focused his energies on the creation of a 'presidential monarchy'. Most of his supporters were Allawites from the military which had important implications for how his government was perceived by the Sunni majority and the Syrian population as a whole (Worren, 2007, pp. 41-42) (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba'ath Party*, 2011, p. 68) and also gave him considerable power to enforce his rule through the security forces.

The rule of Hafez al Assad began a period of unprecedented stability in Syria, in part because he represented periphery groups such as the Allawites, other minority sects and rural populations. To broaden his support base Assad set out to co-opt urban Sunni through his economic policies, as despite being politically displaced Sunni merchants still held influence within the economy. Additionally although

the regime remained secular Assad increased his public participation in Islamic rituals in order to strengthen his legitimacy with the religiously conservative Sunni majority and to discredit radical Islamists arguments which declared his rule was illegitimate as he was not an orthodox Muslim (Zisser, Commanding Syria, 2006, p. 9). At the same time the Ba'ath party repressed the traditional Sunni elite, particularly the Islamic elements who had been thrown into disarray following the Ba'ath party takeover (Zisser, Commanding Syria, 2006, p. 7).

Al Assad's use of both Ba'ath ideology and Islam did not disguise that Allawite Hafez al Assad's autocratic Presidency had ousted traditional Sunni leadership of Syrian society, essentially inverting the previous socio-political arrangement and introducing a new system of patronage and elite recruitment that focused largely on his Allawite allies. The Assad regime styled itself on Ba'athist principles in order to present itself as a legitimate Arab nationalist movement but in reality it was a military regime in which personal loyalties and rivalries dominated politics (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 133).

In line with Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilizational Model it is evident that the discrimination and grievances experienced by the Allawites meant that the potential for them to seize an opportunity for political power was high. As such Allawite sectarian networks were and are the keystone for the Assad regime. With Assad in power, minority sectarian groups were now in a position of relative security which cemented their support of the Assad regime. By using existing sectarian alliances and assuming control over the military through the proportionally high number of Allawites in the officer classes, Hafez al Assad was able to secure autocratic rule over Syria.

3.2 Hafez al Assad and the Allawite rise to Power

In a society in which communal identity is a key means of defining individuals it made sense that Hafez al Assad, as with earlier Syrian politicians, found the most natural and effective means of building up political support was along religious, tribal and familial lines. Hafez al Assad's ability to build a loyal and largely Allawite power base whilst repressing his enemies was the key to his durable presence on the Syrian political scene (Dam N. v., The Struggle for Power in

Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party, 2011, p. 65). As such sectarianism was an important part of Hafez al Assad's implementation of power and control over the Syrian people.

However it is inaccurate to claim that Hafez al Assad saw power as a chance to impose Allawite rule over Syria, alternatively his aims were to gain authoritarian power and control (Pipes, Syria Beyond the Peace Process, 1996, pp. 10-11). Nevertheless the Allawites were a readymade support base given the traditional strength of tribal and sectarian ties especially given Allawite sectarian insecurity resulting from past marginalisation (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, p. 40 & 52). Furthermore in view of the comparative safety Assad afforded Christians and other minorities, and their preference for the regime's secular repression to the fundamentalist Sunni alternative, Assad's support base extended beyond just the Allawite minority (Pipes, Syria Beyond the Peace Process, 1996, p. 10). This is supported by Ethnic Conflict Theory which clearly identifies that elites within divided states typically achieve power through the mobilisation of political support via communal ties through the manipulation of ethno-sectarian fears (Wolff, 2009, p. 41).

The high number of Allawites employed within the security apparatus meant that after Hafez al Assad came into power his Allawite supporters were ideally placed to move into powerful positions within the military and to consolidate on this rise in status by assuming control of key political positions (Pipes, 1996, p. 10). Allawites continued to enrol in the military in disproportionately large numbers, a trend which was reinforced by Allawite poverty as Allawite youth lacked the necessary funds to buy their way out of military service, an option often taken by Sunni families (Pipes, 1996, p. 10). Horowitz identifies that where an ethno-sectarian group has a significant representation within the military and security forces, the security apparatus can become a tool for the internal repression of political opposition from other ethno-sectarian groups (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 10-12). As such the Allawite dominance of the military gave the Assad regime considerable power to use the security apparatus to project political authority.

Hafez strengthened his political control by embedding loyal co-religionists, often members of his Kalbiyya tribe and family, into leadership roles within the armed forces, intelligence services, the government and the civil bureaucracy. With many co-religionists holding key positions within the regime many non-ideological Allawi pragmatically adopted Ba'athism as a means to secure themselves within the regime patronage system (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 97) (Zisser, 1999, p. 135). Dominating the regime were twenty loyal men, collectively called the Group or al Jama'a. These men were predominantly both Allawites and military officers reflecting the military and sectarian intersect that constitutes the backbone of the regime (Pipes, *Syria Beyond the Peace Process*, 1996, p. 10).

The Ba'ath Socialist Party's 1947 constitution stated 'The Arab nation constitutes a cultural unity. All differences existing amongst its sons are accidental and spurious, and will disappear with the awakening of the Arab consciousness' (Dam, Spring, 1978, p. 201). However although the Ba'ath party proclaimed that cultural unity was central to its political agenda (Rais, 2008) Syria's culture of communalism created a vicious cycle, as in order to generate enough support to secure power political groups were forced to rely on traditional sectarian and tribal loyalties thereby perpetuating sectarianism (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 74). The Ba'ath party's response to this cultural environment was pragmatic with the party choosing to use its ideological slogans to support the Assad regime's legitimacy as well as obscure the Allawite elite's dominance of Syria (Bar S. , 2006, pp. 360-361).

One of the weaknesses of Assad's rule was a direct result of his reliance on communal loyalties to maintain political power. The lack of accountability expected of politically connected Allawites and regime members resulted in widespread corruption which Hafez attempted to address in 1977. Upon discovering that key members of his inner circle, including his brother, were among the worst offenders he was forced to accept their corruption as their prosecution would have severely undermined the regime's legitimacy (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th*

Party, 2011, p. 73). However corruption decreased the security of citizens and greatly reduced the reliability of legal recourse against injustice. Ethnic Conflict Theory asserts that where a state neglects to safeguard citizens' interests there is an increased perception that ethno-sectarian affiliations are a necessary alternative to address injustice and security concerns (Horowitz, 1985, p. 74).

As his ultimate aim was power for an Allawite elite, as opposed to the dominance of the Allawite sect in its entirety, Hafez sought to make ties within the Sunni sect appointing loyal Sunni politicians such as Abd al Halim Khaddam, Mustafa Tlass and Faruq al Sharaa to highly placed cabinet positions, an action which again helped to obscure the Allawite elite's dominance of Syrian politics (Pipes, 1996, pp. 10-11). Crucially however Allawites occupied the lead positions within any part of the security apparatus giving the President ultimate control over the state. In order to prevent coups Hafez ensured that non-Allawite regime members were isolated thus limiting their ability to mobilise opposition movements along sectarian lines and effectively weakening any potential Sunni, Druze or Ismaili factions within the power structure (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 69).

Hafez worked to pacify the Sunni population with additional tactics. The Assad regime's initial support base was the social and economic periphery which explains its early alignment with Sunni rural communities as they shared a common interest in ousting the previous leadership (Zisser, 1999, p. 136). The established Sunni elite were given the option retaining wealth and some status through commerce so long as they remained out of politics, whilst in order to appeal to the Sunni masses the regime continued to promote itself as socialist (Pipes, 1996, pp. 10-11). However from 1970 to 1995 the Syrian cabinet saw a significant increase in the numbers of Damascenes and urban Sunni as Hafez worked to co-opt this group behind his leadership (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, p. 78). After the 1990s the regime succeeded in establishing greater ties with the Sunni urban business elite who supported the regimes restricted economic reforms and imposition of stability (Zisser, 1999, p. 137).

Despite efforts to pacify Sunni the ascendancy of the Allawite elite caused non-affiliated Sunni to increasingly oppose the regime, specifically within the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood who staged riots in Hama in 1964 and again in 1982 (Pipes, 1996, pp. 12-13). Hafez used three sectarian strategies to manage the early 1980's uprisings. He selectively deployed politically reliable troops, pairing Allawite elite units with front line troops to compel allegiance and prevent defections. He encouraged the development of paramilitary units from within the Allawite community to supplement the military. He also mounted clear and hold campaigns within major predominantly Sunni population centres using armoured forces and long term garrisons, the most obvious of which resulted in the 1982 Hama massacre of between 10,000 and 30,000 people (Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 2013, pp. 10, 11 & 12). The 1982 massacre effectively intimidated both opposition groups and the population. However whilst internal opposition assumed a much lower profile following the Hama massacre, it became increasingly anti-Allawite (Pipes, 1996, pp. 12-13).

In order to discredit the regime and discourage Sunni acquiesce, opposition figures sought to highlight sectarian divisiveness. Hafez's rule was described by Egyptian President Anwar al Sadat as 'firstly Alawi, Secondly Ba'thi, thirdly Syrian'. However the regime is not firstly Allawi it is firstly interested in the maintenance of power and privilege for its central elite rather than Allawite ascendancy as a whole, although the regime would be unable to maintain political power without the support of the Allawites (Pipes, 1996, p. 10).

Despite many coastal Allawites in the mountainous regions remaining comparatively poor and outside of the regime's patronage networks, (Reuters, 2011) there was considerable resentment of the entire Allawite sect as a result of the Assad elite's rise to power with many Sunni continuing to see themselves as socially superior (Zisser, 1999, p. 138). As such the opposition's accusations of sectarianism and rising anger at the Allawite elite increased insecurity amongst the Allawite sect, with rising fears of resentful sectarian out-groups causing them to continue to defensively back the regime (Dam N. v., *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party*, 2011, pp. 70, 97 & 100). Ethnic Conflict Theory identifies that a dominant groups fears of out-group resentment and retaliation is a typical feature within ethnic tensions and any

subsequent outbreak of ethnic conflict (Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001, p. 61).

After 30 years of rule Hafez al Assad died on 10 June 2000 with a plan in place to secure the Presidency and the regime for his eldest surviving son, Bashar al Assad. Under Hafez al Assad sectarian networks and sectarian politics were crucial to the establishment and maintenance of power and control over the Syrian people. However despite 30 years of stability Hafez left his successor with some brewing problems. The most significant amongst these threats resulted from his sectarian strategies, with widespread Sunni resentment of repression by the Allawite elite, and the Allawite elite's corruption and autocratic power having placed Allawites at significant risk of future retribution. Furthermore the economy had suffered under his brand of socialism, Lebanese resentment of Syrian domination was high and stability had been secured not through improvements but a repression that ensured the opposition was intimidated into silence, elite corruption continued unabated, and Sunni still largely rejected the assertion that the Allawi were Muslim. Stability was secured by a repression so harsh and effective that it masked but did not eradicate the deep tensions and communal divisions within Syrian society which were to make themselves felt during the reign of his successor, Bashar al Assad.

3.3 Bashar al Assad and the Pillars of the Assad Regime

Bashar al Assad became President in 2000. The structure of Hafez al Assad's regime continued under Bashar al Assad with sectarian insecurity assuring the loyalty of minority sects, however important differences existed primarily caused by Bashar al Assad's less successful management of the pillars on which the Assad regime was based and acerbated by the global economic downturn. The management of the sectarian patronage system and co-opted individuals from other sects continued however the nature of this changed under Bashar al Assad with wealth becoming a key unifying feature within the regime networks.

In preparation for Bashar's takeover potential opposition from within the regime was removed, with Hafez shifting power away from Sunni Vice President Abdul

Halim Khaddam who could have conceivably sought the Presidency, and two other senior Sunni officials Hikmat Shihabit and Ghazi Kanaan with whom Khaddam shared charge of security in Lebanon. Hafez perceived that these Sunni government officials were getting too close to Lebanese Sunni Rafik Hariri, who opposed Syria's presence in Lebanon, and to Hariri's Saudi Arabian Sunni connections. Power shifted towards Bashar's maternal relations Hafidh Makhluf and Allawi tycoon Rami Makhluf (Australia: Refugee Review Tribunal, 2010, p. 6).

Additionally Bashar al Assad ran an anti-corruption campaign which was conspicuous in that it focused on officials that were critical of his inheritance of the Presidency. Bashar was also involved in the 1999 crackdown in Latakia, the remaining stronghold of his uncle Rifaat al Assad who had previously sought to overthrow Hafez al Assad. This brutal crackdown against an Allawite clan in an Allawite city was particularly significant, as it sent a very clear message that Allawite political opportunism during the comparatively vulnerable succession process would not be tolerated (Bar S. , 2006, p. 369).

The succession went smoothly primarily due to an assessment by the regime elite and co-opted groups that a continuation of the status quo best served their interests. The interests of Bashar al Assad and the support bases he inherited from his father were largely reciprocal and co-dependent, centring on power and control over Syria and the protection of elite privileges (International Crisis Group, 2011).

Bashar al Assad's assumption of power in Syria lead to a short period of hope and increased dialogue on political and economic reform which was known as the Damascus Spring. It appears likely that Bashar saw limited gradual reforms as a means to tackle unemployment and economic stagnation. However the unexpected groundswell of civilian demands which followed talk of reforms (Bar S. , 2006, p. 373) resulted in the security apparatus renewing pressure on civil society activists by February 2001. This was due to fears that reforms, particularly reforms towards allowing political plurality, would alter the balance of power by reducing the climate of fear and subsequently reducing the regime's

control. There was concern that this would destabilise Syria and cause widespread ethno-sectarian violence (Project, 2006, p. 14) .

Additionally the regime was aware that political pluralism would spell its demise as indicated by former Syrian Vice President Abd al-Halim Khaddam who declared that the ‘National Mosaic’ or multi-culturalism was an attempt by the US and the West, to shatter Third World countries into pieces by demanding the self-determination of their different ethnic groups. Khaddam posed the query “Are there any conflicts between people in Syria today? ...We will under no circumstances let Syria turn into Algeria or Yugoslavia”. The regime’s dependence on a crafted hierarchy of power between the Allawite elite and sectarian groups plus a carefully maintained balance between minority sectarian insecurity and stability made political reforms too risky a venture for the regime (Rais, 2008).

Syrian stability was helped by a common perception between the sects that they are all jointly experiencing misery and repression under the Assad regime. Additionally the instability of neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq reinforced the dangers of antagonising other sectarian groups, at the same time reducing confidence in the ability of alternatives to the current regime to maintain stability. However, years of enforced unity has not eradicated the communal divisions within Syria, beneath the surface the state is still very much divided along sectarian lines. Identification of individuals along ethnic or sectarian lines remained standard practice resulting in underlying animosity between sects and low rates of intermarriage and socializing (Bar S. , 2006, p. 391).

In an attempt to gain legitimacy amongst Muslims the regime supported moderate Islam whilst discrediting radical Islam. Bashar al Assad has followed his father’s path where Hafez declared ‘It is not the right of anyone to impose on the others his path to Allah . . . Allah is for all and he regards all men as equal . . . every human is free how he prays, how he worships and how he sees Allah.’ (Bar S. , 2006, p. 366). However in contrast to this rhetoric the Syrian school system’s compulsory religious studies are essentially Sunni in nature despite the regime’s support being primarily based amongst Allawites and Christians. Syrian school

texts criticise religious sectarianism whilst proclaiming Islam to be the only true religion thereby paradoxically endorsing sectarianism. However in contrast to all other Middle Eastern states the texts do recognise Christians go to heaven rather than insisting that both Jews and Christians are unbelievers destined for damnation (Landis, *Islamic Education in Syria: Undoing Secularism*, 2003, pp. 22-23). This reflects the regime's complicated sectarian strategy as it works to pacify the Sunni majority and promote the regime as genuinely supportive of Islam, whilst asserting its commitment to political stability and secularism in order to appease minority sects.

Despite the Assad regime's narrative which proclaims the regime's legitimacy rests in its ability to prevent chaotic sectarianism, opposition to the regime has often been along ethno-sectarian divides such as the Muslim Brotherhood insurgency from the late 1970s to 1982, the Druze intifada in 2000 and the Kurdish rebellion in 2004. Notwithstanding the regime's declared nationalist aims there is a perception amongst opposition groups that the regime encourages communal suspicions whilst suppressing outbreaks of communal conflict and opposition in order to maintain this legitimacy (Harling, 2012). However weakening confidence in the regime by the mid decade saw citizens increasingly turning to tribal or sectarian leadership for guidance and the outbreak of communal conflict between Bedouin and Druze in Suwayada and Alawis and Ismailis in Masyaf (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 99).

Given its minority support pillar is based on sectarian insecurity, sectarian unity is the enemy of the Assad regime (Goldsmith, *Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective*, 2011, pp. 53-55). As such the regime has not worked to genuinely create national feeling and unity amongst the ethno-sectarian groups, instead it has done its best to highlight communal divides in order to hail itself as the sole means of avoiding sectarian fragmentation and conflict (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 2).

The Damascus Declaration for Democratic National Change issued in 2005 was the first unified opposition statement in a decade. It contained accusations against

the regime of 'authoritarianism, totalitarianism and cliquish' strategies that were responsible for Syria's international isolation (International Crisis Group, 2009, p. 3). In response the regime backed further away from reforms accusing activists of both corruption and 'inciting racial and sectarian strife' as a cover for the state repression of the activists' political agendas (Bar S. , 2006, p. 372) (Ehsani, Could Syria's current predicament been avoided over a decade ago?, 2012). In this instance a manufactured defence of the Ba'ath party's nationalist ideology which contends that unified Arab nationalism should transplant regional, sectarian, religious and tribal loyalties, served as a means to justify the suppression and arrest of both opposition figures and political rivals (Dam N. v., The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba'th Party, 2011, p. 39).

Initially Bashar al Assad attempted to modernise the regime's authoritarianism through an early focus on corruption by government officials. However like Hafez al Assad, Bashar abandoned his attempts to rout corruption as it risked disrupting the political crony networks (Bar S. , 2006, p. 389). Corruption and the patronage networks underpinned the regime's power. Under Hafez al Assad corruption was somewhat restrained, in contrast under Bashar al Assad corruption had become rampant. Although it ensured the continued support of the corrupt officials and the predominantly Allawite elite, corruption had become so blatant that it undermined civilian support for the regime (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 11).

Civilian acquiesce to the regime also weakened in reaction to Bashar al Assad's leadership style. He did not inspire the same loyalty, deference or fear that his father commanded with the result that the regime's apparatus was a less malleable instrument for Bashar than Hafez. Consequently Syrians were less assured of the states continued stability (Bar S. , 2006, pp. 366, 374-375). In an attempt to rectify this over 60% of officials within the regime were replaced with younger members effectively removing the old guard from power and installing new people who owed their new positions directly to Bashar al Assad (Bar S. , 2006, p. 371).

However Bashar al Assad's regime members have a significantly different outlook than the old guard. The old guard started their careers as socio-political

underdogs and had worked to project themselves and to a lesser extent the Allawite sect into a position of political power. In contrast the new guard have been born into wealth and power, widening the gap between the regime and the majority of Syrian's who are feeling increasingly disenfranchised (Haddad, My 50 Minutes with Manaf, 2012). Furthermore Bashar's new guard are less invested in their ancestral homes and their Allawite identity. Their social reference groups have tended to be associates from within their immediate sphere in the military, academic or economic world rather than limited to sectarian networks (Bar S. , 2006, pp. 382-385). This disrupted the traditional patronage networks and corruption arrangements resulting in corruption going from organised to disordered and contributing to a situation where authority was ambiguous leading to 'authority grabs' (Bar S. , 2006, p. 392).

From 2005 on the power base within the regime narrowed, and became increasingly concentrated in the hands of the Assad and Makhoul families at the expense of other regime elites (Tabler A. , How Long Can Syria Last?, 2005). This move to concentrate power more specifically within the Assad clan contributed to Allawite loyalty beginning to fray (Ismail, 2009).

Faced with the global economic downturn and a domestic economic crisis, Bashar introduced limited economic reforms and was largely credited with improving Syria's economic position. However these reforms came at significant cost to the support base of the regime. Typically the regime was supported by the periphery; peasants, blue colour workers, rural minority groups and civil servants, however lifting subsidies significantly increased the cost of living of these groups. Furthermore reforms threatened another regime pillar of the sectarian and military regime, the powerful merchants and factory owners who had relied on energy subsidies along with political cronyism to mitigate the effects of their own underinvestment and lack of economic competitiveness (International Crisis Group, 2009, p. 7). In contrast the alliance between the merchants and their religious leaders was strengthening. Together with economic liberalisation this religious-mercantile connection was an early sign that the regime was developing fractures within its socio-political structure (Ismail, 2009). A palpable sense of public discontent developed, with Al Hayat reporting protests against the reforms on 6 May 2006 (International Crisis Group, 2009, p. 7).

The economic reforms ultimately benefited big business that was heavily invested in the regime. As such families with close ties or direct involvement with the regime such as the Assad, Makhlouf, Shalish, al Hassan, Najib, Hamsho, Hambouba, Shawkat and al As'sad families, reaped disproportionate rewards. The economy of the al Assad regime had moved from semi socialist to crony capitalism, with the visible wealth of regime sponsored big business families again highlighting the economic disparity between the wealthier Damascus and Aleppo cities and the rest of the state, in particular the rural areas (Haddad, *The Syrian Revolution's Business Backbone*, 2012).

Furthermore despite the Assad regime's social roots within the sectarian minorities and socio-economic classes on the periphery, under Bashar al Assad the children of the rich, known as the *awlad al-sultah* or 'sons of power', emerged as a visibly rich and privileged urban elite. The developing gap between the state and the industrial bourgeoisie was also directly connected to the rise of the *awlad al-sultah*, with the *awlad al sultah* significantly involved in flights of capital, illegal commandeering of state resources and usurious investments (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 14). The visibility of privileges secured by the *awlad al-sultah* began to drive a wedge between the regime and many of its pillars of support, including the Allawite sect. The elite began to be described as the Assad-Makhlouf mafia for their frequent use state authority to procure assets and advantages within the private sector (Bar S. , 2006, p. 395).

Tellingly, the corruption, whilst being internally cohesive, was externally disintegrative given its few benefactors (Billon, 2003, p. 415). The increasingly smaller number of benefactors was indicated by the widening wealth gap in Syria, by 2004 the poorest 20% of the population consumed 7% of all expenditure whilst the richest 20% consumed 45% (Haidar, 2010). Increasingly it looked as if the 'President had abandoned the poor for the sake of the rich' (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 102). The nature of the regime's sectarianism had changed towards a blatant and visible favouring of the wealthy, predominantly from within the Allawite sect but including a notable number of co-opted members of other sects.

Not only had the regime moved away from its earlier support base within the rural poor but the economic decline gripped the country and was particularly felt in many rural areas due to droughts. Basic services declined and salaries stagnated whilst the cost of living increased largely due to the removal of subsidies. The middle class also declined, with the predominant socio-economic categories being the wealthy few constituting the regime elite, those in the public sector who supplemented their often insufficient salaries through bribery, and the increasing number of poor (Hinnebusch, 2012). There was a perceptible decrease in public deference to the regime as a consequence of the death of Hafez, economic hardship, elite corruption, talk of reforms, the ousting of the Syrian army from Lebanon, the US removal of the Iraqi Ba'ath regime and the UN investigation into the assassination of Hariri looking likely to implicate top Syrian regime officials (International Crisis Group, 2011). As a journalist observed in 2010 'the country is about to explode' (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 16).

Correspondingly the uprising broke out in 2011 causing the administration and governance arms of the regime to falter. The psychological 'wall of fear', which is a huge factor in the regime's maintenance of power and control over the Syrian population, is now significantly weakened (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 5). Furthermore the pillars of the regime are narrowing as the economy weakens and state brutality alienates sections of their support (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 3).

Although Syrian politics is dominated by an Allawite elite, its ability to rule over all of Syria was based on a form of confessional coalitionism (Bar S. , 2006, p. 357) which is under serious strain due to the uprising. However it becomes clear upon analysis that the regime has manipulated genuine and perhaps relevant minority sect fears regarding the Sunni majority, and citizens' general fears of sectarian instability in the manner of Iraq and Lebanon, through the highlighting and exacerbating or downplaying of these fears according to internal calculations.

The Assad regime's primary preoccupation is self enrichment and empowerment facilitated by sectarian politics rather than the protection of minorities and stability for the sake of the nation. The pillars of the regime were significantly

under stress prior to the uprising and this ignited into a protest movement given the opportunity afforded by the Arab Spring and hope of a similar outcome to the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. However with the regime's determination to remain in power at all costs the stakes in Syria are high. With the 2011 initiated uprising devolving into a civil war with high sectarian animosity it is not only the Assad elite's wealth and position at stake but increasingly their survival as well. As such they will be prepared to go to any lengths in order to remain in power ultimately utilising sectarian mobilisation and narratives as justification for military attacks against the predominantly Sunni uprising.

3.4 Conclusion: The Allawite Ousting of Sunni Power

The Allawite elite rose to power from within the lowest and poorest social group in Syria, largely through their high numbers within the state military due to limited alternative employment opportunities available to them. This disproportionately high presence within the military was crucial in a state plagued by military coups since independence and where both the military and sectarianism were firmly entrenched in politics.

With communalism a strong feature of Syrian society the Assad regime primarily used Allawite sectarian bonds to form political alliances whilst incorporating co-opted Sunni and minority group members to create a regime structured as an Allawite dominated sectarian coalition. Despite its claims around national unity and secularism the regime continues to rely heavily on sectarian divisiveness to maintain power. It has been arguably necessary to do so within a social system in which the Sunni majority were and to extent still are hostile to Allawite leadership due to prejudices against the Allawite sect.

As such autocratic militarily backed power and control was the only way for the Allawite elite to raise their socio-economic position in a land hostile to their interests. It is important to note however that the Assad regime supports the power and privileges of an Allawite dominated elite not the Allawite sect in its entirety, although there is a wide spread belief that Allawites are favoured over Sunni by the regime particularly within the military and security forces.

As Bashar al Assad's Presidency progressed the divide between regime affiliated families and the rest of the population has become increasingly obvious with Syria transforming from a brand of socialism to corrupt crony capitalism. The disparity has caused many Syrians, particularly the large youth population and rural areas hit by the global economic decline, to believe that the Assad regime had deserted its rural poor support base in favour of the rich and this contributed significantly to the outbreak of the uprising in early 2011. The Arab Spring initiative for human rights and democracy has joined forces with economic dissatisfaction and Sunni historical feelings of entitlement and resentment to erupt into a popular uprising for the downfall of the regime which has devolved into civil war with an intensifying sectarian dynamic.

Chapter Four

The Sunni Shia Divide

4.1 Allawite alignment as Shia

The characterisation of Muslims into the broader categories of Sunni and Shia has significant political and security implications for minority sects such as the Allawites, particularly given the strong emphasis on communal opposition to out-groups within the region. Effectively the nested communal groups to which minority groups belong extends from family through to sectarian group then finally through to where they sit relevant to the larger and more politically visible sectarian groups, Sunni and Shia.

The Allawite faith emerged from the teachings of Mohammad ibn Nusayr and his follower Hussein ibn Hamdan al-Khasabi in the 9th and 10th centuries (Henegan, 2011). The faith believes that the first Allawites were stars to which virtuous Allawites revert back to after death whilst sinning Allawites become Jews, Muslims and Christians. The faith has elements in common with other religions in the region, for example it shares the Shia Islam belief in the successive divine emanations of Ali. In common with Ismailis they admit only a select few into the core creed which includes a reverence of a holy trinity, reincarnation and a rite of drinking consecrated wine which echoes Christianity (Faksh M. A., 1984, p. 136). In contrast to mainstream Muslims, Allawites read the Koran allegorically and tend to pray at home rather than in mosques (Henegan, 2011).

A main focus of the Allawite faith is the belief that Islam emphasises tolerance and acceptance of other religions including different Muslim sects, and that judging an individual's religious faithfulness is reserved for God, thus the Allawi faith stands in stark contrast to radical Sunni beliefs which reject all out-groups and extremists assume the right to judge and punish others according to their own strict interpretation of Sharia law (Worren, 2007, p. 65).

