Beyond Sectarianism:
Geopolitics, Fragmentation, and the Syrian Civil War

Benedetta Berti and Jonathan Paris

A bloody civil war has been raging in Syria over the past three years, pitting the regime of Bashar al-Assad and his international supporters against the different factions that make up the domestic and diaspora-based anti-regime opposition. As the initially sporadic armed clashes turned into a protracted civil war, the international coverage of the conflict focused on the sectarian dimension of the struggle, highlighting the increasingly antagonistic relations between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority within Syria. This Sunni-Shiite sectarian cleavage is especially important given the regional dimension of the Syrian conflict, which has quickly become entangled in a broader proxy war between the main regional powers, Saudi Arabia and Iran. Sectarianism within Syria also appears to have strengthened preexisting sectarian cleavages across the Middle East, especially in neighboring Lebanon. Yet the longer the conflict in Syria continues, the more it is important to understand cleavages not just between the main warring parties, but also within them and in the wider region.

This article explores the main historical and political drivers behind the strengthening of sectarian dynamics within Syria, focusing on the regional impact of this sectarian trend. The article seeks to put sectarianism in context, noting the contribution of both domestic and regional political factors to the revival of pre-ascribed identities. The article tries to integrate sectarianism into a broader explanatory framework beyond a simplistic Sunni vs. Shiite narrative. Finally, it

Dr. Benedetta Berti is a research fellow at INSS. Jonathan Paris is a London-based Middle East analyst and non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

examines the impact of emerging sectarian and in-group tensions on the "day after" in Syria.[1]

It is Complicated: Sectarian Cleavages and the Syrian Civil War in Context

The roots of the Syrian civil war are complex and multi-layered, and cannot be understood by looking solely at preexisting sectarian identities and the Sunni-Shiite cleavage. There are at least three other explanations for the explosion in Syria. First, anti-regime protests, seen in the broader regional wave of social and political mobilizations spurred by the Arab Awakening, were a response to an authoritarian regime ruled through emergency laws, clientelism, and endemic corruption.

Second, the initial demonstrations in March 2011 were ignited by a sense of frustration over growing social inequalities and bad governance within Syria.[2] Since being "anointed" president in July 2000, Bashar al-Assad accelerated his father Hafez's gradual economic liberalization to push broad and far reaching neo-liberal policies aimed at privatizing public assets, liberalizing the finance sector, and encouraging private investments and injection of foreign capital into Syria.[3] These reforms, which gained additional traction following the 2005 withdrawal from Lebanon, led to economic growth – partly backed by the rise in global oil prices – and to a spike in foreign investments. Yet as with recent neo-liberal reforms in other Arab countries, "the move toward the market economy neglected equitable income distribution and social protection, thereby culminating in anti-developmental economic growth."[4] Economic liberalization did not lead to substantial funds channeled toward boosting local industrial or agricultural production, and failed to generate substantial employment. As a result, sharp increases in income inequality emerged between the main urban centers and the ever more impoverished peripheries.[5]

Third, living conditions of lower middle class and working class Syrians, and especially those living at the geographical periphery of the country, further deteriorated in the years preceding the 2011 revolutions as a result of rising inflation, a decline in oil prices, and shrinking subsidies from Damascus. This macro-level deterioration was compounded by pervasive faulty governance and corruption at the local level. There was a perceptible decline in the effectiveness (but not brutality) of the security sector while local government "became the embodiment of a predatory

culture in which resources were not redistributed but skimmed off for the benefit of the few." [6]

This dynamic of unequal development, corruption, and center-periphery inequality explains the roots of the revolution in Syria and shows parallels between the political demonstration that sparked the Arab Awakening in Tunisia and the initial cycle of protest in Syria. At the same time, sectarian fault lines cannot be discounted as an additional factor that contributed to heighten the internal tensions spurred by this combination of structural, political, and economic factors. In the Syrian case sectarian and ethnic boundaries often overlapped with the geographic map of poverty and exclusion. Over recent decades, individual and community access to power and privileges has become correlated with sectarian identities.

Historically, the Assad regime relied on a combination of repression and co-optation to ensure its permanence in power, maintaining a strong grip on all institutions of government and on Syria's coercive apparatus.[7] A key strategy to maintain the Assad regime was to award minorities like the Druze, Ismailis, and most of all, the Alawites – who account for roughly 10 percent of the Syrian population – with disproportionate access to power and privileges.

