

The Syrian Crisis: A Protracted Social Conflict?

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Abstract

Since the Syrian conflict has been going on for over ten years, it is often stated that the civil war in that country became protracted or intractable. In addition, the emphasis on the sectarian dimension of the conflict draws attention to the social and religious structure of the Syrian population. In spite of these characteristics of the conflict, the Syrian civil war has been rarely associated with Edward Azar's theory of protracted social conflict (PSC). This paper tries to explain the Syrian civil war with the theory of PSC that presents a multi-dimensional approach. Thus, it is argued that a crisis of legitimacy that stems from socio-economic and sectarian imbalances triggered the civil war in Syria.

Keywords: Syria, Civil War, Protracted Social Conflict, Edward Azar's Theory

Suriye Krizi: Müzminleşmiş Bir Toplumsal Çatışma mı?

Özet

On yıldan fazla süredir devam eden Suriye çatışması nedeniyle bu ülkedeki iç savaşın müzminleştiği ya da kör döğüşü haline geldiği sıklıkla dile getirilmektedir. Ayrıca çatışmanın mezhepsel boyutuna yapılan vurgu, Suriye nüfusunun toplumsal ve dini yapısını öne çıkarmaktadır. Çatışmanın bu özelliklerine rağmen, Suriye iç savaşı Edward Azar'ın müzminleşmiş toplumsal çatışma teorisiyle nadiren ilişkilendirilmiştir. Bu makale, Suriye iç savaşını çok boyutlu bir yaklaşım sunan müzminleşmiş toplumsal çatışma teorisi yardımıyla açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Bu çözümlemede, sosyo-ekonomik ve mezhepsel dengesizliklerden kaynaklanan bir meşruiyet krizinin Suriye'deki iç savaşı tetiklediği savunulmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Suriye, İç Savaş, Müzminleşmiş Toplumsal Çatışma, Edward Azar'ın Kuramı

Introduction

The failure or reluctance of the Bashar al-Assad regime to meet the demands of Syrian protesters in the initial phase of the Arab Spring led to the outbreak of a civil war in Syria. Although the conflict did not result in a regime change like in Egypt or Libya, the long duration of the war undermined hopes of breaking the deadlock in favour of either side. Besides, the civil war in which the military and the opposition forces suffered thousands of casualties then turned into an international crisis involving several regional and global actors. Currently, by many observers, the ongoing conflict is described as a proxy war between these actors. In addition to the external balances, the delay in finding a compromise solution to the crisis is closely related to Syria's social, cultural and political structure. In this context, the sectarian dimension of Syrian politics in general and that of the civil war in particular draws attention to the ethnic and religious dynamics of the current crisis.

This paper aims to examine the role of sectarianism in the Syrian civil war in order to understand why it has become so prolonged and intractable. The civil war will be analysed by

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applying Edward Elias Azar's theory of protracted social conflict (PSC) as a framework for conflict analysis. According to this concept, the main research question of this paper is: "To what extent does the Syrian civil war have the characteristics of a PSC?" In that context, the paper's analysis of the multi-sided civil war in Syria revolves around its multi-sectarian society. It is argued that a crisis of legitimacy originated by socio-economic and sectarian imbalances precipitated the country into a civil war.

This paper is organised in three parts. Firstly, the relevant historical context will be outlined in order to reveal the roots of the mutual distrust between various ethnic groups in Syria. The Alawites, members of a branch of Shia Islam who dominate the political and military establishments, will be the focal point of the historical process. Following the introduction of the background of the conflict, its compatibility with Azar's theory of PSC will be examined. It will be discussed whether the Syrian case meets the assumptions of a PSC. Lastly, the resolution of the Syrian conflict will be addressed in the context of Azar's point of view.

The reason for choosing this theoretical framework is the existing gap in the literature that this paper is intended to close. There are only a limited number of studies that link this theory with the Syrian case despite the fact that they are often described as "protracted". A recent study on this topic, which is written in Turkish by Yasin Atlıoğlu, offers a comprehensive analysis of the Syrian civil war by using the theory of PSC. He points out that the theory enables the researchers to consider many factors, not just sectarianism or external interventions and he argues that the Syrian case contains many of elements of a PSC.¹ Another relevant study on this topic is a master's thesis by Peter Gomez that was presented at the Menendez Pelayo International University in Spain. He analyzes Iraq, Syria and Yugoslavia as cases of interethnic conflicts in which the West hesitates to become involved. He states that the underlying cause of the conflict is an issue of "failed politics" and points out the importance of a power sharing arrangement between ethnic groups for national reconciliation.²

The Alawites: Historical Background

The Syrian Alawites, who are concentrated on north-western Syria, consist of 12 to 15 per cent of the pre-war population, corresponding to around three million people.³ As indicated in Table 1 below, there has not been a significant change in their share in the total population of Syria since 1945. However, as a matter of fact more than six million Syrians fled the country as refugees during the civil war, and it should be taken into account that Sunni Arabs comprise more than 80 per cent of these refugees.⁴ Accordingly, the proportion of the Alawites in the Syrian population has been growing during the civil war⁵ due to the decline in

¹ Atlıoğlu, Yasin, "Suriye İç Savaşı ve Müzmin Toplumsal Çatışma", Ankara Üniversitesi SBF Dergisi, Volume 73, Issue 1, 2018, pp. 129-156.