The Allawites claim their religion is an offshoot of Shia Islam. However, the Allawite religion has significant differences to Shi'ism, having broken away from the Shia branch of Islam over 1000 years ago. Whilst Allawites share the Shia reverence of Prophet Muhammad's cousin and son in law Ali from which the name Allawite is derived, in contrast to the Shia Allawites they believe that he is one of many materialisations of God along with Jesus, Adam, Mohammed, Socrates, Plato and a number of pre-Islamic sages from Persia. As such the Allawite faith blends together Zoroastrian, Islam, Christianity, Gnostic and Neo-Platonic thought, a blending of faiths that has lead orthodox Muslims to declare them to be heretics and apostates (Heneghan, 2011). Historically the Shia considered the Allawites, along with the Druze, to be religious extremists and rejected their inclusion within Shi'ism (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 176-177).

The Allawites historical isolation among mountains near the Mediterranean coastline, their unusual religious practices and the secretive clannish nature of their communities triggered suspicion among Sunni and to a lesser extent amongst Shia. Animosity between Allawite and Sunni predates by centuries the current sectarian struggles within the 2011 initiated uprising (Heneghan, 2011).

Since the creation of the Syrian state the internal sectarian composition has caused concerns for the Allawites. These concerns were strong enough to prompt an attempt to avoid inclusion in Syria by a group, which included Hafez al Assad's father Ali Sulayman, who petitioned the French to include the Allawite region within Lebanon asserting that Allawites would never be accepted or secure within Syria. An excerpt from the group's statement read as follows 'The Allawites refuse to be annexed to Muslim Syria because, in Syria, the official religion of the state is Islam, and according to Islam, the Allawites are considered infidels...' (Landis, Islamic Education in Syria: Undoing Secularism, 2003, pp. 36-37). Historical persecution of the Allawites had created significant levels of sectarian insecurity.

The persecution of Allawites was justified religiously through fatwas, with the most significant fatwas issued by Sunni Shaykh al -Islam Iaqi al-Din Taymiyya (died 1328) in the 14th century. These fatwas are still referred to today, including by radical opponents of the Assad regime. Ibn Taymiyya advocated for the return

of the Muslim faith to its origins, Salafiyya, and as such rejected the Shi'ite religion as heretical. Ibn Taymiyya's fatwas refer to the Allawites as 'pretending to be Shia' that 'they are not Muslims, or Jews, Or Christians' that 'their warriors should be killed and their property confiscated'. The Fatwas directly affected the Allawites (Nusayris) with one fatwa preceding a 1305 military attack within the religiously diverse Kisrawan region in Lebanon causing many Allawites to be killed whilst survivors fled to the security of the 'Nusayriyya Mountains' in Syria (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 175,179-180).

The massacre of up to 50,000 Allawites living near the Persian border occurred after a fatwa was announced by Sheikh al-Hanafi in 1516 which outlined an 'obligation to fight and kill' Shia and Shia creeds and that 'their women and children may be enslaved'. This caused another exodus of Allawites to the 'Nusayriyya' Mountains where since the 16th century Allawites have predominantly occupied remote villages in order to avoid Sunni prejudice (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 181-183).

Sunni Sheikh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Mugrabi issued a fatwa in the 1820s which declared that Allawite lives and property were at the disposal of Muslims. This fatwa preceded an attack on insurgent Allawite villages surrounding Latakia resulting in the deaths of up to forty men and the enslavement of a number of women, men and children. This fatwa was also adopted by the Egyptians 1832-1840 during an Allawite insurgency against Egyptian occupation of Syria, although it was discredited by the actions of the Egyptian General Selim Bay who when conscripting Syrian Muslims included the Allawites thus inferring that Allawites were Muslim. The Ottomans had also conscripted from Muslim sources and as such they required the Allawites to enlist in face of considerable Allawite resistance (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 183-184).

After the 1920 French Mandate of Syria significant changes began for the status of Allawites. First of all they changed their name from Nussayriyya to Alawiyya which Allawites explain was their original name and that the label Nussayriyya had been given to them by their opponents. In addition to this Allawite religious leaders began to stress that the Allawites were Muslim, declaring in 1926 that

‘Every Alawi is a Muslim . . . every Alawi who does not confess his Islamic faith or denies that the Quran is the word of God and that Muhammad is his Prophet is not Alawi . . . The Alawis are Shi’ite’ (Talhamy, 2010, p. 185). The Middle East was and is a dangerous place to be a minority. In a region where sectarian belonging has serious implications for security it is to be expected that the Allawites would seek to align their religion where it is politically expedient and safer to do so.

In 1936 the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem Muhammad Amin al-Husayni strengthened the Allawites claim to be Shia by issuing a fatwa which described Allawites as ‘brothers in faith’. This was a political move to ensure Muslim Arab unity and to reassure Allawites so as to facilitate the incorporation of their region into Syria following the end of the French mandate. This is the first time that the Allawites were recognised as within Islam rather than as endangering Islam with their heretic beliefs. Following this fatwa Allawite religious scholars left for Iraq to study at Iraqi religious schools and mosques were built in Allawite villages. In 1952 the Grand Mufti of Syria also accepted the Allawites as Shia and this was approved by the President of the Syrian Republic (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 185-187). Additionally as Allawites abandoned sectarian particularism they gained increasing acceptance from Sunni Arab nationalists promoting Arab unity (Kazimi, 2010, p. 23).

In 1972 Ayatollah al-Shirazi, a Shi’ite cleric from a prominent Iraqi-Iranian religious family issued a statement which is taken as a fatwa declaring that ‘the Allawites are Shia’. Al-Shirazi’s fatwa was seen by Allawites as proof that they have been formally included as part of the Shia community and as evidence of the rapprochement of the Shia religious establishment towards Allawites (Talhamy, 2010), a rapprochement which intensified within Bashar al Assad’s Presidency through his alignment within the so described Shia crescent.

Compared to many Middle Eastern states which are fragmented along sectarian lines, under the Assad regime the tension between the sects was comparatively quiet giving credence to the regime claim it has been able to maintain stability. However the sectarian tensions within the state are suppressed rather than solved

with an underlying animosity between the sects still apparent. Region wide sectarian persecution was common and typically minority sects such as the Allawites, Druze and Shia have practised what the Shia describe as *taqqiya* or quietism i.e. hiding your religious beliefs in order to avoid persecution, usually from radical Sunni (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 188-189).

In view of regional and domestic prejudices Hafez al Assad sought to strengthen the impression that Allawites were Muslim by publically demonstrating his observance of traditional Islamic rituals. To placate the Sunni majority, he also supported the building of Sunni style mosques for Allawite worship and minimised references to the Allawite religion within the media (Bar S. , 2006, p. 394).

However these more recent fatwas did little to lessen the perception by many Sunni, particularly within the Muslim Brotherhood, that Allawites were heretics. This resentment rose once the Assad elite came into power. Sunni were adamant, urged by the Brotherhood, that the new 1973 constitution include that the President must be Muslim. Yet many Sunni felt that an Allawite President did not fulfil this requirement leading to the Allawite community seeking another fatwa with regards to their religious status through Musa al Sadr, one of the founding members of the Amal movement which sought to mobilise Shia politically. He identified that 'the Allawites and the Shia are partners in distress, since they are persecuted like the Shia' and called the Allawites 'brothers of the Shia' (Talhamy, 2010, pp. 189-190). Despite these moves to promote the acceptance of Allawites under the umbrella of the Shia Muslim religion, the Assad regime's violence within the 2011 initiated uprising has strengthened sectarianism with various FSA battalions reacting by naming their units after Ibn Taymiyya and thereby recalling his earlier fatwas to exterminate Allawites (Dick, 2012).

It becomes clear whilst looking over the fatwas outlining the status of the Allawite religion within the Muslim world that the primary motivation for making a declaration as to the religious category to which the Allawite religion belongs has been to either religiously sanction Sunni persecution of Allawites or to avoid it. Although the Allawite religion is fairly unique, and appears to draw from a

number of theological sources, the orthodox religion that it has been most associated with is Islam, so it is reasonable although politically expedient for the Allawites to claim to be Shia. Fatwas formalising the Allawites as Shia have not only provided the previously isolated and persecuted sect with security within the safety of a larger religious community, which has contributed to the Assad regime receiving support during the uprising from both Shia Iran and Hezbollah, but it has also strengthened Syria regionally through the political unity within the Shia Crescent and within that Syria's alignment with the Shia theocracy in Iran.

4.2 Syria and the Shi'ite Crescent

In 2006-2007 the Jordanian King Abdullah II warned of the Shia crescent, which he described as an alliance of Shia centred on Iranian leadership and sponsorship, observing that this alliance represented a threat to Sunni political and religious authority within the region. Primarily constituting Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, this Shia alliance identifies itself as the axis of resistance to the 'evil' of the US supported Zionist occupiers in Israel and to proclaimed US imperialism in the Middle East (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013, p. 4).

The Ethnic Communal Mobilizational Model outlines how the political mobilisation of domestic communal groups is facilitated by the supply of resources and support from transnational religious or ethnic networks (Sahliyah, 2001, p. 5). As such the political culture of the region with its strong communal allegiances means that internal politics is overlaid with transnational politics conducted through sectarian bonds. This gives Middle Eastern states the ability to interfere in each other's affairs through religious and tribal networks and further points to the impact sectarianism has on Syrian politics.

As Barbara Walters outlines security explanations for ethno-sectarian conflict extends to the impact of changing dynamics within the regional political environment (Wolff, 2009, pp. 27-28), consequently both the emergence of the Shia crescent and the resurgence of Sunni power within the Arab Spring have

heightened the contest for power between Sunni and Shia increasing sectarian tensions across the region and within Syria (Gavlak, 2013). (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013, p. 1).

The split into Sunni and Shia Islam began over 1400 years ago and centred on a disagreement regarding succession following the death of Prophet Muhammad. Shia make up 10-15% of the Muslim world and the Shia identity is centred on a narrative of marginalisation, resistance and martyrdom which has a basis in reality given Shia's historical marginalisation and current prejudices revealed within an 2012 Pew Forum survey which discovered that at least 40% of Sunni in Arab states reject the notion that Shia are true Muslims (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013, p. 6).

The Middle East has been largely ruled by Sunni autocracies with the exception of Iran where the 1979 revolution introduced a Shi'ite theocracy lead by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Iranian revolution was a significant turning point for the region's Shia. With a Shia theocracy in power, Iran emerged as a state prepared to support the development of Shia politicisation and empowerment across the region (Nasr, 2004, p. 9).

Despite being Persian rather than Arab, Iran had goals of extending its influence beyond its own borders and developed close ties with Arab Shi'ites for this purpose. It has particularly close ties with Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon and considerable influence with the Shi'ite dominated democracy in Iraq. Although Syria, Iran and Hezbollah seek to mobilise the region's Shia to expand their own power and influence, in general Shia are bigger than Iranian ambitions and local agendas remain prominent in their calculations (Susser, 2003, p. 6).

The tension between Sunni and Shia has intensified as a result of the Arab Spring. Protests in the Gulf states in which Shia are significantly involved have been particularly harshly suppressed as they represent a threat to Sunni power and status. For instance Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states deployed Gulf Alliance

troops in Bahrain to help the Sunni royal family quell the predominantly Shia Bahraini protests (Chulov, 2011).

Additionally sectarian violence has increased dramatically in Iraq following the departure of the US military and again following the outbreak of the Syrian uprising in 2011. The removal of Saddam Hussein stripped the Sunni elite from power. Furthermore democracy introduced Shia political dominance with Shia making up 90% of the senior officials in the Interior and Defence Ministries (Cockburn, 2011). Sunni protesters in 2012-13 claimed that the government is sectarian and impinges on Sunni rights, however this is disputed by the Iraqi Prime Minister Maliki who counter claims the current unrest has been mobilised through transnational sectarian connections, in particular from within Sunni Turkey and the Sunni dominated FSA within Syria (Al Jazeera, 2012).

Saudi Arabia is widely perceived to be the leading Sunni power and together with its allies within the Gulf their wariness of Shia is at an all time high with the threat of nuclear weapons development in Iran, the primarily Shia uprising in Bahrain, Shia support of the Syrian regime and their own restless Shia populations. The region wide protests and revolutions against autocratic rule make a tense backdrop to the persistent tensions between Sunni and Shia. The Gulf States are very nervous of the region's Shia seeking to challenge Sunni regional dominance and this explains Saudi Arabia's support of the predominantly Sunni lead uprising in Syria (Heydemann, 2012).

Although Shia leaders such as the Iranian ex-President Ahmadinejad have attempted to frame the Arab Spring as an Arab street mobilisation to remove autocratic regimes in favour of Islamic theocracies, it is evident that the current unrest is best described as grass roots movements against autocratic leaders who enrich themselves whilst ruling via corruption and violent repression. The region's ruling families tend to treat state's resources as their own and their leadership is based around procuring elite privileges, riches and power at the expense of their citizens (Yacoubian, 2011).

Despite Bashar al Assad's confidence that Syria was insulated against the Arab Spring, protests erupted in early 2011. Iranian enthusiasm for the Arab Spring died down in face of the Syrian uprising (Gwertzmann, 2011). Social Movement

and Ethnic Conflict Theory both confirm that political mobilisation is more likely when there is a perception of a political opening and an opportunity to mobilise (Wolff, 2009, pp. 30-31) (Jackson J. W., 2006, p. v & 4). As such the successful revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya created the perception that the time was right to overthrow the Assad regime.

Regionally Sunni and Shia are siding with their sectarian counterparts in Syria. Support from Sunni regimes such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia for the Syrian uprising contrasts with the presence of Hezbollah fighters and Iranian Revolutionary Guards on the side of the Assad regime and this is heightening perceptions that this is a sectarian contest between Sunni and Shia thus escalating sectarian tensions across the region (Blog, 2012). Moreover the regime coalition was openly reinforced in mid-2013 by Hezbollah forces within selected engagements such as the battle for Qusayr (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 7) which may have significant regional implications should the regime fall as the fight could follow Hezbollah back to Lebanon (Riedel, 2013).

The Sunni regimes support of the opposition has enabled Bashar al Assad and Iranian officials to attempt to frame the conflict as the work of outside forces seeking to weaken the Shia axis of resistance. Correspondingly Syria took advantage of high anti-US sentiment following global Muslim protests against the US made anti-Muslim amateur film 'the Innocence of Muslims', to claim that the Syrian uprising is not part of the Arab Spring protests but is instead as a US/foreign instigated conflict aimed at the whole axis of resistance (Al Arabiya News, 2012).

Iran remains very concerned about the internal challenges to the Assad regime. Syria supports Iranian ambitions by forming part of the supply chain to its key proxy in the region, Hezbollah (Kreps, 2010, p. 8). If the Assad regime was to fall it is likely that any new democratic political system in Syria would be characterised by sectarian parties. Given Sunni represent approximately 60% of the population, free elections would most likely result in a Sunni dominated government opposed religiously and politically to Iranian and Shia aspirations. Any subsequent withdrawal of Syria from the axis of resistance would greatly

impact on Iran's patronage of Hezbollah, and would represent a serious blow to Iran's regional ambitions.

Alongside Iran and Syria, Hezbollah's President Nasrallah has also attempted to frame the Syrian uprising as a conspiracy against Syria and Shia. In line with Ted Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilization Theory Hezbollah's narrative draws heavily from Shia historical memories and religious traditions (Sahliyah, 2001, p. 5) with claims that the downfall of the Assad regime will be theologically damaging to Shia. Hezbollah has related the Syrian uprising to the Shia mystical text *al Jahr*, with some clerics claiming that the downfall of the Assad regime will precipitate the premature arrival of the (occulted Imam) Mehdi (Rowel, 2012). In keeping with Ethnic Conflict Theory this is an example of an elite using an ethno-sectarian myth symbol complex in order to muster support for political aims through the central assumption that 'people make political choices based on emotion and in response to symbols' (Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001, p. 29).

The Syrian crisis is having a significant impact on the political calculations of sectarian groups within Lebanon. Hezbollah's dominance of Lebanese politics is under threat given that the Syrian regime's continued rule is insecure and the loss of the regime will deprive Hezbollah of Syrian support and alter its supply path from Iran. Furthermore Hezbollah's support of the regime has damaged its previously high standing on the Arab Street. Hezbollah is struggling to stay relevant as its narrative positioning itself as the vanguard of the people and a resistance force has been undermined by its rejection of the aspirations of the grass roots Syrian protest movement (International Crisis Group, 2011). Additionally it is likely that openly backing the Assad regime from May 2013 is a risk for Nasrallah as it puts pressure on his Shi'ite support base who may require some convincing to send their sons into battle in Syria (Al Monitor, 2012).

Like Iran Hezbollah are concerned that any new Syrian government is likely to be Sunni dominated which would cause the abandonment of the Shia crescent alignment within Syria's foreign policy. This could result in a reversal of the current Lebanese sectarian politics whereby Shia affiliate with Syria, alternatively

it could be Lebanese Sunni aligning with Syria for support against their Christian and Shi'ite political adversaries (Shawaf, 2012). For the Lebanese the situation in Syria is a very divisive issue. Tension between Hezbollah and their Lebanese political adversaries was already high, particularly following the assassination of Hariri, and the situation in Syria has added to this tension (Ali, 2011).

Western interests within the Middle Eastern region are complicated and threatened by the hardening Shia and Sunni divide. The tension between the US and Iran over Iran's nuclear ambitions and retaliatory threats regarding the Straits of Hormuz also intensifies the significance of Syria's revolution. The US and the Sunni regimes want to see a decrease in Iran's influence and its nuclear ambitions stymied, consequently they are prepared to support the uprising whilst remaining wary of the Islamic extremists within the opposition movement. The risk of Iran – or other Islamic radicals - having nuclear Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) is summed up by Bernard Lewis who states that Mullahs 'are religious fanatics with an apocalyptic mind-set. In Islam, as in Christianity and Judaism, there is an end-of-times scenario – and they think it's beginning or already begun'. Thus unlike the dynamic within the earlier West-USSR Cold War 'mutually assured destruction is not a deterrent – it's an inducement' (Lewis B. , *The Trannies are Doomed*, 2011).

The Sunni Shia divide has the potential to emerge as the most prominent conflict and narrative in the Middle East supplanting the Muslims against the West and/or Israel contest. The region wide contention has led to a climate of insecurity and uncertainty and the recent weakening of autocratic power has increased the salience of pre-existing communal bonds and led to increased attention being paid to identity politics. During a recent interview with Geneive Abdo a Lebanese religious scholar stated that 'when states are weak sectarianism rises...and the more religiosity in a society the more the state is weak'. Yet this contemporary sectarianism is not a return to traditional communalism rather it is a contest to seize power mobilised through sectarian bonds and arguments in the face of declining autocratic power (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013, pp. 2-5).

However the current wave of anti-Shi'ite sectarian violence across the region is unprecedented in modern Islamic history and such extreme sectarianism has not been seen since the Saudi and Wahhabi sacking of Najaf and Karbala in 1806 (Riedel, 2013). This surge in sectarianism does not suggest that autocratic repression suppresses inevitable sectarianism rather that sectarianism rises during insecurity in this case resulting from political uncertainty and decreasing law and order (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013). To the detriment of Middle Eastern stability this decreasing law and order has led to a resurgence of al Qaeda's deceased leader Zarqawi's violent crusade against 'heretic' Shi'ites (Riedel, 2013).

Additionally Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilizational Model outlines how the absence of democracy predisposes marginalised groups towards political mobilisation. Further to this Gurr explains that transnational communal networks support political mobilisation in that they provide resources such as ideology, materials, leadership and a forum for the media distribution of grievances (Sahliyah, 2001, p. 5). The transnational Sunni and Shia networks have facilitated both mobilisation within the Arab Spring and the counter revolutionary measures in response.

Sectarian communities that exist on both sides of porous borders, long term disagreements with neighbouring states and disputed territories are all factors that increase the risk of the violence spreading beyond a state's borders (Wolff, 2009, p. 7 & 31). With rising Iraqi sectarian violence, Syrian regime attacks crossing the Turkish and Lebanese borders, conflict between Sunni and Allawite neighbourhoods in Tripoli, high Shia numbers in protests against Sunni autocracies, and the Syrian conflict progressing towards a Allawite/Shia versus Sunni confrontation, fears of the regional sectarian dynamic transforming into a darker fear of an outright regional war between Sunni and Shia are intensifying (Pollack, 2012).

A transnational sectarian conflict would be difficult to resolve not least because it would transcend state boundaries making UN resolutions and solutions which are based on the Westphalian state system difficult to implement, thus leaving the international community at a loss at how to approach a conflict that exists outside

of the state systems and therefore outside of state solutions. Plus Middle Eastern political narratives and conspiracy theories that portray the West, and by extension the UN, as a Christian threat out to exploit and control the Islamic world greatly complicates Western intervention in the region. As such a transnational sectarian conflict would be a real and probably severe test of the UN's ability to address the problems of globalisation and transnationalism, in this instance violence spilling over state boundaries largely through the politicisation of transnational religions. Furthermore the eruption of the Syrian uprising against a backdrop of rising regional sectarian tensions is increasing sectarian fears and suspicions within Syria.

With regional political positions polarising along sectarian lines there is an ever increasing danger that the Syrian protesters demands will become obscured behind the broader political contest between Sunni and Shia governments across the region. As rebels continued to battle government forces in Damascus, Aleppo and Hama in August 2012 Saeed Jalili, a senior aid to Ayatollah Ali Khomeini attempted to further Iran's interests by stating that Syria's crisis 'wasn't an internal issue' instead describing the internal uprising as 'a conflict between the axis of resistance on one hand and the regional and global enemies of this axis on the other' (Al Jazeera, 2012). The uprising that began as a protest movement against Syria's repressive dynastic dictatorship is at serious risk of degenerating into a proxy conflict between regional sectarian groups (Kinninmont, 2012) possibly presenting as a straight contest between an Allawite-Shi'ite-Iran-Hezbollah Western mini-state versus a Sunni-al Qaeda-Saudi-Qatari Eastern mini-state (Riedel, 2013) with the social movement for change breaking down into small brigades and joined by tribal militias fighting to protect their local communities from both sides.

4.3 Radical Islam and Regional Sectarianism

The sectarian politics between Sunni and Shia are further complicated by the intensifying divisions within Sunni Islam. The recent spread of Sunni Salafists, extremist Sunni militias and the initial emergence of governments dominated by Islamic parties in Egypt and Tunisia had on the surface strengthened Sunni hegemony. However with Sunni extremism seeking to expand its power and

hijack the democratic outcomes within Egypt and Tunisia and the persistent existence of Islamic militia threatening the Libyan security, there is a growing backlash from civilians against the transparent use and reinterpretation of Islam in order to achieve power and impose sectarian dominance.

Since the beginning of the 20th century Islam's religious and political authority has been under threat within Syria and the Middle East. In Syria the introduction of the 'revolutionary' and secular Ba'ath regime disrupted the historical links between religious and political leadership and advanced a rhetoric that in theory departed from opposition towards out-groups and advocated for Arab unity (Bar, 2012, p. 1 & 3).

Given the traditions of religious authority Middle Eastern regimes understood the necessity of bringing the religious networks into their patronage systems and called on clerics to publicly indicate their support. However as Middle Eastern regimes are out of step with their citizens, extending support to the regimes caused a decline in the stature of the traditional religious establishments. The resulting vacuum of credible religious leadership has been predominantly filled by an increasing number of clerics operating outside of the traditional religious sphere (Bar, 2012, p. 4).

These clerics tend to be radical and virulently anti-Western. Their ability to evoke religious narratives that resonate with the mainstream has given Islamic radicals the opportunity to promote themselves as the vanguard of Islamic aspirations (Bar, 2012, p. 2). The breakdown of traditional social, religious and political structures within states such as Syria combined with large youth populations with limited economic horizons, has led to an increasing number of youth seeking validation within radical Islam (Bar D. S., A Toolbox for Countering Extremist Religious Doctrines, 2012, p. 5). Additionally the disruption of secular and liberal civil society by regimes like the Assad's has provided Islamic groups with the opportunity to fill this additional vacuum between the populace and the regime (Bar, 2012, p. 5).

Radical Islam has a long sense of history with a keen memory for the Christian crusades paving the way for Western colonialism, and as such radical Islam seeks honour through protecting the Middle East from the invasion of Western values and ideals into Islamic territory. The prevalence of Western culture and values on the internet and increasingly across media channels is seen as challenging the fundamental values of Islamic society making resistance to the West an important rallying cry for radical Islamists (Bar D. S., *A Toolbox for Countering Extremist Religious Doctrines*, 2012, p. 5)

Many Middle Eastern regimes, including Syria, lack genuine legitimacy and as such their rule is secured predominantly through fear and the manipulation of sectarian insecurities. However in the same way that the violent security apparatus of autocratic states attracts membership from the violent and anti-social, terrorism does the same, resulting in both sides of the political game becoming increasingly violent and coercive (Bar, 2012, p. 6). This contributes to the danger of sectarian conflict in line with Posen's observation that when violent extremists of one group begin to terrorise rival groups there is an increased risk that ethno-sectarian groups will pursue violence as a whole (Wolff, 2009, p. 27).

Traditionally the ultimate Islamic leader is characterised as combining the traits of a warrior and an Islamic scholar (Bar, *Islamic Leader Paradigms*, 2012, p. 6). This again intensifies the likelihood of ethno-sectarian conflict with Kaufman identifying that a group that both admires warrior characteristics and incorporates them within the group's identity has an increased likelihood of engaging in out-group violence as this cultural construct provides a framework for the military mobilisation of ethno-sectarian groups by opportunistic elites (Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001, p. 30). This has important implications for the Sunni Muslim driven uprising in Syria.

The regional unrest has helped fuel a resurgence in fundamentalist Salafism and its purist approach to Islam. This rise has contributed to anti-Shia sentiment given the Salafi rejection of Shia. Political Salafi have been portraying the Allawi-Shia-Iran axis as the greatest threat to Sunni and promoting themselves as the resistance to this Shia threat. Furthermore the brutality of the Assad regime

against predominantly Sunni protesters in Syria has been used by Salafi political clerics to mobilise Sunni behind Sunni political ascendancy. As such, the intersect between the Arab Spring and the rise in Salafi politics has exacerbated the intensity of the Sunni Shia divide (Abdo, *The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide*, 2013, pp. 4, 6, 7 & 42). Furthermore with 'a legacy of textual incitement to Jihad' specifically against the Allawites by the most important source of inspiration for political Jihadi, Ibn Tayyimiyya, combined with the symbolic and strategic importance of Syria to Sunni Islam, Syria's civil war is a natural front for the Salafi Jihadists (Kazimi, 2010, pp. 8-9).

It is important to examine the characteristics of religious fundamentalists in order to understand the nature and threat of the Jihadi Salafi movement. Research has shown that religious fundamentalism is related to prejudice and discrimination, displaying a combination of religion's in-group cohesion and loyalty, with authoritarianism's trait of out-group extreme prejudice (Saroglou, 2011, pp. 1-7).

The religious fundamentalist mindset is vehemently opposed to anyone who challenges their world view or values. Their beliefs reinforce the power of the traditionally dominant usually meaning there is significant prejudice against women, gays and other ethnic or religious groups (Saroglou, 2011, pp. 6-7). Religious fundamentalists often frame their own personal power and the prioritising their own needs as ordained by God/Allah. As such other's freedom and self determination is interpreted not just as a challenge to their own personal power but also as a challenge to the dictates of God and history. From here it is easy to understand how they are prepared to kill, oppress and physically harm others to ensure the dominance of their own beliefs as these beliefs are the foundation of their personal power and justify their entitlement relative to select others

Radically religious people tend to be highly sectarian and ethnocentric holding a belief in a just world which paradoxically is often associated with justifying and legitimising the suffering of out-groups. The in-group loyalty of religious fundamentalists has been proposed as an explanation for contemporary religious terrorism (Saroglou, 2011, p. 22). In addition religious fundamentalists display a

high degree of submissiveness towards in-group authority figures with the result that they are potentially highly malleable to inflammatory rhetoric from manipulative elites (Saroglou, 2011, p. 23). These traits are shared with non-religious authoritarians and as such religious fundamentalism is better understood as religious authoritarianism (Saroglou, 2011, pp. 6-7).

