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Thomas Pierret

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Syria's "Sunni question" is here to stay

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President Obama's top Middle East advisor Robert Malley once argued that the Syrian civil war was not a confrontation between Alawis and Sunnis, but rather a "fierce struggle between Sunnis". A like-minded analyst challenged what he described as the "myth" of an Alawite regime ruling over a Sunni majority. The latter view, he argued, was an ideological construct devised by political actors—including the Syrian opposition, Jihadi groups, and Gulf monarchies—with a vested interest in promoting a narrative of Sunni victimhood.

The above arguments bears significant implications for Syria's future. If the Sunni question is indeed a "myth" constructed by identity entrepreneurs, then the latter's weakening due to their military defeat against the regime and, in the case of Gulf monarchies, their ongoing normalization with Assad, could potentially render sectarian dynamics irrelevant in Syrian politics. On the other hand, if, as this author assumes, the Sunni question in Syria results from an objective condition, then sectarian dynamics will remain key to future developments in the country.

I contend that those observers who downplay the significance of the Alawite-Sunni divide in Syria understate Alawite domination over the regime while they overstate the role of identity entrepreneurs in sectarianizing the conflict. In 2021, there is probably only *one* Sunni among the top-forty officers who head the Syrian army's five corps, twenty-one divisions, provincial military-security committees, elite units, intelligence agencies, strategic weapons commands, and paramilitary affiliates. Sunni officers often command the less powerful security agencies attached to the Ministry of Interior (State Security and Political Security), but they operate under the close supervision of—formally—lower-ranking Alawite colleagues.

Civilian state institutions are, of course, totally subservient to the presidential clan and the military-security barons. Therefore, significant Sunni presence among those institutions reflects a strategy of trans-sectarian co-optation, rather than genuine power-sharing. Neither should the rise of Sunni businessmen be considered as evidence of any balance in the sectarian distribution of power. In Syria like in many postcolonial states, it is political power that determines access to economic resources, not the other way around. Accordingly, Sunni tycoons like Muhammad Hamshu and Samer Foz owed their success to close personal relations with the ruling clan.

Speaking of a "Sunni condition" in Syria raises the following question: apart from their sectarian identity, what is the commonality between a Sunni merchant from Damascus, a Sunni peasant from Aleppo, and a Sunni Bedouin from the steppe? The answer lies in the deadly threat such disparate social groups would pose to Alawite rule if, as they partly did after 2011, they were to overcome class and regional divisions, and united against the regime. It is because it could help fostering such unity that Sunni religious observance is subjected to extreme levels of securitization by the regime, even when it is apparently devoid of political implications.

While they are a danger for the regime, Sunnis are also tremendously vulnerable to it since, as shown above, they exercise virtually no control over the country's coercive apparatus. Being a Sunni in Syria is, therefore, an objective condition with tangible consequences. In peacetime, sect-based differential treatment was particularly obvious in mixed, Sunni-Alawite areas. In Homs, for instance, state jobs were disproportionately attributed to Alawites, while in the border town of Tell Kalakh, a 2010 crackdown on smuggling dismantled Sunni networks while sparing Alawite ones. Such policies stemmed from distinct patterns of relationship to the state: whereas Alawites often enjoyed direct personal links with members of the military-security apparatus, Sunnis more often interacted with the state through local notables acting as intermediaries. A UNDP survey also showed that between 1997 and 2007, the Alawite-majority coastal region did better than the rest of the country in economic terms, as it had the lowest share of population living in poverty, and consumption expenditure largely above the national average.

It was, of course, during the past decade of civil war (as well as during its bloody rehearsal in 1979-1982) that the Sunni condition was exposed in the most brutal manner. During the first months of the uprising, state repression varied depending on the protesters' ethno-sectarian background: whereas the death toll rapidly increased in Sunni Arab regions, it remained very low, despite recurrent demonstrations, in the Ismaili city of Salamiyye and in Kurdish towns. This pattern also prevailed in the regime's mass-detention system: dissidents of all sectarian backgrounds were imprisoned, but only Sunnis were subject to a policy of extermination.

Collective punishment, too, was reserved for Sunni communities. The latter's members did not have to be opponents to be rounded up or, as regularly occurred in 2012, lined up against a wall and shot in the company of other passers-by: for this to happen, it was often enough to reside in a Sunni town identified by the regime as a hotbed of the uprising. The same logic applied, a fortiori, to the many rebel strongholds whose inhabitants were bombed, starved, gassed and displaced in the following years.

One might object that the regime did not target Sunnis in general, but "only" those local communities that were genuinely hostile to it. Yet, the structure of the confrontation was pre-determined by the level of sectarian stacking in the military. Asserting, for example, that an uprising in Alawite regions would have been met with the same degree of violence on the part of the regime is rather absurd. Indeed, Alawite control of the coercive apparatus precludes both the emergence of a mass revolutionary movement within that community, and the possibility for the regime to exercise military-type repression against its own core constituency.

It is precisely because Syria's Sunni question stems from an objective condition that it does not need to be explicitly formulated by identity entrepreneurs in order to shape political dynamics. Sectarian divides already featured prominently in the make-up of formally secular Syrian political parties in the 1950s and 1960: whereas many members of minorities sought equality and empowerment by embracing Communism, Ba'thism, and Pan-Syrian nationalism, conservative Sunnis hoped to preserve the status quo by supporting the Nasserite movement. For sure, Sunni Islamism is better equipped than other opposition forces to objectify and exploit the contradiction between the regime's sectarian character and its pretense to embody national unity. However, as explained above, sectarian dynamics pervaded Syrian politics before the advent of Islamism as the main opposition force and, in all likelihood, they will outlive this ideology if the conditions that underline the politicization of sectarian identities were to persist.

Such politicization does not result from some cultural feature, but rather from the weakness of Syria's state institutions. Access to state resources (starting with basic individual safety) is function of personal ties based on kinship, region, and sect, rather than of bureaucratic processes. Consequently, political sectarianism will not be overcome by a revival of secular ideologies promoting an inclusive conception of national identity, notwhistanding the merits of such an endeavor. What Syria needs, from this point of view, is robust and reliable state institutions that operate on a genuinely sect-blind basis.

This transformation of the Syrian political system will not occur under the iron-fist of an all-Alawite officer corps. As long as the latter is in charge, no large-scale social movement will be able to pressure the regime for greater freedom and better governance. Although they include many dissidents, minorities are held hostage by the regime. As for another mass-mobilization among the Sunnis—be it, as in 2011, in the name of freedom and dignity, rather than of sectarian identity, it will be treated by the regime with the limitless brutality it has in store for the peril from the majority. This means that either such a mobilization will be stifled, or it will become militarized again, in the hope that, this time, it will win.

Thomas Pierret is a Senior Researcher at Aix Marseille Université, CNRS, IREMAM, Aix-en-Provence, France. He was a Senior Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh (2011-2017). He is the author of *Religion and State in Syria. The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge University Press, 2013) and *Islam in Post-Ottoman Syria* (Oxford University Press, 2016).