² Gomez, Peter, Conflict Resolution in Iraq and Syria: Remembering Yugoslavia, Master's Thesis, Universidad Internacional Menendez Pelayo (UIMP), International Cooperation, Public Policy Management and Development Programs and Projects, Madrid 2015.

³ Goldsmith, Leon T., Cycle of Fear: Syria's Alawites in War and Peace, Hurst & Company, London 2015, p. 6.

⁴ Balanche, Fabrice, Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington 2018, p. 21.

⁵ Izady, Michael, "Syria: Ethnic Shift, 2010-mid 2018", The Gulf/2000 Project, https://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Shift_2010-2018_lg.png, (17.11.2020).

total population by 20 per cent since 2010.⁶ On the other hand, the Alawites have been playing a crucial role in Syrian politics since the Ba'ath Party came into power in 1963. The Ba'ath rule ended the Alawite community's "long history of persecution." As they enjoyed a disproportionate influence in state affairs under the leadership of the Assad family, opposition grew among the Sunni majority who was frustrated by the privileged relationship between the Alawite community and the regime. In addition, the socioeconomic deterioration of the countryside contributed to growing unrest as well.⁷ In that regard, understanding the roots of the animosity toward the Alawites and the historical background of their rise is the first step of the analysis of the social conflict in Syria. Therefore, the relationship between Syria's Sunni Muslim majority and the Alawites should be analyzed beginning from the 19th century under the Ottoman rule.

Table 1. Religious Communities in Syria by Percentage

	1945	1964	2010	2017	2018
Sunnis	68,7	72,2	80	77	74
Christians	15,3	12	5	3	10*
Alawites	11,5	11	10**	13	13***
Druzes	3	3	3	4	3
Ismailis	1,5	1	1	1	--

Source: (1945 data) Khoury, Philip Shukry, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism, 1920-1945*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 1987, p. 15; (1964 data) Perlmutter, Amos, "From Obscurity to Rule: The Syrian Army and the Ba'ath Party", *The Western Political Quarterly*, Volume 22, Issue 4, December 1969, p. 829; (2011 and 2017 data) Fabrice Balanche, p. 13, 22, 24; (2018 data) "2018 Report on International Religious Freedom: Syria", U.S. Department of State, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/syria/>, (30.11.2020).

* Despite lower estimation that take into account the growing number of Christians fleeing the country, the U.S. government has a higher estimation at 10 per cent.

** 2010 data includes a Shia population of one per cent, excluding the Alawites.

** 2018 data on the Alawite population includes Ismailis and Shia as well.

Firstly, it should be emphasized that Syria had never constituted a unified and separate statehood during its long history stretching back to about 2500 BC and until its independence in 1946.⁸ Moreover, as Pipes states, "not only does Syria have no history as a state, but its residents historically do not consider themselves members of a Syrian nation."⁹ These historical facts about Syria were reflected in the Ottoman period between the 16th and 19th centuries as well. Under the Ottoman rule, Syria was not a separate political entity, and

⁶ World Population Prospects 2019: Highlights, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York 2019, https://population.un.org/wpp/Publications/Files/WPP2019_Highlights.pdf, s. 12, (17.11.2020).

⁷ Balanche, *ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁸ Ma'oz, Moshe; Ginat, Joseph; Wickler, Onn, "Introduction: The Emergence of Modern Syria", Ma'oz, Moshe; Ginat, Joseph; Wickler, Onn (ed.), *Modern Syria: From Ottoman Rule to Pivotal Rule in the Middle East*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton 1999, p. 1.

⁹ Pipes, Daniel, *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1990, p. 16.

the identity of the Syrian population was determined by “the tribe, the religious sect, or the place of residence rather than with the country.”¹⁰ Therefore, sectarian divisions in Syria are attributed to the inherited Ottoman *millet* system¹¹ that granted the non-Muslim religious minority groups a degree of autonomy and thus created “separate, unequal, and protected”¹² communities. However, the Alawites and the Druzes were not officially regarded as *millets* since the divisions within Islam were not recognized by the Ottomans.¹³

The Alawites, affiliated to a heterodox “mountain sect”, were not considered as a religious problem by the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century when the Arab lands were conquered. However, the decline of Ottoman authority at the beginning of the 19th century revealed the conflict between the Alawite notability and local officials. It was the first time the Alawites were identified as heretics and outcasts from the Ottoman society.¹⁴ They were also the poorest and most numerous peasants serving Sunni and Christian landlords. The Alawites held a minority status in political terms despite they were a majority numerically.¹⁵ It was alleged that they were not permitted to testify in courts¹⁶ or even to enter the cities.¹⁷ On the other hand, Stefan Winter criticizes the notion of “historical persecution” for not being supported by historical evidence. He underlines that due to the development of tobacco cultivation, Alawite tax farmers became the landed gentry and achieved a degree of autonomy in the 18th century.¹⁸ Moreover, it should be taken into account that there was a tension between the Ottoman Empire as the upholder of Islamic orthodoxy and the Shiite Safavid state in Iran. It brought about “tension and conflict with Shiite communities seeking to preserve their autonomy and separate identities.”¹⁹

Following the end of the First World War, the mandate for Syria and Lebanon was allocated to France at the San-Remo Conference in 1920, but the French authorities discouraged the development of a Syrian national community. Syria was accordingly divided into small and politically weak autonomous regions as a result of the “divide and rule” policy of the French mandate. Six states were established under the French mandate: the states of Damascus, Aleppo, Alawites (Latakia), Jabal Druze, Greater Lebanon and the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta (modern day Hatay). The separatist feelings of various sections of the

¹⁰ Ma’oz et al., *ibid.*, p. 1.