Islamic extremists reject the idea of religious tolerance as this would undermine their goal of religious dominance which is based upon the rejection of any outside faiths including other Muslim sects. They are often murderously vehement in their protection of Islam's reputation. Evidence of this is seen within reactions to the killing of the US diplomat in Libya during protests against the US made anti-Islamic film entitled the 'Innocence of Muslims' and by association against the US. Sheikh Mohammed Zahawi, the leader of the Islamic group Ansar al Sharia which was accused of being behind the attack on the US diplomatic compound was recorded as stating that 'he did not understand why so many tears were being shed over the death of a diplomat when the 'real crime' was the insult to Muslims within the film, 'Innocence of Muslims' (Davies, 2012). Islamic fundamentalism is often characterised as in confrontation with globalisation i.e. 'Jihad versus McWorld' (The Wiley-Blackwell Encyclopedia of Globalization, 2012, p. 1770).

There is a growing divide within Islam between moderates and extremists/religious authoritarians. This struggle between moderate and radical Islam is proving challenging for the new governments in Libya, Egypt and Tunisia. The Libyan protests against the 'Innocence of Muslims' and the coinciding attack on the US diplomatic compound were followed by contradictory protests which ousted Islamic militant groups from their headquarters illustrating the extent of the divide (Davies, 2012). There has been a backlash to the rise of political Sunnism which has been particularly evident within Egypt where when President Morsi sought to increase his Presidential powers protests erupted ultimately resulting in his removal.

Furthermore just as government violence represses criticism, the aggressive rejection of religious pluralism and violent reactions when religious traditions are

challenged from religious extremists serves to limit analysis of Islam within both the general population and amongst Islamists. However the state of flux caused by the Arab Spring has created an opening for criticism not just of Middle Eastern regimes but also of the opportunistic use of Islam. An example was reported by the BBC in reference to Syrian refugees in Libya. Syrian refugee Ahmed Atrash claimed that wealthy Libyan businessmen were approaching hungry and poor Syrian refugee families and offering money for marriage to their, at times underage, daughters. Ahmed Atrash took the unusual step of making a public criticism of religion practices in defence of women by saying 'Syrian women escaped from rapes by [President] Bashar al-Assad's thugs to face rapes in the name of religion.' He also disputed Libyan Sheikh Ashraf Al-Aqrabi, the Imam of the Garyounis Mosque's defence of the practise as a 'religious duty' to protect Syrian female refugees from turning to prostitution in desperation as incorrect, declaring instead that 'This is modern-day slavery, using the word marriage is just a euphemism' (Maher, 2012).

The Arab Spring has altered the Middle Eastern political landscape and the outcome of the social movement for democracy and freedom underway in Syria will have further repercussions. Religion plays a central role in the Middle East and was reflected in the election of Islamic parties in Egypt and Tunisia, and the emerging Islamification of the Syrian uprising. However upon analysis of religious authoritarianism, and as seen in Egypt under the now ousted President Morsi, it is clear that Islamic extremists share many traits with the region's authoritarian rulers making them more likely to attempt to impose sectarian based autocratic rule and repression under the justification of religion than to encourage the emergence of tolerance, freedom and democracy.

This realisation is spreading across the Middle East. In Syria the Al Qaeda brigade the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant has imposed its rule in the only provincial city no longer in regime hands as at August 2013, Al Raqqa. However their attempts to create an Islamic emirate are largely unwelcome with unarmed protesters taking to the streets yet again to chant 'Islamic State leave our area' and to express opposition to the brigade's human rights abuses and authoritarian governance. Syrian activist Khaled Sajjar observed that the people of al Raqqa

are resisting the imposition of local Islamic rule as they 'see the continuation of the government operation but only with a different face' (Khodr, Syrians protest against al Raqqa's New Rulers, 2013).

4.4 The Sunni Shia Divide: Conclusion

The Syrian crisis intersects with the sectarian conflicts and tense rivalries across the region including the contest between the Shia axis of resistance and the Sunni regimes for prominence in the region. Due to transnational sectarian politics and cross border tribal ties throughout the Middle East, repercussions from conflicts readily cascade from one state to its neighbour making surrounding states vulnerable to their neighbours crisis's or as former Syrian dictator Adib Shishakli's stated 'when Syria's adversaries in Lebanon sneeze Damascus gets pneumonia' (Olmert, 2011).

The Arab Spring uprisings and any subsequent introductions of democracy are likely to, in the short term at least, create instability whilst new political contracts are negotiated and a new power balance between the different ethno-sectarian groups is established. As such there has been a rise in sectarianism in response to this insecurity (Grenier, 2011) resulting in the intensification of the Sunni Shia divide (Abdo, 2013). This supports Barry Posen's observation that the anarchy that follows regime change is similar to the anarchy of the international political system. This state of anarchy increases ethno-sectarian groups' perceptions of insecurity resulting in a greater likelihood of inter-group conflict (Wolff, 2009, pp. 26-27).

Sectarianism has also been exacerbated by the theological debates over the role and nature of Islam sweeping the region. Syria has become a focal point for radical Islam in the struggle between secular and religious governance, and between moderate and radical Islam. At this stage the increased Islamic presence that initially followed the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia potentially contradicts the aims of the social movement in Syria for freedom, human rights and democracy creating concerns about post Assad governance amongst many Syrian civilians. There is a growing understanding that Islamic radicals are

authoritarian in nature with significant religious out-group prejudices and are likely to work towards political domination should they come into power.

With the Shia seeking to retain leadership in Syria and the Sunni seeking to re-establish their historical dominance or at least achieve a Sunni dominated democracy, the Syrian sectarian unrest within the uprising mirrors the regional contest between transnational Sunni and Shia interests resulting in it serving as a proxy war. Furthermore radical groups have come to the realisation that the uprising signals that the old order is vulnerable, and as such now is the time to make their move, concurrently the secular democratic movement has come to the same conclusion.

Chapter Five

From Protest Movement to Armed Rebellion: Ethno-Sectarian Dynamics within the Uprising

5.1 The Syrian Uprising: Sunni Ambition or Social Movement?

The Arab Spring has been generated in part by seismic global events such as the increased availability of social media and the economic downturn. This has resulted in a political environment marked with changes and instability (Kyrou, 2011). These events occurring against a backdrop of globally rising religious tensions (Danin R. M., Religious Restrictions and Violence Growing Globally led by the Middle East, 2012) has led to a very fraught situation in the Middle East where competing political agendas, with an ethno-sectarian bias, are in a state of flux. Whilst there is a significant level of ethno-sectarian tensions within the resultant Arab Spring, the protests at least initially represent social movements against autocratic, incompetent and corrupt rule.

This drive for political change can be significantly attributed to the rise in poverty (Svadkovsky, 2012). Due to economic hardship there is significant periphery resentment fuelling the Syrian uprising. Another driving force behind the Arab Awakening is the youth population bulge with an unprecedented 60% of the region's population under the age of 25 years (Wilkins, 2011). With phenomenal growth in secondary and university education, a 50% rise in urbanisation, the introduction of communications technology and exposure to international media youth expectations are high. However the corrupt, autocratic and stagnant regimes are failing to meet these expectations instead political repression, the low standard of living experienced by many and the global economic downturn has resulted in high youth unemployment and corresponding frustration (Shaikh, 2011).

This combination of highly educated, technologically savvy and underemployed youth with repressive and stagnant political systems is proving to be a

combustible mix (Stimson Center, 2011, pp. 36, 45, 71). The emerging generation's desire for change is strengthened by being shared throughout the Middle East across sectarian lines leading to a grassroots resistance to autocratic rule (Stimson Center, 2011, p. 49 & 97). The Middle Eastern social movements represent a drive to end corruption, cronyism and repression, plus a desire for freedom, human rights and democracy.

The Syrian uprising has many features of a popular social movement. Resource Mobilisation Theory outlines how empowerment starts with frustration and the meeting of a minimum level of resources to facilitate collective opposition. Additionally mobilisation must be sufficient to overcome apathy in face of long term powerlessness (Sadan, 2004, pp. 150-151). In the case of the Middle East, in particular Syria, Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, intense and rising discontent against widespread corruption and repression had grown to the extent that it overpowered fear of opposing the regimes with a Syrian opposition member stating 'People reached the point at which they preferred death to humiliation. The only thing the regime can do is kill us' (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 5). It is very difficult for autocratic regimes to rein in civilian demands once psychological barriers, such as sufficient fear, have broken down (Sadan, 2004, pp. 156-157).

Additionally Political Process Theory's explanation for social movements stresses the importance of political opportunity and timing particularly relating to rising expectations of success (Opp, 2009, pp. 161-165). As such the speed in which popular protest overcame both the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes contributed significantly towards motivating Syrian activists.

Social Movement Theory identifies that self representation in order to challenge regime narratives contributes to social movement mobilisation. As such communications technology has given Middle Eastern protesters a means to communicate their grievances and challenge the regime's use of state media to broadcast narratives criticising the protesters' aims and actions. In this way activists are able to create and broadcast an identity for the uprising to challenge the one imposed on them by the regime (Sadan, 2004, p. 124).

Furthermore a key source of motivation and recruitment within the Egyptian revolution, replicated strongly in Syria, was the use of social media sites such as the Egyptian Facebook page 'I am Khalid Said' to highlight regime abuses, a move which strengthened solidarity through a sense of shared injustice. Social media also helped to remove barriers to participation revealing the full extent that the average Egyptian citizen opposed the regime (Human Rights Watch, 2012, p. 28). Through increased communication citizens begin to see their repression is a source of connection leading to collective activity (Sadan, 2004, p. 222).

The Syrian revolution is part of a new era of social revolutions where international and national audiences, both individuals and governments, are sought via the internet giving under resourced grass roots social movements a powerful means of opposing autocracy (Kyrrou, 2011). Additionally social media has provided an avenue for recruiting participants, identifying grievances and attributing blame thus fulfilling the requirements that Resource Mobilisation Theory outlines as needed to generate a social movement.

New Movement Theory was developed to analyse Western grass roots value movements such as the green movement. The theory proposes these movements developed due to fractured identities as a result of the fast pace of change within these societies (Buechler, 1995). Correspondingly in the Middle East the breakdown of the old order as demonstrated by an emerging divide between secular ideologies and Islam, between moderate and radical Islam, plus the introduction of communications technology and higher rates of education has also led to a re-assessment of identities, religion, ideologies and political systems. However existing alongside the Middle Eastern social movements based on modern ideals such as democracy there is a conflicting movement back towards traditional Islamic values resulting in two contradictory movements simultaneously in motion. This drive towards traditionalism complicates the Syrian political movement, and is reinforcing the growing Islamification whilst also strengthening sectarian sentiments.

Despite initially being a social movement aiming to redraw the contract between ruler and ruled in Syria, the high level of Sunni participation within the uprising

has resulted in it having a significant Sunni face. This has meant that despite cross sectarian support for many of the movement's aims, such as challenging corruption and improving human rights, Sunni dominance of the uprising has discouraged cross sect participation.

The high Sunni participation is due to several factors. Firstly Bashar al Assad had abandoned his support for the rural poor, the greater numbers of which were Sunni, in favour of policies and networks that supported his contemporaries within the wealthy urban elite (International Crisis Group, 2011). Additionally Sunni have long resented Allawite rule particularly given it usurped Sunni dominance, and furthermore the high numbers of Sunni within the protests is a reflection of demographic reality given that Sunni are the most populous sect.

Additionally the alienation of citizens from the Middle Eastern regimes meant citizens turned to other affiliations for religious, social and political support fuelling the development of a layer of mezzanine leaders. Given that many of the mezzanine structures were religious organisations they tended to strengthen sectarian ties (Miscik, 2010). Thus as a result of government repression of civil society and a divided spectrum of opinions within opposition groups, the two prominent public voices became regime controlled cultural centres and media, and the mosques (Hamidi, 2005). This increased stature of religious organisations enabling the use of Sunni mosques and religious establishments as mobilising and recruitment centres for the protest movement. This is in keeping with Social Movement Theory's recognition that mobilisation generally takes place through existing social structures and that citizens act upon their grievances once they have sufficient resources to facilitate mobilisation (Jackson J. W., 2006). However mobilisation through Sunni mosques and after weekly Friday prayers has contributed to the identification of the movement with Sunni and consequently increased minority fears of the uprising.

Along with a surge in conservative Islamic values, from 2000 moderate scholar's began advocating a renewal of Islamic values to include democracy, women's rights and an acceptance of other religions (Blanford, Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation: Mohammed Habash offers Alternative to Islamic

Conservatism, 2005). In contrast traditional and radical Islamic thought is incompatible with democracy and religious pluralism (Bing, 2011). One of the defining qualities of the Islamic revival in Syria is the diversity of the Islamic religious currents ranging from extremists to the renewal movement (Blanford, Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation: Mohammed Habash offers Alternative to Islamic Conservatism, 2005). However the rising visibility of Islamic culture and values in Syria has reinforced the regime's warnings regarding Islamic fundamentalism to the concern of religious minorities and moderate Muslims (Wilson, 2005).

Despite the internal Islamic debate, the mosque has provided an important psychological and social space for citizens to connect over their dissatisfaction with the regime as the mosque is one of the few places they are able to congregates in significant numbers due to state repression (Jackson J. W., 2006, p. 17). Furthermore according to Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilisational Model, a strong group identity, in this case Syrian Sunni, alongside grievances advances the likelihood of political mobilisation (Sahliyeh, 2001, p. 5). However the significant political mobilisation of the Sunni sect within the uprising discourages other sectarian groups from joining the opposition network and is creating a sectarian dynamic within the social movement whilst giving the regime the opportunity to use sectarian counter revolutionary tactics.

The resulting instability and the sectarian dynamic within the Sunni led social movement is increasing communal anxiety. According to Symbolic Politics Theory, mobilisation to engage in ethnic conflict is manufactured by corrupt elites through appeals to the 'emotional bonds based on kinship feelings' inherent within ethno-sectarian groups (Kaufman, 2001, p. 29). Narratives encouraging mobilisation are often grounded in an ethno-sectarian groups' myths and prejudices which highlight the group's 'greatest collective fears' (Kaufman, 2001, pp. 29-30). Thus, given minority groups' collective fears of Sunni persecution and the regime's willingness to capitalise on this communal anxiety, the social movement's sectarian composition carries an inherent risk of ethno-sectarian conflict.

In contrast to the majority Sunni sect, minorities did not see the regional Arab Spring as an opportunity to overthrow the Assad regime due a perception of greater vulnerability. This has meant that although the aims of the protests were shared across sectarian groups, mobilisation to overthrow the regime was significantly activated along sectarian lines as the majority Sunni perceived they had more to gain and relatively less to lose from toppling the Assads. This calculation was not shared by the minorities whose fear of the regime was matched if not succeeded by fears of the sectarian prejudices of the Sunni majority and the rise in Sunni fundamentalism.

It is evident through analysing the Arab Spring and the Syrian uprising through the lens of Social Movement Theory that many of the elements pertaining to a social movement have been met by the uprising. As such the origin of the Syrian civil war was a social movement for freedom, democracy and human rights. However with continuing violence and the resulting societal breakdown, Syria's enduring sectarian dynamic is contributing to increases in sectarian violence and religious radicalism. With the social movement and radicalised armed opposition groups on divergent paths there is a danger of continued conflict in the post Assad phase with the democratic social movement facing challenges from militias either Salafist, Allawite and/or undemocratic or even criminal seeking to impose their own political, religious or personal will upon others in a similar manner to the ousted autocratic regime (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 19). Therefore although uprising was not initially a Sunni mobilisation there is significant risk of the movement developing into Sunni sectarian ambition driven by fear, insecurity and a desire for retribution.

5.2 Sunni Communalism and Rising Sectarian Violence

The Sunni majority is linked together through a variety of diverse Sunni religious networks however there is no central religious authority and there are deep divisions on issues such as fiqh (religious jurisprudence), what position to take in relation to the regime and what religious family one is from for instance (Donker T. H., 2010, pp. 437-439). Nevertheless the strength of the Sunni collective

identity has supported and driven the Syrian Arab Spring. However it has also enabled the development of sectarian narratives, often steeped in history, which encourage political and social mobilisation against out-groups, consequently the prevalence of Sunni in the opposition raises the risk that the social movement will degenerate into sectarian warfare.

Kaufman describes ethnicity as based on communal myth symbol complexes and outlines that when hostility towards out-groups is an important part of this intergroup conflict is more likely (Wolff, 2009, p. 28). The Arab saying 'Me against my brother, me and my brother against my cousin; me, my brother, and my cousin against the world' (Salzman, 2008) illustrates how within Syria and the Middle East as a whole, ethno-sectarian group's myth symbol complexes are based upon hostility and/or wariness towards out groups. This increases the likelihood that the current Syrian civil war will degenerate further into ethno-sectarian conflict.

When threatened groups solidify in response. The cohesiveness of Sunni for example, strengthened in response to the Crusaders making inroads into the Middle East in the 12th century. The Sunni orthodoxy was suspicious of the heterodox Shi'ite sects' relationship with the Crusaders, as such Sunni launched a Jihad campaign against the Crusaders which overlapped somewhat onto Shia sects (Worren, 2007, pp. 57-60). Furthermore modern Western interference in the Middle East has enabled radical groups to strengthen older narratives and myths around resisting Crusaders attempts to expand the Christian faith into Muslim territories. Radical groups have intertwined Crusader mythology with colonialism, imperialism and the global spread of Western values and culture contributing to a visible Islamic (Bar D. S., A Toolbox for Countering Extremist Religious Doctrines, 2012, p. 5).

By the 12th century a combination of Crusader and Mongol threats further hardened Sunni prejudices against out-groups. Saladin emerged as the Islamic champion who reinvigorated Sunni Muslims and led a successive Jihad against the Christian crusaders, recapturing Jerusalem. However in the Allawite historical narratives Saladin 'laid the foundation for a Sunni Muslim resurgence

and the subsequent persecution of Allawites' (Worren, 2007, p. 57 & 58). Allawites were 'uprooted and marginalised, not to mention oppressed and massacred, for the next six centuries'. The situation became much worse after 1305 when Sunni scholar Ibn Taymiyyah, whose rhetoric against other religious groups is referred to by Salafist Islamists today, issued fatwas declaring that Allawites were infidels. In 1516, after the Ottoman's vanquished the Mamluks, Allawites clerics were massacred after being summoned by Sunni Turkish officials to Aleppo where they were beheaded. Other massacres of Allawites were carried out at the same time with some sources asserting that approximately 100,000 Alawis were killed by Sunni. The Allawites were subsequently cleared from Aleppo and other cities and found refuge in the Jabal Ansariyeh – the Mountains of the Allawites. Until the Assads the following centuries were a time of Allawite isolation and backwardness, with the Allawites becoming the indentured farmers and servants cast within the Sunni feudal system (Worren, 2007, p. 57 & 59). Historical narratives and events heavily influence a group's myth symbol complex and the use of sectarianism, including Ibn Taymiyyah's writings, to justify political aims is being replicated within the 2011 initiated uprising through radical clerics using religion to legitimise the removal of the 'heretic' Allawite elite.

In 2005 an observation was made in the Syria Comment blog outlining concerns with the growth of Islam in Syria stating 'there is no clear line between being religious, extremist, ideologist or even terrorist: moving from one level to another can be triggered by sectarian reasons, superpower threat reasons or other reasons such as the crackdown of the regime' (Landis, Islamism in Syria, 2005). As such there are concerns that regime wrought massacres and high losses suffered by Sunni within the civil war may increase the likelihood that extremist Salafi rhetoric against Allawites, such as radical cleric Adnan Arour's declaration that 'By Allah we will chop their flesh and feed them to the dogs' in reference to Allawites involved in state actions against the uprising, will resonate with growing anger and radicalise Sunni towards revenge (Fielding-Smith, 2011).

Accordingly this creates credibility issues and information breakdowns which Lake and Rothschild describe as facilitating manipulative elites' messages and discouraging negotiation between groups (Wolff, 2009, p. 28). As such due to radical Sunni sectarian propaganda and the influx of Salafists the Sunni majority is further alienated from the minorities and cannot credibly commit to protect the minorities thereby contributing to the Allawites and many Christians continuing to back regime.

In 2012 the Associated Press conducted a poll through interviews with Syrian protesters in Syria and Lebanon. The results illustrated that Sunni perceive Syria as under Allawite domination. The regime was accused of religious discrimination in favour of Allawites alongside corruption and nepotism. Sunni protesters claimed that the regime discriminated against devout Sunni, outlining how many university educated Sunni cannot find jobs whereas university educated Allawite youth readily found jobs within state institutions (Karan, 2012). According to Ethnic Conflict Theory when one group has dominated a state and the power balance begins to shift, there is a high risk of identity conflict (Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001, p. 32). This dynamic is reflected within the Syrian civil war and is likely to come to the fore as the Allawite dominated regime weakens.

It is evident that the protesters are predominantly Sunni and that in accordance with Gurr's Ethnic Communal Mobilizational Model the strength of this communal bond has helped to shape and drive the protest movement. Furthermore significant levels of grievance against the regime and regime targeting of Sunni areas is fuelling their feeling of shared suffering and thereby encouraging group mobilisation. Given Syrian communalism the interconnectedness within sects generates the potential for political activism along sectarian lines both within the opposition and within the loyalist camp.

The dominance of Sunni within the uprising places it at great risk of degenerating into outright sectarian conflict and sectarian ambition. This relates not just to minority insecurity relating to historical persecution by Sunni but also to the Sunni myth symbol complex. Kaufman identifies that a group that holds a belief in their own entitlement to power and privileges relative to out-groups finds it

easier to justify ethno-sectarian prejudices, increasing the likelihood of involvement in ethno-sectarian conflict (Kaufman, 2001, p. 30). Additionally Kaufman points out that a myth symbol complex that heavily features an admiration for warrior characteristics also encourages violent attitudes towards out-groups (Kaufman, 2001, p. 30). The Sunni myth symbol complex, particularly the Salafi strain, encompasses these two dynamics, and this has influenced a new generation of Jihadis emerging within the Syrian civil war.

Additionally Posen describes how ethnic ties create an easily mobilised army (Wolff, 2009, pp. 26-27). With the Syrian uprising degenerating into the chaos of civil war, the conditions for ethno-sectarian insecurity are high. The FSA was initially created to protect protesters under fire from the Syrian security forces however given the prevalence of Sunni in the FSA and rising Sunni anger at the 'Allawite' regime there is considerable risk of FSA units further mobilising along sectarian lines against the Allawites, alongside the risk of Allawites continuing to join pro-regime militias for protection against the opposition.

Posen identified another dynamic that intensifies ethnic conflict, this being the violent actions of extremists from within each group (Wolff, 2009, p. 27). Clearly identifiable as extremists are the predominantly Allawite Shabbiha who have openly boasted on social media of violence and massacres against Sunni. This is an instance whereby social media is used as part of a terror campaign with violent acts filmed and shared in order to embolden their own side and intimidate the other. Equally on the Sunni side there have been increasing acts of violence occurring against Allawites in retaliation for state and Shabbiha terrorism of their communities. As such extremists on both sides are greatly intensifying ethno-sectarian fears.

Furthermore Syrian sectarian groups are developing new symbols and myths which reinforce their position within the Syrian uprising which according to Kelmen, explains the escalatory and self perpetuating nature of ethnic conflict. New traumas harden existing myths and intensify hostility and fear often culminating in zero sum politics that cast compromise as sectarian betrayal (Kaufman, *Escaping the Symbolic Politics Trap: Reconciliation Initiatives and Conflict Resolution in Ethnic Wars*, 2006, p. 205 & 215). With Allawite elites

perceived to be leading the violence against predominantly Sunni targets the 'mass hostility, chauvinist political mobilisation and security dilemma' that Kaufman identifies as increasing the likelihood of inter group violence is evident in Syria (Wolff, 2009, p. 31).

Kaufman also identifies demographic concentrations of an ethnic group, political freedoms, third party involvement, opposition to the regime weakening its power and an opposition base in a neighbouring state as predisposing a state towards ethnic conflict (Wolff, 2009, p. 31). With extensive third party involvement within the Syrian crisis given FSA bases in Turkey and Western states calling for the regime to step down, which contrasts sharply with Iran, Russia and Hezbollah's support of the regime, the Syrian situation has many factors that potentially make ethno-sectarian conflict likely. With Syrians conscious of Iran, Hezbollah and the Shia dominated Iraqi governments' support of Bashar al Assad, as well as Sunni lead nations such as Saudi Arabia supporting the uprising, it is difficult for citizens to see the conflict outside of a sectarian prism (Ghadry, 2012).

According to Horowitz's description ethnic groups are ranked hierarchically in order of dominance (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 22-23). Whilst this is evident within Syria the hierarchical dominance of Allawites is not absolute. The regime ultimately benefits the wealthy families within its patronage system irrespective of sect and this includes powerful Sunni families (Worren, 2007, pp. 87-89). This complicates defining the uprising as a revolution as described by Horowitz whereby ethnic groups seek to change the ethno-sectarian hierarchy and the distribution of power and resources (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 10-15). Furthermore, it is difficult to characterise the uprising as one of Sunni sectarian ambition due to the diversity of positions taken by Sunni in response to the uprising, in particular the urban middle classes remain concerned about retaining their employment and affluence should the uprising succeed and a societal reshuffle take place as a result. It is thus more accurate to define the uprising as a civil war with a rapidly intensifying sectarian dynamic which was sparked off by a harsh armed government response to a popular protest movement.

Social Movement Theory highlights the importance of an effective narrative for protest movements (McAdams, 2001, p. 44). Sunni divisiveness relative to the uprising is impacting on the protest movement which has a corresponding lack of unity and as a result lacks a consistent narrative (Sheppard, 2011). This has obstructed its development into a coherent and unified social movement against the regime and is increasing sectarian insecurity. Although regime violence is pushing the revolutionary cause in the minds of many citizens, the Syrian people need the opposition to develop a unifying narrative that resonates with their own needs as they lack confidence in emerging leaders to manage Syria in a post Assad era (Sheppard, 2011).

The challenge for the Syrian social movement has been to overcome the inherent social divisions within the population (Gamson, 2011) and the myth symbol complexes of the key participants, the Sunni and Allawites, which predispose both groups towards either fears or hostility towards out-groups. However unity within Syria is significantly compromised given that the struggle between the rebels and the government is not only perceived as a struggle between Sunni and the Allawites, but also it is increasingly appearing as a struggle over the identity and ideology of the state with alternative positions existing between rich and poor, secularism and Islam, modernity and traditionalism (Khalaf, 2012).

5.3 The Shabbiha: Allawite Militia or Regime aligned Mafia?

The Shabbiha emerged in 1976 during the Lebanese civil war when the Syrian army entered Lebanon. The Shabbiha, which is generally taken to mean phantom-like, consisted primarily of young Allawite men from the coastal towns of Latakia, Tartus and Baniyas. Prior to the uprising the Shabbiha were involved in the smuggling and sale of stolen goods and/or banned popular Western goods such as Coca Cola, Levis and Malboro cigarettes across the Lebanese border and carrying out raids on warehouses and civilian homes (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2012). As the first Allawites who felt safe to leave their villages due to the Assad regime pushing underground outright Sunni animosity, many poor uneducated young Allawite men saw smuggling Western goods across the Lebanese border as a financial opportunity (Mohammad, 2012).

Smuggling was a lucrative business and aware that they were above the law, members of Hafez al Assad's extended family joined the Shabbiha. The back window of their Mercedes cars, known as al Shabah (the Ghost) was reserved for pictures of 'Father the Commander', Hafez al Assad (Flamand, 2012).

In 1983, a failed coup by Hafez al Assad's brother, Rifaat al Assad, resulted in the disbanding of his Defence companies containing 53,000 Allawite elite soldiers. It was Rifaat's elite force that had led the deadly strike against 1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama. Many of the disbanded Defence companies and intelligence units loyal to Rifaat eventually joined the Shabbiha resulting in a considerable increase in their numbers (Stratfor Global Intelligence, 2012).

