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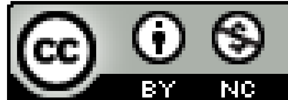

Sectarian Political Economy in Syria: The Attenuation and Resurgence of Pre-State Loyalties

Mohammed Shabani

Abstract

This paper offers a critique of the two prevailing explanations for sectarianism in Syria—the essentialist, which attributes it to dogmatic divisions and fixed social characteristics, and the instrumental, which ascribes it to authoritarian manipulation. A third framework is accordingly proposed, which posits sectarianism as a structural outcome of shifts in the political economy. Adopting an historical political economy approach, the paper models the relationship between the mode of production and the structure of sociopolitical loyalty, while underscoring the role of intervening variables. On this basis, it presents an explanatory model that correlates the structure of the political economy to the formation of political identity, reconceptualising sectarianism as a product of structural economic changes and the interplay between it and political and social structures, rather than as a fixed cultural given or a top-down political decision. The paper concludes that sectarian polarisation in Syria from 2011 until after the fall of the Assad regime represents the culmination of a prolonged structural process related to the erosion of the material foundations of citizenship and the transformation of affiliations that predated the nation state into a network of social relations that provides socioeconomic protection for the individual.

Keywords: Syria; Sectarianism; Nation State; Political Economy; Crony Capitalism

Introduction

Since the fall of the Assad regime on 8 December 2014, Syria has been plagued by acute sectarian, ethnic, and regional polarisation, manifested in recurrent waves of violence in multiple regions. This violence has been coupled with, and at times preceded by, demands for secession or federalism based on sectarian and ethnic grounds.[1] Sectarian rhetoric and fighting in Syria did not come into being with fall of the regime, nor are they a mere byproduct of the fourteen years of conflict and violence that preceded it. Those years, with all the communal strife they brought,[2]

merely exposed and exacerbated what came before, demonstrating the depth of sectarian and ethnic polarisation and other symptoms of social fragmentation. These divisions should thus be understood as a manifestation of a decades-long process. Although communal polarisation reached its peak with the fall of the regime, it was formed and evolved over a period that saw a historical divergence between two distinct eras: the first, characterised by the rise of capitalist relations of production and a parliamentary political system, set in a climate of political freedom in which loyalties that predated the nation state were attenuated; and the second, a regression and reversal of these conditions in favour of crony capitalism, a rentier bureaucratic bourgeoisie, and political authoritarianism, which led to the resurgence of pre-state loyalties and their penetration of economic, political, and social structures.

This study seeks to analyse the dynamics driving the decline and then resurgence of pre-state loyalties in Syria by tracing structural transformations in the Syrian economy and the interplay between the economy and social and political structures, with the aim of understanding how these dynamics have contributed to the weakening and revival of pre-state identities.

Literature on Sectarianism

The academic research on sectarianism in the Arab region and Syria in particular can be divided into two main currents. The first views cultural, ethnic, and religious identities as immutable social characteristics, and sectarianism as an extension of long-standing historical, dogmatic conflicts. This current is represented several prominent scholars, among them Michel Seurat,[3] Leon Goldsmith,[4] and Nikolaos van Dam.[5]

In contrast, the second group sees political sectarianism not as a self-contained essence, but as a historically determined phenomenon. Using various approaches, these scholars examine the way authoritarian regimes utilise and politically mould social identities to consolidate their rule and ensure their survival. Among the most important approaches within this second group is the socio-political approach, most prominently represented by Azmi Bishara[6] and Burhan Ghalioun.[7]

Within the instrumentalist current, the class-based approach stands out. This approach interprets sectarianism as a mechanism for reproducing control over society under crony capitalism, by weakening the possibility of an independent class consciousness or a popular anti-regime movement. The roots of this perspective can be traced back to the works of Mahdi Amel, specifically his *Fi al-Dawla al-Ta'ifiya*,[8] in which he explains sectarianism in Lebanon as a specific historical form linked to the structure of the Lebanese bourgeois colonial state. Contemporary readings of his arguments tend to reformulate them to more directly focus on the political-economic function of sectarianism in the context of authoritarianism and crony capitalism. Most famously, Joseph Daher draws on Mahdi Amel's thought in his analysis of sectarianism in Syria, notably his paper on Syria's political economy.[9]

The instrumentalist current advanced the critique of essentialism, highlighting the historical and social nature of sectarianism and exposing the role of political and economic institutions in its production or reproduction. Yet, its framing of sectarianism tends to avoid analysis of the structural

conditions that render possible the existence of pre-state loyalties in representations of consciousness in the first place. In other words, it neglects the role of economic and social structures in catalysing the resurgence of primordial affiliations as a social phenomenon capable of becoming a channel for organised political action.

In addition to the two main currents, a new body of literature has emerged on sectarianism in Syria. One example is Asmaa Elbanna's paper on pluralist citizenship in Post-Assad Syria,[10] which focuses on rebuilding citizenship through institutional reform, political participation, transitional justice, and addressing hate speech. Although important for its spotlighting of the institutional dimension, this approach nevertheless belongs in the realm of top-down solutions that do not touch the deep-seated material structures that produce sectarianism, treating it instead as a problem that can be resolved through institutional and public policy reforms.

Kevin Mazur[11] examines the evolution of the Syrian protest movement from a civil movement into an ethnic conflict under the ethnically exclusionary structure of the Syrian regime, in which the dominant Alawite group enjoyed more and better access to state resources than other groups, particularly Sunnis. His work stands out for its 'structural-interactive' analysis of the trajectory of Syrian protests wherein he treats the movement not as a monolith operating in accordance with a uniform logic, but instead conceptualises it as a changing phenomenon shaped by differences in economic and social structures and local power networks in each region. Political transformation is thus conceived as a dynamically diachronic process, in which modes of action and actors shift according to the changing conditions and tools of control and repression employed in different local contexts. In explaining the process of 'ethnicisation,' as he calls it, Mazur links the interaction of two key elements: the failure of the cross-identity, local intermediary networks relied upon by the regime to contain the protests and the regime's subsequent resort to violence due to the shrinking margin for action within an exclusionary, narrow authoritarian structure. This process served to reshape actors themselves and gave rise to more acute social divisions.