¹¹ Balanche, p. xi; Snell, Arthur, “Conflict in Syria: An Historical Perspective, *Caribbean Journal of International Relations & Diplomacy*, Vol. 1, No. 4, December 2013, pp. 49-50.

¹² Barkey, Karen, “Islam and Toleration: Studying the Ottoman Imperial Model”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, Vol. 19, No. 1/2, December 2005, p.16.

¹³ White, Benjamin, “The Nation-State Form and the Emergence of Minorities in Syria”, *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2007, p. 74.

¹⁴ Winter, Stefan, *A History of the ‘Alawis: From Medieval Aleppo to the Turkish Republic*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2016, pp. 8-9.

¹⁵ Tekdal Fildiş, Ayşe, “Roots of Alawite-Sunni Rivalry in Syria”, *Middle East Policy*, Vol. XIX, No.2, Summer 2012, p. 151.

¹⁶ Kirkpatrick, David D., “Syrian Children Offer Glimpse of a Future of Reprisals”, *New York Times*, 3 September 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/04/world/middleeast/in-syrian-conflict-children-speak-of-revenge-against-alawites.html?pagewanted=all>, (01.12.2020).

¹⁷ Balanche, *ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Winter, Stefan, “The Alawites in the Ottoman Period”, Kerr, Michael; Larkin, Kraig (ed.), *The Alawis of Syria: War, Faith and Politics in the Levant*, ed. and Oxford University Press, New York 2015, p. 50.

¹⁹ Rabinovich, Itanar, “The Compact Minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-1945.” *Journal of Contemporary History*, Volume 14, Issue 4, 1979, p. 694.

population and their different levels of development were cited as justification for the division by the French authorities.²⁰ However, this division itself contributed to the widening of the gap between the Sunni Muslim majority and other minorities. Thus, the sectarian and class divisions among the Syrian society continued throughout the mandatory period as well.

The French mandate administration incited sectarian divisions in order to counter Arab nationalism. The Druze and the Alawites were granted autonomy in that regard. For most of the period of the French mandate, the Alawite and Druze states were separate from Syria administratively.²¹ Additionally, the French mandate cooperated with the Sunni-Muslim upper class, namely with the traditional elite of the time while, at the same time, they brought Alawites into the colony's military to help control the Sunnis. The notable families that had played a prominent role in the 19th century were again the dominant actors of the transition from Ottoman to the Arab rule. The French policy represented a perpetuation of Sunni dominance,²² although the Alawites were heavily represented in the army. As a result, the developments in this period seem to reinforce the arguments of Azar's linking the split between state and society in many parts of the world to "a colonial legacy which artificially imposed European ideas of territorial statehood onto a multitude of communal groups on the principle of divide and rule".²³

After Syria gained independence in 1946, the required measures were adopted to Arabize and Islamize public life and institutions in order to achieve Syrian national integration and to weaken the autonomous status of the various minorities. For instance, minority representation in the Syrian People's Assembly was completely abolished in 1953.²⁴ The Alawites, who continued to resist submission to the central government even after independence, got acclimated to Syrian citizenship after the failure of a Druze uprising in 1954.²⁵ Young members of the minorities and the rural lower-middle class were then involved in Syrian political life mainly through the army and the Ba'ath Party. Thus, thanks to the influence of the young radical army officers, the Ba'ath military faction gained upper hand by 1957. The socialist trend in Syria under the United Arab Republic (UAR) regime (during the union with Egypt) facilitated the integration of many young educated Syrians of Druze and Alawite origin into the public sector and led to the March 1963 Ba'ath Revolution. The 1966 coup d'état marked the end of the cooperation between Ba'ath officers from the various religious sects and the beginning of the superiority of the Alawite officers in both the army and the party commands over the Druze.²⁶ Ultimately, the power struggle between Assad and Alawite General Salah al-Jadid, who came into power with a military coup in 1966, ended in 1970 with the victory of Hafiz al-Assad.

²⁰ Hourani, Albert F., *Syria and Lebanon: A Political Essay*, Oxford University Press, London 1946, p. 172.

²¹ Tekdaş Fildiş, *ibid.*, p. 148.

²² Rabinovich, *ibid.*, p. 693.

²³ Ramsbotham, Oliver, "The Analysis of Protracted Social Conflict: A Tribute to Edward Azar", *Review of International Studies*, Volume 31, Number 01, 2005, p. 115.

²⁴ Ma'oz et al., *ibid.*, p. 3.

²⁵ Pipes, Daniel, "The Alawi Capture of Power in Syria", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 25, Issue 4, 1989, p. 440.

²⁶ Faksh, Mahmud, "The Alawi Community of Syria: A New Dominant Political Force", *Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 20, Number 2, 1984, p. 146.

