



**UNIVERSITEIT VAN PRETORIA
UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA
YUNIBESITHI YA PRETORIA**

**Religious Trends within the Syrian Civil War: An Analysis of Religion as a Dynamic and
Integral Part of the Conflict**

**Department of
Science of Religion and Missiology**

by

Jonathan Denzil Kerrin

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of

MA

in

Science of Religion

in the

Faculty of Theology

at the

University of Pretoria

Supervisor: J. Beyers

February 2014

© University of Pretoria

Table of Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction	1
Chapter 2. A Brief History of Syria: Ottoman Rule to Ba‘thist Regime	6
2.1 Introduction	6
2.2 The Alawis Torment: A background to the history of the Alawites in Syria before the twentieth century.....	8
2.3 Military conscription in the nineteenth century.....	8
2.3.1 Egyptian Conscription.....	9
2.3.2 Ottoman Conscription.....	10
2.4 Syria under the French mandate.....	11
2.5 Independent Syria (1946-present).....	14
2.6 Hafez al-Assad.....	17
Chapter 3. Islam and the Alawites	20
3.1 Introduction.....	20
3.2 The life of the Prophet Muḥammad.....	21
3.3 Theology.....	23
3.3.1 Books.....	24
3.3.1.1 The Qur’ān.....	24
3.3.1.2 Ḥadīth.....	25
3.3.2 Pillars of Islam	26
3.3.2.1 <i>Shahāda</i>	27
3.3.2.2 <i>Ṣalāt</i>	27
3.3.2.3 <i>Ṣawm</i>	27
3.3.2.4 <i>Ḥaḍj̣d</i>	28
3.3.2.5 <i>Zakāt</i>	28
3.3.3 <i>Īmān</i> (Six Beliefs)	28
3.3.3.1 Divinity.....	28
3.3.3.2 Angels.....	29

3.3.3.3	Prophets.....	29
3.3.3.4	Books.....	30
3.3.3.5	Day of Judgement.....	30
3.3.3.6	Predestination.....	30
3.3.4	<i>Shari‘a</i>	30
3.3.5	Jihād.....	31
3.3.5.1	Jihād in the Qur’ān.....	31
3.3.5.2	Jihād in Ḥadīth.....	33
3.3.5.3	Restrictions of Jihād.....	35
3.3.5.4	Goals of Jihād.....	36
3.3.5.5	‘Greater’ and ‘Lesser’ Jihād.....	36
3.3.5.6	Contemporary interpretations of Jihād.....	38
3.4	Muḥammad’s succession and the creation of divisions within Islam.....	40
3.5	Ghulāt sects.....	43
3.5.1	Alawites (Nuṣayrīs).....	43
3.5.1.1	Historical Context.....	43
3.5.1.2	Theology.....	44
3.5.1.2.1	Divinity.....	44
3.5.1.2.2	The Trinity.....	45
3.5.1.2.3	Metempsychosis.....	45
3.5.1.2.4	<i>Taḳiyya</i> – religious dissimulation.....	46
3.5.1.2.5	Further doctrine.....	46
3.6	Conclusion.....	47
Chapter 4.	Religious Kaleidoscope of Syria’s Civil War.....	49
4.1	Introduction.....	49
4.2	Religious makeup of Syria.....	50
4.3	Religion and Politics in Syria.....	51
4.4	Secularism.....	53
4.5	Sunnī Muslims.....	56
4.5.1	Free Syrian Army.....	58
4.5.2	Sunnī Extremists.....	59

4.5.2.1	Salafist Jihād.....	59
4.5.2.2	<i>Jabhat Nusra</i>	60
4.5.2.3	Other Salafist Jihādist Groups.....	61
4.5.2.4	Hezb al-Tahrir.....	61
4.5.3	Religious symbolism and opposition brutality.....	62
4.5.4	Sunnīs in Support of the Regime.....	64
4.5.5	Internal conflict within the Syrian opposition.....	64
4.5.6	Saudi Arabia and Qatar.....	65
4.6	<u>Shī</u> 'a-related Groups.....	66
4.6.1	Alawites.....	66
4.6.1.1	Bashar al-Assad.....	68
4.6.1.2	Modern Alawites.....	70
4.6.2	Twelver <u>Shī</u> 'ites.....	71
4.6.3	Hezbollah.....	71
4.6.4	Iran.....	73
4.7	Christians.....	74
4.8	Jewish Involvement.....	77
4.9	Conclusion.....	78
Chapter 5.	Analysis	80
5.1	Introduction.....	80
5.2	Theological differences between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites.....	83
5.3	Religious violence.....	84
5.4	Opposition to the government.....	87
5.5	The minority dilemma in Syria.....	88
5.5.1	Minority rule.....	88
5.5.2	Violence against Christians.....	89
5.5.3	Solution for minority groups.....	91
5.6	Religious intolerance.....	92
5.7	What does the Syrian war compare to?.....	93
5.7.1	Comparing Syria to Northern Ireland.....	95
5.8	Inter-religious or intra-religious conflicts.....	96

5.9	Difficulty in analysing the Syrian civil war from the perspective of Christianity.....	99
Chapter 6.	Conclusion.....	102
	Works Consulted.....	108
	Figures and Maps.....	128

Summary

The civil war that started in Syria in 2011 began as a series of political disputes between government forces and opposition groups. Tension mounted when citizens of Syria called for their president, Bashar al-Assad, to step down from power. When government forces resisted the will of the people, and instead used force against them, the country descended into all-out war.

Two distinct groups surfaced in opposition to one another, with opposition rebels fighting against the Syrian regime. But as the war progressed these two groups began to display religious characteristics. Opposition groups began to represent a Sunnī Muslim rebel force, while regime forces were represented by the Alawite sect, and as the war continued elements of jihādism began to surface within the fighting.

Syria's sectarian rifts began to reveal themselves as religious factions became more involved in the fighting. These rifts are a result of centuries of violence and tension between Sunnī Muslim and Alawites in the country. Their theological beliefs differ extensively from one another, and over the course of history these differences have led to clashes between the two groups.

The study looks at the historical interactions between Sunnī Muslims and the Alawites in Syria, and identifies the theological differences between the two groups. The study then uses these two elements to understand the religious violence that Syria is experiencing, and why such intolerance is happening between the religious factions of the country.

Key terms: Syrian civil war; Sunnī Muslims; Alawites; Christians; Secularism; *Shari'a*; Religious violence; Religious intolerance; Jihād; Minority groups.

Chapter 1

Introduction

*Hail, rich Damascus, to thy fertile plains
O'er whose glad realm a milder Pasha reigns!
Where the broad waste's expanded surface yields
To fruitful gardens and productive fields.
No despot hands a tyrant's sceptre wave,
To make the source of happiness its grave;
But well-tilled plains arise, and gardens glow,
And gay content sits smiling on each brow.*
(Agg 1817:39)

This was the description by the great poet Lord Byron (1788 – 1824) of the splendour, beauty and joy that was Damascus. His words echo those of numerous travellers who have experienced the ancient city throughout the many millennia of its existence. The magnificent Damascus has been a refuge for its citizens over the years, becoming a stronghold for the country it oversaw. Each new empire that took its reins added to the diversity, ingenuity, and prosperity of the land.

While this may have been the reality of Damascus for much of its long history, such a description is difficult to imagine in its modern state. Today Damascus and Syria lie in ruins. The effects of an ongoing three-year civil war have taken their toll on both the people and infrastructure of Syria. With a death toll well over 100 000 people and no end in sight for the fighting in the country, the casualties of Syria keep stacking up.

But what has fuelled such a long and bitter struggle in the country?

Some have argued that years of political and social repression by a corrupt dictatorship have led to a revolt by the citizens of Syria in order to overthrow the government. The regime's grip on power has led to the lengthy and brutal violence against Syria's masses.

Others have argued that politics are a mere front for the religious battle that is raging between Muslims in the country and has consequently affected Christians as well. Such arguments point to the perceived violence between Sunnī Muslims and Shī'ite Muslims in

a battle to control the country. Some proponents of this theory even go as far as labelling this battle the platform for the start of Armageddon (Hafiz 2013).

However, Syria's war is a complex and evolving event that cannot be defined within such clear-cut parameters. Such attempts to simplify the violence in the country ignore the diversity and extensive history of the people in Syria.

Syria's civil war started as a link in the chain of events commonly referred to as the Arab Spring. This series of events saw revolts and uprisings occur against the governments of particular Arab countries in both North Africa and the Middle East, and as a result many of the leaders of these states were overthrown. But while the majority of these countries resolved their political issues over a matter of months, Syrians laboured in their struggle against their president, Bashar al-Assad, who refused to step down from power. Civil revolts and protests gradually became more intense, slowly transforming into more organised attacks on the regime. As months became years of fighting in Syria, the world started to become aware that the country's disputes went far beyond the cases of the Arab Spring. Not only was the fighting between opposition forces and the government, but also between religious factions. The government, which were made up of predominantly Alawite adherents, stood against the opposition or rebels, who were almost entirely made up of Sunnī Muslims. Thus, fighting was occurring on two fronts: the political and the religious.

However, Syria's religious violence did not and could not occur overnight. Instead, the country's long and turbulent history, of which Syria's religious factions have been a part, has created the deep rift that is seen today through the country's ongoing violence. Alongside this historical issue, there exist doctrinal differences between the varying religious factions of the country, conjuring up intolerance and hatred between the various groups. These two aspects have helped fuel the war that exists in Syria today.

Thus the study at hand seeks to investigate the role that religion has played in the ongoing violence in Syria. Focusing largely on the difference between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites, which form the two largest ethnic and religious groups in the country, the study seeks to understand why these two groups are fighting against each other, and why this violence is affecting the religious landscape of Syria.

Parallels can be drawn between religious movements in Syria and the elements driving the civil war that persists in the nation. Thus, the study will argue that while the civil war taking place is not a religious war, religion most definitely has a large role to play in the conflict. It is therefore necessary to understand not only the religions involved in the violence, but also their role in the history of Syria. This will help to paint a picture of how Sunnī Muslims and Alawites have interacted with each other in the past, as well as provide a pattern from which the current religious violence stems.