Mazur thus presents ethnicisation as a two-way, cumulative process that runs both top-down, through state policies, mechanisms of repression, and resource redistribution, and bottom-up, as local communities find themselves compelled to revert to their primary identities amid the disintegration of social protection and mediation networks. Accordingly, sectarianism is not figured as a direct political decision, but rather as the result of a protracted interaction between violence, regime structure, and the fragmentation of local networks.

Despite Mazur's nuanced analysis, he treats what he describes as the ethnically exclusionary regime in Syria as a given. That is, he does not attempt to explain the origins of the regime but suffices with a brief recapitulation of its formation after 1970, when Hafez al-Assad and several officers from rural Alawite backgrounds came to power. Mazur's focus is on how this regime subsequently operated; he does not address the conditions of its historical emergence, nor the existence of sectarianism itself as a social phenomenon.

The present study seeks to bridge this gap by linking the emergence of pre-state loyalties to changes in the mode of production and the erosion of the material foundations of citizenship, instead of treating these loyalties as a preexisting political given and/or a contingent security

outcome. As such, this study aims to transcend the prevailing competing essentialist and instrumentalist approaches by offering a third way to understand pre-state loyalties. It posits that political sectarianism waxes and wanes depending on transformations in the structure of the political economy and its interaction with social structures and political institutions.

One caveat is worth noting: the division of the existing scholarly literature into two main currents does not imply a similarity of scholarly output within each current, nor does it suggest any normative judgment of its academic value. The research in each camp varies significantly, as does the quality of its contributions. The aim is simply to highlight the general methodological features of the literature to facilitate a comparative discussion, instead of addressing each study individually. This paper does not claim to offer a comprehensive overview of all relevant literature but rather seeks to sketch out the most significant theoretical trends of direct import to its research question.

While this paper relies on this body of literature and other research for data and analysis in part, it does not treat it as the direct foundation for its proposed theoretical framework. Its relationship with the previous literature is not one of linear extension, but rather of deconstruction and reconfiguration, taking some of its analytical tools as a starting point for an independent interpretive approach. Accordingly, this study does not pretend to be the product of a gradually formed consensus within the field; it is an attempt to develop an independent theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon under investigation.

Research questions

To what extent can sectarianism in Syria be considered a dependent variable of changes in the mode of production and wealth distribution? And how do these shifts interact with the intervening variables of social and political structures? Secondary questions that naturally follow include the impact of the rise of the national bourgeoisie and capitalist relations of production on the decline of pre-state loyalties, and the role played by the rise of crony capitalism and the underdevelopment of the Syrian economy on the atomisation of society and the resurgence of pre-state relations.

Theoretical and methodological framework

This study proposes an explanatory framework that models the relationship between shifts in the economic structure and the emergence and eclipse of pre-state loyalties as a sociopolitical phenomenon resulting from the interplay of economic, political, and social structures. It thus adopts a historical political economy approach to observe the dialectical relationship between transformations in the economic structure and morphologies of sociopolitical consciousness. This model takes the mode and structure of economic production as the independent variable and the structure of sociopolitical loyalty (the decline or resurgence of pre-state loyalties) as the dependent variable, hypothesising that pre-state loyalties become less salient when the mode of production gives rise to material formations (a national bourgeoisie, an organised working class, representative political organisations) that cross the boundaries of pre-state identities and have an interest in citizenship as a legal framework and economic necessity. Conversely, it hypothesises

that the resurgence of pre-state loyalties is correlated with the erosion of these national material formations. When institutional, contractual capitalist relations of production are lacking or in decline, or redistributable state capitalist resources are depleted, whether of a rentier or productive nature—both supplanted by crony capitalism—pre-state affiliations become a channel for resource distribution. In turn, such affiliations are transformed into a political loyalty that generates pre-state loyalties as a sociopolitical phenomenon.

In this regard, it is essential to note that the independent and dependent positions of these two variables, like economic, political, and social structures, are not fixed. The model does not assume a static relationship of cause and effect, but rather a state of perpetual interaction. It also assumes that these variables have their own dynamics, meaning that over time they acquire relative independence from other variables. Accordingly, the paper argues that while social, political, and historical structures (the intervening variables) are important determinants of the form, quality, intensity, and speed of this process, the primary driver remains shifts in the structures of the political economy.

Conceptual and practical definitions

Pre-state loyalties: Conceptually, these are modes of political loyalty that fall outside the framework of the nation state. In addition to religious or sectarian affiliation, they include loyalty to the clan, the extended family, and other sub-state loyalties that serve as alternatives to national belonging. This phenomenon cannot be fit solely into religious or ethnic frameworks, which would suggest cultural or dogmatic approaches that are incompatible with this study's perspective. Practically, these loyalties are observed through distribution patterns of resources, protection, and jobs across familial, tribal, sectarian, and regional networks, both within and outside of state institutions.

Crony capitalism: The paper's operating definition of crony capitalism relies on the analytical framework that North, Wallis, and Weingast laid out in their *Violence and Social Orders*. They analyse what they call 'limited access' orders understood as a socioeconomic system in which the central authority politically manipulates the economy to create distinct interests. Resources and opportunities are distributed through networks of privilege and personal loyalty rather than open competition, reflecting restricted access to economic organisations and means.[12] The study also draws on Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality*, which links rising inequality and class disparities in the United States to rent-seeking. He discusses various practices, including tailoring laws to capture monopolistic contracts or obtain state resources at reduced prices, that function as mechanisms to redistribute wealth through political influence rather than competitive markets.[13]

While most of the relevant literature agrees on these general characteristics, this study also adopts the concept of 'reverse' crony capitalism, inspired by Alemayehu Geda's analysis of crony capitalism in Ethiopia under the developmental state model between 2000 and 2018. Geda argues that crony capitalism is not limited to an alliance between the ruling power and already existing business figures. The regime itself creates new economic actors through financial fronts and firms

owned by the party or security apparatus.[14] Both models can be observed in Syria. The traditional type is embodied by existing relationships between the regime and relatively independent business figures, while the reverse pattern entails the creation of businessmen from within the ruling power structure itself to function as a financial front. This is the direct restructuring of the economy through political influence.