When Assad (1971-2000) seized power, the Alawites were still of lower socio-economic status and excluded from administration and power spheres. They were only able to rise from the ranks through the military academy.²⁷ In the 1970s and 1980s, the policies of economic liberalization brought about a “détente between the Sunni bourgeoisie and the Alawite state elite” who developed business partnerships.²⁸ On the other hand, the Syrian regime sought to sustain and develop its rural support base in the face of growing opposition from urban groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Therefore, Assad used his influence on certain tribes including the Sunni Arab Bedouins²⁹ to control the Islamists.³⁰ He aimed to “make the Alawite community a loyal monolith while keeping Syria’s Sunni majority divided.”³¹ In February 1982, Assad committed the massacre of Hama, in which the government besieged the city for three weeks and between 5.000 and 25.000 people were killed,³² to preclude the Muslim Brotherhood uprising of 1979-1982 from escalating into a nationwide campaign. Thus, the oppressive policies pursued by the Ba’ath Party deepened ethnic divisions further. Although Bashar al-Assad (2000-present) himself then married a woman from a leading Sunni family of Homs, the Syrian periphery did not have the cross-sectarian interaction as the upper-level did. The Sunni Arab majority was mainly affected by the stagnation in suburbs and countryside.³³

In short, it was observed that following the birth of the Ba’ath Party and the campaign of secularism, socialism and Arab nationalism in post-colonial Syria, the Alawites got their “first real taste of the privileged life”. Furthermore, Alawites’ control over the military-intelligence apparatus as well as their unity and solidarity are crucial elements of Syria’s minority Alawite-Ba’athist regime. However, Reva Bhalla states that “rather than exhibiting a clear Sunni-Shiite religious-ideological divide, Syria’s history can be more accurately described as a struggle between the Sunnis on the one hand and a group of minorities on the other”³⁴ due to the presence of Christians and the mostly mountain-dwelling Druze. Fouad Ajami, on the other hand claims, from a broader perspective, that this conflict is “between the Shiite Crescent, spanning Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon versus a Sunni bloc consist of Turkey, Egypt and Saudi Arabia.”³⁵ It is obvious that, from a historical perspective, Syria’s ethnic and religious diversity as well as the formation process of modern Syria deeply affected the subsequent developments in Syrian politics and it still continues to shape it.

²⁷ Gomez, *ibid.*, p. 14.

²⁸ Stephen J. King, “Sustaining Authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa”, *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 122, No. 3, Fall 2007, pp. 443-446.

²⁹ Lund, Aron, “Syria’s Bedouin Tribes: An Interview with Dawn Chatty”, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 July 2015, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/60264>, (12.01.2021).

³⁰ Dukhan, Haian, “Tribes and Tribalism in the Syrian Uprising”, *Syria Studies*, Volume 6, Number 2, 2014, p. 5.

³¹ Balanche, *ibid.*, p. 7.

³² Conduit, Dara, “They Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and the Spectacle of Hama”, *Middle East Journal*, Volume 70, Number 2, Spring 2016, p. 211, 214.

³³ Harris, William, *Quicksilver War: Syria, Iraq and the Spiral of Conflict*, Oxford University Press, New York 2018, p. 23.

³⁴ Bhalla, Reva, “Making Sense of the Syrian Crisis”, *Stratfor Global Intelligence*, 5 May 2011, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/making-sense-syrian-crisis-0>, (04.12.2020).

³⁵ Ajami, Fouad, “Turkey’s Dangerous Asad Dilemma”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 October 2012, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10000872396390444897304578046911104798452.html>, (10.03.2020).

Protracted Social Conflict Theory in the Syrian Case

The PSC theory that focused on the role of communal identity in an intra-state conflict began to develop in the early-1970s with a series of publications by Azar and his colleagues. They had a keen interest in conflicts in post-colonial multicomunal societies.³⁶ Azar, who began collecting events data for his PhD dissertation in the 1960s,³⁷ gathered about half a million “daily events” at the end of 1979 under the Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB) project. These events covering the period between 1948 and 1978 were reported in 135 nation-states and obtained from 70 news resources.³⁸ The project revealed that 95 per cent of 641 major conflicts between 1945 and 1975 were indicated in the Third World countries.³⁹ It was implied that almost all conflicts in the post-World War Second period occurred in the Third World. Additionally, it should be noted that these conflicts were ethnic rather than strategic. This emphasis was viewed as a break from the realist approach of power politics.⁴⁰

Edward Azar’s theory should be evaluated in the light of developments in conflict analysis since his death in 1991 for an understanding of the sources of major armed conflicts. In order to figure out the relevance and importance of his theory for post-Cold War politics, the transformation of conflicts of the 20th century should be taken into account firstly. During the Cold War, major interstate war was not feasible due to the emergence of nuclear weapons and the military competition between the Soviet and Western blocs. Therefore, while the prevailing patterns of armed conflicts were wars of national independence in the 1950s and 1960s, post-colonial civil wars became frequent in the 1970s and 1980s.⁴¹ In addition to the evolution of modern warfare, the emergence of the principles of popular sovereignty and national self-determination are of critical importance in that regard within the historical process. As Holsti stated, wars of the late 20th century were “not about foreign policy, security, honor, or status; they [were] about statehood, governance and the role and status of nations and communities within states.”⁴² Such conflicts can be described as internal conflicts, ethnic conflicts and civil wars. This observation was confirmed by the statistics that 111 of total 118 armed conflicts between 1989 and 2004 were intra-state.⁴³ Some scholars who focused on interstate war changed their emphasis due to the transformation of conflicts, however, a variety of scholars in the peace and conflict research field had long been engaged upon communal wars and called them “deep-rooted”, “intractable”, and “protracted social”

³⁶ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, pp. 113-115.