With the realisation that Syria's ongoing war is a combination of both political and religious factors, the study seeks to focus on the religious aspect of the conflict, paying special attention to the sharp divide between Alawites and Sunnī Muslims.

In Chapter 2, the study investigates the historical religious elements of Syria that have had a direct effect on the current violence, from the formation of the Alawite sect to the occupation of Syria by the Ottomans and Egyptians, stretching through to the French Mandate of Syria, until the establishment of the current Ba'th party. These periods all play a pivotal role in the formation of the religious conflict that exists in Syria today.

Following the historical aspect, Chapter 3 provides an overview of the doctrinal aspects of Islam and the Alawites, making special reference to the difference between Sunnī Muslims and Shī'ite Muslims. This allows for a contrast to be drawn between the two religious factions and their association with the Alawite faith.

Chapter 4 looks at Syria's present situation, listing and expanding on the various religious groups that are currently involved in the fighting. These include the various forms of the opposition movement, the Alawites, as well as Christians and international groups such as Iran, Israel and Saudi Arabia, which form some part of the conflict and hold religious significance in it.

Having drawn data from the historical, current, and doctrinal elements of Syria's religious factions, Chapter 5 uses these three elements to understand how all three are relevant to the ongoing war, and consequently what role religion has played within it.

Thus, from these chapters the study will address a number of research goals:

- It will investigate the historical data relevant to the Syrian conflict;
- It will expound on the origins and doctrines of the Islamic faith, as well as those of the Alawites;
- It will determine the various religious factions present in the ongoing conflict;
- It will present a descriptive account of the religious factions present in the conflict;
- It will analyse the above steps in order to make sense of how they are relevant to each other; and
- It will use the gathered data to address how religious factions in Syria have been impacted as a result of the conflict.

Syria's ongoing violence has widespread consequences not only for the country itself, but also for the broader Middle-Eastern region. While many such consequences may be political, others are religious. The increase of religious violence in Syria has helped to escalate the country's death toll, as well as displacing thousands of its citizens. It has also helped to fuel religious violence in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Iraq. Thus, an enquiry into which religious factors are causing such violence is necessary for a resolution to be found.

Since Syria's war is still relatively recent, and is still unfolding, little has been written on the religious factions that are present within the conflict. Both Aron Lund and Elizabeth O'Bagy have written on the jihādīst factions of Syria. Their research focuses largely on the Sunnī Muslim factions of Syria. Yvette Talhamy has done extensive research on the history of the Alawites, most of which is a historical account. Many other scholars have done research on the history of Syria and given accounts of both Muslim and Alawite doctrine. Thus, the research conducted draws on all of these sources in order to give a holistic account of the religious influences on the Syrian civil war.

Although the study focuses on the religious aspect of Syria's violence, it inevitably engages and intersects with political matters. Not only religious doctrine, but also the very social fabric of Syria are deeply influenced by political matters and this factor is thus unavoidable in dealing with religious factions involved in the conflict.

While an attempt has been made to understand and depict the situation in Syria as well as is possible, it cannot be ignored that the research undertaken is not from first-hand experience, nor is the researcher associated with any of the cultures, creeds or political

parties of Syria. As such, an etic approach is taken to the study whereby all data collected is analysed from an outsider's perspective. This allows for a critical and unbiased position to be taken toward the material being investigated.

The study also follows a quantitative methodological approach, in which historical data is especially relevant. Thus, journal articles as well as other academic-related material have been used in the study to gather such information. However, given the recent timeframe of the Syrian civil war, sources of material relevant to its current events have mainly been limited to news articles and internet resources, which are used to give a comprehensive account of what is happening. This has been supported by material on religious violence, which has been used to analyse such events. Certain terms and concepts have been used to describe words that are not native to the English language. Such words have been placed in italics, except in cases where a word is used extensively throughout the dissertation. The Encyclopaedia of Islam has been used as a source of reference for the Arabic words used throughout this study.

The war-torn nation of Syria stands divided between two groups separated by ideology. Each ideology carries both a political and religious tone that clashes with that of the other faction. These ideologies also have deep historical roots that have moulded and shaped each group into what they are today. This study will identify those groups and place them in their respective historical and doctrinal contexts in order to show how the current violence has mounted in the Syrian nation.

Chapter 2

A Brief History of Syria: Ottoman Rule to Ba‘thist Regime

2.1 Introduction

Bashar al-Assad, ruling president of Syria, took charge of the country on 17 July 2000 (Wieland 2006:9). His rule was part of a much larger line of succession under a party with ideals that have been moulded and shaped since its outset.

In the wake of the allied victory of World War I, France and Britain imposed new political borders in place of those of the former Ottoman Empire. The change in the political landscape instilled resentment in many of the Arab people of that region, who had grown tired of the political instability that had dominated the Greater Syrian district over the past few centuries. As a result a political movement, pan-Arabism (AbuKhalil 1990:4), was established, which sought to unify the Arab nations under one political banner. However, it was not without opposition, and found itself struggling to find a foothold in the political arena. Islamic tradition formed a major barrier between pan-Arab ideology and the Arabs themselves. On top of this, the French, as a part of their mandate from 1920 – 1946, were inciting sectarian divisions in order to quell any form of Arab nationalism that could threaten their legitimacy in the country (Fildis 2012:148-156, Khoury 1981:441).

Where Arab nationalism was typically labelled as a Sunnī movement, religious minorities in the region saw the formation of the Ba‘th party in 1942 as a form of Sunnī affiliation. However, Ba‘th nationalism, which adopted the pan-Arabism ideology, was not interested in specifically Sunnī Islam, but rather sought a secular Arab society. Ironically, minority groups began to support the Ba‘th party while Sunnī Muslims did not, owing to the lack of Islamic law at its core. The party promoted equality among all Arabs, which religious minorities favoured, whereas Sunnī Muslims saw the religious minorities of the region as an “inferior” Arab (Fildis 2012:148-156, Devlin 1991:1397).

Along with a secular ideology that sought to achieve “freedom (*hurriyah*) from foreign control and the unity (*wihdah*) of all Arabs in a single state” (Devlin 1991:1397), the Ba‘thists incorporated a socialist aspect, which for them meant social justice for the underclass of society (Fildis 2012:153).

As the party grew in popularity their leadership expanded, incorporating minority representatives including members of the Alawite community. The secularist, populist and socialist components of the party provided a certain attraction to Alawite people, especially the peasants in the rural areas and members of the military. For them, the Ba‘th party was the key to freeing them from their minority status and reducing the social gap of sectarianism. “Ba‘ath ideology promised minority communities equality on the basis of being an Arab, not on being a Sunni” (Fildis 2012:154). However, as religious minority groups infiltrated the Ba‘th party, so Sunnī resentment grew.

It was during the union between Syria and Egypt, which lasted from 1958-1961, that all political parties in Syria were suspended, including the Ba‘th party. However, because of the relationship the Ba‘th party had forged with religious minorities, an Alawite group remained, organised in secret in Latakia. During this time the group became the strongest and most structured group among the Ba‘th. Four leaders emerged from within their ranks: Salah Jadid, Hafez al-Assad, Muhammad Umran, and Hamad Ubayd. Their aim was to restore the Syrian army to Syrian control, and in 1963, shortly after the dissolution of the union between Syria and Egypt, they launched a coup to take control. The coup ended with political and military control in the hands of the Alawite Muslim minority, with the Sunnī majority now in a subordinate position (Ben-Tzur 1968:162, Galvani 1974:8-10, Van Dam 1973:11).

This series of events set the political stage for the next half-decade. The Alawite Ba‘thist regime (a party that was part of a minority group in a Sunnī-dominated country) would lead the nation for years to come. However, this leadership would instil distrust and resentment within the Sunnī population. As Fildis points out (2012:155), “many Sunnis regarded the Alawite Ba‘thist regime as illegitimate, oppressive and anti-Islamic”. For them, power over the nation had been taken by force.

For the Alawites, however, along with other Syrian minority groups, this had been their reality for the past few centuries. Living under the oppressive rule of the Ottoman Empire, the Alawite tribe had seen its fair share of ethnic oppression, and in the mid-1960s it seized the opportunity to advance its social status within the Syrian nation.

2.2 The Alawis Torment: A background to the history of the Alawites in Syria before the twentieth century

The historical roots of the Alawite tribe can be traced back as far as the eighth century CE, shortly after the Sunnī–Shī‘a split resulting from the death of the Prophet Muhammad. This split shall be expanded on in the next chapter; however, for an historical understanding of the Alawites, it was during the development and expansion of Shī‘ism that this tribe emerged (Talhamy 2011b:24).

The Alawis are not a well-researched tribe, with much about their existence shrouded in mystery. The founder of the ‘*Alawīs* is thought by many to be Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Bakri al-Numiri. However, alternative research has placed Ibn Nuṣayr not as the founder, but more as a deity. This point will be argued further in the following chapter, but other scholars have argued for al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī being the founding figure of the ‘*Alawīs* (Talhamy 2011b:23, Friedman 2001:91).

For most of the tribes’ existence they were known as the Nuṣayrīs, after Ibn Nuṣayr. It was only in the twentieth century (between 1920 and 1946) under the French mandate of Syria that their name would change to the Alawites or ‘*Alawī*. This change was in order to give the tribe legitimacy among Muslim sects, emphasising the link between the Prophet Muḥammad’s cousin ‘Alī and Shī‘a Islam (Hassan 2012:3).

By the turn of the first millennium the Alawite community had two established centres, in Baghdad and Latakia. This soon became one centre after the Mongol raid of Iraq that eliminated the region’s religious hub. This devastation created the platform for the ‘*Alawīs*’ establishment in Syria (Talhamy 2011b:25).

Largely owing to their doctrinal beliefs, the Alawites were ill-treated by other inhabitants of Syria. In the eleventh century, Sunnī Muslims drove them out of all Levantine cities and into the uninhabitable coastal mountains of northern Syria, where they largely remained in isolation from the rest of the population of Syria until the French occupation of the region that followed the First World War (Goldsmith 2011:39).