At the same time, the exclusion/inclusion boundary was not solely determined by sectarian and identity politics. Both Assads, father and son, used economic reforms to consolidate power.[8] Economic liberalization was a tool for expanding the supporting bases of Bashar's government by ensuring the loyalty of the beneficiaries of those economic reforms, namely the expanding Sunni urban upper middle class. Sunni and Christian business elites in Damascus, and to a lesser extent Aleppo, gained from Assad's policies by obtaining more access to political power, a process facilitated by the rise of an entirely new generation of officers loyal to Bashar and committed to his political and economic plan.[9] The marriage between Bashar al-Assad and British-Syrian Asma al-Akhras, the daughter of a well-to-do Sunni family originally from Homs, symbolizes this alliance between the Alawite military and political elite and the Sunni business elite.[10]

The combustible mix of corruption, arrogance, entitlement, and inequality fueled the initial protests in March 2011. Their focus was not so much on sectarian demands but on calls for genuine social, economic, and political change. The protests began in Syria's disenfranchised

periphery in the southwestern rural and impoverished town of Dara'a, and then spread like wildfire across Syria through the flames of social media and YouTube videos uploaded from cell phones. Along the way, the protests enlisted support of the main intellectuals, opposition leaders, and groups behind the 2000 "Damascus Spring" and the 2005 "Damascus Declaration."[11]

Beginning as non-violent protests, the confrontation shifted from peaceful to violent, and even more swiftly, from political to sectarian. Understanding this metamorphosis into a violent sectarian conflict requires an analysis of the deliberate political strategy employed by the Syrian regime and, perhaps less deliberately, by foreign powers on both sides of the conflict. These political strategies mobilized preexisting cross-sectarian cleavages and pushed them into the foreground of the conflict.

The Assad regime's strategy for dealing with domestic opposition had a number of components: violent crackdown on the protests, mixed with vague cosmetic political changes, and a campaign accusing the opposition of *takfiri* extremism and terrorism in order to rally minorities and other fence-sitters behind the regime.[12]

Eyeing the protests through security lenses, the Assad regime relied on a deliberate and fairly comprehensive strategy to induce fear. This strategy included suppressing all types of mobilizations, retaliating against the communities and areas where anti-regime activism occurred, arresting, torturing and killing protest leaders, and intimidating supporters.[13] This deliberate and increasingly violent campaign played a key role in pushing the opposition from non-violent to violent protest. The militarization of the conflict played into Assad's hand and gave him wider options in dealing with the opposition, since an authoritarian ruler is usually better equipped to confront violent opposition than to withstand a prolonged non-violent struggle.[14]

The violent escalation also allowed the regime to preserve its bases of support. The strategy of fear called for fanning the flames of sectarianism to rally the country's main minorities, with the notable exception of the Kurds. The regime shrewdly asserted that there would be an existential threat to these communities' survival in the event of an opposition victory. Assad emphasized the Sunni nature of the opposition, while also pointing out its Islamist character and referring to anti-Assad forces as "terrorists." In a September 2013 interview with the French newspaper

Le Figaro, Bashar provided a sample of regime discourse: "We are fighting terrorists…80-90% belong to al-Qaeda. They are not interested in reform or in politics. The only way to deal with them is to annihilate them."[15]

The sectarian specter of Sunni extremism managed to ensure the loyalty of small but important minorities within Syria, including the Druze, Alawites, and growing portions of the Christian community. Assad also dangerously strengthened the sectarian dimension of the conflict by relying on paramilitary "self-defense" groups belonging mostly to his Alawite community (referred to as *shabiha* by the opposition).[16] The more these *shabiha* militias perpetrated massacres and atrocities to "defend" the regime, the more Sunni resentment against the regime was also directed at the Alawite community, making the fate of the Alawites intertwined with Assad's survival, and adding to a vicious circle of sectarianism.