³⁷ By 1968, Azar’s data bank had contained 35 nations since 1945. Eckhardt, William, “Pioneers of Peace Research VII Edward E. Azar: Apostle of Events”, *International Interactions*, Volume 10, Issue 2, 1983, p. 269-291.

³⁸ Azar, Edward E., “The Conflict and Peace Data Bank (COPDAB) Project”, *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, Volume 24, Issue 1, March 1980, pp. 143-152.

³⁹ Eckhardt, William; Azar, Edward, “Major World Conflicts and Interventions, 1945 to 1975”, *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, Volume 5, Issue 1, 1979, p. 88.

⁴⁰ Fisher, Ronald J., *Interactive Conflict Resolution*, Syracuse University Press, New York 1997, p. 77.

⁴¹ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, pp. 110-111.

⁴² Holsti, Kalevi J., *The State, War, and the State of War*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1996, pp. 20-21.

⁴³ Harbom, Lotta; Wallensteen, Peter, “Armed Conflicts and Its International Dimensions, 1946-2004”, *Journal of Peace Research*, Volume 42, Issue 5, 2005, p. 624.

conflicts.⁴⁴ Furthermore, the description of the prevailing pattern of post-1945 wars as “wars of the third kind” that are neither nuclear nor conventional, is the contribution of Edward Rice.⁴⁵

Although there was not a strong tendency to categorize the crisis in Syria as a long term conflict in the initial phase of the Arab Spring, it is currently defined as “unending”, “intractable” or “protracted” since the conflict has been in progress for almost ten years. Furthermore, the rhetoric of democratisation and social justice was replaced by sectarianism and violence as the prevailing features of the new order in Syria.⁴⁶ As Bassam Haddad claims, “what might have started as protests and revolts are slowly becoming protracted struggles and -where incumbent regimes have some public support- conflicts.”⁴⁷ The Syrian crisis fits into this description because certain segments of the society that portray “the other” as a source of existential threat, support the Assad regime. Therefore, it is reasonable to link the Syrian civil war to Azar’s theory of PSC that focus on structural violence emerging as a result of “conflicting socio-cultural-ethnic relationships”⁴⁸ particularly in the Third World.

Protracted conflicts are clearly defined by Azar and others as “hostile interactions which extend over long periods of time with sporadic outbreaks of open warfare fluctuating in frequency and identity.”⁴⁹ In the case of Syria, it should be noted that the uprisings of Hama in 1980-1982 and Homs in 2011 can exemplify sporadic violence.⁵⁰ Azar also underlines that the PSCs are processes, not specific events in a given time. The communal conflicts in Cyprus, Kashmir, Palestine, Lebanon, Korea, the Philippines, Ethiopia and Sri Lanka are mentioned as salient examples of the PSCs.⁵¹ However, social conflicts such as the Arab-Israeli conflict were described as “protracted” not because the related dispute (e.g. Arab-Jewish friction) was “age-old”, but the high level of social conflict had characterized the relations for a period of approximately 40 years-at the time of the classification.⁵²

In order to demonstrate the compatibility of the PSC theory with the Syrian civil war, the four clusters of variables presented by Azar as the preconditions of the PSC should be considered: the communal content, deprivation of human needs, governance and the state’s role, and lastly the international linkages.⁵³ First of all, the communal content refers to the unit of analysis in which identity groups’ relations with the state is a decisive factor. In that context, it is stressed that the PSCs center around the issue of communal identity rather than

⁴⁴ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 109.

⁴⁵ Rice, Edward, *Wars of the Third Kind: Conflict in Underdeveloped Countries*, University of California Press, Berkeley 1988.

⁴⁶ Darwich, May; Fakhoury, Tamirace, “Casting the Other as an Existential Threat: The Securitisation of Sectarianism in the International Relations of the Syria Crisis”, *Global Discourse*, 2017, p. 1.

⁴⁷ Haddad, Bassam, “Syria, the Arab Uprisings, and the Political Economy of Authoritarian Resilience”, *Interface: A Journal for and About Social Movements*, Volume 4, Issue 1, 2012, p. 116.

⁴⁸ Azar, Edward E.; Moon, Chung In, “Managing Protracted Social Conflicts in the Third World: Facilitation and Development Diplomacy”, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, Volume 15, Issue 3, 1986, p. 394.

⁴⁹ Azar, Edward E.; Jureidini, Paul; McLaurin, Ronald, “Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practise in the Middle East”, *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Volume 8, Issue 1, 1978, p. 50.

⁵⁰ For a comparison of two uprisings, see Conduit, Dara, “The Patterns of Syrian Uprising: Comparing Hama in 1980-1982 and Homs in 2011”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, Volume 44, Issue 1, 2017, pp. 73-87.

⁵¹ Azar and Moon, *ibid.*, p. 394.

⁵² Azar et al., *ibid.*, pp. 53-54.