Material foundations: These are the stable historical configurations of relationships of production, resource distribution, employment mechanisms, and social protection systems, which buttress and sustain certain types of social and political loyalty and curtail the emergence of others. They should be understood as potentialities. That is, they do not determine the presence or absence of loyalty patterns, but rather their central or marginal position within the social field and their potential to become organised patterns of relationships. Practically, material foundations can be observed through proxy indicators, most notably: the strength and independence of organisations representing economic interests (chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions), types of political representation, and the level of civic activity (political parties, civil society associations). These are the institutional expressions of the structure of production relations and resource distribution.

Sources and tests of the study's hypotheses

In its analysis of shifts in the structure of the Syrian economy, the study relies on economic laws, changes in ownership patterns, and indicators that measure the labour market and institutional representation. Given the lack of complete, quantitatively testable time series data, the researcher uses a qualitative analysis of data points representing key junctures in the trajectory of economic transformation. Accordingly, the study draws on primary and secondary sources, including data from the Syrian Central Bureau of Statistics, official legislation, international reports issued by official and research bodies, and specialised literature on the history of the Syrian economy, such as the works of Mounir al-Hamash and Hanna Batatu, as well as recent research on contemporary economic changes in Syria.

Limits of the study

Although it is grounded in the Syrian context, the proposed model and its methodology may be applicable to other countries such as Lebanon and Iraq, though testing is left to future research. The viability of the model, however, is limited to developing countries. It does not, for example, claim to explain modern racist movements in the West in their various ethnic, religious, and cultural forms.

This paper is divided into two main sections: the first examines the rise of capitalist relations in Syria in the mid-nineteenth century and their impact on Syrian social and political structures, while the second focuses on the disruption of capitalist relations in Syria, the rise of crony capitalism, and its role in the resurgence of pre-state relations.

The Rise of Civic Capitalism and the Eclipse of Pre-State Loyalties

Syrian socioeconomic structures underwent a major transformation in professional and craft relations in trade, industry, and agriculture. This shift from traditional to capitalist relations directly contributed to the formation of the nation-state society and its political structure.

The adaptation of local production and rise of capitalist relations

The Syrian economy came under significant structural pressures in the second quarter of the nineteenth century as the Ottoman Empire was forced open to the European capitalist economy. The Treaty of Balta Liman of 1838 marked a pivotal turning point, enabling European goods to enter the Syrian market under favourable customs conditions.[15] The opening spurred the Syrian craft industry to adapt. Syrian goods, still produced under pre-capitalist production relations and tools, faced considerable difficulties competing with European goods on price given the superiority of European production forces. Nevertheless, Aleppo and Damascus's position on international trade routes, the availability of raw materials, and extensive local and neighbouring markets facilitated adaptation.[16]

By the early twentieth century, a modern industry began to take shape. Many establishments transitioned from small, family-run artisanal workshops to manufacturing enterprises and industrial clusters that used mechanical machinery like the hydraulic press, which was introduced by the Syrian bourgeoisie in the 1880s to localise modern construction industries.[17] The production of oils became more industrially advanced thanks to the use of mechanical presses, while the importation of Jacquard looms and the outfitting of modern factories with steam-powered machinery and hundreds of electrically powered machines allowed for the production of natural and synthetic silks similar to European textiles.[18] As a result of this development and growth, by 1913, the Syrian industrial sector employed nearly 300,000 people.[19]

Although the budding Syrian bourgeoisie faced obstacles during the French Mandate, it nevertheless continued to grow despite diverging French and Syrian economic interests. French interests were concentrated in exports and monopolising the financial and infrastructure sectors, while the Syrian bourgeoisie focused its activity on local and neighbouring markets. The French authorities were also reluctant to clash with the Syrian bourgeoisie because of its role and status in the Syrian national movement and its influence over Syrian society.

During the first decade of independence, the industrial sector witnessed a quantitative and qualitative transformation, which Viktorov describes as the 'Syrian Industrial Revolution.' Thanks to the policies of successive bourgeois governments in this period, new lines of production were introduced and others were developed further, such as the cement, building materials, and glass industries.[20] The mode of operation also shifted fundamentally. Modern Syrian industry, which had grown out of family-run, artisanal workshops a century earlier, began to move towards a system of joint-stock companies, some of which subscribed hundreds of shareholders and employed thousands of workers.[21]

With the structural transformation of the Syrian economy, relations of production were no longer compatible with a traditional agrarian society. This gradually became clear in the social and political changes in Syria that coincided with economic transformations.

Structural shifts in labour relations and the decline of the guild master

The evolution of the structure and relations of production in the Syrian economy had profound implications for labour relations, eroding the family-based inheritance of the trades and guild masters' (*shuyukh al-kar*) occupational monopolies.[22] The technological complexity resulting from the transition from artisanal workshops to steam-powered and then electric machinery helped make technical skill, rather than familial and tribal ties and craft guilds, the standard of proficiency. Concurrent with technological advancements in Syrian industry, and no less significant, the scale and scope of industrial work was transformed. Production gradually moved from small craft workshops to factories that employed thousands of workers from diverse neighbourhoods and social backgrounds. Tens of thousands of migrants from rural areas were integrated into proletarian relations of capitalist production.[23]

This shift in relations of production, from a patriarchal, artisanal model to a capitalist one, meant that the individual's interests were no longer as closely bound to the extended family and clan, and sectarian and regional affiliations. In turn, this transformation disrupted traditional mentalities, with all their inherited customs, traditions, and beliefs, and allowed for new forms of belonging based on shared economic and intellectual interests, in a context created by coexistence in the urban and industrial spheres.