2.3 Military conscription in the nineteenth century

In the nineteenth century the Ottoman Empire was in economic turmoil. Owing to its many military campaigns and wars, signs of its decline were beginning to show. Major

technological advances had improved transport systems, making shipping trade routes more efficient and land transport more accessible via rail. However, this had added to the economic strain on the already burdened empire (Quaraert et al. 1983).

2.3.1 Egyptian Conscription

During this time (1805 – 1823), Muḥammad ‘Alī, viceroy of Egypt, initiated a series of reforms that he hoped would strengthen his territory in the light of other modernisations that were happening throughout Europe. Aside from agricultural, industrial and educational reforms, ‘Ali hoped to modernise his army. He aimed to do this through conscription, but what he did not expect was a revolt by his own people against his new plan. After several years of failure at this attempt, ‘Alī turned his gaze on Syria, and with the aid of his son Ibrāhīm Paṣhā, and against the will of Sultan Maḥmūd, he invaded and conquered Syria in 1832. In order to boost his prowess in the Syrian region, ‘Alī implemented military conscription along with disarmament of the local population. Conscripted soldiers would have to serve a minimum of twelve years in the military. This would leave many households without a breadwinner for many years, and with no guarantee of a safe return. During this time of conscription thousands of men fled the region in order to avoid military service. Others revolted against the Egyptian army, only to be subdued, resulting in imprisonment and execution. However, one area of Syria resisted the Egyptians for a lengthy period of time, causing them many casualties and setbacks (Talhamy 2011b:27-29, Zurcher 1999:122).

It was on the Nuṣayriyya Mountain that the Alawite people, who at that point in time had the support of the Ottomans, stood their ground against the Egyptian army. The Alawite tribes of that area were familiar with the rugged mountainous landscape, which they used to their advantage, and with every attempt the Egyptians made to advance up the mountain the tribesmen would attack and flee, leaving the Egyptian troops disorientated. In the year 1834 multiple acts of retaliation happened between the Alawites and the Egyptians. The well-armed tribesmen from the mountain would launch surprise attacks on villages, plundering and looting them. The Alawites also refused to pay taxes and hand over their weapons. This infuriated the Egyptian leaders, who went on a rampage, torching Alawite villages and crops in the hope of teaching the tribesman a lesson of submission. The Alawites, who suffered hundreds of casualties, still refused to back down, knowing full well that if they did they would face conscription among the Egyptians. Word from the Ottomans had spread to the Alawites that the Empire was soon to reclaim Syria, and that

Ottoman troops would come to the aid of the Alawites. Although they had suffered many losses, the Alawites, with this thought in the back of their minds, continued their fervent attack on the Egyptians. By the middle of 1835 the Ottomans had still not come to their aid. By that time the Alawites had been overrun and defeated. They had been abandoned. The Alawites were forced to surrender their weapons and hand themselves over for conscription (Talhamy 2011b:29-32, Zurcher 1999:122-123).

2.3.2 Ottoman Conscription

In 1839, the Ottoman Empire had found support from England, France, Austria, Prussia and Russia. Word had spread among conscripted soldiers in Syria of this alliance, and within a short space of time thousands of soldiers abandoned the Egyptian ranks. Within months, the Egyptian army was severely weakened, overrun, and driven out of Syria.

Before leaving Syria, Ibrāhīm Pasha was quoted as saying to a Turkish general, “You with the assistance of the English, have expelled me; you have again put arms into the hands of the mountaineers; it cost me nine years and ninety thousand men to disarm them. You will yet invite me back to govern them” (Walpole 1851:127).

By 1841, the Ottomans had full control of Syria once again. In order to rebuild the military ranks in that area, conscription was once again imposed on the inhabitants of the region. Like the Egyptians, the Ottomans also disarmed the people before they were conscripted. The Alawites, who had once again reorganised themselves in the period of political transition, were also supposed to be conscripted. However, just as they had opposed the Egyptians, they stood firm against the Ottomans as well. A rearmed and -organised Alawite force resisted the Ottoman conscription. In the years that followed, Alawite resistance became stronger and stronger. The Ottomans withdrew their focus from the Nuṣayriyya Mountain in the face of more pressing concerns such as the Crimean war (1853-1856). Alawite clans became more rebellious and ambitious, moving out of the mountainous region and into the lower districts. Throughout the middle part of the century many villages were plundered. Christian villages were targeted, with many Christians being killed by the Alawite tribesmen. Taxes were once again evaded, and by the 1860s this had put pressure on the governing bodies of Syria to once again intervene in the region (Talhamy 2011b:33-38).

Eight leadership changes were made in Syria during the 1860s and 1870s owing to the lack of control the government had over the Alawite clan. The Alawite clan had broken out of the government's control. Drought and famine in that time had also not helped to maintain order in the region. Nevertheless, in the latter half of the 1870s the governor of Syria, Midhat Pasha, attempted to align with the Alawite peoples in order to gain their favour. His strategy was to build and develop new infrastructure and educational systems in the Alawite region. At that time Western influence had made progressive inroads among the people of the northern Syrian region, especially Protestant missionaries. Many of the minority groups of that area that had been influenced by the presence of these missionaries found a loophole in the system of governance. They discovered that if they converted to Christianity they would be exempt from military service, as long as they paid the exemption tax. Many Alawites did this, but later converted back to their original beliefs after the threat of the Ottomans had passed (Talhamy 2011a:225-231, Talhamy 2011b:38-39, Zurcher 1999:124-126).

Attempts to conscript the Alawites had taken their toll on both the Alawi people and the Ottomans throughout the nineteenth century. The rebellious nature of the Alawite people had kept them for the most part away from the submission of the Egyptians and Ottomans. Their military skill and tactics had been perfected throughout the century, and in years to follow this would work to their advantage as they slowly wove their way into the political fabric of Syria.

2.4 Syria under the French mandate

Following the allied victory of World War I in 1918, and the subsequent defeat and collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Greater Syrian region, which had been administered by the Ottomans, was taken control of by the British and French. The Turkish rulers had governed the Syrian district for over four centuries. Sunnī Islam had dominated the religious demographic within the Empire, and consequently had played a major role in its governance (Kayalı 1997:20-41, Rabinovich 1979:694).

After the war the Greater Syrian region, which had been under the hand of the Ottomans, was left unsupervised. Under the newly established League of Nations, Britain and France were tasked with overseeing the administration of this region. Britain was given parts of modern-day Iraq, as well as Jordan and Palestine, while France was entrusted with what now comprises modern Syria, Lebanon, and south-eastern parts of Turkey. The

occupation of these regions became formalised in 1920 under the League of Nations mandate (Khoury 1981:441-444).



Figure 1: Division of Greater Syrian region (National Interest 2013)

Between 1918 and 1920, shortly before the French took control of Syria, an Arab government was established for what was proclaimed the Arab Kingdom of Syria. Headed by Emir Fayçal, the kingdom hoped to demonstrate the first Pan-Arabic nation, which in time would incorporate all Arab lands. However, Fayçal, who in 1920 was proclaimed king of the nation, was soon defeated by the French and evicted from Damascus (Rabinovich 1979:695).

The French occupation of the Greater Syrian district initially received mixed reactions from the local inhabitants of the region. In Lebanon, for example, the majority Christian inhabitants at that time saw the French as liberators. In other parts of the region, such as Damascus, they experienced strong resistance from the Muslim population. Equal

adversity was found in the Alawite- and Druze-inhabited areas. However, the French quickly sought to demonstrate their control and influence in the region. They attempted to achieve this through partitioning their quota of land into various regions. Until 1922 six states existed, namely: the State of Aleppo; State of Damascus; Greater Lebanon; Sanjak of Alexandretta; Jabul Druze; and Alawite State (Rabinovich 1979:695).

The French struggled against both domestic and international advocacy regarding the divisions made in the Syrian region. In response, they argued that Syria was not a distinct and coherent entity. Robert de Caix, the main proponent of this idea, further emphasised that Arabic-speaking countries did not have 'nationalities'. Instead they were only comprised of religious factions. Thus, this heterogeneous nation should reflect its religious pluralism in an organised manner (Rabinovich 1979:697).

French motivations of this point, although expressed publically, were a mere front for the control of Sunnī Muslims, whom they knew were heavily influenced by Arab nationalism. As a result, the French elevated the status of minority sects, such as the Christians, Druze and Alawites, in order to promote their policy. The entry of the French into Syria in 1920 brought with it favourable treatment for the Alawites rather than for Sunnī Muslims. As mentioned above, the French helped to change the name of the tribe to 'Alawite' from 'Nuṣayrī' in order to give them more legitimacy among their Muslim counterparts. They enjoyed subsidies, legal rights and lower taxes, all of which they never experienced under their Ottoman overlords. Most importantly, the French made extensive use of the Alawites in the ranks of the military, police and intelligence in order to help to subdue the Sunnī opposition. This would play a pivotal role in the Alawites' future in the country. Sunnī reactions against these policies fostered deep resentment between Sunnī communities and minority groups in Syria (Hassan 2012:3, Rabinovich 1979:697-700).

By 1922, three states (Damascus State, Aleppo State, and Alawite State), aligned with each other to form the Syrian Federation, with the latter seceding from the union two years later. Several changes happened within the political makeup of Syria up until 1936 when the Franco-Syrian Treaty of Independence was signed. This treaty allowed for the Druze, Alawite and Alexandretta states to be incorporated into the Syrian Republic, with the Lebanese region being the exception, becoming Greater Lebanon. This decision taken by the Alawites to join the republic was not easy. Under the French they had been given autonomy. A decision to join the larger Sunnī Muslim society might compromise all that

they had had before. But, through an unexpected *fatwā* issued by the Sunnī cleric Muḥammad Amīn al-Ḥusaynī, the Muslim leader vouched for the Islamic credibility of the Alawites, and guaranteed their security in the new Sunnī state. This was enough to convince Alawite leaders to join the republic (Goldsmith 2011:54-55, Kelidar 1974:16, Thomas 2002:19).