⁵³ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, pp. 114-118.

traditional disputes over land, economic resources or East-West competition.⁵⁴ The reason why the communal identity comes to the fore is a colonial legacy left over from the principle of “divide and rule.” Syria acquired such a colonial legacy when the French established states for the Druzes and Alawites as well as autonomous districts populated by Kurds, Turkmens and Turks in the early 1920s. Moreover, the French rule was based on “the politics of notables”, with the aim of reducing the political ambitions of the masses.⁵⁵ In modern Syria, although sect was officially disregarded in order to promote Syrian Arab nationalism under the rule of Hafiz al-Assad, sectarian identities were politicized by the regime and its enemies.⁵⁶

In addition to the communal content, the deprivation of human needs is identified as another underlying source of the PSCs and among the preconditions for the transformation of conflicts to high level of intensity. As emphasized by Azar, the deprivation of “ontological and non-negotiable” needs causes the conflicts to be “intense, vicious and irrational”.⁵⁷ Human needs that require social, political and economic participation refer here to the security, development, political access and identity needs (recognition and acceptance). Furthermore, the governments’ capacity to meet them is of a great importance for the analysis of the PSCs. Accordingly, since the opposition forces insistently called for democratic reform, expanded rights, protection from economic marginalization and regime change during the uprisings, the Syrian civil war might be related to the deprivation of such needs. It should also be remembered that in 2005, the Syrian opposition leaders, hopeful of the Bashar al-Assad administration, asked for the implementation of political reforms and lifting of the Emergency Law which had been in force since the Ba’ath Revolution of 1963. They also demanded the suspension of the Law Number 49 stipulating death penalty for membership in the Muslim Brotherhood.⁵⁸ However, many of them were arrested following the announcement of the Damascus Declaration of 2005 that called for democratic reform and the abolition of emergency laws.⁵⁹ Additionally, Syrian citizens’ deprivation of human needs can be explained in economic terms. While 33 per cent of Syrians were living under the poverty line in 2007, 62 per cent of the impoverished people were living in rural areas in 2004.⁶⁰ As the civil war exacerbated the situation, according to 2015 figures, over 83 per cent of Syrians were estimated to be living below the poverty line.⁶¹ The effects of the economic deprivations seem to be stronger because the Sunni tribes favored by the regime and the urban Sunni middle class

⁵⁴ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵⁵ Farouk-Alli, Aslam, “Sectarianism in Alawi Syria: Exploring the Paradoxes of Politics and Religion”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, Volume 34, Issue 3, 2014, p. 214.

⁵⁶ Philips, Christopher, “Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria”, *Third World Quarterly*, Volume 36, Issue 2, 2015, p. 366.

⁵⁷ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 115.

⁵⁸ Wikas, Seth, *Battling the Lion of Damascus: Syria’s Domestic Opposition and the Asad Regime*, Policy Focus #69, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington May 2007, p. 8.

⁵⁹ Farooq, Sadaf; Bukhari, Saika; Manzoor, Ahmed, “Arab Spring and the Theory of Relative Deprivation”, *International Journal of Business and Social Life*, Volume 8, Issue 1, January 2017, p. 130.

⁶⁰ Daher, Joseph, *The Political Economic Context of Syria’s Reconstruction: A Prospective in Light of a Legacy of Unequal Development*, Research Project Report, European University Institute Robert Schuman Center for Advanced Studies, December 2018.

⁶¹ Syrian Arab Republic, *Humanitarian Needs Overview 2019*, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), March 2019, p. 60.

maintained their support for the central government.⁶² It is also pointed out that the PSCs occur most frequently in developing countries affected by rapid population growth and limited resource base.⁶³ Syria's population growth is a remarkable indicator in that regard as well. Syrian population had risen from around 3 million to over 22 million by 2012, and this growth also decreased the water availability per capita considerably.⁶⁴

The third variable which draws attention to the "incompetent, parochial, fragile, and authoritarian governments"⁶⁵ that fail to meet fundamental human needs. It is underlined that such governments experience a crisis of legitimacy in which the dominant identity group(s) monopolize the political authority to maximize their interests. Thus, the state machinery is controlled by the communal groups that are unresponsive to the needs of other societal groups.⁶⁶ As mentioned above, the Alawites control the key institutions of the regime including the military, intelligence and police in Syria. They make up 70 per cent of career soldiers and 80 per cent of officers in the army.⁶⁷ However, there is considerable doubt as to whether it is true to describe the regime in Syria as an Alawite regime despite the fact that most Alawites in Syria support the central government and key state institutions are occupied by their elite. The indicators of this doubt are the low number of Alawite ministers in the government, the power the important families of Damascus hold compared to all Alawites, Sunni monopoly in education, and lastly the downright suppression of Alawite religious mobilisation as a regime policy.⁶⁸ These might indicate that the regime is more interested in the perpetuation of its power than in the communal interests of the Alawites. However, older Alawites, unlike the younger generations, think that the regime of Hafiz al-Assad helped them climb the social ladder because they felt that their living conditions improved in second half of the 20th century.⁶⁹ Additionally, the regime's efforts to present itself as the only viable alternative and the fear of civil war among the population enhanced by the threat of Islamic extremism as well as the lack of open sectarian dialogue, made it easier for the regime to hold on to power in Syria. It also stemmed from the fear that different sects might go for each other's throats once the stability of the regime disappears. For instance, in 2005, due to the UN investigation into the assassination of Rafiq al-Hariri, who served as prime minister of Lebanon from 1992 to 1998 and from 2000 to 2004, and the Bush administration's increasingly hostile approach toward Syria, there was speculation of the imminent collapse of the regime and that Alawite families living in Damascus were planning for a scenario that

⁶² Lakitsch, Maximilian, "Islam in the Syrian War: Spotting the Various Dimensions of Religion in Conflict", *Religions*, Volume 9, Issue 8, 2018, p. 4.