However, it would be reductive to see the rise of sectarianism as entirely regime-driven. The anti-Assad opposition on the ground has done its fair share in contributing to this trend. To be sure, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, the political body recognized as the "representative of the Syrian people," and public intellectuals affiliated with it like Radwan Ziadeh go out of their way to stress the inclusive and non-sectarian dimension of their project.[17] On the ground, however, increasingly empowered Salafist and al-Qaeda-inspired or affiliated jihadist groups have become important sectors of the anti-Assad opposition. They tell a different story, especially as accounts surface of atrocities perpetrated by opposition forces against Syria's Christian and Alawite minorities.[18]

The strengthening of the radical camp of the opposition is related to another main driver of sectarianism in Syria in addition to domestic politics – the role and influence of external actors. Financial backing and support for the Islamist camp, mostly from the Gulf, have improved the status and power of the Islamists relative to other sectors of the opposition. Outside support directly contributes to the sectarian dynamics of the civil war. Indeed, sectarianism in Syria and the wider region cannot be understood without looking at the role regional geopolitics has played in shaping the Syrian conflict and its internal dynamics, and in gradually transforming Syria into both a proxy regional battlefield and a sectarian war.

Broadening the Battlefield: External Actors and Geopolitics

At the most basic level, the conflict in Syria today is an extension of the regional cold war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Saudi Arabia's foreign policy with respect to both the Arab Awakening and Iran became increasingly more assertive after its military intervention in support of a fellow Sunni monarchy, the Khalifa ruling family of Bahrain, against an increasingly restive Shiite-based political opposition in 2011. The growing interest and involvement of the Saudis in Syria is a reaction to a combination of trends they perceive as worrisome. These include the conservative Saudi aversion to the revolutionary wave shaking the Middle East and to political forces pushing for democratization; uneasiness over the collapse of status quo regimes such as the Mubarak regime in Egypt; the perceived retrenchment of the United States from the region; and the deep apprehension over the expanding regional role of the Islamic Republic of Iran − especially in light of the US withdrawal from Iraq and Iran's advances on the nuclear track.[19] The successful negotiation of an interim agreement between Iran and the P5+1 on the Iran nuclear crisis, and the unmistakable rapprochement between Presidents Obama and Rouhani only add to Saudi Arabia's sense of insecurity.

In this context, Riyadh sees support for the anti-Assad opposition and regime change in Syria as crucial tools for weakening Iranian influence in the region by depriving Tehran of its main Arab ally and cutting off Iranian supply lines to Hizbollah in Lebanon. For Iran, a similar calculation of the need to preserve its regional influence has led it to invest heavily in the survival of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. Accordingly, a regional cold war plays out in Syria. If Iran's ally in Damascus is able to prevail, the Saudis fear an unstoppable shift in favor of Iran and its regional allies, particularly Syria and Hizbollah. The combination of growing instability in the region and Iran's nuclear ambition pushes Saudi Arabia toward a more assertive policy that uses sectarianism to galvanize Sunni Arabs against the Iran-led "Shiite crescent." As David Gardner wrote in the *Financial Times*, "The great game against Iran…is at the heart of the Sunni-Shia conflict."[20]

Although preexisting Sunni-Shiite tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia contribute to the animosity and vitriolic attacks by both countries against one another, their current level of involvement and commitment in Syria cannot be understood without recognizing its

strategic significance to both sides. In other words, sectarianism without geopolitics is insufficient to explain Saudi and Iranian policies on Syria.

Moreover, the longer the conflict continues, the less the Sunni-Shiite prism is able to capture the full reality on the ground. The growing fragmentation of conflicts inside Syria goes well beyond the sectarian dimension. Such fragmentation simultaneously reflects and enhances the shifting geostrategic dynamics in the Middle East and contributes to the re-drawing of alliances as well as the regional balance of power.

There are currently at least three main blocs within the region involved in the Syrian conflict. The fault lines between these blocs are determined more by geopolitical interests than by sectarianism. The first bloc, commonly called the "axis of resistance," comprises Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah. After losing the support of Sunni Hamas over a year ago, this Shiite axis has increasing sectarian overtones. However, the Alawites of Syria are not Shiite in a religious sense, and only became politically recognized as Shiite in the context of the Lebanese civil war and the rise of the Iran of Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1980s. These skin-deep sectarian links between Tehran and Damascus have failed to produce broad popular support on the streets of Iran for their government's policy on Syria. Most Iranians do not strongly support Assad's war, and only 37 percent of Iranians back their government's military assistance to the Syrian regime.[21]

The Syrian conflict has also galvanized a Sunni awakening that began in Tunis in late 2010. In fact, two different Sunni regional camps have emerged: a "pro-Muslim Brotherhood revolutionary" alliance and an "anti-Muslim Brotherhood status quo" camp.