The boundaries between the Syrian regime and the Shabbiha are unclear although there are significant kinship links between Shabbiha 'bosses' and the Assad family. The Assad regime and the Shabbiha share a similar approach, the exercise of power and control primarily implemented through violence (Salih, 2012).

Due to its connections with the governing family the Shabbiha, alongside the security apparatus, were part of the regime's wall of fear used to maintain power and control over its citizens and were often hired by the regime to carry out violence against opponents. These links between the al Assad family and the Shabbiha have become increasingly relevant (Mohammad, 2012) with the European Union imposing sanctions in May 2011 on two of Bashar al Assad's first cousins, Fawwar and Munzir, for their involvement in 'the repression against the civilian population as members of the Shabbiha' (Flamand, 2012).

There are four characteristics of the Shabbiha, the first being that its members primarily belong to the Allawite sect (Salih, 2012). To qualify this in areas heavily populated with Sunni the Shabbiha includes Sunni in its numbers, as like the regime it is dominated by but not exclusively Allawite (Sly, 2012). The second is a hostility towards society making criminal acts towards civilians acceptable and even justifiable according to this attitude. The third is loyalty to their leaders and lastly they are united by a motivation to achieve economic gains through the Shabbiha networks (Salih, 2012).

Through interviews conducted by the Associated Press the view emerged that with unemployment high amongst Syria's large youth population, the Shabbiha is a means for predominantly Allawite youth to gain employment and social mobility. A Syrian refugee in Lebanon stated 'An uneducated Shabbiha can get whatever he wants, versus the most educated person in Syria' (Karan, 2012). Due to the uprising the Shabbiha are now paid much more than the average Syrian salary and are able to loot and steal in order to increase their earnings. They are often involved in repression campaigns which involve horrific levels of violence (Flamand, 2012).

In the context of the uprising the opposition's use of the word Shabbiha extends from the criminal gangs to the pro-regime militias that are the People's Army sections of the Popular Committees formed to protect loyalists against opposition forces. These paramilitary groups have a historical precedent given the Ba'ath party has used paramilitary forces to defend their interests since 1963, particularly against the Muslim Brotherhood in the early 1980s. Loyalist armed groups were called the Jaysh al Shabi by the mid-1980s and were estimated to number 100,000 as at 2011. Within the civil war both the Jaysh al Shabi and the criminal Shabbiha have received training and support from the Iranian government as the Iranians try to establish links to proxy groups within Syria that could survive the fall of the Assads and thereby enable Iran to continue to project power in the Levant (Will Fulton, 2013, pp. 19-20).

In order to heighten perceptions amongst minorities that the regime is necessary for their protection the regime has employed the Shabbiha, along with security detail, to disseminate information that actively portrays the current unrest as the work of militant Islamists and terrorists. Andrew J Tabler reported further sectarian tactics when he travelled to Lebanon's Wadi Khaled and spoke with Sunni refugees from the Syrian town of Tal Kalakh which is surrounded by Allawite villages. The refugees described the Shabbiha ransacking homes and threatening to kill or assault protesters in the coastal areas and countryside in co-ordination with cannon fire from the Syrian army (Tabler A. , 2011, pp. 2-3). This points to the regime approaching the conflict as a Sunni challenge to its authority.

There is a belief that the patronage system of the al Assads has grown to resemble a mafia extortion network and is increasingly outside of the regime's control. The Shabbiha militias are similarly a law unto their own and whilst supporting the President are unlikely to be under his direct authority. However despite this it is generally understood that Shabbiha militia report to a security officer who in turn reports to the President's brother Maher al Assad (Flamand, 2012).

The regime's open use of the sectarian and criminal Shabbiha intensifies the view that the regime is corrupt and resembles a mafia state. The regime has had no qualms either before or during the uprising to use criminal tactics to ensure its power and privilege is maintained (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 6). As such the Shabbiha essentially mirrors the dark side of the regime displaying self interest, violence, sectarianism and a willingness to resort to criminal violence in order to achieve power, control and privilege (Salih, 2012). The Shabbiha alongside the security apparatus are the regime's violence mechanism within its power and control structure.

Kaufman identifies that when a group feels that it is faces an existential threat to its survival, and has the opportunity to mobilise the prospect of ethno-sectarian conflict rises (Wolff, 2009, pp. 30-31). These preconditions are clearly evident within the Syrian situation. Many Alawites see the uprising as an existential threat with an interviewed Shabbiha member stating 'I know the Sunnis will take revenge for what we have done. I am fighting to guarantee a good future for my sons and grandsons. So this is the final battle: Win, or die' (Flamand, 2012). Through the Shabbiha and the military Allawites are able to mobilise as an armed sectarian group to protect their interests and the regime.

Rhetoric from the Shabbiha accessed via the internet is very loyal to Bashar al Assad with mottos like 'Bashar, do not be sad: you have men who drink blood' (Sherlock, 2012). The violence of Shabbiha slogans and online videos increases the insecurity of other sectarian groups, particularly Sunni. As such the regime's reliance on sectarian militias to support the security forces is not only responding to sectarian tension within the unrest but it is also heightening it. Unfortunately the killings and violence carried out by the Shabbiha and the regime is increasing

the number of individuals with scores to settle particularly from within the Sunni community (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

However whilst the existence of the Shabbiha increases the odds of outright communal conflict due to its identification as an Allawi militia, the Shabbiha are not popular with all Allawites and this is causing tensions within Allawite support. In October 2012 a gunfight which resulted in one dead and another wounded was reported in the Assad family's hometown al Qardaha. The fight involved Mohammed al Assad, known as the 'Mountain Sheik' for his powerful family connections and his involvement in smuggling and the other criminal activities that underlie the local economy of the Allawite hills. Although accounts vary it has been reported that Mohammed al Assad took offence to expressed opinions that Bashar al Assad should step down in face of high Allawite casualties. Furthermore the regime largely ignores Shabbiha criminality, particularly those with familial ties to the President. The effect of this on the economy and people of the Allawite hills is an additional source of Allawite resentment (Oweis, 2012)

Nevertheless as the loyalty of military units with high numbers of Sunni becomes increasingly questionable, the Shabbiha's importance as a loyalist militia is rising (Oweis, 2012) particularly as Shabbiha numbers may have grown to as many as 100,000 members (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 7). Moreover as the Shabbiha are likely to be among the first to face retribution should the regime fall their commitment to the regime's survival is very high (Flamand, 2012). Dr Azzawi from the Syrian Network for Human Rights in London supports this through his claims that the Shabbiha have been manipulated by the regime. 'They are fuelled by this belief that they are fighting for their survival,' said Dr Azzawi. 'Assad tells them that they must defend the government or else they will be destroyed; it's kill, or be killed' (Sherlock, 2012).

Fear and sectarianism are an effective way for elites to mobilise the disadvantaged to defend elite privilege and power (Salih, 2012). Ultimately however the Assad family are loyal to themselves and it is likely that if they are toppled the regime's inner circle will attempt to escape the country and leave the Shabbiha, Republican

Guard and other visible Allawite armed factions to face retribution from within the revolution.

In conclusion the regime's use of the Assad linked Shabbiha criminal networks and Allawite militias to repress the uprising has transformed the general understanding of the Shabbiha to include a sectarian militia. Effectively the Shabbiha are a criminal organisation that has been mobilised and its ranks expanded in order to protect the regime. The regime's use of the Shabbiha is reinforcing perceptions that the regime is significantly resorting to sectarianism to oppose the uprising. The Shabbiha's violent and extremist culture combined with its origins as an Allawite criminal network has significantly exacerbated sectarian animosity and fears.

5.4 Sectarianism and the Syrian Security Apparatus

The Syrian military and security apparatus is a highly sectarian institution with the roots to this characteristic emerging from the French mandate of Syria. During their administration the French employed the tactic of sectarian 'divide and rule' in order to control the population. As part of this strategy they drew recruits for the 'Speciales Troupes' from ethno-sectarian minorities such as the Armenians, Kurds, Allawites and Circassians as opposed to the Sunni majority. Given that at the end of the French mandate the Speciales Troupes formed the Lebanese and Syrian armies, this concentration of minorities became a defining factor in the relationship between the military and the civilian politicians. Politicians during this period largely still represented a wealthy, nationalist, anti-French and mostly Sunni elite (Whitman, 2011, pp. 11-15).

Syria's first military coup was led in 1949 by General Musni Za'im and this left an enduring legacy on the Syrian political environment with subsequent power transfers typically achieved through military coups (Whitman, 2011, p. 28). Additionally by making himself both Head of State and Head of National Defence General Za'im linked together the military and the state (Whitman, 2011, pp. 33-48). As such from 1949 the military played an influential role within Syrian politics (Whitman, 2011, p. 28).

From 1949 to 1970 the military had the opportunity to develop the art of influencing Syrian politics. From the late 1950s the military began to combine itself with the Ba'ath party and since 1964 the Ba'ath regime has relied on its links within the military and security apparatus to retain its rule. Hafez al Assad's takeover in 1971 resulted in the army becoming firmly entrenched within the Syrian regime. By this stage many army officers also belonged to the Ba'ath party and the two institutions were significantly intertwined. This situation has continued into Bashar al Assad's rule, to the extent that the army and security apparatus are part of the regime and ultimately for the army to turn on the regime would be tantamount to turning on itself (Whitman, 2011, pp. 40-52). This is particularly true of the military and security forces leadership which is significantly based on extensive patronage systems commonly arranged through familial networks linking back to the Assads (Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 2013, p. 31).

Horowitz identifies the military as a 'significant symbol of ethnic domination' when the composition of the military heavily favours one ethno-sectarian group as this group is then able to use the security apparatus as a tool to repress internal challenges (Horowitz, 1985, pp. 10-12 & 443). As such the primarily Allawite regime elite's control over the security apparatus enabled them to dominate the citizenry. Prior to the uprising the security forces were embedded in the civilian structure and given intelligence officers were present in most towns they were able to control civilian life (Bar S. , 2006, p. 390).

The al Assad family's hold on the Syrian army is secured through sectarianism and patronage with the internal loyalties based around corruption and leadership reminiscent of mafia networks. Although the military's 300,000 conscripts were predominantly Sunni, of the 200,000 career soldiers in the Syrian army 70% are Allawite. 80% of the officers are estimated to be Allawite effectively giving the sect command of the military. Furthermore Allawite elite divisions, such as the Air Force Intelligence Service and the Republican Guard, receive the best training and equipment (Bhalla, 2011) and remain committed to the regime.

The higher number of Allawites in the officer class greatly reduces the influence of Sunni officers. Upward mobility in the army is harder for Sunni than Allawites and Sunni officers are more likely to come under investigation (Zenobie, 2011). However Sunni representing the greatest proportion of the rank and file somewhat complicates defining the military as an Allawite institution. Then again, effectively Syria is ruled by an inner circle of security chiefs. After the blast in July 2012 killed four of these men the inner circle became exclusively Allawite given the casualties included Christian Defence Minister General Daoud Rajha, Sunni Assistant Vice President Hassan Turkmani and Sunni Major General Hisham Ikhtiar (Tabler A. , President Bashar al Assad: His Inner Circle and Options, 2013).

The predominance of Sunni within the uprising has contributed to Sunni soldiers defecting from the army as they discover the discrepancy between the regime's claims that they are defending the state against terrorists and the discovery that they are in reality expected to fire on Sunni protesters, FSA fighters and/or civilians. However defections have not been in high enough numbers to decisively weaken the state security forces and soldiers are tending to defect individually (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 2) as the sectarian structure of the military makes it difficult for Sunni soldiers to act in unity.

However a former Syrian army officer has claimed that approximately 6,000 soldiers recorded as Syrian army casualties within the civil war as at May 2012 were shot by regime loyalists (Pfeffer, 2012). This is difficult to verify, however it is evident that Bashar al Assad has tasked the security apparatus to identify and remove possible defectors and to enforce compliance with orders to fire on protesters by detaining, torturing and/or shooting soldiers who refuse (Holliday, The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War, 2013, p. 13). There are also reports of Allawite units accompanying mixed sectarian units and shooting soldiers who refuse to fire (Zenobie, 2011).

In order to discourage the defection of entire units Assad has deployed politically reliable units with high numbers of minorities whilst keeping Sunni soldiers away from active combat (Holliday, The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War, 2013, pp. 26-28). The regime has also cynically used Druze and

Christian troops, as well as Allawites, against Sunni protesters in an attempt to reinforce the wedge between minority sectarian groups and Sunni (Bhalla, 2011). However this selective deployment has had significant repercussions for Assad's military strategy as he has subsequently been unable to generate enough reliable troops to secure the whole country (Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 2013, p. 26).

Questionable loyalties, defections and attrition are causing an over reliance on trusted units, with Allawites increasingly being called on to fill the gaps in the armed forces. As such many Allawites believe that the Assad regime is implicating their sect in criminal violence against the rest of the population and that this is stirring opposition forces towards sectarian retribution. An Allawite doctor interviewed in Lebanon stated how many Allawites felt 'Assad is not representing the Alawites; he is using them. If Alawites are prepared to die for Assad, it is because they fear for themselves, not because they love him' (Sly, 2012).

There is also growing resentment that whilst many Allawite families have suffered casualties supporting the Assads none of the grieving families are called Assad, Makhoul or Shalish. There are reports that the regime is beginning to suffer recruitment problems, primarily among Sunni conscripts, but also numbers of young Allawites are evading conscription given the opposition is holding up against the regime and casualties are rising (Oweis, 2012).

Considering the high number of Allawites employed within the Syrian security and military apparatus many Allawites face losing their incomes should the Assad regime fall. Prior to the uprising a growing number of Allawites were cynical about the regime as most did not directly benefit from the regime patronage system. However with high youth unemployment Allawites took up opportunities to become state employees despite the low pay, particularly in the security forces and the army. The prevalence of Allawites in elite security units and within the officer class has further disconnected both the security apparatus and by extension the Allawites from mainstream Syria. This has significantly played into Allawite's historically based fears of persecution at the hands of the Sunni majority (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 5 & 21). Moreover the security

forces are increasingly seen as the face of the regime. The security force's association with escalating levels of brutality, Allawite political dominance and the Shabbiha, has strengthened the most extreme stereotypes surrounding the regime and the Allawites (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 4) creating a situation whereby Allawite existential fears are valid (Holliday, The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War, 2013, p. 41).

Reports emerging that pro-regime fighters have been supplementing their incomes and gathering resources through corruption and criminal practises has further damaged the reputation of the security forces and military, again reflecting on the Allawites. A businessman in Homs who dealt with both pro-regime fighters and the opposition described a situation where the regime forces were profiting from the unrest 'Corruption has grown to unprecedented levels. In Homs, troops were encouraged to pillage. Money is made by stealing, selling war booty or even weapons. People pay to be released from prison or to be able to escape an area under attack...As a result, many of these people involved in repression now have a vested interest in ensuring chaos lasts as long as possible' (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 32).

As the civil war progresses desertions, both political and military, are ensuring that the regime is being stripped back to its backbone which is essentially the military and security apparatus. Since the 2012 summer, command of military has decentralised with important implications for units post Assad. Furthermore the distinction between Syrian army officers and pro-regime militias is becoming increasingly blurred (Holliday, The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War, 2013, p. 29) (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 6&7). If the regime deteriorates further the state army will begin to represent another militia within the civil war. Whilst this would represent a considerable weakening of the Assad elite's power this development would also be problematic as it is easier to topple a government then remove a large and well equipped militia (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. ii).

The regime has locked itself into a sectarian armed conflict and ensured that the security apparatus's fate is linked to its own thereby securing its loyalty (Haddad, The Syrian Revolution's Business Backbone, 2012). Given the extent of the

regime's brutality the regime has no credibility to negotiate and no legitimacy to re-engage with Syrian citizens, a condition outlined by Ethnic Conflict Theory as predisposing a situation towards ethno-sectarian conflict.

The US experience in removing the Ba'ath government from Iraq has led to the understanding that retaining the existing security institutions to transfer to an emerging democratic government is important to ensure future stability. However the Assad elite has precluded this outcome as the stripping back of the regime's forces to a brutal cohesive faction that is fighting for its survival has made it more likely that the remnants of the regime will join and morph into pro-Assad militias post the Assad regime (Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 2013, pp. 40-41).

To conclude, Bashar al Assad and his generals are increasingly aware that they are unlikely to regain power and will consequently work to retain sectarian control of the armed forces. In order to survive they are likely to fracture Syria until it resembles Lebanon thereby ensuring they remain an armed political player and that the Allawite sect remains loyal and is able to avoid outright retribution (Holliday, *The Assad Regime: From Counterinsurgency to Civil War*, 2013, p. 41).

5.5 From Protest Movement to Armed Rebellion - Ethno-Sectarian Dynamics within the Uprising: Conclusion

The Syrian civil war began as a social movement for democracy, freedom and human rights, evidence of the contagion effect as a result of the rapid success of the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings. However many factors point to the civil war continuing to develop a sectarian dynamic that threatens both the ability of the uprising to overthrow the Assads but also its ability to achieve any real benefits and stability for Syrians should it succeed.

Traditional Sunni religious culture with its prejudice against out-groups and a history of dominance within Syria prior to the Assads intensifies Sunni dislike of the 'heretic' Assad regime. However Sunni animosity towards the Allawite elite

is also a reaction to modern issues such as corruption, harsh repression and perceived favouritism of Allawites over Sunni with regards to state employment, advancement within the military and security services plus other opportunities. Given the absence of alternative meetings places much of the protests have been organised through mosques and after Friday prayers contributing to significant Sunni mobilisation within the opposition. Although a proportion of Sunni remain wary of developments, this has created perceptions of the uprising as a Sunni lead movement intensifying the likelihood it is seen through a sectarian prism. This is intensified by both sects having differing armed bodies within which they are highly represented, for instance the Allawites in the armed forces and Shabbiha and the Sunni within the FSA and extremist Islamist brigades, giving both sides the ability to mobilise armed sectarian units. Therefore regardless of the uprisings origins as a social movement the revolution has disintegrated into a sectarian civil war with the intensity likely to escalate the longer the conflict continues (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 1&2).

Chapter Six

Syria's Fractious Opposition Movement

6.1 The Grass Roots Revolution

Despite the rapid devolution from demonstrations to a civil war with a sectarian dynamic, the initial uprising was a social movement that precipitately grew from a surge of optimism following quick removal of the Tunisian, Egyptian and Libyan regimes. The Syrian people saw a historic opportunity to rid themselves of authoritarianism through a grass roots protest movement and an opportunity to introduce democracy, freedom and human rights. This was a popular movement which initially resisted the historical and cultural instinct to resort to communalism.

The arrest of teenagers for spray painting 'down with the regime' on a school wall on the 25 March 2011 in Deraa quickly grew into nearly national wide protests against the regime (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 20). The uprising was led by citizens, with a significant number of youth participants, acting within a local capacity against the regime. From the outset the revolution contained divisions, primarily along sectarian and rural-urban lines, due to the socio-economic, sectarian and political divisions within Syria and the regime's balanced use of these to secure acquiesce.

The grass roots revolution has not stemmed from the established political opposition nor is it lead by them. There is a fundamental disconnect between the two (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 20). The political opposition appear urban and are predominantly educated, often in the West, and have previously fled or been exiled from Syria (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 10). Participants in the uprising are predominantly rural, 15-35 years old, poor or middle class (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 21) these being groups significantly marginalised by the regime with 56% of youth unemployed in Syria (Momani, 2012). The traditional political opposition has had years of articulating their political and

ideological vision for Syria, whilst the protesters' goals for Syria appear little developed beyond broad ideals and the fall of the regime (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 20).

It has been difficult for the grass roots opposition to connect with the international community and within Syria due to political inexperience, regime pressure and sectarian divisiveness. However there are developing organisational streams within the grass roots movement capable of co-ordinating on a local level and adapting strategies in pursuit of their aims. Despite many of its leaders having to lead double lives or live in hiding with their identities only known to their immediate associates, formal structures have formed within the protest movement. However the organisational ability of the grass roots activists is limited by the intelligence capabilities of the regime. Larger more unified councils require communications and assembly as such they are more vulnerable to interception by the regime's intelligence. These structures, predominantly the revolutionary committees, work to co-ordinate protests, media releases, humanitarian and medical aid, security and armed operations (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 21 & 25).

Small local groups have formed into Local Coordination Committees of Syria (LCC) who primarily consist of youth activists who support nonviolent political action (Abdulhamid, Syria 2013: Rise of the warlords, 2013). The LCCs, along with armed opposition groups, are able to coordinate their activities through the next organisational tier, the Revolutionary Councils and Revolutionary Command Councils that operate at city or district level. The activities of the regional councils are in turn promoted by the main national body, the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) which manages diplomatic advocacy, organisation, mobilisation and acts as the main media outlet. An example of a SRGC initiative is the document 'Pointers for Demonstrations' which was posted on its website with its advice followed on the same day in places as far away from each other as Deraa and Idlib pointing to its influence and ability to reach protesters. However although the SRGC represents 70% of the Revolutionary Councils, the SRGC is essentially a body that connects rather than leads as it has a limited ability to control local groups (O'Bagy, 2012, pp. 21 & 25-27). The command structure is bottom up, so to speak, rather than top down.

The LCC are the backbone of the revolution and by early 2012 most Syrian villages and neighbourhoods had formed their own LCC. There are approximately 200 LCCs with volunteers coming from diverse backgrounds and including women, differing sectarian groups and varying ages. These committees operate within their own communities organising, filming and publicising their own demonstrations (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 22).

The Revolutionary Councils have primarily formed in urban areas to oversee developments and are the point of contact for the opposition's activities within districts. They help coordinate the activities of LCCs including demonstrations and armed groups. Activists claim there are approximately 50 Revolutionary Councils in Syria. Of particular note is the Council in Homs which has a high level of organisation featuring an elected leadership and separate divisions responsible for publicity, demonstrations, medical and humanitarian aid and armed operations. Security detail is also attached to protests and checkpoints are manned daily to alert activists of approaching regime forces. As at January 22 2012 the Homs Revolutionary Council was feeding 16,000 families (O'Bagy, 2012, pp. 22-23). It is important to note that although the uprising is increasingly organised many of the protests as one activist noted 'just happen' (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 24) reflecting a strong motivation within the protesting proportion of the Syrian population that precludes the need for leadership from above to maintain its momentum.

The largest national coalition is the SRGC. Again due to security concerns many of its leaders have chosen to remain anonymous. An emerging problem is that many protesters resent those that claim to represent them and this resentment is not just reserved for dissidents organising from outside the country but also includes the SRGC, with one Syrian complaining that 'there are too many groups trying to take over the revolution' who claim they 'represent the people'. The grass roots social movement started the revolution and currently remains the dominant force that attempts to keep it moving forward. This is increasingly recognised by political opposition groups with many moving to connect with the social movement. However protesters recognise that in the contest for influence

and power groups may seek to impose leadership from without rather than from within the revolution (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 27).

Activists are aware that among the groups jostling for position to take the revolution from its grass roots origins are local and foreign Jihadis and other Islamic groups. This threat is weakening grass roots efforts to broaden support through uniting sectarian groups behind the uprising. However as the movement matures, its leadership and organisation abilities are improving and any subsequent leadership or political agenda will have the strongest legitimacy if it emerges from within the grassroots opposition rather than imposed from without.

Whilst there are disagreements within the opposition as a whole over what form of governance should replace the Assad regime the social movement is primarily united around a desire for change, particularly relating to the introduction of democracy, freedom and improved human rights. An example of the common purpose within the uprising is the unanimously naming of the Friday protests nationwide. In the beginning of the week the Syrian Revolution 2011, who are aligned with the SRGC, holds a poll on its Facebook page offering a variety of choices regarding protests themes. Once votes are in, the Friday protest theme is posted onto both its Facebook page and the Facebook pages of the committees, councils and organisations that form its entirety (O'Bagy, 2012, pp. 27-28).

Social media is a valuable tool for activists and protesters within the social movement as it is an important means of forming a largely anonymous space for connecting activists across the country (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 28-29). Social media circumvents networks based on sect and unites activists from different ethno-sectarian, socio-economic and regional backgrounds. However the regime's censorship and monitoring of social media hinders the opposition. Additionally the infiltration of regime agents into opposition organisations significantly disrupts the uprising. In response the opposition often falls back to relying on tradition meeting places such as the teahouse and Sunni mosques (O'Bagy, 2012, pp. 28-29) which weakens opportunities for cross sectarian unity and strengthens Sunni leadership of the social movement.

Some opposition groups are aware of the importance of cross sectarian unity for the success of the social movement for example the Nabd Gathering for Syrian Civil Youth works to counter sectarianism linking young Syrian civilians concerned with ‘the fragmentation of the social fabric of Syria’. The cross sect organisation seeks to promote unity amongst all Syrians in face of the increasing numbers of Jihadis and the regime’s sectarian characterisation of the uprising. The group claims to have cells in every city and is grateful to its minority sect members, including Allawites, who are freer than Sunni activists to move supplies through government checkpoints to the FSA. In order to stress minority participation in the uprising the group reveals minority activists who have been arrested and detained by the regime on its Facebook page. Founding member Nabeel, 24 year old Dr from Homs, claims that it is a mistake to assume that minority citizens who do not openly protest are pro-regime. He points out that many minority sect members are unable to protest openly within their loyalist neighbourhoods but are supportive of the uprising (Bramley, 2012).

In conclusion the uprising began as a social movement that was not organised along communal lines in contrast to the political culture of the region. It contains grass roots organisations that seek to promote unity within Syria and have an understanding that cross sectarian mobilisation is the surest way to bring down the regime. Furthermore it includes activists that are working to ensure it continues as a movement for change and resists deteriorating into a sectarian contest for political power and influence as the regime weakens. However with the onset of civil war this is a real challenge.

6.2 The Arming of the Opposition and Rising Sectarianism

Acutely aware of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes’ quick demise to non-violent protest the Assad regime from the outset sought to push the social movement from peaceful to an armed confrontation high on sectarian sentiments (Abdulhamid, Syria 2013: Rise of the warlords, 2013). Armed resistance in Syria began as early as April 2011 with individuals in the Homs districts of Bab Amr and Bab Sbaa taking up arms to defend protesters and their districts alongside corresponding

reports within the same time frame of outbreaks of armed resistance in the provinces of Idlib, Deraa plus Damascus and its suburbs (Rosen, 2012).

The armed groups are predominantly from rural areas or the urban working class as these men typically have access to arms and have been marginalised by the regime thus they have less to lose through engaging in armed struggle than educated activists from the upper and middle classes. These pockets of armed resistance developed into a configuration of units loosely united under the banner of the Free Syria Army (FSA) (Rosen, Q & A: Nir Rosen on Syria's Armed Opposition, 2012). Alongside the FSA are locally based companies mostly lead by traditional tribal elites (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 4).

The FSA was publicly announced in Syria's 2011 summer. The majority of the fighters are civilians although defected soldiers continue to join their ranks. Despite the regime's claims, the fighters are not armed gangs nor part of a foreign conspiracy orchestrated by Israel and the US against the regime. The FSA members are typically fighting for self protection, family, friends, village, province, revenge, dignity, and democracy (Rosen, Q & A: Nir Rosen on Syria's Armed Opposition, 2012).

The FSA is not an organised disciplined fighting force, rather it is an umbrella term to describe the opposition fighters working at a grass roots level to remove the regime from power. Whilst there is some leadership and structure the armed opposition is primarily a grass roots armed uprising with limited central leadership (McNaught, 2012).

Attempts by FSA heads such as Riad al Asaad to centralise leadership of the FSA have been largely unsuccessful at controlling or even maintaining regular contact with armed groups. The real leadership is localised, this is accentuated by the necessity of armed groups to fund and arm themselves separately from any central leadership (Rosen, 2012).

With fighting intensifying from March 2012 cooperation has increased between the FSA and the grass roots protest movement (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 30). It is evident that the FSA's actions are predominantly carried out in response to events

on the ground as opposed to a coordinated strategy. The LCC actions are indirectly creating FSA operations given their protests typically lead to an armed response from the regime which provokes a FSA rejoinder (Kyrou, 2011). Armed opposition groups often receive guidance from local Revolutionary Councils giving the grass roots leadership the potential to contribute politically should the Assads fall (O'Bagy, 2012, p. 30). Significantly the FSA and the grass roots opposition are seen as the 'popular resistance' by Syrian citizens according them greater legitimacy as the revolutions leaders than the Syrian National Coalition (NC) and other political groups (O'Bagy, 2012, pp. 30-31).