World War II saw the fall of France at the hands of Germany, and with it, its control over the Syrian Republic. This control lasted until mid-1941 when the British invaded the region. For a brief moment Syria claimed its independence. This independence was supported by the British, who were pushing for a Greater Syrian state in order to gain preferential treatment in the region, and in so doing help Syria to halt Jewish ambition in Palestine. However, this proposition was opposed by the United States and France, which perceived Britain as trying to take full control of that area. As a result, the State of Israel was created. In 1944 the mandate upon Syria was terminated, and the nation officially became recognised as an independent republic. It took another year and a half for French troops to withdraw from the region through the continued pressure from Syrian nationalists. By mid-1946 the nation was under full Syrian control. (Rabinovich 1979:705-706).

Although Syria had finally gained its independence, it was left fragmented by the continual change of power. Years of instability within the region had formed rifts within the social makeup of the Syrian people, leaving a noticeable mark on the nation.

2.5 Independent Syria (1946 – present)

The years following the Second World War can be characterised by three phases: the nationalist phase, the radical phase, and the Islamic phase. These periods were a time of identity-building for the Syrian nation (Teitelbaum 2004:135).

The nationalist phase was the period in which independence was gained from foreign rule. It lasted until the defeat of the pan-Arabic alliance by Israel in 1948. This period was characterised by pan-Arab unity, and opposed all foreign intervention. It was followed by the radical phase, which saw the nationalist phase as a failure, owing to the incapability of the older nationalist elites to rule the nation. This new phase was characterised by socialist trends and a move toward modernisation and renewed Soviet interest, but again culminated in defeat by Israel in the 1967 war. With the realisation that radical socialism

would not forge their future, Islam would become the new banner under which the nation would be united (Khoury 1991:1393, Teitelbaum 2004:135).

Not only had the nation gained its independence in 1946, but minority groups had also begun to find a foothold in the political arena. However, when the independent, Sunnī-controlled government came to power, one of the first policies adopted was to abolish communal representation in parliament. This was furthered by the abolishment of jurisdictional rights given to minority groups under the French Mandate. As a result, the initial years were characterised by multiple rebellions against these new policies. However, owing to the advanced weapons that the government now newly possessed, these rebellions were not as successful as they were in the past. This marked a turning point among the Alawites, which, because of these new reforms, now had to actively participate in political life in order to have a voice within the nation (Ma'oz 1972:399).

During the following years, Alawite clansmen as well as citizens from other minorities began to engage in Syrian political life. In a few years the political climate had transformed within Syria, showcasing new and emerging political parties such as: the Communists, the Muslim Brotherhood, the Syria Social Nationalist party and the Ba'th party, all of which expressed modern ideologies and intellectual ideas. It was the secularist and socialist parties, which placed focus on social change and ethnic equality, which drew the attention of the minorities (Khoury 1991:1392, Ma'oz 1972:399).

The Ba'th party, which was one of Syria's nationalist parties, was a pan-Arab party. The party was founded by Michel Aflaq (a Syrian Orthodox Christian) and Salah ad-Din Bitar (a Syrian Sunnī Muslim) (Fildis 2012:148). Its ideals sought the unity of Arab people. In theory it sought the separation of religion and state, aiming to include all Arab ethnicities and religious groups. However, the Ba'th saw Islam as an essential part of Arab nationalism, also realising that the majority of peoples belonged to this faith (Ma'oz 1972:400).

In fact, Islam dominated the region so much that in 1950 the independent government labelled Syria as an Islamic nation, with president Adib Shishalkli stating: "Since the majority of people of Syria belong to the Muslim faith, the state declares its adherence to Islam and to its ideas" (Ma'oz 1972:400). This was later done away with due to liberal

Muslim and Christian opposition. Instead, Islam was considered the religion of the head of state (Ma'oz 1972:400, Teitelbaum 2004:143-144).

After their defeat by Israel in 1948, the newer reformed parties blamed the older nationalists for not maintaining the ideals of pan-Arab unity. Parties such as the Ba'th helped to reform nationalist ideology from constitutional and parliamentary forms, to further social and economic justice for everyone (Khoury 1991:1394).

The Ba'th's main support was, however, drawn from the lower/middle class, such as the peasants and workers, and those in the rural areas and outskirts of the cities. Rural citizens who wanted to take advantage of the new reforms sought a way to become actively involved in the country's administration. Thus, many of these people, especially Alawites, which by this time had a reputation of being fierce tribal fighters, began to infiltrate the military's ranks. They were initially under the Sunnī command that had led the military from independence, but as their numbers grew within the ranks they soon monopolised the chain of command. In 1958, with the rising threat of communism and the influence of the Soviet Empire, a decision was taken by Ba'th and veteran nationalists to unite with Egypt to form the United Arab Republic in order to avoid power falling into the hands of the Communist Party. This plot was successful in keeping power out of the hands of the communists. The union did not last, owing to the discontent among Syrians concerning Egyptian dominance, and in 1961 a coup was launched by 'Abd al- Karīm al- Naḥlawī -, with Syria being re-established as an independent state (Teitelbaum 2004:155).

The 1960s were characterised by multiple coups and revolts. In 1963 a significant shift in Syrian politics occurred when the Military Committee, the Ba'th military division, took down the regime that had broken the Syrian–Egyptian union. The Sunnī Ba'thists that previously controlled the party were overthrown by military personal from minority religious groups. Led by Alawite officers, namely Salah Jadid, Hafez al-Assad, Muhammad Umran, and Hamad Ubayd, the coup meant that the Sunnī majority was put in an inferior position (Fildis 2012:155, Galvani 1974:8).

This new Ba'thist control, characterised as neo-Ba'thism, fervently pursued the policy of Arabisation. This move strongly emphasised the separation of Arabism from Islam, and state from religion. However, this was strongly opposed by Sunnī Muslims, who demonstrated against the regime, accusing them of trying to impose heretical policies.

Demonstrations saw Sunnīs chanting a slogan “Allāh Akbar! Either Islam or the Ba‘th!” (Ma'oz 1972:402). This was followed by violent clashes with government forces resulting in multiple deaths. The Arabisation policy was passed in 1969, with the policy that declared that Islam was to be the religion of the president completely abolished. Instead, a vague reference was made to Islam, stating that “Islamic jurisprudence is the chief source of legislation” (Ma'oz 1972:402, Galvani 1974:8).

At this time Salah Jadid was in control of the country. His partnership with Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian Air Force Commander and Syrian Defence Minister, had helped to place the nation under Alawite control. However, it was after the defeat by Israel in 1967, in an attempt to retake the Golan Heights, that their relationship split. In essence, this split caused a rift between the Army Command and the Ba‘th party organisation. In 1970 Hafez al-Assad launched a bloodless coup, through his military control, and ended the series of coups that had preceded his rule (Bhalla 2011:4, Galvani 1974:9-13).

Hafez al-Assad’s reign was the first within several centuries that was able to take control of the unpredictable Alawite sect. In order to cater for the new Alawite leadership, the constitution was changed to allow for non-Sunnī Muslim leaders to be elected to the presidency. What previously read, “I swear by Allāh Akbar” changed to “I swear by my honour and faith”. This change was the first of its kind in Syria, marking a crucial period in the history of the nation (Bhalla 2011:4, Ma'oz 1972:402).

2.6 Hafez al-Assad

Hafez al-Assad, father to current president Bashar al-Assad, came to power in 1970 following a coup he launched to overthrow his former ally Salah Jadid. Hafez’ control of Syria (1970 – 2000) stands as the longest period of continuous governance in the country since the end of the First World War. He maintained a firm grip over the nation, imposing strict laws, and changing long-held policies (Bhalla 2011:4).

In this time the Alawite people experienced a freedom unlike that experienced at any other time in their history. They were now governed by one of their own people. Throughout the 1960s and 70s Alawite clansmen began moving into the cities, mostly Latakia, but also Damascus. The Alawites found their means of income mostly in the military and the large bureaucracy. Sunnīs, however, tended to stick to the traditional private economic sector.

As a result, a sectarian footing was established in the division of labour, with Alawites dominating the public sector and Sunnīs the private sector (Goldsmith 2012:157).

Sunnī Muslims soon became discontent with the influx of the ‘heretical’ Alawite tribesman into the cities; further cementing sectarian divides between the two groups. Furthermore, Hafez al-Assad, although characterised as having a secular ideology, has been viewed as having supported his own people in a way that pertains to sectarian ideals (Goldsmith 2012:159).

Hafez al-Assad’s rule has been described as iron-fisted and repressive. Sunnīs saw his policies as unjust and unequal, characterising his rule as discriminatory. However, from an Alawite perspective, with their history characterised by Sunnī dominance and repression, this was not a situation that they would want to let go of needlessly (Goldsmith 2012:160).

In 1973, debate once again arose over the issue of Muslim presidency. Hafez al-Assad, who wanted to downplay the role of religion in the secular state, was met with mass violent demonstrations in Aleppo, Homs, Hama, and Damascus, with religious leaders demanding that Syria be restored to its position as an Islamic state. In order to calm the masses, Hafez al-Assad reverted the previous amendment, changing it to: “the religion of the President of the Republic has to be Islam” (Goldsmith 2012:162). These demonstrations proved the importance of religion within Syria at that time, showing that Sunnīs were still a force to be reckoned with (Goldsmith 2012:162).

As a result of this, a new debate began over whether or not Alawites were Muslims. This had a direct effect on the legitimacy of Hafez al-Assad’s leadership. With the help of Adb al-Halim Khaddam, a decision was made that the president did not have to specifically be a Sunnī Muslim or an Alawite, as long as he was a Muslim. This was met with scepticism from Sunnī Muslims, who were not convinced by this argument. Thus, Hafez al-Assad turned to close friend and ally Ayatollah Hasan Mahdi al-Shirazi, who issued a *fatwā* regarding the Alawites, saying: “I found them, as I expected, to be Shi’a of *ahl al Bayt* [of the house of the prophet] who are loyal and totally committed to the truth” (Talhamy 2010:188, Sindawi 2009:93).