Energized in the early months of the Arab Awakening, the revolutionary alliance initially included Morsi's Egypt, Erdogan's Turkey, Qatar under former Emir Hamad bin Khalifa, and Hamas in Gaza. At the moment, however, this camp is very much in flux following the downfall of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and the negative impact of the Egyptian political transition on Hamas. Qatar's foreign policy activism may also be reduced following the ailing 62-year-old Emir's abdication in favor of his 33-year-old son, Crown Prince Tamim. Although it is too early to tell, the new Emir has shown indications of being more focused on domestic development than on promoting regional support of Islamists.[22] Prime Minister Erdogan's pro-Islamist foreign policies on Syria, along with his authoritarianism, eccentricity,

and alleged corruption, have become much more controversial at home. After months of turning a blind eye to movements of foreign fighters and jihadists entering northern Syria from Turkey, the growing presence of pro-al-Qaeda groups in Syria has begun to raise concerns regarding the long term safety of the Turkish border.[23]

The "anti-Muslim Brotherhood status quo" camp could also be labeled the "no-Muslim Brotherhood-in-my-backyard" alliance, with the focus being on preserving the status quo within the monarchies while supporting regime change to remove the Muslim Brotherhood from power elsewhere, such as in Egypt.[24] Key players in this camp are the monarchies led by Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and in a different capacity, Jordan, in addition to the current Egyptian government. The Palestinian Authority, though marginal in the conflict in Syria, is also part of this camp.

With respect to the Syrian conflict, both the revolutionary and the status quo Sunni camps are interested in removing Assad from power, yet they have given priority to funding and supporting different segments of the opposition, furthering divisions within the opposition ranks. The main foreign backer of the opposition, Saudi Arabia, supports both the National Coalition and the Free Syrian Army on the one hand, and their rival Salafist factions. Perhaps this is best explained by the overriding Saudi strategic interest in bringing down Assad by backing any and all fighters other than al-Qaeda-affiliated groups and the Muslim Brotherhood.[25] The fragmentation within the opposition is aggravated by the rise of a possible fourth camp representing transnational pro-al-Qaeda jihadist fighters inside Syria. These groups contribute to even stronger fault lines within the rebel ranks, further segmenting the opposition.

This brief excursus into some of the different Middle East players involved in the Syrian civil war underlines the limitations of an exclusively bi-polar Sunni-Shiite framework in describing the reality of the civil war in Syria. In early 2014, regional geopolitics best explain the evolving dynamics on the ground.[26] More than a sectarian conflict, Syria today is a complex and increasingly fragmented regional proxy war where the main blocs have decided that their victory on the proxy battlefield will improve their regional power and weaken their opponents. These regional kingmakers are willing to fight "until the last drop of Syrian

blood," while also putting their own non-Syrian allies (like Hizbollah) on the line to achieve this result.

Beyond the War: Sectarian and Geopolitical Implications for the Future

The powerful mix of sectarianism, geopolitics, and fragmentation instills deep and potentially long term repercussions both in Syria and regionally. On the ground, the civil war is more intractable than ever, and the conflict has evolved into several parallel struggles: a vertical conflict between the regime and the opposition, a regional proxy war led by Iran and Saudi Arabia, a horizontal struggle between the rebel forces over who represents the opposition, and a Kurdish move toward autonomy.

Fragmentation affects prospects for both ending the war and a successful political transition in four ways. First, fragmentation within the anti-Assad groups is the biggest obstacle the opposition faces in both trying to change the military balance of power on the ground as well as in creating a unified and cohesive front with political status and legitimacy. Second, a divided opposition lacks the clout to both negotiate a political deal and guarantee its actual implementation.[27] Third, in a vicious circle, the rise of radical jihadist groups further alienates much-needed international backing for the opposition, while strengthening the regime's support bases. Fourth, internal divisions and the proliferation of radical militias made up of growing numbers of foreign fighters complicate future post-war efforts at political transition and reconciliation.

Sectarianism, much like fragmentation, has a toxic effect on the termination and resolution of the conflict, especially as the convergence of geopolitical and domestic interests has heightened the stakes of the conflict for both Assad and his backers and for the opposition groups. As the main sectarian communities within Syria increasingly perceive the conflict in existential zero-sum terms, the rise in mass atrocities, ethnic cleansings, and crimes against humanity should not be unexpected. The war against the regime has become a war between communities. Looking ahead, the restoration of Syria's destroyed social fabric will be a hugely difficult task.