The growing consensus that force is the only means of coercing the regime to relinquish control has legitimised the armed opposition and increased the popularity of the FSA with protesters. Many protests chant slogans such as 'Free Syria Army' and 'the people want a declaration of Jihad' (Rosen, 2012). The FSA has a considerable amount of legitimacy with the population, not least because they are typically made up of local community members. Despite this citizens are wary of FSA entering their neighbourhoods due to the regime's indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas to remove an FSA presence (McNaught, 2012).

Given that the FSA is made up of predominantly Sunni lower ranking soldiers and rural poor there is concern about the possibility of ultra conservative Salafists gaining traction within the FSA. Despite NC and FSA assertions that this is not the case wariness is relevant considering transnational Salafist interest in the conflict. For instance protests have been staged in support of the Syrian revolution in the Lebanese city of Tripoli which is a traditional stronghold for Sunni Salafists. These protests have featured Salafist clerics such as Dai al-Islam al-Shahhal calling for Lebanese Sunni to actively support the Syrian opposition movement (Zambelis, 2011). The entrance of Jihadis into the conflict and calls for Sunni region wide to mobilise in support of Syrian Sunni supports the regime's claims that the uprising is the work of Islamic terrorists and helps the regime maintain the necessary divisions between Syrian sectarian groups, thereby keeping the uprising confined to a largely Sunni mobilisation.

FSA heads such as General Ahmad Rahal have sought to reassure the civilian population, asserting that once the regime falls fighters will be urged to surrender their weapons and return to their previous jobs (McNaught, 2012). Whether they do so remains to be seen, and given the Libyan example where ex-revolutionary Islamic militia have not disbanded it is likely to be difficult to get rebel units to disperse, especially in the vulnerable security situation following the ousting of an autocratic regime.

Assessing the extent of Sunni sectarianism in the uprising is complex. When journalist Nir Rosen travelled extensively throughout Syria in 2011 he observed that the FSA fighters he met in Homs, Idlib, Hama, Deraa and Dasmascus were typically pious Sunni Muslims. This helps explain the why units are often named after Islamic martyrs or terms with 'heroic' religious connotations, additionally this further cements Sunni unity within the uprising (Rosen, Q & A: Nir Rosen on Syria's Armed Opposition, 2012) given it reflects the Sunni myth symbol complex.

The strong religious identification within the battalions casts doubt on the ability of the FSA leadership to control sectarianism within the armed opposition. However in terms of communalism contributing to mobilisation, Nir Rosen found that members of the armed uprising were divided, with some identifying their Sunni roots as a significant reason for joining the uprising, whereas for others it was not part of their calculation at all (Rosen, 2012).

The religious focus of the armed groups is not typically Salafist or radical but a reflection of the conservative religious culture of Syrian Sunni. As such many fighters pray. Furthermore Nir Rosen met fighters who were not religious before the uprising but had turned to prayer as a reaction to the extreme uncertainty of civil war. However despite this increased religiosity if a group member did not pray Rosen observed that there was no pressure brought to bear on them to do so (Rosen, 2012). The majority of the armed rebels are traditional rather than Islamist and whilst not purely secular they are pursuing a conservative civil future for Syria and are wary of the Islamist agenda (Abdulhamid, 2013). However the

prevalence of Sunni religiosity within the armed opposition contributes to minority exclusion from the conflict and increases minority fear of how armed Sunni groups will behave once the regime falls given the increasing amount of arms passing into Sunni hands.

This fear is intensified through YouTube which features hundreds to thousands of videos inciting sectarianism in Syria. Many videos star extremist opposition fighters, in some instances forcing captured Allawites to confess to acts of violence against Sunni such as the rape and the killing of Sunni women as the video authors seek to intensify sectarian hatred in order mobilise fellow Sunni to seek retribution through opposing the regime (The Arab Digest, 2012).

However within towns that the FSA have secured locals have stated that they would rather have anyone then the regime proving the desire to be free of the Assad regime is well rooted. However as freed towns resort to self rule they face issues such as rising sectarianism, lack of resources and a lack of leadership which is leading to factionalism and infighting. For example the Binnish Youth Organisation sought to strengthen unity between local sectarian groups including local Allawites, however their inclusive position was challenged by a small group of well armed and organised Salafists (Tanir, 2012).

In conclusion the armed grassroots opposition to the regime has a decentralised leadership by necessity due to regime repression preventing greater co-ordination. As such the grassroots opposition has formed through local agencies and not behind visible leaders or one organisation thus making it hard for the regime to destroy, as Elisabeth O'Bagy states, the opposition is 'disorganised like a fox'. The localised activities of the armed opposition and the protest movement also means that they are part of and able to closely identify the needs of their constituencies potentially creating the grounds for a pluralistic political future (O'Bagy E. , 2012). However this is complicated by the high number of Sunni within the opposition, and the religious character of Syrian Sunni. Minorities fear that the opposition movement is, or will become due to regime violence, a sectarian uprising intent on imposing Sunni power. This works in the favour of

the Assad regime who understand that should the uprising begin to mobilise more extensively across sectarian lines they will be unable to hold onto power.

The grass roots movement is unified in its focus on ousting Assad and currently this overrides agendas of imposing sectarian dominance, however a contest for influence between the conservative religious Sunni and groups seeking a secular democratic government is emerging, similar to the Egyptian situation with the standoff between ex-President Morsi and his Islamic supporters and Egyptians seeking secular governance. In contrast to Egypt the contest in Syrian is taking place in a state with a mosaic of sectarian groups which will either assist in the establishment of democratic rule or it will hasten descent into communalism in the manner of Lebanon. It is evident that armed struggle is necessary to overthrow the regime however the conflict is radicalising the population, causing civilians to seek the security of ethno-sectarian ties and increasing the likelihood of ethno-sectarian conflict.

6.3 Radical Islam and its Impact on Communalism within the Uprising

Most opposition fighters joined the uprising as revolutionaries within a popular revolt, however the prevalence of Sunni within the uprising has meant that many relate their struggle to Islamic cultural constructs such as Jihad. Generally their use of Islamic symbols and myths is incidental and relates to their cultural heritage as opposed to evidence of an Islamic uprising. As such much of the FSA can be accurately described as religious nationalists, fighting for a Syrian cause whilst mobilising through references to their Islamic culture (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 18).









This is reflected in the increasing use of symbols by the rebels that are derived from Jihadi tradition. However it is important to distinguish between the use of Islamic references as symbols of revolution, such the chant 'God is Great', Islamic Friday protest themes and rebel units named after significant Muslim figures, as opposed to espousing a Salafi Jihadi ideology. Many fighters have grown long beards for example that are traditionally associated with the Salafi

Jihadis, however as long beards drew the attention of state security forces prior to the uprising the beard has therefore come to symbolise a ‘tough rebel look’ (O’Bagy E. , Jihad in Syria, 2012, pp. 21-22).

Additionally due to its association with rebellion and defiance Jihadi symbols such as the traditional black Jihadi flag have been used by rebels as a statement of allegiance to the revolution. Whilst this flag is typically associated with al Qaeda it has a long history as a ‘popular symbol of resistance’. For instance many rebel groups that carry the black flag also display the Syrian 1938-58 national flag, which contradicts Jihadi thought given nationalism is incompatible with al Qaeda’s global caliphate aspirations (O’Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, pp. 21-22). This indicates that in line with Symbolic Politics Theory the rebels are drawing inspiration from their culture’s myths and symbols, in this case the Islamic tradition of Jihad or holy war. However, the use of Jihadi symbols is evidence of growing militancy and this militancy is further reinforced by the use of Islamic symbols of Jihad (O’Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, pp. 21-22) Moreover these symbols spark fear in minority sects given they represent a violent tradition of prejudice against other religions.

Although the FSA appears to be largely supportive of the democratic agenda of the protest movement, there are units under the FSA umbrella who are not secular in outlook, instead espousing an Islamic agenda and seeking a moderate interpretation of Sharia law and Islamic governance in Syria without extending these goals to an Islamic caliphate. One such group is Suqour al-Sham based in Idlib. In April 2012 their leader Abu Issa delivered a speech in which he advocated seeing politics as a vehicle for God’s word and framed his speech within Jihadi framework declaring that Muslim’s had lost their honour as they had abandoned Jihad. Suqour al-Sham is a moderate Islamist faction given Abu Issa declared he wanted to establish an Islamic state ‘without imposing it on society’ (O’Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 23). Abu Issa’s references to Jihad and honour links to the region’s tribal culture with its emphasis on honour and is evidence of the use of cultural myths and symbols within a conflict setting as described by Symbolic Politics Theory.

Fig 6 Reliosity Spectrum within the Armed Opposition

	Secular	Islamist	Salafist			
Syrians	 Free Syrian Army	 Suqour al-Sham	 Jabhat Nusra			
Foreign Fighters		 Umma Brigade	 Ahrar al-Sham	 Fatah al-Islam	 al-Qaeda in Iraq	 Abdullah Azzam

(O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 18)

Other groups are more radical in their outlook as seen in fig 6 which displays a selection of armed groups across the spectrum from secular to Salafist. The violence and chaos of civil war constitute the ideal conditions for the growth of a home grown Jihadi group. Consequently Jabhat Nusra (Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahedeen of Syria in the Place of Jihad) released its founding video on 24 January 2012. Nusra (JN) has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks across Syria and has grown in prominence in early 2013. Local activists have revealed that initially JN was inexperienced but has since received help from foreign fighters some from Fatah al Islam and subsequently improved in effectiveness and influence (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, pp. 31-33).

The emergence of the al Qaeda ideology in a home-grown group with a domestic platform gives Jihadis a credibility they struggled to achieve in Syria prior to the revolution (O'Bagy E. , Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 38). JN identifies its struggle in sectarian terms describing itself as defending Sunni against the 'Allawite enemy' and its 'Shi'ite agents'. JN often refers to Allawites as Nusayri to emphasis their view that the Allawites worship their founder Muhammad ibn Nusayr and as such are outside Islam, rather than employing the accepted term Allawite which refers to Ali Ibn Abi Talib considered by Sunnis to be the 4th Caliph (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 11). In accordance with Ethnic Conflict Theory the use of

religious narratives in this manner greatly increases the risk of ethno-sectarian conflict.

Whilst JN is associated with Al Qaeda there are independent Salafi units who are not subject to the Al Qaeda's political baggage and are thus considered more legitimate by the opposition. The most prominent independent Salafi group is Kata'ib Ahrar al-Sham with supposedly 200 battalions. Online statements declare their primary objectives to be establishing an Islamic state and waging Jihad against Iranian attempts to project Shia power in the Levant (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 14-15). Another independent Salafi group, Liwa Saqour al-Sham (Falcons of Syria Brigade), which has 4000 fighters, describes the state army as the Nusayri (Allawite) army and believes that Arab nationalism is 'absolutely forbidden' by Islamic law given it unites Sunni Muslims with Christians and Allawites (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 16-18). Given such rhetoric Syria's minorities are under considerable threat from radical Salafi groups. In accordance with Ethnic Conflict Theory the existence of radicals escalates tensions and thus greatly heightens the risk of ethno-sectarian groups as a whole engaging in communal conflict.

Fortunately Jihadi ideology does not have the support of mainstream Syria. Many within the uprising are fearful of the presence of highly motivated extremists who believe their agenda is ordained by religion, with activist Abu Yassir stating 'They [Jabhat Nusra] are stealing the revolution from us and they are working for the day that comes after'. The increasing visibility of groups such as JN reinforces the regime's narrative which asserts that the uprising is not part of the Arab Spring but is the work of Islamic terrorists and armed gangs (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 38). Salafist and Muslim Brotherhood ideologies are not prevalent in Syria and it was not until 2013 that they became a significant factor within the uprising.

Jihadists and JN have at times worked alongside the FSA in joint operations. Various units of the FSA express a willingness to work with JN and other Jihadists due to their common commitment to the downfall of the regime, their effectiveness in battle and their greater access to resources. The admiration for

bravery that JN has earned from the FSA and sympathetic citizens is not an indication of acceptance of JN's ideological stance, but a willingness to accept additional fighters as the opposition becomes increasingly desperate (O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 2012, pp. 36-37).

However this does not negate the developing distrust between the two groups over their ideological differences which has at times escalated into violence. Reports have emerged of fighting between rebels and Islamic groups for control over rebel held villages. For example in Homs, a Fatah al Islam member, Walid al Boustani, attempted to establish an 'Islamic Emirate of Homs'. Within a few weeks Walid al Boustani was executed after a trial by the FSA for the kidnap and murder of Syrian citizens. This is emblematic of the conflict within the uprising between the founding mainstream opposition with its democratic and pluralist aims and the radical elements increasingly inserting themselves into the chaos (O'Bagy E. , *Jihad in Syria*, 2012, pp. 27, 36 & 37).

Furthermore foreign fighters are also a worrying dynamic, particularly as they get more established within Syria, although they are marginalised by the revolution's local leadership and as such are not able to significantly alter the nature of the grass roots uprising against the Syrian regime (O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 2012, pp. 19-21 & 24-26). JN and al Qaeda in Iraq number at least 5000 fighters and maybe as many as twice that out of approximately 100-150,000 rebels in which only 30-40,000 fighters are prepared to fight outside their home towns (Pollack K. M., 2013, p. 3).

The early actions of the Syrian regime facilitated the arrival of religious radicals into Syria. The Syrian regime's earlier ties with terrorist groups had resulted in its inclusion on the US State Sponsors of Terrorism list since 1979. This particularly relates to their support of Jihadis in their 'holy' war against the US presence in Iraq. However these ties enabled Jihadis to develop networks and a logistical knowledge of Syria, providing them with a useful platform to infiltrate the opposition and extend their influence (O'Bagy, *Jihad in Syria*, 2012, p. 9 & 13).

Religious tensions within the uprising has been further accentuated by militant Iraqi Sunni joining the fighting espousing it is their divine duty to support the Sunni lead movement. There has been a corresponding arrival of militant Iraqi Shi'ites in support of the Allawite regime, a move reportedly facilitated by the Iranian government. The Iraqis are bringing with them militant sectarian attitudes honed within their own civil war adding to the escalating sectarian hatred (Arango, 2012).

Further regional developments are evident in Lebanon with the Lebanese political power balance likely to change should the Assad regime weaken further as this will reduce the dominance of Syrian aligned Hezbollah. As such some Lebanese Sunni are leaving to fight in Syria with one describing it as 'a chance to check Hezbollah's power' by ousting the Assads (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 24-26).

With the traditionally marginalised Shia mobilising politically within the last 20 years across the region and gaining ground in Iran, Lebanon and Iraq, radical Shia are interpreting the Syrian conflict as a fight for the future of the Shia faith to preserve the sect's recent advances resulting in a rise in the Shia Jihad narrative. The Iraqi Shi'ites are joining forces with Iranian and Lebanese Shi'ites creating a potential for an all-out proxy war with Syria as the regional sectarian battlefield in the contest for power and influence between the Sunni and Shia (Arango, 2012).

Intensifying this development is the very anti-Shi'ite Salafi rhetoric within Syria where prominent clerics are rejecting the notion that the Syrian uprising is a social movement for democracy instead declaring it is 'a Jihad on behalf of Sunnism against a polytheistic Allawite regime waging full-scale war against Islam as part of a broader Iranian-led regional Shi'ite conspiracy'. Unfortunately moderate clerics are either keeping a low profile within Syria or remain loyal to the regime resulting in little religious challenges to the narratives of radical clerics. This is making it increasingly difficult to contradict the regime's narrative and gives legitimacy to regime advisor Buthaina Shaaban's description of the uprising as fitna (religious strife) (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 30-33).

As such Al Qaeda's attempts to graft itself to the revolution is supported by religious narratives including declaring Sunni Muslims as duty bound to fight against the heretic Syrian regime. However given that al Qaeda ideology rejects Arab states due to their Western origins this translates as a rejection of the nationalistic loyalty displayed by the rebels (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 29). Given that Al Qaeda's ideology also clashes with the revolution's primary objectives of democracy and pluralism it is evident that Al Qaeda's solidarity with the Syrian uprising is opportunist. Rather than genuinely supporting the revolutionaries' key aims the group is instead attempting to position itself so as to take advantage of an anticipated upcoming power vacuum in order to advance their own goal of imposing an Islamic caliphate.

As such radical Islamists are challenging the rebels for the right to choose the future of Syria. This is evident in the following statement by an Egyptian Salafist talking to a group of fellow Jihadis 'You are in confrontation with two apostate armies,' he said referring to both the Syrian army and FSA, 'When you have finished with one army you will start with the next', this statement was recorded at the border post of Bab al Hawa where a group of foreign Jihadis had raised the al Qaeda flag (Abdul-Ahad, 2012). As such Jihadi participation in the uprising has been divisive with reports that a Homs protest dispersed when a Salafist stood up and chanted Salafist slogans (Wood, 2012).

Debates over leadership within rebel held areas is also creating conflict between Salafist armed groups and local rebel units. For example the FSA Islamic Farouq brigade accused foreign Jihadis of spreading yet another disfigured form of Islam and behaving like war lords within a local community. Farouq issued a death threat against the Jihadi group's leader Abu Mohammad if he did not leave the area. The Jihadi leader refused as he claimed that given the Arab Spring was due to Islamic fervour they had a right to remain. A few days later Abu Mohammad was found dead in a ditch. Given rebels are already resisting Salafists seeking to impose local authority they are likely to resist a radical Islamist takeover should the regime fall (Abdul-Ahad, 2012). Furthermore the lack of international and domestic support means that JN and other radical Islamic groups would lack the capacity to govern effectively. However it is likely that in a post Assad

environment radical Islamists will continue to contest for control therefore they represent a danger to the future stability of Syria (Blake, 2013, pp. 12-13).

As such rising militancy and radicalism is exacerbating Syrian sectarianism and this is intensified by being set against the Islamic revival. In 2005 the Daily Star reported Sheikh Wehbi Zuleimi, a conservative Islamic cleric described the Islamic revival sweeping the region in these terms, 'It is a reaction to the flagrant European and American policies that challenge the existence of Islam and try to rid Islam from the region' (Blanford, Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation: Mohammed Habash offers Alternative to Islamic Conservatism, 2005). This reflects the Sunni myth symbol complex which is based around struggles against outsiders perceived to be challenging Islam.

Historically this was evident within resistance to the Christian Crusaders, and in the modern context extends to resistance to globalisation and the corresponding spread of Western lifestyles and values such as secularism which are threatening to marginalise not only to the Muslim religion but also to decrease the social power and influence of its clerics. Consequently politically motivated clerics seek to promote the Sunni Islam and to encourage a defensive cohesion amongst Sunni. Sadeq al-Asm states 'Fundamentalists believe this is the final confrontation,' he said. 'If the modernization of states continues like this what is there to prevent Islam from eventually becoming like Christianity in Europe? They feel that if they don't stand up now and draw a line, that's it' (Blanford, Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation: Mohammed Habash offers Alternative to Islamic Conservatism, 2005). Most Syrians however remain moderate in their religious views and remain fearful of Islamists installing a repressive Islamic regime (Blanford, Syrian Islamic Scholar Preaches Moderation: Mohammed Habash offers Alternative to Islamic Conservatism, 2005).

Manipulative elites provoke group defensiveness in order to mobilise sectarian groups for political goals of power and control, a tactic identified within Ethnic Conflict Theory (Kaufman, Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War, 2001, p. 34) and often used by radical clerics. This was evident within the

protests and violence in reaction to the 'Innocence of Muslims' film with Bernard Haykel observing that 'It's true that there are sanctions against insulting the Prophet, but this is really about political or symbolic opportunists amidst the breakdown of traditional religious authority, who use religious symbols to advance their own power or prestige against other groups' (Worth, 2012).

There are contradictory influences running through the local population regarding the monopolisation of Islam for political purposes. Regionally Islamic terrorism is losing credibility and going the way of Arab nationalism, as it is revealed to be another ideology that has failed to improve the lot of Middle Eastern citizens (Wright, *The Struggle within Islam*, 2011). However direct exposure to state violence is decreasing resistance to Islamic rhetoric amongst affected sectors of the population. The Middle Eastern Islamic cultural emphasis on obedience to authority and a reliance on religious guidance potentially heightens the susceptibility of Muslim populations to the extreme sectarian rhetoric of clerics such as al Qaeda's Zawahiri who called on Muslims in Syria to join the international Jihad against the Syrian regime and the West (The Arab Digest, 2012).

Additionally the lack of unified leadership, including the disconnect between the exiled political leadership and the protesters, has created a vacuum and there is a risk this void will be filled by extremists voices such as Salafi Sheikh Adnan al-Ar'our, who has proclaimed that the Sunnis should take back Syria (Nayel, 2011). The Salafist worldview is particularly harmful in conflict situations given it features the negative defining of out-groups, a readymade narrative encouraging armed conflict, and justification for martyrdom (International Crisis Group, 2012, p. 5), thereby satisfying many of the characteristics Ethnic Conflict Theory outlines as increasing the likelihood of ethno-sectarian conflict.

Although the mainstream opposition rejects Jihadi ideology and has repeatedly confirmed their commitment to democracy, pluralism and the protection of minorities, given many Sunni are religiously conservative many are predisposed towards a moderate Islamic reform of Syrian governance. Though moderate

Islam is not incompatible with democracy there is increasing concern that the uprising may be losing sight of pluralistic democracy as its end goal (O'Bagy E. , Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 9 &24) and looking towards assuming power in the more traditional Middle Eastern style, i.e. the big fish eats the little fish, and legitimising such actions through Islam and tribal culture (Salzman, 2008). Additionally Sunni's voting choices within any potential democracy are likely to reflect their Islamic faith through the support of sectarian based political parties meaning at least initially democracy is unlikely to lesson sectarian tensions created within the civil war.

Jihadis on the other hand are completely incompatible with democracy as they seek to establish dominance through changing the global world order to an early Islamic model. However the persistent use of violence and state terrorism by the regime has 'blurred the line between proponents of peaceful reform and proponents of armed struggle, which in turn has blurred the line between political Islamists who have resorted to violence and Salafi-Jihadists who espouse a global Islamist agenda' as it becomes increasingly evident that force is the only means to rid Syria of the regime (O'Bagy, Jihad in Syria, 2012, pp. 10-18).

Ethnic Conflict Theory identifies that people seek the security of sectarian alliances to solve issues of fear and insecurity as well as using ethnic and religious myths and beliefs as justification for violent 'defensive' actions (Kaufman, Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War, 2001, p. 31). This increases the threat of massacres and revenge killings, given the insecure conditions of civil war, widening sectarian divides and the Islamification of the opposition (O'Bagy E. , Jihad in Syria, 2012, p. 24). The regime's terrorist narrative and the Islamification of the opposition is thus increasing moderate Syrians and minorities' fears. However despite the acerbating influence of Islamic radicals, the Assad regime's military response to the uprising is the primary cause of hardening sectarian tensions within the civil war.

Despite the rise in Salafi fighting groups the ideology is not deeply rooted nor is it a widespread social phenomenon that has been exposed by the drawing back of regime repression. In Salafi rebel held areas local communities have already

shown signs of resistance to their strict Islamic rule. Rather it is an ideology well suited to take advantage of ethno-sectarian tensions within a conflict situation as it draws on these fears and places them into a readymade Jihadi narrative. Extremists' explanations and incitements to mobilise in protection of their own sects are emerging both amongst both Allawites and Sunni and are largely a symptom of civil war however there is the potential for this dynamic to decrease should the regime be toppled, provided that democracy and human rights are sufficiently observed in the post Assad political environment (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 36-37).

However a protracted civil war, overlaid with an intensifying transnational religious contest between radical Sunni and Shia, is likely to increase desires for retaliatory violence which can be easily legitimised through a radical interpretation of Islam and tribal culture's emphasis on retribution to redeem honour. This would greatly intensify Syria's sectarian divisions and hinder the development of a future democratic government.

6.4 The Marginalised Political Opposition and its Anti-Sectarian Stance

The uprising took the traditional political opposition by surprise. In October 2011 the Syrian National Council (SNC) was formed by mostly exiled activists in an attempt to participate in the uprising and unite the opposition. They announced their intention to function as a government in exile in order to direct the future development of Syria. Despite this the SNC has had very limited success at uniting the opposition despite Western support. This has partly been due to infighting, particularly over suspicions regarding the influence of the Muslim Brotherhood within the SNC. Additionally the grass roots movement is resentful of exiles and ex-patriots assuming leadership of what they see as their uprising (O'Bagy, Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 9). The political opposition was not poised to lead a social movement for political change, as such they are now struggling to gain relevance and leadership of a political movement that they did not instigate but which provides them with political opportunities.

Upon its formation in Istanbul the SNC leader was Paris based Syria political scientist Burhan Ghalioun and it consisted of seven main groups: the Muslim Brotherhood, the Damascus Declaration, National Figures/National Bloc, Kurdish Bloc, Assyrian Democratic Organisation, Independent Figures and representatives of the Local Coordination Committees. By April 2012 seats were distributed as follows: 8 seats allocated to the National Bloc, 6 Independents, 5 Independents, 5 Muslim Brotherhood, 5 Damascus Declaration, 4 Local Coordination Committees, 2 Kurds and 2 for the Assyrian Bloc. The SNC aimed to provide the political framework in support of the uprising and to work towards the establishment of a 'democratic, pluralistic civil state' (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 10). However some of the groups within the SNC have a communal or religious bias.

SNC members are predominantly established dissidents exiled due to state repression of political activism. They are well educated with an understanding of the West. Due to their ability to form secure and good communication channels with key international figures they have been able to emerge as the leading political opposition group on the international stage, (O'Bagy, Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 10) a position however that increasingly weakened to the point that the SNC became part of the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces (NC) formed in November 2012 in yet another attempt to unite the fractious Syrian opposition (New York Times, 2012).

The international community is reluctant to intervene in Syria due to a lack of leadership, complicated regional politics and few perceived credible alternative political organisations to the Assads which in light of the uprising has heightened sectarian anxiety. In order to secure international and domestic support the SNC held a conference in Tunisia in an attempt to consolidate its aims, unify the opposition and create momentum. This was a difficult task for the SNC (BBC, 2011) as there is a feeling amongst protesters that the SNC are external Syrians preparing to assume power through diplomacy and negotiations whilst the protesters risk their lives for the cause (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition,

2012, p. 9). Despite this there is support for the SNC from the LCC which features a statement on its Facebook page declaring that the SNC 'aims, according to its founding statement, to support all Syrians, regardless of sect or ethnicity; to overthrow the regime; and to establish a civil society and democratic, multi-party system' (Local Co-ordination Committees, 2011).

The international community, for the lack of an alternative political body, acknowledged the SNC in April 2012 as 'the legitimate representative' and the 'main interlocutor with the international community' citing 'the urgent need for a political framework for the revolutionary work being done on the ground'. However despite these acknowledgements the SNC has legitimacy problems within Syria, the grass roots movements has developed a leadership structure of its own which, although seriously hampered by a need for secrecy, has a higher degree of domestic legitimacy (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 9-10).

The political opposition does not drive the revolution, in fact it is merely attempting to assume leadership of a revolution started and carried forward by others. The grass roots movement is driven by a deep rooted desire for change and by the internal frustration of citizens rather than inspired by the ideologies of political figures (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 9-10).

The effectiveness of the SNC has been compromised by internal divisions and disagreements, the most significant disagreement being over whether the SNC should support the internal armed opposition. Further issues emerged during February 2012 when 20 SNC members broke away to form the National Change Movement amid complaints over a restructuring that secured more power for Ghalioum and his supporters and a lack of transparency over the use of funds (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 11-15).

Additionally there have been criticisms of the Muslim Brotherhood's activities within the SNC with claims made both by outsiders and some SNC members that the SNC is a front through which the Muslim Brotherhood pushes its own agenda. Due to high level of unity among its members and the extent of funds they have

put forward for the SNC, the Muslim Brotherhood has been able to exert considerable influence within the SNC (O'Bagy, Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 11-15).