Even with this *fatwa* being issued, Sunnī Muslims still had their doubts over the legitimacy of Hafez al-Assad. This scepticism was being fuelled by one of Hafez al-Assad’s main

opponents, the Muslim Brotherhood (a Sunnī Islamist organisation). The Muslim Brotherhood strongly opposed the government's secular stance. Throughout the 1970s they initiated multiple protests and demonstrations against the regime. In 1976 they launched a massive attack against regime officials in Hama, resulting in their subdual by government forces. These conflicts constituted a religious war in the minds of the Muslim Brotherhood, fought between the two rival groups, Sunnīs and Alawites (Goldsmith 2012:169, Kaplan 1993:5).

In 1982 the mounting tensions and mutual aggravation between the Muslim Brotherhood and regime forces culminated in what has become known as the Hama Massacre. In a clash between regime forces and the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in Hama, Hafez al-Assad sent 12,000 Alawite soldiers to subdue an attempted coup. The massacre left approximately 30,000 Sunnī Muslims dead in the city. This clash was the ultimate sign of sectarian insecurity within the regime (Goldsmith 2012:183-186, Kaplan 1993:5).

This major event in Syrian history marked the end of all political opposition to the Ba'thist regime. However, this was not seen as a victory by the government, but rather a failure to properly integrate different religious factions into a united Syrian society. This forced the government into a stance of coercion that would characterise its ideals for years to come (Goldsmith 2012:191).

Chapter 3

Islam and the Alawites

3.1 Introduction

Islam in the modern era is a religion of great diversity and character. Today it is the second-largest religion in the world, and its adherents can be found in all parts of the globe. As with all religions, Islam is a faith defined extensively by its past. Its multidimensional features and beliefs are not isolated from the course of history that they have passed through, but are deeply entrenched in the historical events that have defined and continue to define the religion. As such, in order to understand Islam and its beliefs and practices, it is important to also understand the historical context from which it arose. While Islam is a religion firmly grounded in its primary scripture, the *Ḳurʿān*, its texts have been interpreted by multiple readers over the centuries, which has resulted in the faith being enacted in multiple ways. The concept of *jihād* within Islam contributes to the perception that Islam is a religion prone to violence. It is therefore a topic that needs to be addressed in order to understand the doctrine of this aspect of Islam in its proper context.

Islam is also a religion deeply interwoven with politics. This is evident through the internal split that occurred in the early formation of the faith, leading to a number of different groups, and eventually forming two major groups, *Sunnīs* and the *Shīʿites*. This relationship Islam had with politics was a driving force for its rapid expansion across the Middle East, but it also inspired many other innovations within Islamic society. Armstrong (2008:3) notes this point in saying: “Muslims developed their own rituals, mysticism, philosophy, doctrines, sacred texts, laws and shrines like everybody else. But all these religious pursuits sprang directly from the Muslims’ frequently anguished contemplation of the political current affairs of Islamic society.” She goes on to add that politics was the arena in which Muslims experienced God, and where God was able to act effectively in the world (Armstrong 2008:3). Thus in seeking to understand the Islamic faith it is important to keep in mind the political constructs that have influenced a part of its theology and rituals.

This chapter therefore explores the historical development of Islam, from its formation under the guidance of the Prophet Muḥammad, to the development of the multiple splits that occurred within the faith shortly after Muḥammad’s death.

This chapter also covers some of the major doctrinal aspects of Islam, putting into context the differences between Sunnī and Shīʿa beliefs.

Lastly, given the study's relevance to the Alawite people of modern Syria, the chapter looks at the historical background and theological aspects of the Nuṣayrī (Alawite) people and faith as a deviant form of Shīʿī Islam.

Having expanded on the historical and theological aspects of Islam and the Alawites, the chapter will serve as methodological framework for the rest of the study, in which the Alawites and Sunnīs of modern Syria and the ongoing strife between them can be better understood.

3.2 The life of the Prophet Muḥammad

The exemplary life of the Prophet Muḥammad plays a significant role in the continuation of the Islamic faith. Not only was Muḥammad the founder of the religion, but his actions and practices are seen by Muslim believers to be an example to follow in their own lives.

The accounts of Muḥammad's life are generally taken from Ibn Ishāq (the earliest biographer of Muḥammad's life) and the Qurʾān, but the historicity of these accounts is somewhat problematic, as there is no universal agreement among scholars as to when the Qurʾān was written and assembled, and because Ibn Ishāq wrote this biography over a century after Muḥammad's death (Riddel & Cotterell 2003:16). Anecdotes of Muḥammad's life also appear in what is referred to as Hadīth collections (later literary interpretations), but these also prove problematic in terms of bibliographic information because of the use of Muḥammad as a figurehead in the promotion and elaboration of Islam. Not only did Muḥammad's life and actions become an example for Muslim behaviour, but his practices also became a source of law within Islam. As such, the identity and life of Muḥammad came to be used as a way to substantiate legal positions (Rippin 1990:39).

Nevertheless, accounts of Muḥammad's life generally follow a similar line. It is generally agreed upon that Muḥammad was born around the year 570 CE. He was born into the tribe known as Quraysh and was from a well-positioned, but not highly influential family. However, he was orphaned when he was still very young, and lived a very basic early life. He was later married to a prominent businesswoman much older than himself named Khadīdja who was a camel-caravan trader (Rippin 1990:32, Robinson 2010:183-184).

During this time, around the age of forty, it is said that Muḥammad retreated into the hills by himself along the trade routes he travelled with Khadīdja, while one tradition has it that he meditated in the caves of the hills surrounding Mecca (Haykal 2008:80). It was there that he was approached by the angel Gabriel who told him he had been commissioned to be the prophet of the one God, Allāh. Although he was filled with self-doubt, Muḥammad persisted in his calling and preached the message he had been given by Allāh. He initially felt much resistance toward his message, with little success or acceptance. However, he managed to convert a number of the lower-class members of the society he lived in, as well as his wife Khadīdja and his cousin ‘Alī. As Muḥammad’s following grew, his stance toward the polytheistic society of Mecca hardened. He became increasingly vocally opposed to their inequalities and hypocrisies, and as a result the people of that region became resentful and hostile toward him and his following. In addition, it is thought that Muḥammad’s harsh stance toward the institutions of Mecca, which included the Ka’ba (a religious shrine with much prominence in the region), was as a result of the hostility he himself felt from the Meccans. The new religion that Muḥammad had formed started to face higher degrees of persecution that resulted in the need for the followers of Muḥammad to find another place to live. While some members of the community fled to Abyssinia, Muḥammad was invited to stay in the town of Yathrib (later know as Medina). This move came to be known as the *hidjra* or ‘emigration’ (Rippin 1990:32-33, Robinson 2010:184-187).

The resettlement of Muḥammad and his followers in Medina was a significant turning point for the community. It was here that Muḥammad established himself as a prominent religious and political leader. The ‘Constitution of Medina’ was formed in this time, which was a treaty that various tribes in the region subscribed to and were subject to. The constitution stipulated that all authority ultimately derived from God, and all disputes were to be brought to Muḥammad for judgement (Rippin 1990:33, Robinson 2010:188-189).

Muḥammad’s ultimate goal was to return to Mecca. His strategy to attain this goal was to throttle the trade industry in Mecca through random attacks on the trading caravans. This strategy would create both an unstable business trade for Mecca, as well as provide immediate financial profits for Muḥammad’s community, which had looted the caravans. In one of these raids in the year 624 CE, a battle ensued, known as the Battle of Badr, in which Muḥammad and his followers triumphed over the Quraysh tribe of Mecca. This victory was taken as a divine sign that God was pleased with Muḥammad and his strategy.

He was not successful in every battle, being defeated in the Battle of Uḥud in 625 CE. In 627 CE the Medina was laid siege to by the Meccan army. For forty days Muḥammad and his followers defended themselves, after which the Meccans withdrew. Muḥammad immediately attacked Mecca, which resulted not in a victory, but in the Treaty of Ḥudaybiya. This treaty allowed Medinans entrance into Mecca the following year in order to perform the pilgrimage. Muḥammad's eventual success over the Meccans was owed to the rapid growth of his own community, such that in 630 CE his army was large enough to attack and subdue Mecca. Following this victory, Muḥammad was able to reside in Mecca for the final two years of his life, during which time he formed stronger political alliances in the region in order to better equip the spread of Islam (Rippin 1990:34, Robinson 2010:190-193).

The underlying structure of the story of Muḥammad's life is, according to Rippin (1990:35), "an attempt to provide a context for the revelation of the Ḳur'ān, such that ambiguous references may be made clear through the process of interpretation". For Rippin the texts used to establish a history of Muḥammad's life were essentially creative story-telling as a way to substantiate an authoritative text. He sees the historical and the anecdotal as intertwined, making it difficult for historians to interpret. He points to inconsistencies in the sources used to form the story of Muḥammad's life, showing that later sources seem to show specific data, while earlier sources are vague on the matter (Rippin 1990:35). Rippin's critical stance toward the construction of an authoritative figure in Islam is clearly an emic approach to the topic; however, for many Muslims Muḥammad remains the authoritative and unquestionable leader of the faith, from whom comes the true law and a code of life that should be followed (Maudoodi 2002:74).

Regardless of critique, the role that Muḥammad plays within the Islamic faith is of central importance both to the everyday believer, as well as to the broader Muslim community.

3.3 Theology

The beliefs and practices of Islam vary between the faith's different branches. While the Ḳur'ān acts as the primary source for many of these beliefs, it does not systematically lay down a set theology. Instead, such theology has been developed over time, drawing from multiple sources, and at different time periods.