The costs to the region have also been substantial, for example, in Iraq, where Sunni extremists affiliated with al-Qaeda have become re-energized, aggravating Iraq's dangerous sectarian divisions.[28] As Lebanon becomes more destabilized because of the war in Syria, it now

faces a precarious and dysfunctional political paralysis, souring sectarian relations, growing restlessness within the respective Sunni and Shiite communities, rising Salafism, and mounting pressure from the massive influx of Syrian refugees.[29]

At the geopolitical level, the fault lines between the pro- and anti-Assad camps have set the stage for an especially tense regional balance with deleterious implications for Shiite-Sunni relations. The more hostile and threatening Iran appears in the region, the more unified is the regional Sunni alliance to contain Iran. Arguably, an Assad victory may create a moment of Sunni unity in reaction. But the current stalemate in Syria is not an Assad victory and has not resulted in Sunni convergence on the ground or regionally.

At the regional level, sectarianism in Syria is becoming a contributing factor to growing radicalization.[30] Sunni clerics and televangelists like Yusuf Qaradawi stoke sectarianism by encouraging Sunnis from all over the world to engage in jihad against Bashar al-Assad's regime. After Hassan Nasrallah's May 25, 2013 speech announcing that Hizbollah forces were fighting and would continue to fight in Syria, Qaradawi began to make calls for jihad against Hizbollah. The demonization of Hizbollah by Qaradawi is driven in part by religious animosity fueled by a sense of victimhood at the hands of the Shia *mushriqin* (non-believers). Within Lebanon, this type of rhetoric has contributed to strengthening radical Salafist groups and their animosity against Hizbollah, resulting in a growing number of attacks against the Shiite group, including a major November 2013 suicide bombing attack against the Iranian embassy in Beirut.[31] At the same time, Shiite leaders like Nasrallah, along with Assad and Iranian authorities, stoke radicalization by using parallel language of existential threats from Sunni *takfiri* terrorists.[32]

The overall lesson is that while sectarianism can be deliberately fueled in the region in the context of a larger geopolitical game, once the genie is out of the bottle, sectarian dynamics and the accompanying instability and radicalism are difficult to control. This "genie out of the bottle" explains the growing concern across the region and beyond over the rise of sectarian tensions and related extremism.[33]

The increasing sectarian rift could be seen by some as a mixed blessing for Israel. Some feel that continued stalemate in Syria is the least bad option. As the civil war continues, both Sunni jihadists and Hizbollah fight and weaken each other, while the war risks becoming a black hole

for Iran. In addition to these negative outcomes for Israel's enemies, the regional cold war may also pave the way for better relations with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf monarchies, especially if progress is made in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Yet evolving dynamics on the ground seem to tell a different story. Regional instability and polarization spell trouble for the West, including Israel, by fostering radicalization. Sectarianism radicalizes Sunnis, providing "a breeding ground for al-Qaeda type organizations to thrive,"[34] and this is especially the case as thousands of aspiring jihadists flock to Syria the same way they were previously attracted by the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan.[35] The longer the Syrian civil war persists, the more radicalized the Sunni rebel forces become. This will leave a nastier and more chaotic Syria with a strong jihadi element on Israel's northern border if Assad is eventually toppled, while risking another "Sinai scenario," where radicalized non-state armed groups rely on Syria as a launching pad for attacks against Israel. As rising sectarianism destabilizes the region overall, it also impacts on individual countries like Jordan, whose stability is indispensable for Israel's regional position.

In this context, an attempt to resolve the conflict through a negotiated settlement and the subsequent creation of a power-sharing government may be the most effective tool to stop the region from descending further into a spiral of instability, radicalization, and sectarianism. From this perspective, the argument of "let them fight each other"[36] may be strategically shortsighted, in addition to being morally problematic, for the international community.

Notes
1. The "Day after Project" was carried out between January and June 2012 by the United States Institute of Peace and by a coalition of representatives of the Syrian opposition seeking to plan the post-Assad transition. See http://www.usip.org/the-day-after-project.
2. "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): The Syrian People's Slow Motion Revolution," International Crisis Group, Middle East/North Africa Report 108, July 6, 2011, p. 13, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/108-popular-protest-in-north-africa-and-the-middle-east-vi-the-syrian-peoples-slow-motion-revolution.aspx.
3. Majid Rafizadeh, "In Syria, Follow the Money to Find the Roots of the Revolt," *Daily Beast,* April 8, 2013, http://www.thedailybeast.com/

articles/2013/04/08/in-syria-follow-the-money-to-find-the-roots-of-the-revolt.html.