The nascent mode of production relations divided labour and created two new social classes: the national bourgeoisie and the working class. Both demonstrated a sophisticated class consciousness, manifested by the latter in the establishment of dozens of trade unions, culminating in the founding of the National Federation of Trade Unions in 1938. These unions staged numerous protests and strikes in defence of their interests and rights.[24] Similarly, the rising bourgeoisie founded chambers of commerce in Damascus in 1840, followed by similar chambers in Aleppo, Homs, and Hama between the mid-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, that were responsible for protecting its economic interests.[25]

The bourgeoisie distinguished itself from the traditional feudal elite by exerting pressure on the French Mandate authorities on multiple occasions through its representatives in parliament and the executive branch. For example, it secured customs exemptions for the import of industrial equipment in 1928 and successfully lobbied for higher tariffs on Japanese textile imports in 1932.[26] It continued to gain in political and social strength, becoming the main driving force in parliament and the government between 1936 and 1939.[27] Geoffrey Schad writers that the nascent industrial bourgeoisie and the urban working classes exhibited 'all the hallmarks of class development.' He asserts that industrialisation in Syria is not a post-independence phenomenon, nor could industrialists be seen 'merely as a fraction of a larger undifferentiated elite class.'[28]

Trade unions and chambers of commerce and industry are early manifestations of the material foundations of the nation-state society, representing socioeconomic units cut across pre-state

affiliations. Towards the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, civil society organisations in Syria proliferated and expanded beyond economic organisations. More than seventy-three scientific, cultural, and intellectual societies were founded by 1947, in addition to dozens of newspapers and magazines.[29] The Syrian bourgeoisie played a pivotal role in fostering and establishing these groups, as many of its members were part of the Enlightenment movement that embraced the values of 'love of country' that transcended religious and sectarian affiliations.[30]

The rise of Syrian nationalist thought

With the economic and social development of major Syrian cities, the early outlines of national political thought gradually came into view, influenced by the cultural and intellectual initiatives of the first generation of thinkers in the Levant.

This new social movement bore political fruit with the founding of a secret society in Beirut in 1875. Including members from diverse religious and sectarian backgrounds, the group explicitly advocated an end to Turkish rule.[31] National political thought continued to evolve, culminating in rebellion against the Ottoman Empire and its narrative pretence of Islamic government headed by a caliph. For nationalists, the goal was to replace it with a system governed in the name of Syrian and Arab nationalism, as manifested in the first Arab government of 1918 and the Syrian National Congress of 1919. The congress brought together Syrian figures from diverse backgrounds who agreed on the unity and independence of Syria and rejected the mandate system.[32]

The rebellion, spearheaded by Sunni Muslims against Ottoman rule, was not the only indicator of the shift in social values among various communities in Syria. The Syrian Christian bourgeoisie played a leading role within their community and at the national level, bringing pressure to bear in church elections to secure the patriarchal see for their preferred candidates.[33] In Suwayda, home of the largest Druze community in Syria, Sultan Pasha al-Atrash came forth to lead the Great Syrian Revolt against the French Mandate, disregarding the traditional religious authorities, including the four senior sheikhs (*mashayikh al-'aql*) who opposed his revolt.[34] Within the Alawite community, signs of social shift towards Syrian nationalism appeared in the 1918 revolt led by Sheikh Saleh al-Ali against French forces, following communication and coordination with nationalist figures in the north and Damascus. He, too, faced off against several traditional Alawite leaders who favoured secession from Syria.[35]

These developments illustrate the reach and influence of urban centres, even in less industrialised regions. Nationalist forces in Damascus and other Syrian cities gave Sultan Pasha al-Atrash and Sheikh Saleh al-Ali political legitimacy and military backing, which legitimised their resistance to the French Mandate and their traditional leaderships. Although it was in cities that the structure of the Syrian economy was most comprehensively and profoundly changed, particularly in the two major metropolises of Damascus and Aleppo, relations of production, and consequently their impact on social relations, were also affected in less industrialised regions. This impact was felt in two dimensions: first, in the country's cultural structure, which encompasses all its regions, and second, in the adaptation of rural relations of production themselves—that is, the relationship between rural areas and major cities, which became a beacon of progress for rural

inhabitants, offering them the promise of work and social and economic mobility. The same is true even of the advanced capitalist countries of that time, which also contained vast rural areas, although the capitalist mode of production was culturally hegemonic, thus limiting the cultural influence of rural areas.

In short, the decline of pre-state relations was evident throughout Syria, as demonstrated by the nationalist movement in the coastal region, Suwayda, and other predominantly rural areas.

Political belonging on economic foundations

In parallel with the relentless strides towards independence from the French Mandate, political alignments began forming along the lines of class, ideology, and interest. As the French drew down their presence, finally withdrawing from Syria in 1946, the national question gave way to the economic struggle. The first sign of this conflict was seen when some 50,000 workers, led by the National Federation of Trade Unions in Damascus, staged the largest labour demonstration in Syrian history in 1945, demanding the enactment of a labour law.[36] The conflict was also reflected in the political parties established in this period. The People's Party and the National Party grew out of the National Bloc, while several parties came out of the working and peasant classes, most notably the Arab Socialist Party, the Arab Socialist Baath Party, and the Communist Party.

The class-based economic agendas represented by these parties reflected the class affiliation of their supporters and members. Even so, academics with a more essentialist bent view them as mere ideological facades for sub-state loyalties and divisions. Nikolaos van Dam, for example, argues that religious minorities in Syria found in the secular Baath Party an opportunity to protect themselves from Sunni encroachment and to free themselves from Sunni political dominance by championing a secular, socialist political system free of chauvinism. He draws a link between the demographic affiliation and rural origins of these minorities and their membership in the Baath Party.[37] In correlating religious and political affiliation, Van Dam suggests that Syrian groups, specifically Muslim minorities and the Sunni Muslim majority, exist in a state of continuous conflict. This flies in the face of several facts. Most importantly, the Baath Party, founded in 1947, was an Arab nationalist party whose primary tenet was the rejection of pre-state loyalties. Moreover, its literature was not anti-religious. In fact, it gave Islam a special status due to its association with Arabs.[38] In other words, the party did not adopt a confrontational, militant secularism. Nor was the question of the peasantry central to its early priorities. Indeed, most of the party leaders and members, who numbered no more than 4,500 by 1952, came from the ranks of professors and students.