3.3.1 Books

3.3.1.1 The *Ḳur'ān*

The *Ḳur'ān* is the central religious text of Islam, revealed to Muḥammad over the course of his lifetime. This revelation given to Muḥammad was not as a result of his own inspiration. Rather, it was the text transmitted through the angel Gabriel that was inspired. Muḥammad himself was not the source of the message, but the message came directly from the 'Preserved Tablet' in heaven (Riddell & Cotterell 2003:62). Thus the text is considered infallible. However, the *Ḳur'ān* was not compiled as a complete volume in his lifetime. Instead, the various revelations Muḥammad received were recorded by scribes and in oral format. Muḥammad's own literacy and his role in the recording of the revelations he received has been debated over the centuries, but the *Ḳur'ān* effectively leaves this question unanswered (Robinson 2010:186). What are certain, though, are the opinions of later eighth-century scholars as to the existence of a unified book, namely the *Ḳur'ān*. By this stage, additions to the volumes of the *Ḳur'ān* had been closed, and although debates still existed over the transmission and preservation of the revelation Muḥammad received, there was agreement over the existence of a *Ḳur'ān* (Robinson 2010:687). A general agreement among Muslims is also the fact that the *Ḳur'ān* is only viewed as the *Ḳur'ān* when it is written in Arabic. Translations do exist, but these do not compare or hold the same weight as that of the Arabic form (Riddell & Cotterell 2003:59). However, Robinson points to the argument that the original language it was written in was not pure Arabic as understood today, but rather a combination of both Arabic and Aramaic, an influence found through Syriac Christianity at the time of its writing and compilation. He notes that while this theory should not be taken too far, in no way does it discredit the vision's Muḥammad received (Robinson 2010:181).

Much of the *Ḳur'ān*'s content runs parallel to the events of Muḥammad's life. However, in the compilation process of the volume the *sūras* (chapters) were organised from longest to shortest, which virtually reverses the chronological order of events. This is with the exception of *Sūra 1*, which is a short chapter, but is an introduction to the *Ḳur'ān* used as a prayer. The *Ḳur'ān* contains 114 *sūras* (Riddell & Cotterell 2003:62). In these 114 chapters the *Ḳur'ān* covers a number of themes, namely law, prophets before Muḥammad, and the final judgement, but overarching these three themes is the central theme of God (Rippin 1990:15).

As a result of its compilation, its language style, and its unique set of revelations, the *Qur'ān* has captivated countless readers over its long existence. This attraction to the text is what Kermani (2010:15) has described as an aesthetic effect, which he considers to be uncontested by any other text in world literature. Where a Western understanding of Islamic history has given ideological, political, psychological, social or military reasons for the success of the message Muḥammad spread, Kermani says Muslim scholars over the centuries saw this same achievement by Muḥammad as being a result of the strong literary quality of the *Qur'ān*. This should be given credit for the spread of Islam in its formation period.

Part of the aesthetic appeal of the *Qur'ān* is the 'cultural memory' it formed in the early Muslim community. This collective memory, which preserved the memory of events, was able to create an identity that stabilised the community. This memory did not take historical factuality into consideration, but was more concerned with the narratives that were able to form the referential framework for interpreting the realities the community was faced with (Kermani 2010:16-17).

Thus the *Qur'ān* became a unifying factor in the early Muslim community, becoming a driving force for Muslim expansion. The *Qur'ān* is considered by Muslims to be a miracle sent from God because of its attraction and its motivation to spread its message, and therefore see it as being of supreme importance (Bewley 2008:154).

3.3.1.2 Ḥadīth

While the *Qur'ān* remains the unrivalled dominant text of Islam, other texts are also recognised within the faith. Second to the *Qur'ān* is Ḥadīth. Ḥadīth is a collection of the sayings, actions, and implied approvals of Muḥammad. What this material provides essentially is a confirmation of the way Muḥammad lived, either through words he said or words said about him. Ḥadīth can be said to fulfil three things. It stresses what is in the *Qur'ān*; it expounds on the approach that should be followed in carrying out matters, and it introduces teachings that come from verses in the *Qur'ān* (Haleem 2008:22).

Ḥadīth is a very large collection of material. This material is made up partly of reports on Muḥammad's childhood and his life in Mecca before his calling, but is largely a collection of the many questions he was asked by his followers in the process of instruction, and the disputes he helped to settle among these people. It was thought that for a source to be

included in Ḥadīth, it should not contradict what was assumed to be certain about Muḥammad. Because of the sheer volume of Ḥadīth sources, evidence exists of forgeries and distortions finding their way into the collection, mostly associated with sectarian tensions that had begun to arise. While methods were developed to filter these unwanted accounts, the vast array of different views made complete eradication of such forgeries almost impossible (Haleem 2008:22-23).

This secondary source of scripture provided the Muslim community with a respectable and complimentary companion to their primary text; the Qurʾān. This literature provided a framework that helped to define what the community was, and became the backbone for education, learning, and practical life (Gilsenan 2012:55). While it may not hold as much weight as the Qurʾān, the expanse of topics related to everyday living it covers, helped and still helps Muslims across the world to find justification and context for everyday ways of life (Haleem 2008:24).

3.3.2 Pillars of Islam

The ‘Pillars of Islam’ are a set of religious and ritual-based practices that are commonly accepted as foundational within the faith. They are expressed differently across the various expressions of Islam, but among Sunnī Muslims (the largest of Islamic groups) there are five such rituals. They include:

- *shahāda* (declaration)
- *ṣalāt* (daily prayer)
- *ṣawm* (fast during the month of Ramaḍān)
- *ḥajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca)
- *zakāt* (obligatory almsgiving)

Varisco (2012:324) notes that these ‘pillars’, with the exception of the *shahāda*, say very little about the message of Islam. But Kreinath (2012:112) argues that these religious practices are “indicative of Islam having a temporal order and rhythm of repetition, which follow a unique calendarical time-line to different degrees of organisational complexity and require deliberate commitment.” These practices are performed as acts of faith by adherents in their commitment, loyalty and submission to the will of God. They are an essential part of being accepted as Muslim, and have consequences that stretch into social and political life. They also help to determine to some degree the extent to which

outsiders can participate, and essentially determine the distinction between believer and non-believer (Kreinath 2012:112).

3.3.2.1 *Ṣhahāda*

The first and most important pillar is the *ṣhahāda*. It is a declaration and testimony of faith and states: '*I bear witness that there is no god save God, Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.*' This is essentially two *ṣhahādas*, with the first stating the 'right' of God, and the second pertaining to human worship and servanthood toward God (Chittick 2008:222).

Beyond simply being a statement, the *ṣhahāda* acts as a methodology for coming to know God: firstly, by adhering to the belief that no being can compare to that of God, Allāh, and secondly by realising that God's revelation comes through his messenger Muḥammad. These two elements are essential in understanding the essence of God. With this understanding, the *ṣhahāda* bears witness to that truth that the believer knows to be true in his heart (Chittick 2008:232).

3.3.2.2 *Ṣalāt*

This is the ritual designated for prayer, and other than the *ṣhahāda* (which a believer is encouraged to repeat in his head throughout the course of the day), *ṣalāt* is the most frequently practiced of the 'pillars', occurring at specified times in a given day. Participants follow a certain liturgy in each of these prayers, through which they hope to achieve a state of purity. In each of these processes they are required to face Mecca from wherever they may be situated in the world (Kreinath 2012:113).

3.3.2.3 *Ṣawm*

Ṣawm is ritual practice of fasting that takes place during the month of Ramaḍān (the month in which Muḥammad is thought to have first received his revelations). This practice was instituted by Muḥammad and follows the Jewish practice of fasting on the tenth day of the month (*Tishri*). Muḥammad instituted this fast on the tenth day of the Islamic month *Muḥarram*, but after becoming discontent with the Jews of Medina he changed it to a fast during the whole month of Ramaḍān to coincide with the month his revelations began. *Ṣawm* is considered by Muslims to be a spiritual discipline. *Ṣawm* requires that Muslims abstain from all food and drink between dawn and sunset, but they may continue to partake in these once it is dark (Kreinath 2012:113; Riddel & Cotterell 2003:46).

3.3.2.4 *Ḥajj*

In the month of *Dhu 'l-Ḥijj* (the twelfth month in the Islamic calendar), between the eighth and twelfth day, the Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca takes place. This is known as *ḥajj*, and every Muslim person, if capable, is expected to perform this pilgrimage at least once in his or her lifetime. This journey to Mecca is a unifying event for Muslims across the world, yet is a distinct experience for each individual believer (Kreinath 2012:114).

3.3.2.5 *Zakāt*

The last pillar is that of alms-giving. While this is an obligatory ritual that should be enacted throughout the course of the year, it also holds special significance during the month of *Dhu 'l-Ḥijj*, when sacrificed meat is distributed among the poor. *Zakāt* also entails a form of taxation upon believers' personal property. The act of almsgiving is seen as a way of purifying one's possessions as well as receiving spiritual rewards for such acts (Kreinath 2012:114-115).

3.3.3 *Īmān* (Six Beliefs)

The Messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, as do the faithful. They all believe in God, His angels, His scriptures and His messengers: "We make no distinction between any of His messengers." They say: "We hear and obey; grant us Your forgiveness, our Lord. To You we all return." (2:285)

This verse, taken from the *Qur'ān*, sums up some of the essential components of the Islamic faith. These core beliefs are known as the *Īmān*, and include the doctrines of divinity, angels, the Prophets, the books, the day of judgement, and predestination.

Unlike the Five Pillars of Islam, which set Muslims apart from non-Muslims, and which are largely based on the actions of Muslims, the *Īmān* is a pattern of belief within Islam and largely pertains to the metaphysical (Riddel & Cotterell 2003:47).

3.3.3.1 Divinity

The first of these doctrines is most central to Islam. This is the belief of *tawḥīd*, which emphasises the oneness and uniqueness of God. In *Ḥadīth* God is virtually unknowable, and best understood through his ninety-nine wonderful names. But God is also one being (monotheistic). This was one of the reasons why the *Qur'ān* was written: in order to

challenge the polytheistic beliefs of the cultures surrounding the early Muslim community (Riddel & Cotterell 2003:48).