4   Linda Matar, "The Socioeconomic Roots of the Syrian Uprising," *Middle East Insights* No. 58, March 27, 2012, http://www.mei.nus.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Download-Insight-58-Matar-HERE.pdf.

5   Ibid.

6   "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV)," p. 14.

7   Ahed Al Hendi, "The Structure of Syria's Repression: Will the Army Break With the Regime?" *Foreign Affairs,* May 3, 2011, http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/67823/ahed-al-hendi/the-structure-of-syrias-repression?page=2.

8   See Steven Heydemann, "The Political Logic of Economic Rationality: Selective Stabilization in Syria," in *The Political Economy of Stabilization Measures in the Middle East*, ed. Henri Barkey (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

9   "Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (IV)," p. 19; Selvik Kjetil, "It's the Mentality, Stupid: Syria's Turn to the Private Sector," in *Changing Regime Discourse and Reform in Syria, Saint Andrews Papers on Modern Syrian Studies*, ed. Aurora Sottimano and Selvik Kjetil, No. 1 (Autumn 2008). ojs.st-andrews.ac.uk/index.php/syria/article/download/705/592; see also Eyal Zisser, "Alone at the Top: Bashar al-Assad and the Struggle for Syria," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 3 (2013): 57-65.

10 Shmuel Bar, "Bashar's Syria: The Regime and its Strategic Worldview," *Comparative Strategy* 25 (2006): 357-58. Asma's father, Dr. Fawaz Akhras, is a well-regarded Harley Street medical consultant in cardiology and a founder of the British-Syrian Society in London. Her paternal grandfather was in the textile business in Homs.

11 See Jonas Bergan Dræge, "Struggle for Attention in the Syrian Opposition, 2000-2013," Thesis, Oriental Institute University of Oxford, May 2013.

12 See "Syria: Mass Grave Found in Dera'a," *The Telegraph*, May 16, 2011, http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/8516958/Syria-mass-grave-found-in-Deraa.html.

13 See "Syria's Phase of Radicalisation," *International Crisis Group,* Middle East Briefing N°33, April 10, 2012, http://www.crisisgroup.org/en/regions/middle-east-north-africa/egypt-syria-lebanon/syria/b033-syrias-phase-of-radicalisation.aspx.

14 Stephen Zunes, "Supporting Non-Violence in Syria," *Foreign Policy,* December 20, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/12/20/supporting_non_violence_in_syria.

15 Georges Malbrunot, "La Mise en Garde d'Assad à la France" ("Assad's Warning to France"), *Le Figaro,* September 2, 2013, http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/09/02/01003-20130902ARTFIG00532-la-mise-en-garde-d-el-assad-a-la-france.php (full transcript at http://www.buzzfeed.com/miriamelder/assad-speaks-the-only-way-to-deal-with-them-is-to-annihilate).

16 For a basic overview, see "Syria Unrest: Who are the Shabiha?" *BBC News,* May 29, 2012, http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14482968.

17 See for example "Transcript: A Revolution for all Seasons," *al-Jazeera,* November 10, 2011, http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/empire/ 2011/11/2011111072216938979.html.

18 See "'You Can Still See Their Blood': Executions, Indiscriminate Shootings, and Hostage Taking by Opposition Forces in Latakia Countryside," *Human Rights Watch,* October 11, 2013, http://www.hrw.org/reports/2013/10/10/you-can-still-see-their-blood; see also "Syrian Christians Fear for Survival," *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights*, http://syriahr.com/en/index.php?option=com_ news&nid=1044&Itemid=2&task=displaynews#.Uom8EeJQNnE.

19 See Jonathan Paris, "Prospects for Iran," *Legatum Institute,* January 2011, http://www.li.com/docs/publications/2011-publication-prospects-for-iran. pdf.

20 David Gardner, "Hizbollah has Become a State above the State," *Financial Times*, July 23, 2013, http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/50cd60e8-f2bc-11e2-a203-00144feabdc0.html#axzz2ZrRYdQ1g .