The Muslim Brotherhood is the most influential and prominent Islamic group in the political opposition. Its prominence is secured through its pragmatism and its Muslim revivalist program which resonates with the Sunni religious conservatism, particularly among the urban middle class (Lund, 2012 , pp. 104-105) (Bar, Islamic Leader Paradigms, 2012, p. 7). Although it is the party with the highest membership in Syria this is balanced by the fact that it has been operating out of Syria since membership of the Muslim Brotherhood was made a crime punishable by death in 1980. Additionally its ability to organise and influence events is limited due to minorities, secularists and many civilians' fears of the Brotherhood, which relates particularly to the violence carried out by the group between 1979-82. Additionally the Muslim Brotherhood has many enemies within the general population despite having some support within the Sunni religious community. The regime has capitalised on this implying that the Muslim Brotherhood is the real force behind most opposition activity within Syria (Lund, 2012 , pp. 104-106).

As such the Muslim Brotherhood struggles to overcome the distrust and fear they generate amongst many citizens (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 16) despite their new March 2012 declaration announcing support for religious equality stating 'every citizen has the right to reach the highest of positions' (Lund, 2012 , p. 107). Despite its lack of domestic support and weak internal networks the Muslim Brotherhood is strengthened by its established regional networks and access to funding from wealthy and powerful supporters in the Gulf States (O'Bagy, Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, p. 16).

The umbrella group, the SNC, is placing itself behind the social movement's agenda whilst resisting engaging the sectarian tensions within the uprising. In order to strengthen its anti-sectarian position and to gain support from within the largely anti-sectarian grass roots opposition movement and the West, the SNC

elected the recently exiled Christian George Sabra as President in November 2012 which Sabra declared was an indication that the SNC would not allow the uprising to descend into sectarian conflict and chaos (Gutman, 2012).

Both the Syria National Coalition of Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NC) and the SNC are increasingly aware that international support is dependent on commitments from Syrian's that the post Hussein sectarian civil war in Iraq will not be replicated in Syria. Nir Rosen reported that 'The regime has tried, since the beginning of the revolution, to fragment Syrian society and drive a wedge within mixed communities by dividing cities along military and security lines,' to counter the regime's rhetoric the SNC issued a February 26 statement declaring 'The Alawites remain an important component of Syria, and will continue to enjoy the same rights as other citizens as we build one nation of Christians, Muslims, and other sects. The regime will not be successful in pitting us against one another' (Rosen, Syria's Allawite Activists stuck in the Middle, 2012).

However the SNC is struggling to remain relevant with leadership of the political opposition groups now assumed by the NC (New York Times, 2012) and with then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton stating that any new emerging opposition group should include more representation from within the uprising (Gutman, 2012). However the new coalition is also struggling to emerge as the legitimate political voice for the revolution given many fighting within Syria continue to operate independently to the exiled opposition (New York Times, 2012).

Another political grouping, the National Coordination Body for Democratic Change (NCB), was formed on 30 June 2011 three days after the unprecedented but unfruitful Semiramis Congress opposition meeting which was allowed by the regime amidst unfruitful meetings with regime officials. The NCB primarily unifies the leftist-nationalist flank of the Syrian political opposition. The NCB is committed to the formation of a democratic government to replace the al Assad regime and believes the revolution should adhere to what it calls the three no's: no violence, no sectarianism, no intervention. Its formation has counterbalanced the SNC whom the NCB believed were forming a government in exile through

which to call for foreign intervention. The NCB generally represents nationalists and leftists with some Kurdish support, however it lacks the backing of Sunni Islamists and liberals. The NCB has a stronger minority representation than the SNC with a number of Allawite activists at its formation including Aref Dalila and Abdelaziz al Khayyer (Lund, 2012 , pp. 80-81, 84).

The NCB has positioned itself within a gap in the political landscape as the internal political opposition. It shares the regime's intense resistance to US and Western influence in the Middle East explaining its opposition to violence within the revolution given it could provoke foreign intervention. The regime has been comparatively more tolerant of the NCB due to its stance against Western intervention and the NCB gives them the opportunity to appear less autocratic through granting a nonviolent opposition group a voice. Furthermore from the regime's perspective the NCB is usefully contributing to opposition divisiveness (Lund, 2012 , pp. 88-90).

Although the NCB's secular, anti-sectarian and nonviolent approach is reassuring for minorities and the business sector, it alienates the more determined armed rebels and protesters who are now committed to a violent resolution and the complete removal of the Assad regime. Furthermore the NCB is not well connected to the large number of youth driving the uprising and has not created a prominent profile in regional or international media in contrast to the better funded SNC (Lund, 2012 , pp. 90-91) and NC.

The biggest grouping within the political opposition is the Sunni Islamic opposition which has been reinforced by the growing observance of Islam within Syria. However as with the rest of the opposition, Islamic opposition is divided with varying ideological, political and theological strands (Lund, 2012 , p. 104).

An ultra conservative branch of Sunni Islam, the Salafists have made inroads into certain areas, mainly among Arab poor, although it is present in some form in the majority of Sunni areas. It derives its theology from the 'Wahabbi' religious institutions in Saudi Arabia and its followers adopt a strict dress code with rigid family and societal rules. Political Salafists see the imposition of Islamic law as a

holy struggle and reject the regime as anti-Islamic due to its secular position whilst also opposing the regime due to the 'heresy' of Allawite rule (Lund, 2012 , pp. 108-109)

Many refer to ancient fatwas given by medieval scholars such as Ibn Taymiya who declared the Allawites as enemies of Islam and heretics who should be annihilated. The most prominent Syrian Salafist group is the transnational Hezb al-Tahrir who are seeking to establish a Sunni Islamic caliphate and take a long term approach to this goal in order to avoid direct violent confrontations. However they have encouraged Syrians to overthrow the regime on the basis that it does not rule by Sharia law. The ultra radical Jihadi Salafists, such as al Qaeda, regard themselves as engaged in Holy War with secular Middle Eastern regimes and the West, and are somewhat scornful of other Islamic groups which extends to hostility towards the Muslim Brotherhood. They see unrest as an opportunity to insert themselves within a weakened state as such they seek to 'ride the wave of popular protest' in Syria despite serious misgivings from the majority of Syrians (Lund, 2012 , pp. 108-109) (Lund, 2012 , p. 111).

There is also the loyal opposition, parties such as the National Committee for the Unity of Syrian Communists which is a splinter of the Syrian Communist party and headed by Qadri Jamil who is a reformist with regime connections. The Iranian, Russian and Syrian media outlets have all portrayed Jamil as an important opposition leader. This is not true, in fact opposition leaders with regime connections or who extend support to the regime whilst advocating for reforms and/or more inclusive governance are under threat from the rebels. For example Ali Heidar's Syrian Social Nationalist Party/Intifada party has been being targeted with Heidar's son and another party official assassinated by rebel forces in May 2012 (Lund, 2012 , p. 101).

Importantly the grass roots movement is beginning to organise politically and the US has indicated that it supports political coordination that includes domestic opposition from within the uprising. The Civilian Protection Commissions (CPC) created by the activist Abu Jafaar, an ex-Shabbiha member, is an example

of local organisation with the potential for political involvement. The CPC was formed to help coordinate the civilian activists and FSA efforts to manage the Homs crisis. The CPC was met with enthusiasm from civilians, humanitarian organisations, human rights activists and armed opposition groups who rallied behind its efforts. The CPC is clear that it supports the growth of opposition political resistance 'on the soil' from within the 'popular resistance against the Assad regime' (O'Bagy E. , Syria's Political Opposition, 2012, pp. 31-32). Groups such as these could become important should the regime fall as Syrians have become wary of political leaders and are likely to seek leaders from within the movement itself.

In order for the political opposition to achieve greater international support they need to broaden their base, however pressure from the Muslim Brotherhood within the NC is increasingly blocking greater representation, particularly of liberal groups such as those lead by Michel Kilo. The actions of the Muslim Brotherhood exposes its real attitude towards pluralism and representative government i.e. only if they have too. The strength of the Muslim Brotherhood is based more in their regional backers, most notably Qatar, then from support within Syria (Hassan, Inside Syrian Opposition's Talks in Turkey, 2012).

Despite the external political opposition consistently verbalising anti-sectarianism its influence within Syria is hampered by lack of communication channels due to regime repression, but is also by the internal opposition movement's suspicions and resentment that an external educated source is attempting to assume leadership of what they see as their revolution. Additionally for a number of its members, most notably from within the Muslim Brotherhood, anti-sectarianism is likely to be a transient and pragmatic choice rather than an ideological stance.

6.5 Syria's Fractious Opposition Movement: Conclusion

The uprising began as a grass roots movement, however overtime divisions within the opposition have become increasingly evident. Whilst all want the downfall of the regime, ideas about what should replace the Assads varies greatly. The groups that constitute the opposition movement range from secular through to radical Salafist as such whilst it is clear the opposition are uniformly anti-regime not all the opposition are pro-democracy.

Despite an influx of Jihadi's and the establishment of home-grown Salafist armed units these groups are still considerably outnumbered by more moderate Syrian nationals. Considerable wariness of al Qaeda and Islamic terrorism within the domestic population is limiting the influence of extremists. However the surge of radical Islamic groups greatly complicates the outcome of the revolution and contributes to international and domestic reservations regarding the uprising.

Due to the varied ideological and religious stances within the opposition movement and the logistical difficulty of communication due to state repression and violence, establishing a common leadership for the movement has proved difficult. The mainstream moderate opposition generally represents the nature of the uprising but given other more radical elements it is unable to realistically promise security, stability or safety for all sectarian groups.

Grass roots opposition is the driving force behind the uprising. Most of the fighters in the armed rebellion are best described as Sunni religious nationalists. They are firmly behind the Syrian state, religiously conservative, and generally seek freedom, human rights and the downfall of the regime. The opposition activists and fighters are typically wary of leadership and are concerned about political groups stepping in and taking over the revolution once they have secured the downfall of the regime. This means that despite the efforts of the political groups like the NC and the Revolutionary Councils the uprising does not have a coherent narrative through which to convince the minority groups and Sunni wary of the uprising to join the movement in significant numbers and to reassure the population of coherent plans for the future of Syria.

Chapter Seven

Minority Responses to the Uprising: Allawite Fears, Christian Vulnerability and Kurdish Aspirations

7.1 The Allawite Dilemma: Allawite Security and the Assad Regime

From the eleventh century the Allawite myth symbol complex permanently included animosity towards and wariness of the Sunni sect (Worren, 2007, p. 53 & 57). To escape persecution Allawites fled to the safety of geographical isolation in the Jabal al-Sahiliyah Mountains in North-Western Syria. However this placed them further onto the social periphery and contributed to them being seen as ‘wild’ and ‘uncivilised’ heretics (Worren, 2007, p. 44 & 54). The Allawite identity is constructed around their insecurity within a threatening environment in which they have typically been the subject of persecution and social rejection. The insecurity of the Allawites, and other minorities, is the primary reason that the most Allawites remain committed to the Assad regime (Worren, 2007, pp. 96-98).

Symbolic politics outlines how ethnic conflict becomes part of an ethno-sectarian group’s identity and how in the case of the persecuted, each time they suffer violent discrimination it confirms their victim status (Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds: The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War*, 2001). Historically the Allawites have been subject to ongoing sectarian persecution by Sunni Muslims. For example the Sunni Mamluks, like the Ayyubids who ruled the region before them, saw the Allawites, Ismailis and Twelver Shi’ites as heretics and persecuted them on this basis (Friedman, 2010, p. 62 & 176). The Ottomans who ousted the Mamluks continued to persecute Allawites as non-Muslims, beheading Allawites they deemed to be testing the existing order. This led to Allawites politically prioritising security (Goldsmith, *Resilience of Allawite Asabiyya and Implications for the Syrian Uprising*, 2012).

Even as recently as 1950 Allawites remained uneasy about travelling to Latakia due to Sunni animosity (Mohammad, 2012). Each violent and/or prejudiced event has become part of the Allawite identity and its myth symbol complex which centres on the Sunni as threatening and themselves, the Allawites, as at risk (Worren, 2007, p. 102).

In contrast, the history of the Christians and the Allawites is marked with cooperation dating back to the Crusaders campaigns in the Holy Land in the 11th century where the Allawites and the Christians discovered a common interest in resisting Sunni domination (Worren, 2007, pp. 57-60). According to Ethnic Conflict Theory when faced with assessing a current threat communal groups refer to history, particularly where other groups are implicated in past atrocities. However referring to a past marred by communal conflict makes a recurrence of such conflict more likely (Wolff, 2009, pp. 26-27) and given the historical persecution and clashes between minorities such as the Christians and Allawites with the Sunni this therefore has important implications for the current uprising.

Given their history of marginalisation and persecution the Allawites perceive that they need the Assad regime for protection against the Sunni majority. The Assad regime elite and the Allawite sect have a symbiotic relationship in that both assess that without the other they would face hostility. However although the majority of the political and military elite are Allawite it does not follow that all Allawites are privileged. Benefits to Allawites from the Assad regime can be very uneven, however the previously universally poor Allawite region has largely been better off financially since Hafez al Assad and indeed some of its community members have since risen to become the wealthiest in the country (Bar S. , 2006, p. 393). Despite this there are still villages in the mountains in Northern Syria that do not have access to electricity or a ready water supply and live under poverty stricken conditions (Beck, 2010, pp. 85-86). As such Bashar al Assad's perceived alignment with the wealthy elite to which he belongs has contributed to rising resentment amongst Allawites.

Therefore although the Assad regime is headed by an Allawite family the regime does not represent Allawite sectarian dominance of Syria. Political power in

Syria is held by an inner circle of the Assad family and their close associates, who are often but not always, Allawite (Rais, 2008). The regime has co-opted individuals from all sectarian groups in order to broaden its support base creating a political system based on an Allawite dominated confessional coalition (Bar S. , 2006, p. 357). It is important to note that whilst the regime would fall without Allawite support, particularly as this relates to the security apparatus leadership, the Allawite sect as a whole are ultimately another repressed group within Syrian society (Rais, 2008).

The regime are keenly aware of how vulnerable they are to the Allawite sect and as such opposition that comes from this sector appears to be met with harsher punishments than meted out to members of other sectarian groups (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, p. 46). Furthermore in order to consolidate its influence over the Allawite sect the Assad regime has steadily worked to overtake any internal Allawite leadership. Traditionally the Allawite clerics were prominent community leaders, including during the French Administration and in early independence. A loosely constructed Allawite national council, the Majlis Milli, co-ordinated Allawite affairs and also held some influence over the President Hafez, however over time both the influence of community leaders and the power of the Allawite religion and clerics has been eroded by the regime (Bar S. , 2006, pp. 393-394).

Under Hafez al Assad the Allawites entered a period of relative security which was shaken by the Muslim Brotherhood uprising between 1976 and 1982 and culminated in the state massacre of predominantly Sunni in Hama. Not only was much of the Muslim Brotherhood rhetoric and violence aimed at Allawites but the harsh regime reaction meant that Allawites now had a strong reason to fear Sunni retribution and this cemented Allawite reliance on the regime for security (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, pp. 42-43). Ethnic Conflict Theory shows that sectarian conflict often has its roots in the past which is reflected in the current

civil war given that Northern Syria, significantly Hama and Homs, have emerged as key opposition areas within the 2011 initiated uprising.

Additionally Lebanese and Iraqi sectarian violence, the rise of Sunni Islam and activities of Salafists around the region has upheld the belief that Allawites are still vulnerable to sectarian threats and therefore continue to need the Allawite dominated autocracy for security (Bar S. , 2006, p. 393). As such Allawites become nervous and potentially more loyal when the regime is under threat such as during the Special Tribunal for Lebanon crisis (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, pp. 48-49) caused by the assassination of former Lebanese PM Hariri and the subsequent 2005 ousting of the Syrian military from Lebanon.

However the primary feature of this period was the significant weakening of the regime's wall of fear, including within the Allawite community as emphasised by activists such as Allawite Professor Aref Dalila beginning to publicly criticise the regime. This activism was advanced by the growth of online communities which linked together dissenters from all sectarian groups signifying the potential to corrode the sectarian insecurity necessary to maintain the regime's support from within the minority sects (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, pp. 45, 46-48).

Furthermore the earlier Allawite Interior Minister Ghazi Kana'an was an alternative source of influence within the Allawite community. With rumours of links to anti-Syrian Lebanese and the Sunni politician Abd al-Halim Khaddam, Kana'an could conceivably have orchestrated a challenge for leadership of the Allawite community. This speculation that Kana'an represented a threat to the authority of the Assad regime both nationally and within the Allawite region was seemingly confirmed by his death in 2005 described as 'state suicide' and is another indicator that Allawite unity behind the regime was fracturing (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, p. 47) prior to the uprising.

However the uncertainty and instability caused by the uprising, high Sunni numbers among the activists and the elites' use of sectarian tactics has predominantly reversed the Allawite drift away from allegiance to the regime (Sheppard, 2011). According to Symbolic Politics Theory fear is the key to understanding ethnic conflict. Groups such as the Allawites with myth symbol complexes that heavily feature feelings of persecution and victimization are already geared towards fearfully defensive attitudes (Kaufman, 2001, p. 31). Security concerns manipulated and intensified by a predatory elite are often the root cause of ethno-sectarian rifts (Kaufman, 2001, p. 34). As such fear of both Sunni Islamists rising to power and sectarian chaos, intensified by the regime's rhetoric and actions, is the primary glue that secures many Allawites, Christians, the business class and secular middle class citizens to the Assad regime in face of the uprising.

In order to secure minority allegiance and to justify violence against the internal opposition the regime is circulating a narrative that resonates with the US War on Terror and civilian fears of Salafist terrorists who have destabilised the region in recent years (Sheppard, 2011). For instance in early 2011 Presidential advisor Buthaina Shaaban made a statement claiming to both national and international audiences that there was no uprising, that alternatively Syria was facing attacks from Muslim terrorists and/or an Israeli/US or Saudi/US conspiracy to destabilise Syria. Shaaban declared that the terrorists were aiming to disrupt the peaceful coexistence of sects and had timed their mobilisation with the Egyptian and Libyan revolutions in order to appear as a popular protest movement for human rights and democracy. She also implicated the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming they were enacting revenge for their failed uprising in 1982 and that the protests were not representative of the Syrian people (AFP, 2011).

This rhetoric is in line with Ethnic Conflict Theory's proposition that manipulative elites play on the greatest fears of their sectarian group, in this case sectarian conflict and retribution. As such the Assad regime is mobilising support through framing their aim to hold onto political power as a necessary for the maintenance of sectarian security and stability (AFP, 2011). However the fact this narrative is politically expedient does not discount the comparative security

the regime has afforded Allawites and other minorities but neither does it reveal the extent to which the regime has manipulated the sectarian dangers. Moreover it is evident that the regime has highlighted radical Islamists within the uprising whilst attempting to persuade citizens that radical Islamists are representative of the whole opposition movement in order to provoke fear in minorities and moderate Sunni.

Freelance journalist Moe Ali Nayel's trip to Syria in 2011 depicted the growing sectarian tensions. He discovered that despite Allawites living relatively peacefully alongside Sunni prior to the uprising, the Allawite neighbourhoods in Homs were now guarded by the Mukhabarat and army tanks. All the Allawites he spoke to were convinced by the state's assertions that the revolution was a joint Saudi/American conspiracy to pressure Syria to remove its allegiance from the axis of resistance whilst forcing it to sign a peace treaty with Israel and abandon its connections with Palestine (Nayel, 2011).

Allawite actress and activist Fadwa Soliman spoke out about the regime's attempts to manipulate minority sectarian insecurity (International Crisis Group, 2011) (Atassi, 2011). She claims they had proof that the regime tried to incite rifts by staging sectarian conflicts through sending a troop of 200 men to kill members of one sect then dropping the bodies into another sect area. Despite her fears of the regime security forces, Fadwa Soliman had joined the protests in an attempt dispel the perception that all Allawites support the Assad regime (Atassi, 2011).

Additionally reports have emerged that the regime has used the security apparatus to spread rumours of sectarian violence, distributing sandbags and weapons long before there was a need for them in order to intensify fearfulness amongst minority groups. Over time the effects of state repression and state violence within the uprising has resulted in the reality beginning to approach the regime's rhetoric. The regime's actions have intensified the historical perception of the 'savagery' of the Allawite community and exacerbated past grievances such as the transfer of land ownership from Sunni elite to Allawite serfs in some areas during the early years of Ba'athi rule (International Crisis Group, 2011, p. 2).

There are emerging pointers that the regime is securing areas for Allawites in the region that was formally the Allawite autonomous state given large numbers of Sunni being displaced following clearance campaigns in Sunni enclaves along the coast in Baniyas, Bayda, Tal Kalakh and Latakia's Rama neighbourhood. Moreover given the lack of state denial of the recent massacres of Sunni civilians by Allawite Shabbiha and the security forces in Baniyas and Bayda, coupled with a YouTube video showing a leader of the Alawi militia alongside an Allawi religious leader outlining plans to 'cleanse Baniyas of the traitors' in what appears to be a calculated move, these operations point to an additional motivation. It appears that the regime is attempting to intimidate Sunni and to deliberately intensify sectarian hatred in order to secure Allawite recruitment and support given anti-Assad attitudes developing amongst Allawites, most notably in the Assad hometown of Qardaha where a rift amongst Allawite elite led to clashes in Fall 2012 (O'Bagy E. , Syria Update: Assad targets Sunni along Syria's Coast, 2013).

The coast is not a homogeneous Allawite area given the presence of Sunni enclaves. Figures released recently by the International Strategic Research Organisation place Sunni at 45 % in Tartous, 50% in Latakia and 70% of the population in Latakia's outskirts. Allawite numbers in Tartous were reportedly 90% at the beginning of the uprising but due to influxes of civilians, mostly Aleppo's upper classes escaping inland violence by retreating to their coastal resort homes, the figure decreased to 60% by summer 2012. Additionally whilst the clearance campaigns were taking place the security forces were successfully suppressing anti-regime cross sectarian demonstrations in Latakia. Given these demonstrations the coastal region may emerge as the ideal place for future cross sectarian mediation (O'Bagy E. , Syria Update: Assad targets Sunni along Syria's Coast, 2013).

The opposition movement has long been aware of the Assad regime's dependence on Allawite support with former Muslim Brotherhood leader Ali Bayanouni stating in 2006 'The Alawites in Syria are part of the Syrian people and comprise many national factions... [The] present regime has tried to hide behind this community and mobilize it against Syrian society. But I believe that many

Allawite elements oppose the regime, and there are Alawites who are being repressed.’ Attempts to reassure minorities of their place within Syria have also emerged within the current conflict for instance protesters have chanted ‘Syrians are one!’ (Goldsmith, Syria's Allawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective, 2011, pp. 50, 51 & 53).

However as the uprising wears on sectarian violence on the ground is undermining opposition attempts to reassure Allawites that their security is not dependent on the regime. As a result Allawite activists tend to keep their sectarian identity secret or they make a very clear stance of their allegiances, with the example an Allawite protester declaring over the microphone at a protest ‘I am from the Allawite sect not the Assadi sect’ (Rosen, Syria's Allawite Activists stuck in the Middle, 2012).

Disengaging Allawite support from the regime will be a difficult. Given that the Muslim Brotherhood and many Sunni have repeatedly voiced disapproval of Syria being ruled by Allawite heretics, the regime has worked to mainstream their sectarian position through an ‘Islamification’ of the Allawite religion and suppression of outward expressions of the Allawite identity. As such the Allawite religion is underrepresented within the religious schooling system, with the Sunni religion having hundreds of religious schools in contrast to the complete lack of Allawite establishments (Bar S. , 2006, p. 394). With the Allawite religious identity suppressed, an alternative identity centred on the Assad family was enforced by the cult of personality around the Assad Presidents. To an extent ‘Assadism filled the gap left by the negation of traditional Allawite identity’ (Khoury, 2012 , p. 50). The Allawite adage ‘You are with Assad, you are with yourself’ used widely in the uprising, reflects that the identification of many Allawites with the Assads has been strengthened by the current instability (Balanche, 2011).

Furthermore the personality cult surrounding Bashar al Assad has extended within the uprising to accord him god sanctioned status as defender of the homeland. As such the cult of personality propaganda has reinforced the intertwining of the Allawite sectarian identity with the Assad family whilst invoking nationalism to

justify state violence against the opposition movement and the hero worship of Bashar al Assad (International Crisis Group, 2012).

However the regime's rhetoric does not stand up to analysis. It is clear that the uprising is not solely comprised of Sunni radical Islamists nor do radical Islamists lead the movement. It is evident however, that many within the protests are rural Sunni and that significant numbers of Allawites, Christians and Sunni commercially linked to the regime are notably absent within the opposition (Shabaan, 2013). As a result there is a sectarian imbalance within the protests and correspondingly this meant that once the FSA started to protect protesters militarily the social movement began to take on the appearance of a Sunni lead anti-Allawite rebellion with the escalating violence from both sides leading to civil war. The civil war and the rise of home-grown Jihadi groups such as Al Nusra are increasing fears of outright sectarian conflict and lending credibility to regime arguments (Wood, 2012). According to Ethnic Conflict Theory people seek safety through their ethno-sectarian communities in times of stress and this is happening to a considerable degree, particularly among the Allawites.

However the regime's sectarian and terrorist narrative is being challenged by the opposition through social media. Daily videos are posted showing state violence against protesters and civilians on opposition internet spaces such as the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook Page (Syrian Revolution Facebook Page, 2011). However simultaneously YouTube updates from Jihadis promoting their goals of an Islamic Caliphate are undermining attempts to reassure and unify sectarian groups behind the uprising. Regime supporters doubt the credibility and/or the ability of the moderates within the uprising to contain sectarian retribution and continue to believe that they need to hang together to succeed or they will be hung separately (Sheppard, 2011).

A 2012 New York Times interview with a Damascene Allawite woman described the security situation for Allawites, she outlined that when she went out she now wore a headscarf in order to be taken as Sunni, and that most of the Allawites she knew including her family were moving back to their villages of origin in the Allawite area. With her husband in the Syrian Army, she believes that retribution is likely as 'Who lost a son or a brother wants revenge, and he will take

vengeance from Alawites before anyone else because most Alawites are commanders of security forces. I am sorry to say this, but I think the Assad regime is using us in the crackdown, and when it will falls, they will run away, and we will pay the heavy price' (Bakri, 2012). This fear is supported by Ethnic Conflict Theory which asserts that when a minority inflicts a great trauma on a majority group if that majority group becomes dominant they will seek retribution for past grievances (Wolff, 2009, pp. 39-40).

Furthermore a sentiment heard amongst Allawites is that the regime has damaged the Allawite reputation and as such was responsible for sectarian tensions which would be 'very harmful in the hypothetical situation where a new regime cannot guarantee the rights of the Alawi community' (Worren, 2007, p. 88). Arguably this is no longer a hypothetical situation.

Social Identity Theory suggests that inter-group hostility stems from conflicting goals and the employment zero sum competition which leads to negative stereotypes and hostility (Wolff, 2009, p. 37). The combined effects of the regime tactics to encourage minority insecurity and to put down the largely Sunni led uprising are likely to bring about the danger to minorities that the regime claims they are protecting them from. The more violent the regime's repression the greater the retribution the regime and Allawites face should the regime fall. Conversely the opposition know that if they fail to topple the regime they face death, torture /or imprisonment by the regime with retribution extending to their family members. It has become an existential contest in which for their safety both sides must win.

The Allawites were the vehicle through which the Assad regime secured political power and plundered the country for their own gain. Coupled with state violence in face of the uprising and the high number of Allawites in the armed forces the Allawites are increasingly perceived to be the regime (International Crisis Group, 2011, pp. 2-3). This perception is becoming increasingly accurate as Sunni defections are creating a higher and higher representation of Allawites within the regime and security apparatus (Al Jazeera, 2012, p. 4). In affect the Al Assad regime is using the Allawites and other minorities to hold onto power, thereby holding them hostage and linking their fate, in particular the Allawites, with the

regimes. This is creating a situation where they need the regime to remain in power or they face the angry and prejudiced Sunni masses (International Crisis Group, 2011, pp. 2-3). However there is likely to be a breaking point whereby the regime gets so violent and/or it begins to fall, with the result that Allawites will be forced to reassess their allegiance. Historically pragmatic, the Allawites will at this point seek to re-establish their security through other means than the regime (Jackson, 2006, pp. 15-16).