Only God/Allāh should be worshipped. This is made clear in the Ḳurʾān where it states; “there is no god but God” (47:19). This short but powerful statement is divided into two parts: a negation, ‘no god’, and an affirmation, ‘but God’. This clear separation is a way of distinguishing that which has no claim to be the divine from that which encompasses all the divine qualities and which possesses the ninety-nine wonderful names (Chittick 2008:222). To go against this, or to worship that which is not divine, is considered *shirk* (idolatry), and is considered the only unforgivable sin (4:116), except if one repents (25:68-70) (Haleem 2008:26-27).

3.3.3.2 Angels

Of importance in the Islamic faith, especially because of the way in which Muḥammad received God’s message, is the belief in angels. The revelations that Muḥammad received were brought to him via the angel Gabriel. Because of this fact, Gabriel is the most prominent of the angels, but essentially there is no hierarchy between them. Angels are the messengers of God, and are incapable of disobeying him (66:6). They have various roles, which include giving God’s message to the Prophets (32:51), encouraging and interceding on behalf of believers (40:7-9), recording human actions (50:17-18), and reaping human souls at death (32:11) (Haleem 2008:27).

3.3.3.3 Prophets

On earth there are also messengers, but unlike the angels, these messengers are human beings, also known as prophets. Within Islam there have been many recognised prophets, the majority of which are found in the texts of the Old Testament. There are more than twenty prophets mentioned in the Ḳurʾān, some of which include Abraham, Moses and Jesus, but most prominent among them is the Prophet Muḥammad. Muḥammad is considered the final prophet in a long line of prophets, and thus carries the final revelation from God. While Muḥammad is considered to be the last prophet, all of the recognised prophets that have lived throughout the ages are believed to have shared a common religious belief, that they implemented in their respective communities. These prophets either provided a new revelation or book, or upheld a previous one (Haleem 2008:28-29; Riddel & Cotterell 2003:48).

3.3.3.4 Books

This doctrine incorporates the belief in the *Ḳurʿān*, which has already been discussed.

3.3.3.5 Day of Judgement

On numerous occasions the *Ḳurʿān* speaks of the earth's natural beauty, but it also moves beyond that by speaking about that which is beyond the here and now. Haleem (2008:29) notes that the *Ḳurʿān* makes both direct and implicit reference to the afterlife and judgement on almost every page. It stresses the importance that this world only exists in reference to that which is to come (the other world).

While the time of the final day or “Day of Reckoning” is not known, when the “Hour” does come (7:187), there will be a general resurrection of the dead. The books in which the angels have recorded the good and bad deeds of each person will be brought out, and the account of each person will be read. Those whose good deeds outweigh bad deeds will be given their book in their right hand, but for those whose bad deeds outweigh their good deeds will have their book given to them in their left hand. Those who hold their books in their right hand shall be granted entrance into paradise, the ultimate reward for Muslims (Haleem 2008:29; Riddel & Cotterell 2003:49).

3.3.3.6 Predestination

The last belief that constitutes part of the *Īmān* is the doctrine of predestination. The *Ḳurʿān* generally takes a deterministic stance toward the life of human beings. The topic has raised debate among Muslim scholars over the centuries, concerning the tension between God's omnipotence (does God know everything?; does God foresee everything?) and human free will; however, the belief in predestination has largely prevailed among Muslim scholars and believers (Cobb 2010:257; Riddel & Cotterell 2003:49).

3.3.4 *Ḥarīʿa*

Ḥarīʿa is best described as Islamic law. It is not a separate book, but is formed from the *Ḳurʿān* and other secondary literature. Translated literally, it means ‘way to the water hole’, but has taken on the meaning of ‘the right path’, which in turn has come to be known as ‘law’. However, *Ḥarīʿa* conveys more than just the idea and concept of ‘law’. The notion of right teaching and the right path a person should follow in life is held dear in the meaning of *Ḥarīʿa*. It signifies the driving force for all that is right and good. Equally, it holds a

divine purpose for Muslims, as it lays out the will and design of Allāh (Denny 1985:187-188).

Sharī'a upholds the concept that mankind does not possess rights, only duties, and thus the idea of law rings true for the Muslim believer. The ideal that every Muslim should strive for is seeking right guidance and purpose. This sense of duty brings forth stability to the life of the individual as well as to the community. The ultimate aim of sharī'a is to demonstrate the sovereignty of God. This demonstration of right guidance can be found within the Ḳur'ān as well as the Sunna (secondary Islamic literature), both of which convey the 'infallible' word of God. This is in contrast to the *fiqh*, which are the laws interpreted through human capacity (Denny 1985:188, Mohammad 1985:384).

It is within these guidelines that sharī'a can be practiced both in a person's individual capacity and within political Islamic frameworks. Scholars differ in opinion as to which platforms sharī'a operates on: political, social, or both (Na & Ahmed 2009:220). It is the guideline according to which a Muslim believer should live his/her life, but can also be the laws that govern a nation or state. Whichever it may be, it remains a source of the legitimacy that is to be found in the will of God.

3.3.5 Jihād

The doctrine of jihād is the Muslim belief denoted to "holy war". The word itself means to strive or exert oneself (Firestone 1999:17), but has been adopted by the Islamic faith as a topic of doctrine. This Islamic principle has been subject to multiple interpretations and changes over the centuries, and consequently has been enacted in many different ways. It does, however, suffice to say that the idea of jihād in the Islamic faith was as a direct result of its turbulent origins and the necessity for it to defend itself against possible extinction (Cook 2005:6-7).

3.3.5.1 Jihād in the Ḳur'ān

During the early phase of the formation of the Islamic community, Muḥammad and his followers frequently faced persecution for their beliefs by the tribesmen of Mecca. This persecution led to Muḥammad's eventual emigration to Medina, called the *hidjra*. During a period of five years in Medina, Muḥammad and his followers converted the surrounding tribes to their faith, gaining followers and territory. Before his death, Muḥammad participated in 27 campaigns that helped to establish new territory and expand the Muslim

faith. These campaigns are represented in four groups, with each group accomplishing different strategic goals in the expansion of the Islamic community. It was in the context of these conquests, which formed a major part of the early Islamic community's formation, that the concept of jihād was established (Cook 2005:5-6).

Not all of these campaigns were successful, with some having Muḥammad narrowly escape with his life. However, this military activity did play a role in influencing the writing of the Ḳur'ān, which coincided with these campaigns. As such, parts of the Ḳur'ān reflect the relevance of jihād at the time, and addresses the issue of how jihād should be conducted and what were considered just causes for waging jihād (Cook 2005:6).

Permission is given to those who fight because they are wronged. Surely Allāh is capable of giving them victory. Those who were driven out of their homes unjustly, merely for their saying: "Our Lord is Allāh." Had Allāh not repelled some people by others, surely monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques, wherein the name of Allāh is mentioned frequently, would have been demolished. Indeed, Allāh will support whoever supports Him. Allāh is surely Strong and Mighty. (22:39-40)

This verse attends to the issue of justice with regard to jihād. It justifies the attacks on the Meccans who persecuted Muslims for their beliefs and left the early community without possessions. This passage describes those who worship God but are wronged, but in a later passage, which reflects on a later battle in Muḥammad's campaigns, a covenant between God and Muslims is described that explains jihād as a way of fighting in the name of God.

Allāh bought from the believers their lives and their wealth in return for Paradise; they fight in the way of Allāh, kill and get killed. That is a true promise from Him in the Torah, the Gospel, and the Ḳur'ān and who fulfils His promise better than Allāh? Rejoice, then, at the bargain you have made with Him; for that is the great triumph. (9:111)

Unlike the previous one, this passage does not speak of justification for fighting if a person has been wronged, but rather as a way of fighting and dying for God because of his salvific act. Assurance of Paradise is given to the believer who gives up his life for the cause of God. This is a progressive step from the previous passage, with a completely new reason is given for fighting.

Nevertheless, with the continuation of the conquests, a decision had to be made as to what to do with those who did not convert.

Then, when the sacred months are over, kill the idolaters wherever you find them, take them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them at every point of observation. If they repent afterwards, perform the prayer and pay the alms, then release them. Allāh is truly All-Forgiving, Merciful. (9:5)

This verse is commonly known as the “Verse of the Sword”, and is one of the most important verses pertaining to jihād. Although the context of the verse concerns pagan Arabs, in later centuries Islamic jurists would use this verse to declare jihād against all non-Muslims. It was later followed by a verse that spoke about the dominance of Islam over Jews and Christians, and helped to establish the social system of Islam for some time to come (Cook 2005:6-10).

Fight those among the People of the Book who do not believe in God and the Last Day, do not forbid what God and His Apostle have forbidden, and do not profess the true religion until they pay the poll-tax out of hand and submissively. (9:29)

Each of these passages taken from the *Qurʾān* reflects the early progression of jihād. These passages are a reflection of the context in which they were written, the struggles the early Muslim community was facing, and the intent to expand the faith further. The passages regarding warfare in the *Qurʾān* follow an evolutionary process, coinciding with the historical needs of Muḥammad in the mission he was pursuing. They begin with the avoidance of conflict where possible, progress to the engagement in war for defensive purposes, and finally the justify war on all non-Muslims at any given time or place (Firestone 1999:50). The passages quoted are only a handful of extracts taken from the *Qurʾān*, but the *Qurʾān* also deals with other topics relating to jihād, such as the issues of prisoners and martyrs. It gives a thorough justification for waging war, and sets the foundation for later interpretations of the doctrine (Cook 2005:11).

3.3.5.2 Jihād in Ḥadīth

Because of the great success of Muḥammad and the early Muslims in their conquests and expansion throughout the Middle East, the doctrine of jihād became an essential part of Islam. Its ideas were recorded in the *Qurʾān*, but it was only later in the texts of Ḥadīth that these ideas were expanded upon.

Ḥadīth is today for Sunnī Muslims a form of literature that is essential in deciding how to live one's life. Unlike the Ḳur'ān, which recorded events around the time of their occurrence, Ḥadīth literature was more of a commentary and interpretation of Muḥammad's life. Ḥadīth deals extensively with the issue of jihād, but it deals with the issues of spiritual warfare more than the Ḳur'ān (Haleem 2008:24).