The Baath Party only gained widespread popular support among the peasantry after its 1952 merger with the Arab Socialist Party, which had been founded by Akram Hourani as a purely peasant party. From its inception, its leadership was composed primarily of Sunnis, along with a smaller number of Orthodox Christians. It had heavy backing in the rural areas of Hama, Aleppo, Idlib, Latakia, and Suwayda, which demonstrates its decidedly non-sectarian character. In short, it was a party that united Syrian peasants from various religious and sectarian backgrounds, while Hourani himself, who enjoyed broad popularity, belonged to the Sunni majority. There is thus no

evidence to suggest that the party's supporters, leadership, and principles were drawn to the Baath Party out of fear of the Sunni majority. In contrast, Hanna Batatu attributes peasants' gravitation to the Arab Socialist Party to their animosity towards large landowners and their desire for land ownership. A quite popular party, it had an estimated 40,000 supporters in 1950.[39]

Another key indicator of the marginalisation of the Baath Party's secular outlook was its focus in the Syrian parliament on legislation supporting peasant issues. In the debates of the Constituent Assembly for the 1950 constitution, the party did not take a confrontational stance towards the conservative current, which sought to include an article in the constitution recognising Islam as the state religion, but rather concentrated on questions of agrarian reform and Arab nationalism.[40]

In fact, it was the National Party that openly opposed the conservative Islamic current, while the People's Party, which held the majority in the Syrian parliament, staked out the middle ground on the relationship between religion and state in the constitution. The lack of minority engagement with the National Party and People's Party can be attributed to their urban bourgeois outlook. It is similarly difficult to explain minorities' aversion to the Communist Party and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, despite the two parties' staunch secularism.[41]

The problem with Van Dam's argument, and with essentialism more generally, stems from its assumption that political conflict and competition between parties and groups in Syria is fundamentally doctrinal or dogmatic, its political representations no more than a mere facade for religious and social differences, which are themselves an extension of historical conflicts between Syrian communities. In contrast, an analysis of the material foundations and economic structure allows for a more rational and realistic explanation of the parties' orientations and behaviour. In general, a party's principles and public discourse are aligned with the economic position of its leaders, members, and supporters. It seems, then, that an individual's party affiliation in that era was more closely correlated to their class and economic position and their intellectual leanings than their religious or sectarian background.

The Rise of Crony Capitalism and the Resurgence of Pre-State Loyalties

Economic, social, and political structures in Syria underwent radical transformations that undermined the foundations of the capitalist and urban bourgeois relations that had prevailed before 1958, supplanting them with crony capitalism and a dictatorship, which led to the gradual rise of pre-state affiliations at the expense of national belonging.

Disruption of urban bourgeois governance

The ruling national bourgeoisie in Syria faced two countervailing pressures. The first was the efforts of the United States and its allies to bring Syria into their camp, a move rejected by the government in Damascus, precipitating a Washington-backed coup attempt in 1957. The second pressure was the fear of socialists coming to power and the threat this posed to the interests of the Syrian bourgeois class, especially given the socialists' growing influence within the military establishment, which was seen as a prelude to a military coup that would unseat the ruling

bourgeoisie.[42] The possibility that socialist forces might gain power through parliamentary elections also became a serious threat after the 1954 elections, when the Baath increased their representation from one seat (won in the 1949 elections) to twenty-two. This made it the second largest party after the People's Party, which lost about fifteen per cent of its representatives in the same election.[43]

Seeking to avoid these possible outcomes, the Syrian bourgeoisie sought a union with Egypt in 1958. They accepted the Egyptian terms, which turned the union into a full merger. In consequence, the Syrian bourgeoisie effectively dissolved itself and its class rivals (the Communist Party and the Baath Party), along with political life itself, in exchange for a guaranteed class position in the economy that would give it political stability.[44] In the first two years of the union, its hopes were realised: Arab capital flowed into the country; protectionist policies continued; and an industrial bank was established in 1958.[45] Their gains peaked in 1959 with the issuance of a labour law (Law 91), which prohibited unions from engaging in any political activity or striking. The Syrian bourgeoisie had been reluctant to take such a step during their rule due to the threat it posed to their popularity and political stability.[46]

As a result of the pro-bourgeoisie policies instituted at the beginning of the union, popular pressure mounted, and this, coupled with the Nasser regime's fears of the growing influence of the Syrian capitalist class, prompted the enactment of the nationalisation decrees of 1961 (the July socialist laws), which expropriated major companies and banks.[47] Although the secessionist government (1961–1963) quickly amended these decrees and returned expropriated properties, the coup of 8 March 1963 brought the conflict back to the forefront. At its Sixth National Congress, the Baath Party adopted a radical stance, declaring that 'the bourgeoisie is incapable of playing any positive role, and its opportunism makes it a suitable ally of neocolonialism.'[48] A spate of nationalisations soon followed, culminating in the 1965 decrees that ended private-sector ownership of all major economic enterprises, barred the private sector from dozens of industrial activities, and gave the public sector a monopoly on most domestic and foreign trade.[49]

The Baathist coup did not merely bring in a change of faces in power; it overturned the political, economic, and social system. Politically, the Baath Party abolished multiparty politics and crushed the existing parliamentary system. Economically, the centre of gravity shifted from the private to the state sector, which became the largest employer. This weakened relations of production that had been independent of political affiliation. Most economic activity effectively fell into the hands of Baathists, and it became linked to political loyalty rather than competence.[50] On the social level, Baathist control brought about a transformation in the social structure that mirrored the economic shift. Once driven by diverse orientations and backgrounds, social and cultural structures were ideologised by centralised Baathist policies that shut down and restricted civil society institutions and their activities, replacing them with 'popular organisations.' The end result was a totalitarian system whose mission was ideological mobilisation for the regime and which extended from childhood through university and encompassed professional syndicates and labour unions.[51]

The Baath Party based its legitimacy on an authoritarian social contract that offered economic benefits like government employment, and subsidies for basic goods, education, and healthcare,

in exchange for foregoing political participation.[52] That bargain won over the small farmers, who at the time constituted a large part of the population.[53] This base constituted a reservoir of human resources for the regime, which mirrored their ambitions and exploited their sense of exclusion under the rule of the urban bourgeoisie.