⁶³ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 116.

⁶⁴ Gleick, Peter H., "Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria", *Water, Climate and Society*, Volume 6, Issue 3, 2014, p. 332. (331-340).

⁶⁵ Azar, Edward, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*, Dartmouth, Aldershot 1990, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Ramsbotham, Oliver; Woodhouse, Tom; Miall, Hugh, *Contemporary Conflict Resolution: The Prevention, Management and Transformation of Deadly Conflicts*, Third Edition, Polity Press, Cambridge 2011, p. 101.

⁶⁷ Ted Galen Carpenter, "Tangled Web: The Syrian Civil War and Its Implications", *Mediterranean Quarterly*, Volume 24, Issue 1, Winter 2013, p. 2. (1-11).

⁶⁸ Worren, Torstein S., *Fear and Resistance: The Construction of Alawi Identity in Syria*, Master Thesis, Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo, February 2007, pp. 87-89.

⁶⁹ Worren, *ibid.*, pp. 90-91.

would force them to move to safer areas.⁷⁰ For such fears, Alawites do not see any alternatives to the present regime and remain silent supporters of it. However, some Alawites who were not staunch supporters of the government cursed it as the recent conflict touched them, in other words, as they witnessed the increase in the cases of killings based on their identity.⁷¹

“International linkages”, as the fourth precondition for the PSCs, implies the economic and military dependency of the conflicting parties on richer and stronger states. It is emphasized that the scope and nature of external ties hold great importance with regard to the course of conflicts. When the conflict spills over a broad spectrum of issues, regional and global actors become more involved in the process. For instance, cross-border migration is a matter of concern as the governments of Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq are worried about the influx of refugees because of the fear of the spillover of the conflict to their own territories.⁷² Moreover, Turkey felt the spillover effects of the Syrian civil war since the geopolitical outcomes of the civil war confronted Turkey with the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Kurdish insurgency on its border.⁷³

Furthermore, external fomentation is also regarded as a prime cause of war when the interaction between regional and global actors is taken into account.⁷⁴ In case of Syria, global and regional powers such as the U.S., Russia, China, Iran, Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Qatar are directly or indirectly involved in the process. In that regard, it is of critical importance whether they “push interactions back from war to lower-level conflict” or hinder the efforts to bring about a settlement. It was empirically observed that the great powers’ interventions in Third World conflicts have “added to their severity and cost; and introduced protractedness and horrible consequences to what otherwise could have been a less salient set of conflictive interactions.”⁷⁵ However, before the uprising, the Russians and Iranians were able to extend their influence, while at the same time the regime was a predictable regional actor for Washington and a stable neighbour for Israel, despite its support for Hezbollah and Hamas.⁷⁶ As for the current conflict in Syria, it placed Russia and the U.S. together with their allies on opposite sides.

Resolution

Since there is no indication of an imminent political settlement in Syria, it is argued that the Syrian crisis will probably remain a model case for identity disputes at least in the short term. Azar’s arguments on conflict resolution is worth mentioning even regarding to

⁷⁰ Worren, *ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

⁷¹ Mcevers, Kelly, “Members of Assad’s Sect Break Ranks With Syrian Regime”, National Public Radio, 2 April 2013, <http://www.npr.org/2013/04/02/176039122/in-syria-some-ruling-minority-alawites-take-risky-stand-against-regime>, (07.12.2020).

⁷² Deane, Shelley, “Syria: The Life Cycle of Civil War”, Open Democracy, 29 April 2013, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opensecurity/syria-life-cycle-of-civil-war/>, (07.12.2020).

⁷³ Parlar Dal, Emel, “Impact of the Transnationalization of the Syrian Civil War on Turkey: Conflict Spillover Cases of ISIS and PYD-YPG/PKK”, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Volume 29, Issue 4, 2016, pp. 1396-1420.

⁷⁴ Ramsbotham et al., *ibid.*, p. 107.

⁷⁵ Azar et al., *ibid.*, p. 47.

⁷⁶ Steven Erlanger, “Syrian Conflict Poses the Risk of Wider Strife”, *The New York Times*, 25 February 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/02/26/world/middleeast/syrian-conflict-poses-risk-of-regional-strife.html>, (07.12.2020).

such a complex issue. First of all, in Azar's view, reduction in levels of underdevelopment is key to reducing overt conflicts. He clearly argues that “studying protracted conflicts leads one to conclude that peace is development in the broadest sense of the term.”⁷⁷ He thus underlined that the fundamental causes of conflicts can be addressed when the goal of long-term development is achieved.⁷⁸ However, by mid-2013, Syria had already lost 20.6 per cent of its human development index (HDI) value compared to 2010.⁷⁹ According to 2017 data, Syria ranged at 155 out of 189 (countries and territories) as a low human development country.⁸⁰ These indicators reveal the gravity of the situation and offer a pessimistic outlook on the probability of peace.