7.2 Kurdish Mobilisation and the Syrian Uprising

In accordance with the Ethnic Communal Mobilizational Model given the extent of the Kurd's grievances and marginalisation under the Assads the potential for them to mobilise as an ethnic group has been high. The regime strategy regarding the Kurds has been to repress their identity and continue their marginalisation thereby removing challenges from the Kurdish quarter.

Kaufman describes a precursor to ethnic conflict as the opportunity to mobilise. Political repression can prevent ethnic or sectarian opponents from being able to effectively mobilise ethnically based opposition groups. Conversely a breakdown in state authority within an ethnically divided state can create an opportunity for ethnic groups to violently seek to redress the political balance (Kaufman, 2001, p. 32). The predominantly Sunni uprising against the regime has afforded Kurds this opportunity however Kurdish infighting and tensions between Kurdish groups and the predominantly Sunni opposition are weakening the chances of future stability and complicating the Kurds escape from marginalisation within Syria.

The Kurds are a classic example of a nation without a state. Divided between Syria, Iraq, Iran and Turkey the Kurds have struggled to gain equal rights and escape marginalisation. Within Syria the Kurds have been actively repressed since the 1950s under the guise of promoting Arab unity (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 10). The Ba'ath party continued the repression of Kurds after they came into power in 1962, part of which was a census within the Kurdish al-

Hasakeh region under the pretext that a number of the Kurdish population had illegally entered the country from Turkey. This led to the citizenship of 120,000 Kurds being revoked. With the status as non-citizens being passed onto children, the number of stateless Kurds has since grown to 300,000. Stateless Kurds are denied their rights with their ability to engage in education, employment, property ownership, legal marriage and politics severely restricted (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 10).

Another key part of the regime's strategy to keep the Kurds politically and socially marginalised was to establish an Arab belt by resettling Arabs within the traditionally Kurdish area involving the forced displacement of Kurds already on the land. This Arab belt also served to separate Syrian Kurds from the increasingly politically assertive Iraqi Kurds (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 10).

Horowitz states that 'language is a symbol of domination' with the status of a language being a symbol for the status of a group (Horowitz, 1985, p. 219). This is particularly significant in terms of the Kurds as the regime set out to repress the Kurdish identity and culture, denying Kurds the right to speak their language in public and banning Kurdish language publications. In 1977 the state renamed Kurdish regions and villages with Arab names, justifying this on the grounds of establishing an 'Arab identity'. The 1973 constitution also asserted the Arabness of Syria and the denial of any other ethnic group by stating 'the people in the Syrian Arab region are part of the Arab nation (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 11 & 12)'.

In the 1980s the onset of conflict with the Muslim Brotherhood led to an attempt to co-opt Kurdish compliance through more tolerance of Kurdish cultural expression and the enlisting of many Kurds into the military and security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2009, pp. 11-12). However the repression of the Kurdish identity largely still continued with the regime suppressing Kurdish political and cultural gatherings such as Nowruz, the Kurdish New Year celebrations (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 22). Furthermore Presidential Decree No. 49 enacted in 2008 further disadvantaged Kurds as it restricted the purchase and sale of private property in certain border areas which has

undermined the local economies of the Kurdish region (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 20).

In contrast to its treatment of its own Kurdish community the Syrian regime supported Kurdish rights during the 1970-80s in the neighbouring states of Turkey and Iraq. This was a strategic move to weaken the Iraqi and Turkish regimes through its support of Kurdish activism, and in turn to convince the Iraqi and Turkish Kurds to dissuade Syrian Kurdish mobilisation. With these aims in mind during the 1980s and early 1990s the Assad regime supported the Kurdish Workers Party (PKK) through arming and training its Lebanon based soldiers (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 12).

In common with its strategies regarding other ethno-sectarian groups the regime suppressed the majority of Kurds whilst allowing a select number of Kurds to rise to positions of authority within the regime such as Mahmud Ayubi who was Prime Minister between 1972-1976. This gave the regime the ability to defend itself against criticism of sectarianism by highlighting out-group individuals co-opted within the regime structure (Human Rights Watch, 2009, pp. 12-13).

Kurdish activism revived in the 2000s following the end of Syrian support for the PKK in 1998 after considerable Turkish pressure. Additionally a renewal of ties between the Iraqi and Syrian regimes strained the Assad regime's relationship with Iraqi Kurds. Changes continued, with the Damascus Spring that accompanied Bashar al Assad ascendancy to the Syrian Presidency creating an opening for Kurdish activism and leading to new Kurdish political parties. However political repression soon re-asserted itself with many Damascus Spring activists arrested and imprisoned (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 14).

The 2003 US removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq emboldened Syrian Kurds as they observed the increase in autonomy this afforded the Iraqi Kurds. Tensions rose between the Kurds and Arabs in Syria as many Arabs believed that the Syrian Kurds supported the US invasion of Iraq and the removal of Saddam Hussein who had ruled through the Sunni minority (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 15).

These tensions finally spilled over in 2004 when Kurdish supporters fought with Arab supporters at a football match in Qamishli (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 15). The Arab supporters reportedly held up photographs of Saddam Hussein whilst Kurds shouted slogans supporting US President George W. Bush (Noi, 2012, p. 18). The response of the Syrian security forces focused solely on the Kurdish supporters resulting in seven Kurdish fatalities and the deployment of several Arab tribes against the protesters. The next day there were further Kurdish casualties as the security forces fired upon demonstrations and the funeral processions for the fatalities from the day before (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 15) (Noi, 2012, p. 18).

The two days of violent protests that followed the incident in Qamishli and other Kurdish towns resulted in state and privately owned property being destroyed and the death of a police officer. The security forces responded with force, surrounding and entering Qamishli and other major Kurdish towns in Northern Syria, arresting, beating and detaining many Kurds. At least 36 Kurds were killed with an estimated 2000 detained (Human Rights Watch, 2009, p. 15). The regime reacted to the protests by intensifying repression of Kurdish culture and political mobilisation (Noi, 2012, p. 18).

However tension continued to increase between the regime and Syrian Kurds as the Iraqi example continued to intensify Kurdish political aspirations. The arrest and death, reportedly from torture, of Kurdish reform activist Sheikh Mohammed Ma'shuq al Khiznawi on May 2005 further heightened Kurdish hostility towards the regime. The 2004 Qamishli incident had also stoked latent anger at the regime and led to a tide of Kurdish anti-regime violence primarily led by a grass roots youth movement (Bar S. , 2006, p. 397) (Danish Immigration Service, 2010, p. 29) .

The 2004 Kurdish protests left Kurdish youth particularly embittered not just against the regime but also other Syrian ethno-sectarian groups due to their lack of support. This added to the myth symbol complex of the Kurds which relates to the understanding that they are politically deserted by and alienated from Middle

Eastern Arabs and subsequently reinforced their reliance on their narrower ethnic loyalty over their Syrian loyalty (Sidki, 2012, pp. 2-3).

It is evident that the regime actively engages in a sectarian balancing act with regards to the Kurds, too much freedom could enable Kurdish mobilization to become independent of central authority inspiring the same move across other sectarian and ethnic groups but too much discrimination and resentment could overcome Kurdish wariness of alternative political leaders, in particular Sunni Islamists, and led to support for ousting the Assads (Bar S. , 2006, p. 397).

Although most Kurds oppose the regime, the Kurdish position with regards to supporting the 2011 initiated uprising was originally divided. As a minority, the Kurds have been subject to the regime's claims that without the regime's protection minorities would suffer persecution by radical Islamists. However Kurds also have reasons to fear Arab nationalism within the Ba'ath party. From the beginning of the uprising there have been Kurds, predominantly youths, actively participating in the protests demanding freedom and democracy, whilst also agitating for national rights for the Kurdish people (Sidki, 2012, pp. 2-3). However the lack of assurances towards Kurdish aspirations from the opposition means that Kurds have assessed there is little to gain from engaging with the largely Sunni opposition to a greater degree.

In a post Assad environment the mainstream Kurdish opposition group, the Kurdish National Council (KNC), would like political decentralisation, however is prepared to concede this if its other demands are met such as constitutional recognition of the Kurds, a secular state, constitutional equality between men and women, removal of repressive laws against Kurds and compensation for property lost during Arabization (Tanir, 2012).

The main opposition's position relative to the Kurds stresses the continued inclusion of the Kurdish regions in Syria with Salih al- Hamwi from the Higher Council for the Revolution in Hamah province stating 'We are a united modern civil country and against ethnic or sectarian statelets'. Firebrand Salafi cleric Adnan al-Arour represented the more extreme views within the opposition on the

matter when he stated 'Do what you wish but we will not permit, the division of Syria into ethnic regions' (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

The uprising in Syria saw the regime attempting to defuse any possible Kurdish participation in the revolution through a variety of tactics. Initially they granted citizenship to a significant number of stateless Kurds. In a more aggressive tactic the regime was believed to have assassinated Mishaal al Tammo, the leader of the Future Movement, on October 2011 after he had called for the regime to be overthrown and his party had attended the SNC Istanbul meeting, where the Future Movement had walked out after the SNC failed to agree to remove the inclusion of 'Arab' in any future naming of Syria. The assassination proved to be a miscalculation by the regime as instead of producing submission, it engaged Kurds behind the new attitude of angry mobilisation in the face of state aggression that has emerged from within the Arab Spring. For instance on the day of Tammo's funeral tens of thousands gathered to protest in Qamishli, the largest protest in northern Syria up till 2012 (Noi, 2012, p. 24).

There are multiple organisations through which Kurds can confront the regime within the uprising. However the existence of numerous avenues has resulted in conflict and division within Kurdish mobilisation. The three principle camps can be outlined as follows: The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK); however much of the Syrian opposition contends that following the initial outbreak of protests in Deraa the regime renewed its connection with the PKK and allowed the PKK to operate freely in Kurdish areas in return for it not supporting the uprising. There are further claims that the PKK, with Democratic Union Party (PYD) involvement, manned checkpoints and that these security details were coordinated with the regime's security forces. Secondly, the traditional Kurdish Parties who have tried to manage a middle ground between supporting the uprising and not angering the regime. And finally the Kurdish Future Movement and the Union of Coordinating Committees for Kurdish Youth. Kurdish youth have actively participated in the uprising from its inception (Sidki, 2012, pp. 2-3).

On July 2011 the Kurdish National Conference formed the KNC which demanded 'the right to determine the destiny of the Kurdish people in the framework of a

unified Syria' within a 'plural democratic state'. The KNC consisted of 250 individuals of which 60% were unaffiliated and 40% belonged to the traditional Kurdish political movement, and did not include the PYD who declined to attend. The Council voiced its support of the Kurdish revolutionary youth movement and established local councils affiliated with the SNC. However tensions exist between the Council and the SNC with the KNC withdrawing from the opposition Istanbul conference in March 2012 when the SNC refused to meet key Kurdish demands (Sidki, 2012, pp. 3-4).

Kurdish divisiveness has become increasingly evident reducing their ability to mobilise as a unified ethnic block. There have been conflicting reports of assumed PYD affiliated armed units bearing PKK flags and posters of Abdullah Ocalan preventing anti-regime protests from going ahead in February 2012. In late June and early July 2012 the FSA received complaints regarding the PYD from the KNC resulting in FSA attacks on PYD checkpoints in retaliation. The PYD asserts that claims they are preventing protests is Turkish propaganda and that the KNC and the FSA are negotiating with Turkey to target them. The PYD's 4500 fighters in the Qandil Mountains represent a force that the KNC is unable to match as such PYD assertiveness is causing concern (Sidki, 2012, p. 2) (Wilgenburg, 2012). Given Ethnic Conflict Theory proposes that the violent actions of extremists increases the risk of conflict, the involvement of the more extremist PYD in the uprising creates a serious risk of both internal Kurdish fighting and increases the risk of conflict with other sectarian groups.

It seems likely that the PKK backing the regime was part of a strategy formed between the PKK and the Assad regime against the Turkish government, with the regime also aiming to weaken the FSA. However responding to the changing circumstances on the ground the PYD has begun to disassociate itself from the PKK and the earlier actions of members involved in suppressing Kurdish anti-regime protests (Wood J. , 2012). With the regime quietly losing control over the Kurdish area the PYD has recognised that moving into governance in the area is its best strategy for gaining power (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

Additionally the Assad regime is cautious about targeting the Kurds as they cannot credibly label the ethnic group as Salafist terrorists attempting to install a theocracy therefore the Islamic terrorist narrative is not plausible as a justification for state attacks on the Kurds. Furthermore there are a large number of Kurds regionally that could mobilise in support of Syrian Kurds should the regime attack Kurdish areas. Additionally most Kurds belong to one of the multitude of often very small Kurdish political parties through which Kurds are able to mobilise large numbers quickly to join protests. As such it appears the regime has backed off from Kurdish regions having calculated that it is not in a position to handle any additional regional and domestic pressure (Independent Kurdistan Journal, 2011).

The Syrian security forces withdrew from Kurdish territories in mid July 2012 whereby PYD fighters moved in and by 21 July had assumed control of the cities of Afrin, Amude, Derik and parts of Qamishli (Ilahan Tanir, 2012). Skeletal remnants of the regime remain through state employees and infrastructure such as the courts and schools as the region has neither the funds nor the fighting force to remove them and risk an all-out assault (Wood J. , 2012).

The PYD claim that the regime left after a PYD ultimatum, however the lack of fighting has raised suspicions that the withdrawal was strategic and aimed to strengthen the PYD at the expense of Turkey's internal security and to weaken opposition unity. There are also suspicions that the PYD has collaborated with the regime in order to assume control of the Kurdish region (Tanir, 2012). Furthermore the regime may have calculated that allowing Kurdish control of the Kurdish region would stoke tensions between the Sunni Arab dominated opposition movement and the Kurds, whilst also giving the regime the opportunity to devote resources and army units to more strategic fronts elsewhere such as Homs, Damascus and Aleppo.

After failing to reach an agreement with the SNC the Kurds sought to unite under the Erbil Agreement. This was an attempt to head off politically detrimental infighting between the PYD and the rest of the Kurdish opposition with the PYD accused of kidnapping activists and KNC members and assassinating Nasiradeen

Piro, a senior leader of the Azadi Par party (Ilahan Tanir, 2012). The Kurds recognised they needed to unite against the perceived Arab threat following a history of persecution from Arab nationalist regimes (Mansour, 2012, pp. 5-6).

The Erbil Agreement was signed on 11 July 2012, through pressure from Iraq's Kurdistan President Massoud Barzani, and exists between the KNC and the PYD, establishing unification under a new Supreme Kurdish Council (SKC). The agreement further outlined joint administration of the border posts between Syria and Northern Iraq within areas where the regime forces had withdrawn. In order to participate within the new Council the Iraqi Kurds were insistent that the PYD renounce ties with the PKK and its use of violence (Mansour, 2012, pp. 4-6). However following this accord fighters associated with the PYD assumed control over the Kurdish districts and areas within the Aleppo and Hasakah governorates (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

The divided and fractious opposition outside of the PYD have united under the KNC out of the necessity to limit the PYD's assumption of authority as the civil war has progressed, and additionally to create an alternative source of Kurdish political influence to the SNC given Kurdish fears that the SNC was a Turkish creation driven by its Muslim Brotherhood members with their Arab-Islamist agenda. The creation of the KNC also enabled the launching of a joint Kurdish security force with which to face the degenerating security situation (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

Attempts to unite under the Erbil Agreement fell through after the KNC suspended its commitment to the Agreement accusing the PYD of misusing state infrastructure and demanding bribes for fuel. In response the PYD arrested KNC affiliated activists from Amude resulting in demonstrations against the PYD. After an order from the SKC the PYD released the activists. Despite the aspirations of the KNC around power sharing with the PYD, the PYD appears to have used the Erbil Agreement as a front for carrying out power seizures in the Kurdish region. The situation continued to unravel with the People's Defence Units declaring in September that they would not heed SKC decisions two days before PYD militias raided three KNC party offices near Qamishli. The PYD

warned that non-PYD militias would be prevented from defending their own demonstrations in the area. Things continued to unravel with the KNC's Vice President Mustafa Jumu'ah kidnapped after accusing the PYD of collecting \$200 millions of smuggling revenue (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

Despite a renegotiation of the Erbil Agreement later in September 2012 with the SKC opening five new offices, joint PYD/KNC security control of Kobani established and the replacement of political party flags with the sole logo of the council, many within the KNC still believe the PYD will not abide by its provisions and will continue to work to secure political dominance of the Kurdish regions (Tanir, 2012). For its part the PYD fears that the Turks are enabling the growth of anti-PYD Kurdish groups, a fear which has increased with the formation of Syrian Kurdish brigade Salah-ad Eyubi who threatened the PYD whilst making overtures to other Kurds (Ilahan Tanir, 2012).

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Due to the FSA's lack of central command it is difficult to make a conclusive statement about their relations with the Kurds. There is a great deal of wariness from Kurds of both the PYD and the FSA, although Kurds are supportive of FSA fighting in Arab areas. There has been reports of both fighting and cooperation between Kurds and the FSA (Ilahan Tanir, 2012). Many Kurds remain worried about the FSA and its Arab base. Kurdish groups have moved ahead and began to organise facilities for locals such as Kurdish schools and a volunteer police forces. However although in these areas the nationwide conflict is less evident than elsewhere, the likelihood of future attention and conflict is high as the region produces oil and natural gas. Given this, the chances that Kurds will be left to regenerate under their own devices is unlikely (Wood J. , 2012).

Furthermore tribal affiliations are likely to have a large impact on Kurdish aspirations within the Syrian uprising. The majority of Syria's Kurds live in the Jazirah, Ayn al-Arab, and Afrin regions alongside the Syrian-Iraqi-Turkish borders. In the oil rich Jazirah regions Kurds represent 25% of the region's population and share these oil rich regions with Arab tribes such as the Shammar, Baggara and Ounaiza as well as Christians. The Kurds will need to negotiate with the Christians and tribes in the post Assad scenario if their needs are to be

incorporated into the new political agenda. In the past they have managed this having shared the outcomes of the regime's corruption and economic woes with these other ethno-sectarian groups. However if the tribes become fearful of Kurdish aspirations and attempt to push them out of any future administration of the Kurdish areas the Kurds may feel compelled to side with the PKK and its Syrian sometime partner the PYD, a manoeuvre that would greatly threaten the security of the region (Heras, 2012).

It is likely that the regime has moved towards a strategy of intensifying divisions and conflicts both regionally and within the opposition movement. Through moving out of the Kurdish regions and by all intentions attempting to hand them over to the PKK and/or PYD who are distrusted by Arabs, the regime has sought to divide the Kurds from the rest of the opposition. As Kurds have already secured some autonomy they now have something to lose through the expansion of the FSA into their areas and as such are suspicious of the FSA and other Sunni dominated factions. Additionally Iran, Iraq and Turkey have a considerable stake in the outcome for Kurds in Syria given their own sizeable and restive Kurdish populations (Al Jazeera, 2012).

Tension are emerging between the FSA and the SKC with the Kurds largely preventing both Government forces and the FSA from entering the regions where they have autonomy (Mansour, 2012, p. 2). Fighting between the FSA and Kurds is also likely to represent local level protection of communities against looting and/or distrusted FSA units (Ilahan Tanir, 2012). Whilst Kurds are in agreement with the overthrow with the regime, there is little advantage to a more active role in the revolution given the lack of opposition assurances for Kurdish aspirations, the Sunni Arab nature of the uprising and Kurdish wariness of a radical Islamist takeover. Beyond this they are seeking to formulate a future in which Syria is ethnically inclusive beyond its Arab nationalist political history (Harris, Some Observations About the Syrian Uprising, 2012, p. 9). Kurdish infighting and the more aggressive tactics of the PYD are both reinforcing the regime's assertion that they alone can maintain stability. If fighting continues to develop between the FSA and Kurds it will open up a second front against the FSA which would significantly benefit the regime.

7.3 Christian and Lesser Minority Fears of Sunni Muslim Power

The Levant is the birthplace of Christianity which predates Islam in the region (Ehsani, Fewer Christians in Aleppo than Commonly Thought, 2012). Compared to other Middle Eastern states the Syrian regime is more accepting of non-Muslim religions, including the Christian faith, provided that religious figures and institutions do not oppose the regime. Christians are able to build churches and organise religious gatherings and furthermore like other Syrian religions such as Druze, Muslim and Jews, Christians have considerable leeway to oversee family law concerns (Beck, 2010, pp. 82-83).

The Allawites, Druze, Ismailis and Christians form a minority sect coalition in support of the Assad regime. Druze, Ismailis and Allawites are embedded within the military and regime bureaucracy whilst Christians are significantly involved in the economy. Like the Allawites, Druze and Ismailis are heterodox Shi'ite sects, with the Druze typically inhabiting the Golan and Lebanese border and having a history of peaceful coexistence with the Allawites. In contrast the Ismailis have historically rivalled the Allawites within North West Syria (Bar S. , 2006, p. 396).

The Syrian Druze traditionally reside in the South-Eastern Jabal al-Druze Mountains, and played a significant role in Syrian politics during the French mandate years under the leadership of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. The Druze made up a significant proportion of the military force that challenged French rule from 1925-27 during the Great Syrian Revolt. With the Druze liberating themselves from the French mandate without British assistance in 1945 under the leadership of Amir Hasan al-Atrash, and the sect being the driving force behind the liberation from France they expected to remain politically autonomous and retain economic privileges they had under the French administration within the new Syrian independent state (Landis, 1998).

However in 1949 Adib Shishakli overthrew the existing government and seeing Jabal Druze as a significant threat to his rule he sought, often by force, to integrate them into Syrian state. As a result of Druze resistance to Shishakli's attempts to control the provinces the Druze suffered a decline in their political and economic position within Syria and felt marginalised and mistreated by the Syrian state.

Consequently the 1954 military revolt that ended Shishakli's rule had the backing and participation of many Druze officers (Landis, 1998).

Given the Druze are a compact minority in the Suwaidi province in Southern Syria they had up until 2012 been able to largely avoid involvement in the civil war despite the existence of both Druze activists within the uprising and Druze officers in the regime's crackdown. However the Druze community in the Jeramana suburb in Damascus are under pressure to choose a side from both the regime and the opposition (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

In contrast the 150,000 Ismailites have from the beginning shown support of the revolution holding anti-Assad rallies in Salmiyyeh. However being surrounded by loyalist villages they are unlikely to get more actively involved (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). There had earlier been tension between the Allawite and Ismaili sects with violent clashes in mid 2005 between Allawites and Ismailis in the Qadmous and Misyaf towns (Bar S. , 2006, p. 396). Many within the towns blamed the incidents on unruly youth of both sects and claimed that the regime's suppression of civil society and the removal of traditional leadership and patronage networks had increased dependence on the state for stability and law and order (Landis, *Allawi-Ismaili Confrontation in Qadmous: What does it mean?*, 2005).

Another sectarian group at considerable risk in Syria is the small and fragmented Syrian Shi'ite community. Syrian Sunni animosity towards Shia is high due to the rising anti-Shia sentiment across the region and the Syrian regime's Shia allies Hezbollah and Iran. Anti-Shia sentiment is exacerbated by reports of Hezbollah operating in Syria carrying out atrocities against Sunni (International Crisis Group, 2012, pp. 30-31).

Christians typically live in urban areas in and around Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Latakia as well as the Qamatoun Mountains and the Hasake province (Beck, 2010, pp. 84-85). The secular orientation of the Ba'ath party was established to a significant extent by its ideological founder Christian Michel Aflaq. It is the secular nature of the party that reassures Christians given their fear of an Islamic state. This is the primary reason for Christian support of the Assad regime. As

such Christian religious leaders are expected by the Assads to be pro-regime and often become involved in informal networks supporting the regime (Beck, 2010, pp. 84-85).

However despite the Ba'ath party's secular ideology Syrian law confers greater rights to Muslims than Christians. For example if a Christian women marries a Muslim man she will only be able to inherit from her husband following his death if she converts to Islam. Additionally whilst it is legal for a Christian to convert to Islam it is illegal for a Muslim to convert to Christianity (Ehsani, *Fewer Christians in Aleppo than Commonly Thought*, 2012). Many Syrians believe that to be truly Arab also means to be Muslim and as such they assume their Christian countrymen identify with the West (Landis, *Islamic Education in Syria: Undoing Secularism*, 2003, p. 36).

Unlike the Allawite minority who are heavily involved in the regime's upper echelon, Christians are underrepresented in the higher levels of the regime and tend to favour the private sector. However due to their closer association with the West they often hold advisor or assistant roles with regime structures. Christians rarely hold leadership positions within the military or security forces and prior to 1980 Christians were unable to participate in higher military training (Mouawad, *Syria and Iraq: Repression, Disappearing Christians of the Middle East*, 2001). Despite many Christians improving their social status through higher education and business opportunities in Lebanon, a disproportionate number of Christians have emigrated to the West for greater opportunities and to escape the harsh repression and lack of democracy that besets all sectarian groups within Syria (Beck, 2010, pp. 86-87).

In contrast to Sunni conservatism, the nature of the Syrian Christian culture has strengthened the relationship between Allawites and Christians. Both sects are more liberal, tolerant and more Western/Mediterranean oriented than Sunni, whom they both see as a threat due to Sunni rejectionalism. Allawite claims of sectarian tolerance are usually referencing their close relationship with Christians (Worren, 2007, pp. 69-70, 77-78).

By Middle Eastern standards Syria was considered relatively accommodating of Christians, and the regime's narrative that it protects Syrian minorities is

seemingly reinforced by recent events (Williams, 2013). The sectarian fighting in Iraq caused many Christians to flee, the 2011 Maspero demonstrations against the Salafist burning of a Christian church in Cairo resulted in the deaths of up to 27 Egyptian Christians, the rise in Islam religiosity across the region most notably following the Arab Spring, and the increase in sectarian based attacks and kidnappings in Syria within the civil war have strengthened Christian fears and the regime's central narrative.

Developments in Iraq have had repercussions in Syria particularly on Assyrian Christians. Within Iraq the Assyrians are perceived as having sided with the US forces generating Sunni resentment. In 2004 the killing of two Christians amid Sunni statements that they were 'Christian dogs' and 'Bush supporters' lead to Assyrians in Hasakah protesting for equal treatment from the police. Hasakah residents stated that this was the first time that the Assyrians had staged protests (Bar S. , 2006, p. 397). However a sizable number of Christians considered Syria as a comparatively safe place to reside with the Syrian Apostolic, Giovanni Battista Morandini, declaring in 2006 that Syria was a state where Islam and Christianity lived a peaceful coexistence (Christian News Agency, 2006).

With the war in Iraq and the overthrown of Saddam Hussein weakening the Syrian state's psychological hold over Syrians many felt more able to express their political aspirations and opinions. Armenian Christian activist Mr Kirakos committed the nearly unthinkable act of declaring himself as making a bid for the Presidency in 2004 as a protest against the Syrian law which states that the Syrian President must be Muslim (Zoepf, 2004). However the 2012 new constitution still contained Article 3, section 1 which decrees 'The president has to be part of the Muslim faith' despite the majority of Christians supporting the regime, or remaining neutral, within the uprising (Moormann, 2012).

A key pillar of the regime's strategy for suppressing sectarian conflict has been to weaken internal cohesion within sectarian groups. As such in order to prevent Christians presenting a united front, the regime has exploited tensions between different Christian groups. For instance in 2010 the regime moved against the Evangelical Christians after complaints from the Orthodox Catholic leaders. This

enabled the regime to support the more widely practiced and easier to control traditional Christian establishment (Symth, 2012).