Initially, the Baath's social contract was successful thanks to oil revenues, which increased following petroleum discoveries and price hikes after the 1973 October war, as well as political rents in the form of foreign financial support and remittances from Syrians abroad.[54] To capitalise on these resources, the Baath Party expanded the public sector, both in services and production, which burnished its socioeconomic legitimacy among farmers and marginalised segments of the population.

In the 1980s, this authoritarian bargain began to unravel. Rents declined due to falling oil prices and reduced foreign support, while authoritarianism, the absence of the rule of law, and the lack of accountability led to rampant corruption and mismanagement of the public sector, which was run by Baathists chosen for loyalty rather than competence and merit. As resources dwindled, the population surged from 6.3 million in 1970 to 8.9 million in 1980.[55]

The population increase entailed higher costs for healthcare, education, infrastructure, and subsidies for basic goods, and necessitated the expansion and growth of industrial and service establishments to meet the rising demand for jobs. As the authoritarian social contract in Syria reached its historical limits, the outcome was economic stagnation, high rates of unemployment and poverty, and deteriorating social services.[56]

Two socioeconomic transformations resulted from this dysfunction. The first affected the structure of the Syrian economy. The Assad regime pursued liberalisation in the private sector under a crony capitalism model, which ensured the political loyalty of the rising business class or those acting as business fronts for the Assad family and its associates.[57] Second, the pool of redistributable resources began to shrink. As the Baath Party had insinuated itself into the fabric of society and the state over the years, many Syrians became nominally Baathist out of necessity rather than ideological conviction. Party membership tripled between 1971 and 1974, and again between 1981 and 1992.[58] Amid this growth, the economic structure struggled to distribute the benefits due to political loyalists, let alone those owed the general public. In other words, the Baathist sociopolitical structure was no longer aligned with the economic structure; the party's expansion outpaced the economic system's capacity to sustain the channels of resource distribution.

This development created new dynamics for accessing benefits that were no longer based on citizenship or political affiliation, but rather on pre-state loyalties rooted in sectarian, tribal, and familial networks built over the preceding two decades. The Alawite community benefited the most from these networks given the sectarian affiliation of Hafez al-Assad and the top regime leadership. A number of families and clans close to the regime also gained prominence, with their affiliations forming a security and social buffer for the regime. As a result of these shifts, Alawite employment in government jobs increased, eventually climbing to over eighty per cent of the total Alawite workforce, according to a report by the EU Agency for Asylum.[59] At the same time, given

the historically marginalised rural background of large segments of the Alawite population, coupled with limited opportunities for economic integration outside state institutions, the Alawite connection to the power structure became an important pathway to social mobility and economic stability. Privileges were thus unmoored from political belonging and attached to pre-state loyalties, which in turn became a form of occupational capital.

In this context, it is essential to pause at the thesis of political instrumentalists like Azmi Bishara and Burhan Ghalioun. Bishara argues that the authorities invoke sectarianism to make it into a political loyalty through pre-state affiliations, with the aim of consolidating their rule. This sectarianism remains latent, only surfacing openly during crises like the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011.[60] Ghalioun concurs, though he goes further, describing sectarianism as 'the deployment of relationships of natural solidarity' in the struggle for power.[61] He asserts that Hafez al-Assad exploited sectarianism, even creating a distinct identity for it to serve as a cornerstone of his repressive apparatus.[62]

This thesis is inconsistent with an understanding of sectarianism as a social phenomenon, which is predicated on preconditions—namely, the economic, social, and political structures that allow them to emerge as behaviours, ideas, and values within a particular society. Absent these preconditions, no authority can impose sectarianism from above, especially since a sectarian discourse cannot be promoted in a modern state, particularly in the Syrian context. To put it differently, sectarianism cannot be decreed into existence. In fact, one might argue that sectarianism only exists at the top when certain potentialities are realised. Hafez al-Assad came to power in Syria precisely because of the decline of sectarianism, as Azmi Bishara points out. So why did he resort to sectarianism to perpetuate his rule when it was his fellow Baathists, not the sect to which he belonged, who brought him to power? Similarly, the assertion that sectarianism is 'deployed' presupposes that it is a preexisting phenomenon that the regime can invoke whenever it feels threatened by a crisis. Here, the instrumentalists move closer to the essentialists, the main disagreement between them being the question of whether sectarianism is used as a political tool (instrumentalists) or whether sectarianism uses political organisations in its doctrinal struggle (essentialists). Both lines of inquiry shunt aside the preconditions for the salience of sectarianism in the first place. The instrumentalist explanation is challenged by the continued manifestations of sectarian polarisation in Syria after the fall of the regime, even among groups that were not polarised during the Syrian revolution. The Druze in the Suwayda governorate participated in the protests against the Assad regime in the years before its collapse, while local armed groups helped bring down the regime during the Operation Deterrence of Aggression. Yet, this has not precluded massacres and fighting between Druze fighters and Sunni Arab fighters with Syrian security services and the army. Indeed, these clashes have claimed the lives of hundreds of civilians, both Druze and Sunni tribesman.[63]

Adopting an instrumentalist-class approach, Joseph Daher defines sectarianism as 'a modern expression that derives its force from the class, political, and social contradictions that arose with the integration of our societies into the capitalist system under the administration of colonial states in the late nineteenth century.'[64] Yet, this definition overlooks the fact that national identity in

Syria took shape in this same era and persisted throughout the French Mandate, despite the policies of fragmentation pursued by the colonial authorities, including attempts to create administratively autonomous sectarian entities like the Druze State and the Alawite State. Syrian national forces refused to engage in these structures, holding firm to a unified country. This suggests that pre-state loyalties are not automatically derived from the moment of integration into the capitalist order, but rather from how the socioeconomic structure is formed within it—that is, from the mode of production and the distribution of resources.