Besides the levels of human development, the management of ethnic dominance, creation of economic opportunities and protection of minorities are among the criteria for conflict resolution in protracted cases.⁸¹ In Syria, while Kurds experienced systematic discrimination⁸² and the majority of Sunnis were underrepresented in the state apparatus, “systematic and consistent nepotism and favouritism towards Alawites” indicated an unequal treatment of communal groups.⁸³ Moreover, it should be taken into account that “mutually exclusionary” fears and experiences reinforce communal groups’ threat perceptions against each other. It is in line with the argument of David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild that “ethnic conflict is most often caused by collective fears of the future.”⁸⁴ Accordingly, the mutual distrust between them may disrupt the resolution process. As Professor Landis stated, “the Alawites feel justified in brutality because they fear what may be in store for them if they lay down their guns.”⁸⁵ Shia Alawites and other minorities fell into a state of fear for the overthrow of the regime due to its sharp repression response against the uprisings and its use of the sectarian card as one of its mechanisms of survival.⁸⁶

In Syria, ethnicity and religion were used both by the Assad regime and the opposition as instruments for inciting fear of “the other” in the society. For instance, the Alawites perceive the Muslim Brotherhood as the continuation of extremism among Sunnis that had its roots in the 14th century when the fetwa of Ibn Taymiyyah, an Islamic scholar of Hanbali school who had considerable influence on Salafi thought, was issued. It was the Muslim Brotherhood, which aimed to mobilize the Sunni population in order to replace the regime

⁷⁷ Azar, Edward E., “Protracted International Conflicts: Ten Propositions”, *International Interactions: Empirical and Theoretical Research in International Relations*, Volume 12, Issue 1, 1985, p. 69.

⁷⁸ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 120.

⁷⁹ Syria War on Development: Socioeconomic Monitoring Report of Syria, October 2013, United Nations Relief and Works Agency, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/md_syr-rprt_q2fnl_251013.pdf, p. 6, (12.12.2020).

⁸⁰ Briefing Note for Countries on the 2018 Statistical Update: Syrian Arab Republic, United Nations Development Programme, <http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/SYR.pdf>, (12.12.2020).

⁸¹ Ramsbotham, *ibid.*, p. 123.

⁸² World Report 2011: Events of 2010, Human Rights Watch, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/wr2011_book_complete.pdf, (11.12.2020), p. 588.

⁸³ Groarke, Emer, *Mission Impossible: Exploring the Viability of Power-Sharing as a Conflict-Resolution and State-Building Tool in Syria*, Master Thesis, University of Hamburg, Human Rights and Democratisation, Hamburg 2014, p. 15.

⁸⁴ Lake, David A.; Rothchild, Donald, “Containing Fear: The Origins and Management of Ethnic Conflict”, *International Security*, Volume 21, Issue 2, Fall 1996, p. 41.

⁸⁵ Kirkpatrick.

⁸⁶ Hassanein, *ibid.*, p. 136.

with one committed to Salafist Islam, portrayed the armed uprising launched in 1976 as a religious war against the heretic Alawite regime. The regime, on the other hand, described the insurgents as religious extremists that fought Syrians of all creed.⁸⁷ The fear of sectarian chaos and fundamentalist Islam that was triggered by the Hama massacre of 1982 made many Alawites believe that the collapse of the regime would be a disaster for them.⁸⁸ Furthermore, the Alawite elites were aware that a transformation to a more widely based democracy would sweep them out of their privileged position in the security forces and the state. It is also likely that a more democratic regime will eventually turn into a Sunni dictatorship due to the lack of long-term democratic tradition in Syria.⁸⁹

Lastly, it should be noted that in the protracted conflict situation, it will be a vain attempt to seek for any ultimate resolution because “the conflict becomes an arena for redefining issues rather than a means for adjudicating them.”⁹⁰ Therefore, policy makers should be aware of these pessimistic assumptions regarding the conflict regulation potential. In that regard, building a real civic society, in which minorities are treated equally, is of critical importance.

Conclusion

Although the Syrian civil war is a *prima facie* case of sectarian conflict, it requires a multi-dimensional analysis since the conflict has been internationalized and developed into a proxy war. It is evident that foreign states’ military and financial support for both the government and rebels prolongs and complicates the civil war in Syria. However, an analysis on the root causes of the conflict should remind that it started as an uprising against oppression and economic hardship. In that context, this study seeks to take sectarian, international and socio-economic factors into consideration. Azar’s theory of PSC gives a multi-dimensional understanding of the conflict in Syria. On the other hand, the focal point of this study is the Alawites, as a minority group, and their position in the Syrian political structure. It is emphasized that the degree of Alawite solidarity with the regime is a decisive factor in determining whether the conflict is a PSC.

The four preconditions cited in this study were also used as a tool to understand whether the current conflict could be categorized as a PSC. These criteria are strongly linked to the development level as well as social and political system of the country where the intra-state conflict takes place. In that context, it is argued that the conflict in Syria is caused by a crisis of legitimacy contributed by the political and socio-economic factors. Furthermore, the existence of the legitimacy crisis provides insight into the future of Syria. Consequently, a fair share of political power between communal groups and a more balanced socio-economic development will help eliminating or at least mitigating the root causes of the conflict.

⁸⁷ Worren, *ibid.*, p. 85.

⁸⁸ Goldsmith, Leon, “Syria’s Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective”, *Ortadoğu Etüdüleri*, Volume 3, No 1, July 2011, p. 52.

⁸⁹ Van Dam, Nikolaos, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society Under Assad and the Ba’th Party*, Fourth Edition, I.B. Tauris, London 2011, pp. 134-135.

⁹⁰ Azar et al., *ibid.*, p. 51.

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