21 Jay Loschky, "Iranians' Support for Syria Softens," *Gallup,* November 15, 2013, http://www.gallup.com/poll/165878/iranians-support-syria-softens. aspx.

22 Jonathan Paris, "Syria & Sectarianism: Implications," *Atlantic Council MENA Source*, October 21, 2013, at http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ menasource/syria-and-sectarianism-implications-part-ii. The one exception is Qatari criticism of the Egyptian government's expanding crackdown on Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood.

23 Liz Sly, "Turkey Confronts Policy Missteps on Syria with Rise of al-Qaeda across the Border," *Washington Post,* November 17, 2013, http://www. washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/turkey-confronts-policy-missteps-on-syria-with-rise-of-al-qaeda-across-the-border/2013/11/16/ e6183f12-4e27-11e3-97f6-ed8e3053083b_story.html. See also Kareem Fahim and Sebnem Arsu, "Egypt Expels Turkey's Ambassador, Further Fraying Diplomatic Ties," *New York Times,* November 23, 2013, http://www.nytimes. com/2013/11/24/world/middleeast/diplomatic-ties-fraying-between-egypt-and-turkey.html?ref=world.

24 Yoel Guzansky, "The Arab World and the Syrian Crisis," *INSS Insight* No. 461, September 2, 2013, http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=5540.

25 Gregory Gause, "Workshop on Syria Global and Regional Implications of the Syrian Crisis," Lehigh University, November 2-5, 2013.

26 The cognitive limits of "identity politics" as the sole explanatory framework are demonstrated by the joint concerns expressed by both Iraqi Kurdish leader Masoud Barzani and Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan with respect to the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD) push to establish a Kurdish autonomous region. Perfectly understandable through a geopolitical lens, the statements would appear baffling if seen

through the lens of "identity politics" pitting Turks vs. Kurds. See "Iraqi Kurdish Leader Barzani Urges Support for Peace Process in Diyarbakır rally with Turkish PM," *Hurriyet Daily News,* November 18, 2013, http://www. hurriyetdailynews.com/iraqi-kurdish-leader-barzani-urges-support-for-peace-process-in-diyarbakir-rally-with-turkish-pm.aspx?pageID=238&nID=5 8028&NewsCatID=338.

27 Benedetta Berti, "Syria's Rebels: Between Talks and a Hard Place," *National Interest*, November 8, 2013, http://tinyurl.com/p7y28y8.

28 See Ben Hubbard, Robert F. Worth, and Michael R. Gordon, "Power Vacuum in Middle East Lifts Militants," *New York Times,* January 4, 2014, http://www. nytimes.com/2014/01/05/world/middleeast/power-vacuum-in-middle-east-lifts-militants.html?emc=eta1&_r=0.

29 See Joseph Bahout, "Sectarianism in Lebanon and Syria: The Dynamics of Mutual Spill-Over," United States Institute for Peace, November 18, 2013, http://www.usip.org/publications/sectarianism-in-lebanon-and-syria.

30 For a view of how the atrocities in Syria and the sense of helplessness can fuel resentment, anger, and ultimately radicalization, see Sara Assaf, "I am not a Terrorist...Yet," *Now Lebanon,* November 9, 2013, https://now.mmedia. me/lb/en/commentaryanalysis/519760-i-am-not-a-terrorist-yet.

31 Yoram Schweitzer and Benedetta Berti, "The Bombing of the Iranian Embassy in Beirut: Hitting Two Birds with One Stone," *INSS Insight* No. 488, November 21, 2013, http://www.inss.org.il/index.aspx?id=4538&articleid=5999.

32 Takfirism was Sayd Qutb's term for declaring a Muslim ruler who had strayed from Islam and became illegitimate and an apostate. It then became the duty of all Muslims to take up jihad against the oppressive ruler. See Emmanuel Sivan, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology and Modern Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990). A useful recent discourse on rising sectarianism in the Levant can be found in Benedetta Berti and Yoram Schweitzer, "Hizbollah in Syria: Losing the Balance between 'National Resistance' and Sectarian Interests?" *Strategic Assessment* 16, no. 2 (2013): 47-59, at http://www.inss.org.il.cdn.reblaze.com/upload/(FILE)1376549203.pdf.

33 "Many Sunnis and Shias Worry About Religious Conflict," *Pew Research,* November 7, 2013, http://www.pewforum.org/2013/11/07/many-sunnis-and-shias-worry-about-religious-conflict/.

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