As with other instrumental approaches, Daher views sectarianism as a tool of hegemony and control in Syria, a product of Hafez al-Assad's regime, which, according to Daher, shaped it through its sectarian policies and practices after assuming power. This elides a crucial dimension that analyses like Mazur's have attempted to address. Mazur points out that authoritarian regimes not only fuel sectarianism but also suppress its public expression, while simultaneously seeking to appease various sectarian and religious groups to ensure stability. This contradiction between repression and co-optation is difficult to explain when sectarianism is reduced to a tool of the ruling power. Sectarianism should thus not be understood as a product of regime policies or a preexisting phenomenon to be exploited, but rather as part of a social structure reconfigured by the mode of production and the political economy, in whose orbit both the ruling power and members of society operate. From this perspective, it cannot be assumed that the Baath Party was formed on a sectarian basis, or that a transformative moment occurred that originated from its supreme authority. In fact, party's supreme authority itself was enmeshed in pre-state loyalties as part of a process connected to shifts in the material structure and their impact on representations of knowledge. These representations, in turn, interact with intervening variables related to the socioeconomic structure, among other determinants, which define the form and intensity of this structure in each sphere, as Mazur's localised analysis suggests. Hence, the intensity of sectarian violence varied from one region to another during the years of the Syrian revolution.[65]

One shortcoming of Daher's instrumental-class approach is his reinterpretation of the persistence of sectarian tensions in Syria after the fall of the regime. He argues that the new authorities—represented by the current transitional government led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham — use sectarianism 'as a tool of hegemony and control over the population … and to divide society.'[66] But how does this 'tool' persist outside the context of authoritarian governance? The fact that it endures demonstrates its deep roots within the social structure, showing that power cannot reproduce it so much as take shape within it. Consequently, describing sectarianism as a 'tool of domination' obscures the conditions that simultaneously make it possible and mutable.

Underdevelopment of economic structure and historical stagnation

The Syrian economy has experienced no core changes since the mid-1980s. In fact, the policies pursued by Bashar al-Assad exacerbated the retardation of the economic structure. His programme of accelerated liberalisation—what became known as the 'Revolution of Decrees'[67]—was coupled with the expansion of monopolies in key production and service sectors.

The profound underdevelopment of the economic structure under Bashar al-Assad is evident in the continued historical diminution of the Syrian economy. Syria played a leading role in the textile industry in the first half of the twentieth century, shifting its industrial structures to large-scale production and joint-stock companies and competing in quality with British and Japanese products. Yet, the Syrian economy of the twenty-first century remains stuck in the same textile sector and suffers from severe structural problems.[68] Meanwhile, the global economy has left the Second Industrial Revolution behind—which the Syrian economy missed after the Baathist coup—for the Third Revolution in communications and information and, next, the Fourth Industrial Revolution and the knowledge economy.

This historical eclipse is not solely about technology; it is a more profound underdevelopment of the social and cultural structures associated with production and knowledge. Instead of a gradual transition to advanced industrial models, the Syrian economy remained trapped in structures with limited added value, incapable of generating the dynamics of modern capital accumulation or integrating the workforce into channels of technological development that could absorb the rising number of graduates. Syrian economic underdevelopment is thus a complex, historical, structural problem.

The underdevelopment of the economic structure is visible in the nature of prevailing economic activity. Recent decades have seen the growth of unproductive activities such as brokerage, intermediary work, street vending, and private tutoring. The shadow economy in Syria accounted for roughly one-third of the workforce and household income between 2006 and 2012.[69] These activities largely redistribute rather than create income. At the same time, most economic activity is concentrated in individually or family-owned small and medium enterprises lacking high levels of organisation, technology, and accumulation.

Instead of giving rise to a modern industrial sector capable of absorbing the surplus workforce, the Syrian economy reproduced traditional structures based on family-owned workshops and shops, perpetuating a pattern of limited added value that cannot generate stable developmental dynamics. The distortion of the mode of production is not merely a contingent consequence of flawed policies. Rather, it is a structural feature associated with crony capitalism based on natural and political rents, instead of a transition toward a diversified economy that keeps pace with technological development and modern production methods.

Economic underdevelopment and distorted modes of production resulted in a sharp decline in demand for jobs requiring expertise and scientific skills, particularly given the monopolistic nature of key sectors of the Syrian economy as telecommunications. Given the reality of predetermined market shares, the absence of genuine competition, and the reliance on crony networks, administrative and operational positions like accounting, marketing, and management were de-professionalised. Now filled on the basis of loyalty, trust, and personal connections, such jobs no longer required experienced, competent professionals. Syriatel, for example, had no real need for high-level expertise in management, marketing, or service development since the lack of real competition meant that innovation and improvements in performance were unnecessary for market

survival. This was true of most large firms close to the halls of power: the market became a closed space governed by influence rather than efficiency and productivity.[70]

Official data for 2010 confirms this reality, indicating that only seven per cent of private sector employees hold intermediate, university, or higher academic qualifications, compared to about sixty-four per cent in the public sector. More than seventy per cent of public employees work in health and education,[71] sectors in which an academic degree is a mandatory requirement for employment and professional practice. Outside of those two sectors, the Syrian economy does not generate genuine demand for knowledge and skills. Instead, it reproduces a low-skilled labour market, pushing the majority of graduates into either unemployment or low-wage work that does not match their qualifications.