Middle Eastern Christian's myth symbol complex focuses on a history of persecution from within Islam. As such the predominantly Sunni led Syrian uprising has created anxiety and suspicions amongst Syrian Christians, with Jesuit Bishop Antoine Audo in June 2011 describing the protesters as insurgents who claimed to be pro-democracy but those real aims were Islamification and destabilisation. He claimed that 80% of the country including the Christians wanted the government to remain in power and also asserted that Al Jazeera and the BBC were among the media outlets disseminating false information with regards to their reporting that the regime was committing human rights violations (Christian News Agency, 2011). Prominent Christian leaders such as Lebanese Patriarch Rai also voiced fears of fundamentalist Islamists rising to power within a post Assad Syria (Khoury, 2012 , pp. 48-49).

However other Christian church officials have tempered this stance, declaring that many Christians want reform but not the ousting of Assad again due to fears this would lead to the persecution of Christians and a significant drop in Christian numbers similar to events in Iraq after the ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime (Kerr, 2011). Christian Patriarchs such as Hazim of the Greek Orthodox Church have, whilst acknowledging the relevance of this fear, stressed that a fear of radical Islamists does not translate into support for the Assad regime, stating that it is inaccurate to claim that 'Christians defend their existence at the expense of freedom and human rights' (Khoury, 2012 , pp. 48-49).

Christian activists went further criticising Patriarch Rai's views believing that he was highlighting tensions between Syrian sects that were already sensitive due to the revolution and rising Islamification. They stated that they reject the regime's view that the Assad regime protects minorities, and claimed that the revolution is a social movement with political rather than sectarian motivations. The grassroots Local Co-ordination Committees contain many young Christian activists who are frustrated with the hesitant response of most Christian clergy to the uprising (Khoury, 2012 , p. 49). As the civil war has progressed Christian churches have largely withdrawn from publicly choosing a side in the civil war, however despite

this the Christians suffer both from the effects of the civil war and from religious cleansing efforts by radical Islamic groups in rebel held areas (Shea, 2013)

In August 2011 claims emerged from the city of Latakia which is a historically Allawite stronghold, that the Assad regime was attempting to intensify sectarian fears to further cleave the Allawites and Christians to the regime. The source stated that the regime was attacking the Sunni areas, such as Ramel, with armoured vehicles supported by Navy ships offshore. In affect this divided Latakia, separating the Sunni area which largely opposed the regime from the Allawite and Christian areas (Daragahi, 2011).

Additionally there have been claims that the Assad regime has been inciting minority fears against the protests through the distribution of Mukhabarat memos within Christian neighbourhoods. The memos proclaimed that the uprising consisted of Salafists supported by Saudi Prince Bandar bin Sultan and that Christian churches would come under attack causing neighbourhoods to construct barricades in fear (Syria Comment, 2011).

Rhetoric from Sunni radicals has also undermined efforts to encourage further non-Sunni to join the uprising with a Christian protester from Homs stating 'Christians wished to participate more until they saw people saying "Alahu akhbar", but that made some of the Christians who hadn't made up their mind yet about openly joining the revolution suspicious' (Fielding-Smith, 2011).

As of 2013 the UN Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry on Syria found that Christians potentially faced an existential threat from Jihadis without the protection of the Assad regime. A source explained to the Asia News that 'the purpose of these groups is not only the liberation of Syria from Assad but also the spread by force of radical Islam through the Middle East and the conquest of Israel'. As such Christians, and other sects have been faced with summary executions, forced conversion to Islam, expulsion from their homes, and discrimination within Islamic courts established by al Nusra and other radical groups within their territories. There are reports that Christians are being forced

to pay Jizya, or tax, to remain Christian much like under the Ottoman Empire (Shea, 2013).

Thus although the regime promotes itself as unifying Syria its manipulation of ethno-sectarian fears has maintained the rift between Sunni and minorities, effectively isolating minority groups from mainstream Syrians. This places minorities in a vulnerable situation, because they are disconnected from the mainstream and instead aligned with a regime whose real interest ultimately not protecting minorities but continuing its rein, and as noted by Nasser Weddady of the American Islamic Council, 'when the Assad regime says it is protecting Christians, this sets up a false equivalency: because at the end of the day, this is a dictatorship, and the Baath regime is an equal opportunity torturer: if you oppose them, they will attack you' (Khoury, 2012 , p. 50).

Despite minority fears there are Allawites and Christians within the opposition both as activists and within the armed opposition. They tend to fight within smaller secular units such as Unit 111 in Bdama in the Idlib Province and prefer to work with the Muslim Brotherhood affiliated groups over Salafists, probably due to the foreignness of the Salafi groups and attempts by some to locally impose Sharia law (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). Conversely there is emerging evidence that Christian Popular Committee civilian militias established to protect Christian areas in Damascus and elsewhere have received arms and uniforms from the regime effectively absorbing them within Assad's armed forces (Williams, 2013).

The existence of settled, secure and often forward thinking Christian communities was beneficial to the Middle East in that it contributed towards overcoming radical Islam's legacy of out-group rejection through the encouragement of pluralism, thus fostering Islamic openness and the acceptance of the different other. With Jihadis working to drive out Christians in Syria and Christians facing increased persecution across the Middle East the region is at risk of further radicalisation and intergroup violence as supremacist sectarian groups compete for power (Shea, 2013). With regime forces and the uprising at a deadlock the importance of all ethno-sectarian groups mobilising to topple the regime is

evident, however this looks unlikely in face of the rising extremism and sectarianism. As such the Assad regime's predictions of a post Assad Syria being beset with sectarian conflict and radical Sunni drives for power is becoming increasingly probable (Khoury, 2012 , p. 51).

The minorities are in a difficult position, they face sectarianism from radicals within the opposition however if they stay outside of the uprising and the regime falls, they may not be able to participate equally as political groups work to re-establish governmental rule in Syria. As such they need to at least remain neutral if they want their voice in the post-revolutionary phase to have influence rather than be regarded with suspicion. They are also at risk of suffering a continued backlash from the more radicalised sections of the rebellion. This is relevant to Christians as while their 'primarily narrow sectarian perspective based on Christian existential fears' had lead them to predominantly support the regime, their alliance with the regime is rapidly becoming a liability and this will greatly reduce their security in the reality of a new security dynamic should the regime fall (Khoury, 2012 , p. 51). It is likely they are going to have to re-negotiate their security in the future with a political leadership with a much stronger Sunni voice.

7.4 Sectarianism and the Emerging Chaos

A functioning state has laws that ensure that cooperating in the interests of the majority is enforced and the state monopoly of force punishes those who seek to pursue self centred and violent goals. Incentives are established that ensure 'that in pursuing own interest, individuals acted in a way that supported the interests of society' (Fritz, 2009).

In warlord politics however there are no rules and a weak or non-existent central authority. The law of the jungle prevails as the incentives are no longer structured to enforce cooperative behaviour. Individuals with the ability to enforce a coercive advantage do so and garner rewards through predatory behaviour. With no state enforcing right and wrong, players who engage in this behaviour seek power at all costs knowing that their rivals in the socio-economic

environment will do the same. Many of these players are already rooted into the social fabric of the communities in which they impose their power through patronage politics based on in-group ties, often ethno-sectarian, tribal and/or familial, in order to gain control. Those who lack the ability to compete in this environment are safest if they submit to the emerging kingpins. The results are 'optimal for the winning player(s) but suboptimal for society at large' (Fritz, 2009, p. 81 & 83).

Applying Ariel I Ahram and Charles Kings' ideas outlined above to the Syrian situation it is evident that whilst the Syrian regime was historically strong as opposed to weak it failed to create an effective governance whereby cooperation is rewarded and ruthless self interest is discouraged. In this instance effectively the leading warlord is the regime and due to the state's monopoly on military force the citizens are forced to submit as they are unable to compete. The results were optimal for the regime and those within its patronage system but suboptimal for Syrian society although due to the complete dominance of the regime and lack of effective rivals the system was stable. In contrast to the Assad regime's governance the establishment of the state is intended to supplant the warlord culture with a central governance that creates and enforces a set of cooperative societal rules (King, 2011).

When a state begins to break down the state disintegrates into pieces, with each piece commanded by a warlord who is able to create patronage networks from within the local community (Fritz, 2009, p. 83). The Syrian uprising has created an opening for the emergence of rivals to the al Assad's warlord style of power in Syria. As such warlordism and competing power structures are emerging across Syria amid the chaos and like the regime, any emerging warlords 'cannot be trusted to do what is "right" but what is advantageous and force will be the ultimate arbiter' (Fritz, 2009, p. 83). As the Syrian civil war progresses and the state begins to disintegrate and insecurity increases, the pieces are likely to break up along ethno-sectarian and geographic lines as local warlords generate support through ethno-sectarian, tribal and familial ties.

Partially due to international inaction and the descent of the revolution into civil war, some rebel leaders have already taken on the characteristics of local war lords. Members of the FSA are taking advantage of the chaos to pursue their own ends, getting involved in racketeering, appropriating donated funds and selling arms and medical supplies intended for use within the uprising. Kidnapping for ransom is widespread and is used to collect funds by both sides, with the regime and security forces reportedly the worst offenders, kidnapping wealthy Sunni and Christian citizens on trumped up charges in order to collect bribes to ensure their release. Some opposition members have managed to use their ill-gotten resources to create local patronage networks and militias of up to 50-250 members whilst claiming to be part of the revolution. Again the numbers are small and their power too limited at this stage to indicate they are warlords, but it is of increasing concern (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

Given the rivalries between opposition groups and the lack of a central organisation coordinating arms distribution and resources the further development of warlordism and militia units is likely. Already certain leaders of the armed groups are emerging as key figures in the chaos such as Jamal Maarouf aka Abu Khalid who leads the Brigades and Fighting Unites of Syria's Martyrs in Idlib and parts of rural areas in Homs, Hama and Aleppo. Abu Khalid represents traditional values, has three wives and is a devout Sunni Muslim. When dealing with disputes he draws from Sharia law like many commanders, but claims he is willing to hand over such disputes to local government once it is established. He does not support the establishment of a Sharia state, is wary of the Salafists, hates the Muslim Brotherhood but works with all groups against their common enemy, the al Assad regime. Attempts to unify the armed opposition into brigades such as the Martyrs or the more Islamic Al-Farouq, is creating potential for warlord key figures within the civil war as it is consolidating power in the hands of certain commanders and groups without achieving overall unification and coordination (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

With state control rapidly shrinking the prevalence of chaos and danger will cause Syria to break into its ethno-sectarian parts (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). In liberated areas where rebels are the only authority,

bombardment, sniper activities and checkpoints manned by regime troops and loyalists are making local government organisation impossible (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). Additionally there have been reports of Christians and Armenians fighting the FSA to prevent them bringing the civil war to their neighbourhoods (Malouf, 2012). Neither are loyalists safe as although the regime's ethnic cleansing has meant areas such as Sahel al-Ghab are now predominantly loyalist, the risk of retribution is high and if loyalists begin to feel that their survival is at stake they will fight to the bitter end (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). Many within the grass roots movement are seeking to prevent the ethno-sectarian disintegration of Syria however unless the situation resolves relatively quickly (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012) insecurity is likely to increase sectarianism and extremism (Al Jazeera, 2012).

Thus far it is a tribute to local leaders that communal retribution killings are not more common. However the threat remains with groups that advocate along sectarian agendas increasing in number. Additionally ethno-sectarian communities, such as Sunni communities along the coast, are stockpiling weapons to protect themselves against the regime's ethnic cleansing in and around the Allawite area. Given how close communities are to each other any stockpiling is likely to be perceived as threatening creating a security dilemma in which defensive actions lead to a corresponding defensive action from neighbouring ethnic groups. As such the regime's drive to remove Sunni from Allawite dominated areas is likely to pave the way for Sunnis to take the fight to the Allawite community itself (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

The departure of the al Assad regime will not guarantee the easing of ethno-sectarian tensions in Syria. Most pro-regime militias have been involved in atrocities as given Assad's rhetoric they believe are fighting for their survival and therefore see their violence as pre-emptive action needed to protect their communities from atrocities by Sunni. The pro-regime militias are now almost solely Allawites with only small numbers of Christians, Kurds and Sunni and thereby are identified strongly as sectarian militias, as a result sectarian animosities are very likely to become further entrenched and difficult to resolve (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). Furthermore continued state

aggression, including massacres such as the one reported in the village of Haswiya, and rising violence in 2013 has brought chaotic violence and its accompanying sectarianism and radicalisation to the fore and this is likely to be difficult to reverse and will greatly complicate any introduction of democracy (Doucet, 2013).

Greatly complicating the security situation in Syria is the divide between Islamic groups seeking to establish a Sharia state and the majority of the rebels who are advocating for a more pluralistic democracy. This divide has intensified as the rebels groups compete for supplies, territory and responsibility for attacks. An example that illustrated the situation is the Libyan ship, the Benghazi, which arrived in Syria with humanitarian supplies for the rebels. The Muslim Brotherhood attempted to secure distribution and credit for the supplies, however this was opposed by the ship's captain and after a dispute that lasted weeks the ship was allowed to supervise the distribution of supplies themselves (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

Competition has also extended towards coverage of the uprising with the upper hand going to the Muslim Brotherhood and Salafists through sympathizers within Arab media channels. The Islamists' greater access to funds and sponsorship has also allowed them to buy small channels outright and to secure control over internal media teams. Although they are a small group their access to funds has enabled them to secure a profile greater than their numbers (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

The risk of chaos is greatly increased by the influx of foreign fighters into the conflict with many coming from the Gulf States, Libya, Tunisia, Chechnya, Somalia and Sudan. Although the incidents are relatively few they are increasing, with foreign fighters implicated in kidnapping, torture and mutilation of Allawite and Christian captives (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). Christians appear more likely to be targeted than other groups, a circumstance increased by the absence of a substantial organised Christian militia (Al Jazeera, 2013). Ethnic Conflict Theory explains that when extremist segments attack another ethno-sectarian group the likelihood that the groups as a whole will resort

to violence increases (Wolff, 2009, p. 27). As such whilst Salafists and Jihadis are comparatively few within the opposition their fanaticism and violence means that their impact on sectarian tensions and fears is far greater than their number. Furthermore as Christian awareness of their greater vulnerability mounts, armed sectarianism as a form of self protection may begin to make sense.

With the number of militias rising, individuals within the Muslim Brotherhood and the SNC are also attempting to establish their own armed groups in order to compete in the developing open season on power in Syria. The agendas are both personal and ideological (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012). It appears that individuals are planning for the day after, and are envisioning that armed struggle and force is the way to get rid of the regime and to eliminate rivals for political power further down the road (Abdulhamid, *The Shredded Tapestry*, 2012).

There is a real concern that the fall of the Assad regime will create an opportunity for terrorists and insurgents to gain access to the regime's WMD. It is estimated that Syria 'has one of the largest and most sophisticated chemical weapons programs in the world and may also possess offensive biological weapons' (Blair, 2012). This threat is especially alarming due to insurgents in Syria becoming increasingly radicalised and sectarian, the potential for escalating sectarian attacks from religiously fanatic Sunni or Shia Jihadis under such circumstances is very high. Syria's WMD in extremist hands would severely disrupt the state and threaten the security of the region (Blair, 2012).

Civil war is likely to continue within Syria for some time with the remnants of the Assad regime gradually shrinking to the best equipped and largest militia group. Groups who seek to impose their own ideologies through force and autocracy such as Salafists will attempt to impose their power and control over an unguarded territory alongside local militias who seek to gain security, power and control over their immediate environment. These militias will draw significantly from within their own sectarian and tribal groups to mobilise fighters and organise patronage networks.

Additionally in a post Assad environment there is a danger of the Libyan outcome whereby there are two centres of power, rule by the state and informal rule held by militias and revolutionary groups who hang onto power in the post civil war era (Sharqieh, 2012). In face of this chaos the movement for democracy and freedom will lesson in importance over security and survival until the regime is fully deconstructed. Democracy is likely to be welcomed by mainstream Syrians although it will be challenged, particularly within warlord or Salafist strongholds. Central control will be difficult in face of Islamic parties seeking to impose Sharia law and tensions will remain high between ethno- sectarian groups.

The Syrian revolution reflects strongly the characteristics Bernard Shaw describes when he outlines the revolution that replaced the Umayyads with the Abbasids at the head of the Islamic Empire.

‘It was a revolution in the History of Islam...It came about not as the result of a palace conspiracy or a coup d etat, but by the action of an extensive and revolutionary propaganda and organisation, representing and expressing the dissatisfaction of important elements of the populations with the previous regime and built up over a long period of time. Like most revolutionary movements it was a coalition of different interests, held together by a common desire to overthrow the existing order, but doomed to break up into conflicting groups once victory was obtained. One of the first tasks of the victorious ‘Abbasids was to crush the disappointed extremist wing of the movement which had brought them to power’ (Lewis B. , 1956, p. 80).

This dynamic is reflected in the current situation as in order to form a new stable balance between the confessional groups in Syria the current revolution’s main task should it oust the regime will be to defeat the divisive extremist Islamists and war lords and remove them from political contention.

7.5 Minority Responses to the uprising - Allawite Fears, Kurdish Aspirations and Christian Reticence: Conclusion

Despite the regime being an authoritarian repressive regime and violent towards any opposition regardless of sectarian group, its fall potentially exposes minorities to a greater risk in the immediate instance. Furthermore regime violence carried out by the Allawite dominated Shabbiha, military and security forces has tied the fate of the Allawite sect to the regime securing their loyalty due to a realistic fear of sectarian retribution as Allawite sect is closely identified with the regime despite not all Allawites benefiting from its patronage.

This fear of the Sunni dominated uprising is shared by other sectarian minority groups, particularly Shi'ites and Christians. Despite their internal divisions the Kurds see the uprising as an opening to pursue greater political control over their region and are actively organising themselves with this in mind. However this has placed them at odds with the Sunni led movement, particularly the Islamist brigades.

In the short term the chaos of regime change and the breakdown of a central authority is likely to increase extremist Islamic activity, criminal activity and sectarian conflict. The minorities are safer under stable autocratic rule than they are under chaos and a lack of authority. As the civil war progresses anarchy is becoming a reality.

Chaptor Eight

Final Conclusion

The Arab Spring is indicative of a wider phenomenon. With UN norms such as the Responsibility to Protect there is a shift in expectations of leadership from entitlement to power and privilege towards responsibility for citizens. Reporting on the Arab Spring Telegraph journalist Richard Spencer went further to claim that the end of the ideology of dictatorship was approaching, (Spencer, 2012) this was supported by Bernard Lewis declaring ‘the tyrannies are doomed’ (Lewis B. , *The Tyrannies are Doomed*, 2011). However, the less than successful outcomes of the Arab Spring has proven that the Middle Eastern political culture continues to be resistant to democratic pluralism and human rights.

Coinciding with protests against the region’s autocracies has been a rise in religious tensions, with the Middle East topping the globe in terms of religious conflicts and state repression of religion (Danin R. M., *Religious Restrictions and Violence Growing Globally led by the Middle East*, 2012). The political culture in the Middle East, including Syria, is significantly based upon an opposition to other dynamic which is deeply rooted in tribalism and Islamic chauvinism predisposing the region to ethno-sectarian tensions and conflict (Salzman, 2008). Additionally there is a historical precedent for Islam to be the foundation of the established political order with religion consequently the key mobilising political narrative. This political use of Islam has continued to a lesser but still significant extent into present day Syria.

Relative to this background, this thesis has looked to answer the puzzle of the importance and role of sectarianism within Syrian politics. It is evident that sectarianism is a significant tool within the Assad regime’s mechanisms of power and control over the Syrian population, most notably through the Allawite elite’s dominance of the upper echelons of power both within the political establishment, commercial sphere and the security forces. Furthermore it is clear that ethno-sectarian tensions have contributed heavily to the escalation of the civil war and

that the social movement for the downfall of the regime and democracy is overlaid with significant ethno-sectarian political mobilisation.

Whilst the aims of the uprising appeal across sectarian lines the mobilisation within the social movement is primarily sectarian with a high number of Sunni participants. This strengthens the uprising as it instantly gains the cohesion of a readymade group identity with shared historical experiences, culture, religion and grievances plus it gains the added support from transnational Sunni networks. However it also weakens the uprising's ability to broaden its support base beyond Sunni given minority fears relating to the Middle Eastern culture of zero sum ethno-sectarian competition, and the increased visibility of Islamic extremists with high out-group prejudices. Furthermore it has also given the regime room to manoeuvre in a way that the Egyptian and Tunisia governments lacked. With many protesters Sunni, and the regime aware it would be difficult to justify fighting peaceful unsectarian democratic protesters the regime provoked the opposition into violence and hence both sides into defensive sectarian blocks.

Although the Assad regime does not represent the dominance of the Allawite sect as a whole and is more accurately described as a confessional coalition dominated by an Allawite elite (Bar S. 2006, p. 357) the civil war is narrowing the Assad support base towards the Allawite sect and thereby increasing sectarian divisions within Syria. The Allawites were saved from marginalisation by an Allawite elite which employed various power and control mechanisms to gain and maintain political power including sectarianism, however they are now at risk of suffering retribution through the sectarian politics which saw their elite come into power. This fear of retribution has led to the emergence of Allawite militias and whilst this is in part a defensive move it is likely to spur the continued development of similar Sunni militias in a post Assad environment.

The entrance of radical Islamists, both Sunni and Shia, into the Syrian civil war from both domestic and international sources is greatly complicating the domestic sectarian dynamic. Both Sunni and Shia Islamic radicals present themselves as the vanguards of their respective faiths and represent the intensifying Sunni Shia divide across the region, thereby presenting a grave threat to the future stability of

Syria and the Middle East. Extremists on both sides of the sectarian divide see a primordial world where their respective Islam is threatened by infidels and they position themselves as the champions of their faith drawing heavily on their respective Islamic myth symbol complexes to legitimise their political goals. Fortunately it appears that across the sectarian groups there is a shared distrust of Islamic extremists despite the religiosity of Syria's sects.

It is likely that the gravest threat to the minorities is the breakdown of law and order. As realist theorist Kenneth Waltz states the opposite of anarchy is not stability but hierarchy. That is to say that a state where someone is in charge has a greater chance of avoiding war than one in which authority is definitively held by no one (Kaplan, 2013). As such the chaos of civil war is likely to create conditions in which sectarian attacks increase. Although the uprising was not initiated by sectarian competition, alternatively beginning as a struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed, there is a significant risk of radicalisation and sectarianism dominating the Syrian crisis given both Allawites and Sunni activists, to an extent correctly, perceive the civil war as an existential conflict. Furthermore it is not that the minorities necessarily are against a democratic pluralistic government, however they are doubtful it is possible for one to succeed against a backdrop of centuries of sectarian prejudice and modern resentments caused by the Assad clan's sectarianism.

Should the uprising succeed introducing democracy is likely to be difficult. The values necessary for a stable democracy, such as compromise and tolerance, are not prevalent in Syrian politics given its political experience is grounded in autocracy. Rather than creating stability by suppressing differing factions in the manner of autocracy, democracy is a political system that allows for differing political aspirations and requires political compromise between different societal groups. In contrast, establishing autocracy is almost instantaneous, and neutralises differing views and factions through repression.

The danger within a state with strong sectarian divides is that the removal of an autocratic central power and the introduction of democracy will result in the democratic contest for political power being fought along ethno-sectarian lines.

Given the strong bonds within sectarian groups and the readiness of myths and symbols through which elites are able to mobilise political support, the democratic political process contested with a communal dynamic potentially makes for a volatile and unstable political environment as mirrored in Iraq – or creates a fragile stability dependent on maintaining a balance of power between sects as seen in Lebanon. Democracy in this instance is likely to be marred by instability, sectarian political parties, political assassinations, transnational political sectarian allegiances and sectarian tensions.

As such progress towards democracy needs to be accompanied by a move towards values that embrace ethno-sectarian equality and the political focus needs to shift towards addressing the needs of the nation's citizens, as opposed to politics being driven by self interested elites seeking power and privileges through the support of their communal and other client groups. In order to avoid sectarian contests for power, the old system of violent repression and co-option should be replaced with a system in which sectarian political parties are discouraged and an emphasis is placed on the emergence of political parties campaigning on economic and social platforms.

Additionally state security needs to prioritise the security of its citizens rather than the maintenance of power by the elite over citizens and opposition groups. Accountability within the military and security forces must be high, and accompanied by balancing sectarian numbers within armed units and the police to reduce the risk of one sect securing leadership of the security apparatus.

The transition to democracy also needs to be accompanied by credible guarantees, made with international support, towards the safety and rights of ethno-sectarian minorities thereby reducing their need to resort to sectarian bonds for security. This will mean a neutralisation or discrediting of extremist opinions and narratives and a stronger media presence granted to alternative Islamic voices. Whilst in the long run moves towards secular and democratic values promises increased stability and security, the initial moves away from traditional values will alienate those that stand to lose power, potentially this includes clerics, the wealthy political elite, men relative to women, Allawites and religious

fundamentalists. As such a plan needs to be developed to counter the resulting rhetoric and rising violence from traditionalists and/or extremists.

There is a need to remain mindful that moves towards democracy will weaken religion and religious leaders who will fiercely oppose any loss in power (Shepherd, 2012). In order for democracy to deliver stability, the Middle East needs to adjust its understanding of politics and recognise that politics and religion are a volatile mix given religion elicits strong emotions and polarises groups reducing the likelihood of rational political choices. However despite the current civil war, Syria's history under the Assads of secular governance and relative sectarian harmony could provide a good base for the introduction of a secular democracy, although there will be a need to reconcile the minority-majority, moderate Islam-radical Islam and Islamist-secular divides (Sharqieh, 2012).

Syria is likely to enter a period of long sectarian civil war, with the breakup of Syria into statelets won and lost by competing brigades, including Salafists intent on establishing Islamic emirates, so that the social movement is faced with battling the regime and then warlords and their brigades once the regime is ousted. The post Assad government is likely to have to contend with continued insurgent warfare from Jihadi groups who have now established themselves in Syria after finding this difficult under the forceful Assad regime. To counter the resulting instability any emerging democratic government needs to focus on establishing stability and economic prosperity. Creating employment and educational opportunities for the large youth population is an important way to avoid youth turning to radical Islam for self esteem and an alternative sense of purpose. The political focus moving quickly to the creation of jobs, economic policies, educational programs and human rights reforms would be prudent in order to direct political discussion away from Sharia law and to give peoples' lives purpose and direction outside of religious contests.

To further weaken the traditional involvement of religion in politics the minorities need to reassess their position relative to the regime. By remaining aligned with the regime, even if only out of fear, minorities are giving Sunni and extremist Islamists the scope to use sectarian arguments to prevent the minorities

participating in the post Assad political arena through casting minorities as untrustworthy heretic supporters of the corrupt and violent regime. Additionally the removal of minority support from the regime would bring on the fall of the regime decreasing the length of the civil war, and thereby preventing further militarization and radicalization which would improve the chances of reconstructing Syria along secular and democratic lines. Thus in order to have an ability to participate in post Assad governance the sectarian minorities, Allawites and Christians in particular, need to abandon the diminishing safety of the Assad regime.

In order to move forward the Middle East might pay to look back. In the past the power of the sultans was checked by the consultative process between the various leaders of the cultural nested communal groups. Of course hierarchies and prejudices existed between groups meaning that the process was unequal. However modernity removed the need for the consultative process as groups instead sought absolute power within the new state structure through modern weapons, communication, and mechanisms of repression. Consequently the modern Middle Eastern states autocrats seized 'greater power than even the mightiest of the sultans ever had' (Lewis, 2011).

In order to avoid a backlash towards traditionalism to protect the Islamic identity and to remove the resistance to democracy as a Western invention and secularism as un-Islamic, democracy could be presented as an institutionalized and more structured version of the traditional consultative process. It might help to give nested groups a consultative role in the democratic structure much as lobby groups operate in the West. This will lend democracy greater cultural legitimacy whilst giving the nested communal groups a place within the democratic process.

The aims of the social movement, namely democracy, freedom and human rights, are not just held back by the Assads but also by the political culture of the region, the domestic sectarian divides, radical Islam and the intensification of the regional Sunni versus Shia contest. It is critical, in order for democracy to work, that the Middle East grows to accept that the justification of repression of any one group to the wishes and privileges of another – be it a communal or gender group – culturally paves the way for the introduction of autocracy and the abuse of power

on a much larger scale and thus represents a danger to the freedom of all (Lewis B. , *The Tyrannies are Doomed*, 2011).

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