Employment standards revert to pre-state loyalties

With career paths blocked for graduates and low structural demand for scientific expertise, the Syrian market operated with different hiring mechanisms. Namely, business owners and firms preferred to hire trusted individuals from within their own social networks, which extended from the nuclear family to the clan, sect, and region of origin, or based on mutually beneficial relationships. Absent the rule of law and given weak oversight and accountability, personal trust and favours to relatives became decisive factors in employment and career advancement, at the expense of capability, experience, and knowledge.

The logic of pre-state loyalties thus supplanted the market logic of merit, competition, and contracts. The criteria for accessing economic and social benefits that prevailed in the public sector under Hafez al-Assad were universalised throughout the entire Syrian economy. Formerly confined largely to state institutions, they became deeply entrenched in the private sector as well due to the distorted economic structure reproduced by the regime. Ultimately, pre-state loyalties became the governing principle of economic relations and the labour market in Syria.[72]

Social relations retreat into pre-state affiliations

Shifts in the economic structure were reflected in the Syrian social structure, as pre-state affiliations became an undeniable social phenomenon. The sociopolitical impact is most evident in the decline of the Baath Party, the parties of the National Progressive Front, the so-called popular organisations, unions, and other groups that brought Syrians together on the basis of partisan affiliation and shared interests. As the Baath Party was eclipsed as a source of power and socioeconomic benefits, its social presence weakened. Even the party secretary-general, Hafez al-Assad, no longer attached much importance to the party, demonstrated by the fact that he stopped attending party meetings from 1985 until his death in 2000. Nor did his son, Bashar al-Assad, attempt to revive the party's role. It thus devolved into an administrative structure that managed the roles of those close to the regime within the state apparatus.[73]

Waves of migration from rural areas to Syria's metropolises distorted their urban character, resulting in ruralisation given the structure of the Syrian economy. Rural migrants brought their social networks with them, choosing where to settle based on these relationships. Alawites, Druze,

and even Sunni Arabs from countryside congregated in specific urban areas, such as Mezzeh 86 and Ish al-Warwar (Alawites) and Jaramana (Druze) in Damascus and its surrounding countryside, and Sheikh Maqsoud and Ashrafieh (Kurds) and Sayyid Ali (Mardal) in Aleppo. Newcomers from both nearby and distant rural areas were concentrated in these neighbourhoods and others along sectarian and ethnic lines.[74]

Similarly, family and tribal leaders assumed greater prominence within their own social milieux and in their dealings with local authorities, a reflection of the reproduction of social representation through local leaders and intermediaries. Tribal representation declined in the mid-twentieth century as pre-state loyalties weakened and individual partisan affiliation became more pronounced, as evidenced by the low level of tribal representation in the People's Assembly—just seven per cent in 1943. By 2008, tribal representation in the parliament had nearly doubled, to twelve per cent.[75] Although the Syrian parliamentary elections cannot be considered a true expression of popular will, they do reflect a clear regression in the Syrian social structure, from a civic structure to a return to pre-state relations. Tribal and familial representatives won seats even in Aleppo, illustrating the pervasiveness of ruralisation and the urban penetration of tribal relations.

Shifts in Syria's economic and political structure thus triggered a resurgence of pre-state loyalties, transforming them from narrow practices that were on the retreat, especially in cities, into a social phenomenon whose existence cannot be ignored. Sectarian discourse, or even the mere mention of a sectarian dysfunction, was forbidden in Syria due to the Assad regime's draconian restrictions on research into controversial issues. Yet, if questions of sect remained largely unspoken in the public sphere, they were discussed by Syrians in private and expressed themselves when the opportunity arose. In a 2006 investigative report by *Le Figaro*, for example, Alawites expressed their fears of Sunni reprisals should the Assad regime collapse.[76]

The potential for sectarianism to transform from a latent socioeconomic phenomenon into political-military action can be glimpsed in a number of incidents that occurred between 2000 and 2011, in which localised or individual disputes escalated into violence that assumed a sectarian, ethnic, or tribal character. In 2000, Bedouin and Druze groups clashed in the Suwayda governorate, resulting in deaths, injuries, and the arrest of dozens of people from both sides.[77] In 2004, chants exchanged between Kurdish and Arab fans during a football match in Qamishli escalated into widespread clashes between Arab tribes and Kurdish groups, culminating in dozens of deaths, injuries, and arrests, most of whom were Kurds.[78] The city of Qadmus also saw tension and violence in 2005 between Alawites and Ismailis, as well as recurring tribal and family disputes in the same period.[79]

Conclusion

This study concludes that sectarianism in Syria is not a latent historical relic or merely a tool of authoritarian manipulation; rather, it is a sociopolitical phenomenon linked to material conditions. The analysis shows that the rise of urban capitalism and the national bourgeoisie in the second half of the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries created material foundations that crossed the

boundaries of pre-state affiliations within the framework of a multiparty parliamentary state. This development was disrupted by the Egyptian-Syrian union, followed by the Baathist policies of nationalisation and isolation, and later the rise of crony capitalism and the authoritarian rentier state, which undermined these material foundations. Pre-state affiliations evolved into networks for resource distribution and social protection, thus reproducing sectarianism as an organising structure for economic and political relations.

Accordingly, this study proposes an explanatory model that views the mode of production and the distribution of wealth as structural drivers of shifts in loyalty, while political and social structures act as intervening variables that determine the form, speed, and intensity of these shifts. The sectarian polarisation that peaked in 2011 and persisted after the fall of the Assad regime should not be understood as a sudden rupture, but rather as an acute expression of a prolonged process of structural transformation and the erosion of the economic value of citizenship.

Consequently, sectarianism in Syria cannot be transcended with discursive approaches or institutional arrangements divorced from the material context. Moving beyond sectarianism is contingent on the reconstruction of a productive economy that generates social foundations that cut across pre-state affiliations and restores citizenship as an economic necessity even more than a normative value. Whether this model is applicable to other Arab contexts remains an open question for future research.

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No AI tools were used in the writing or formulation of this paper.

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Mohammed Shabani is a researcher in political economy and international relations and an independent writer who has published in multiple academic platforms and media outlets.

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