The slain [in jihād] are three [types of] men: a believer, who struggles with himself and his possessions in the path of God, such that when he meets the enemy [in battle] he fights them until he is killed. This martyr (*shahīd*) is tested, [and is] in the camp of God under His throne; the prophets do not exceed him [in merit] except by the level of prophecy. [Then] a believer, committing offenses and sins against himself, who struggles with himself and his possessions in the path of God, such that when he meets the enemy [in battle] he fights until he is killed. This cleansing wipes away his offenses and his sins - behold the sword wipes [away] sins! - and he will be let into heaven from whatever gate he wishes... [Then] a hypocrite, who struggles with himself and his possessions in the path of God, such that when he meets the enemy [in battle] he fights until he is killed. This [man] is in hell since the sword does not wipe away hypocrisy.

(Ibn al-Mubarak, Hadith 7)

This is just one of many passages pertaining to jihād in Ḥadīth, but this specific passage adds to what is given in Ḳur'ān 9:111 in the contract made between God and man. It introduces a redemptive theme to jihād. The sinful man who dies for the cause of God is cleansed of his sinfulness. Ḥadīth was able to expand on the spiritual aspect of warfare in order to develop the concept of jihād as a theological doctrine. These developments helped to inspire the great conquests and achievements of the early Muslims (Cook 2005:15).

Another reason for the great successes of these Muslim fighters was the way that they instilled fear in the minds of the enemy. In the Ḳur'ān the Prophet Muḥammad is quoted as saying, "We will cast terror into the hearts of the unbelievers on account of their associating with Allāh that for which He sent down no authority" (3:151). This verse led to interpretations in Ḥadīth literature about how this should be done, with references to poetry, flags and slogans. Where the Ḳur'ān touches on general themes of jihād, Ḥadīth goes into depth on the topic, delving into how warfare should be enacted and how it should be done in a spiritual manner.

3.3.5.3 Restrictions of Jihād

Though both the *Qurʾān* and *Ḥadīth* broadened the operational parameters of jihād from its original definition, both sets of literature maintain restrictions on its practice. The *Qurʾān*, for example, carries a number of restrictions for waging war.

Fight in the path of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for God does not love transgressors (2:190).

While defensive fighting is permitted in this verse, the certainty of what the word “transgression” might mean has fallen subject to much debate over the centuries. Interpretations have ranged from fighting in the Sacred Precinct of Mecca (*haram*), to the killing of women and children, to breaching the general “rules of engagement” (Firestone 1999:74). Restrictions also extend to fighting on certain sacred months (9:36), and collecting the spoils of war (8:41). Such fighting is not permitted except when being attacked (22:39-40).

Ḥadīth, on the other hand, laid the foundation for jihād as a legal process (Cook 2005:20). In this sense, the nature of jihād needed to be regulated.

The Messenger of Allāh, when he would send a commander with a raid or an army would enjoin upon him the fear of Allāh, especially with regard to himself, but also with regard to himself, but also with regard to the Muslims, and say: When you meet your polytheist enemy, call to him [to choose] between three possibilities-accept whichever one they accept, and desist from them:

1. Call them to Islam; if they accept, then accept it from them and desist from them. Then [if they accept Islam] call them to move from their homes to the home of the *muhādjirūn* [immigrants]; if they do this, then they will have the rights and the responsibilities of the *muhādjirūn*. If they refuse, then designate their home, and inform them what they will be like the Muslim Bedouin - Allāh’s law, which is incumbent upon the believers, will be incumbent upon them, but they will not have any right to the movable or nonmovable spoils, except when they fight at the side of the Muslims.
2. If they refuse, then call them to pay the *djizya* [poll tax]. If they accept, then accept it from them and desist from them.
3. If they refuse, then ask Allāh for aid against them, and fight them. If you besiege the people of a fortress, and they desire to surrender unconditionally (*‘ala hukm* Allāh), do not accept this from them, but let them surrender according to your judgement, and do with them what you wish afterwards. (Abu Da’ud, Hadith 2612)

The passage draws parameters of when jihād is acceptable, and lays out a set of rules. While Muslims engaging in warfare have not always obeyed these rules, they have helped in creating a framework or benchmark according to which jihād could operate.

3.3.5.4 Goals of Jihād

In its historical context, jihād may be confused with the idea of merely conquering as many peoples and lands as possible. Especially during the formative years of Islam, Muḥammad and his followers moved through the Middle East at a formidable pace. This could be simply interpreted as Muḥammad using his successes as a way to move forward as quickly as possible, but other interpretations see these swift conquests as being part of a belief that the end of the world was near. This view is supported by various apocalyptic texts, mostly from Ḥadīth literature.

Behold! God sent me [= Muhammad] with a sword, just before the Hour [of Judgement], and placed my daily sustenance the shadow of my spear, and humiliation and contempt on those who oppose me. (Ibn al Mubarak, Hadith 105)

In this passage Muḥammad is portrayed as a doomsday prophet sent to conquer the world just before the Day of Judgement. A sense of urgency is evident in that worldly things are given less priority than the necessity to fight. This apocalyptic belief was instrumental in the rapid expansion of the Islamic faith in its formative years. This sense of urgency contributed to the goal of jihād, which was to convert non-Muslims.

I was ordered to fight people until they say: “There is no god but Allāh.” When they have said that, then their blood and their property is protected from me, solely by reason [of saying it], and judgement upon them is in the hands of Allāh. (Abu Da’ud, Hadith 2640)

Jihād forms a major part of Muslim apocalyptic literature (Cook 2005:24), and throughout the formative years of Islam the belief that the end of the world was approaching played a major role in the way Muslims interpreted the necessity to fight in order to protect themselves and to spread their faith.

3.3.5.5 ‘Greater’ and ‘Lesser’ Jihād

For most of the formative years of Islam, jihād was interpreted and understood as physical fighting. As has been mentioned, this was in part because of its coincidence with the defence, preservation and conquests that the early Muslims engaged in. However, in the

eighth and ninth century, as conquests became fewer, new interpretations of jihād began to be explored, unrelated to the ‘sword’ and killing. These new interpretations focused more on spiritual warfare rather than physical warfare (Cook 2005:33).

A number of fighters came to the Messenger of Allāh, and he said: “You have done well in coming from the ‘lesser jihād’ to the ‘greater jihād.’” They said: “What is the ‘greater jihād’?” He said: “For the servant [of God] to fight his passion.” (Al-Bayhaqi, Hadith 373)

Non-militant traditions, such as that shown in the above passage, began to arise. Scholars began to focus on how to purify one’s own thoughts and emotions. For some, the soul became the enemy that the believers strove against. Others focused on combating one’s passions and desires as a way of gaining worldly success. For many of the early scholars of this reinterpretation of jihād, spiritual warfare was only a precursor to military warfare. It was a way of preparing the soldier for the battlefield (Cook 2005:35-39). Over time, the concept of jihād began to expand in order to designate a term that depicted strife and exertion, but that did not necessarily mean killing or fighting. ‘Jihād of the heart’ entailed an exertion against one’s own sinful tendencies, while ‘Jihād of the tongue’ was a way of speaking good and condemning evil. Many of these interpretations use words attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad to accommodate multiple understandings of jihād.

Every prophet sent by God to a nation (*umma*) before me has had disciples and followers who followed his ways (*sunna*) and obeyed his commands. But after them came successors who preached what they did not practice and practice what they were not commanded. Whoever strives (*jāhada*) against them with one’s hand is a believer, whoever strives against them with one’s tongue is a believer, whoever strives against them with one’s heart is a believer. There is nothing greater than [the size of] a mustard seed beyond that in the way of faith. (Abu Da’ud, Hadith 1408)

These interpretations stood in contrast to ‘jihād of the sword’, which only promulgated jihād through physical warfare. With these two broader understandings of jihād in mind, scholars began to distinguish between ‘greater jihād’ and ‘lesser jihād’. ‘Greater jihād’ represented the struggle or exertion against one’s self, while ‘lesser jihād’ meant to fight [another] in the name of God.

While ‘greater jihād’ was a much later development in Islamic thought, it was an attempt to shift the focus away from fighting and killing toward an introspective understanding of striving in the name of God. ‘Lesser jihād’ is discussed in the majority of texts in both the

Qur'ān and Ḥadīth, and as a result, this still remains the dominant understanding of jihād today.

3.3.5.6 Contemporary interpretations of Jihād

Over the centuries scholars have continued to debate the definition of jihād, and as in the early formation of Islam, these definitions have often been aligned with the socio-political contexts of the time. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the early twentieth century and the subsequent bolstering of the Western power, the Islamic world lost much of its influence across the globe. Arab states were divided, adopting a variety of new political systems and often with no Muslim leader to lead the state at all. There was no longer a single Islamic leader to unite Muslims. This massive transformation in the Arab world boosted a new set of scholars' endeavours to tackle the meaning and implications of jihād (Cook 2005:93).

Even as the Arab world was being shaken up and the world map redrawn, the meaning and permissibility of jihād was being questioned. When posed with the question of whether or not the early Muslim conquests were defensive or not, Egyptian scholars Muḥammad 'Abduh (d.1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d.1935) attempted to answer by upholding Muḥammad's defensive nature in his conquests. They justified this by saying that war played a considerably large part in Muḥammad's time and context, and therefore "aggression" was not a problem within this context. Muḥammad's continued conquests and fighting were done in order to defend and protect Muslims and allow them to continue to proclaim the truth. Riḍā states: "Our religion is not like others that defend themselves... but our defence of our religion is the proclamation of truth and the removal of the distortion and misrepresentation of it" (Cook 2005:96). What 'Abduh and Riḍā succeeded in doing at this early stage was to blur the lines between 'defense' and 'offense'. However, they also used the principle of 'greater jihād' to explain the spiritual aspect of warfare as a way of proclaiming truth before any physical warfare took place (Cook 2005:94-97).

Another person to latch onto the idea that jihād was primarily a proclamation of truth was the founder (in 1928) of the radical Islamic group known as the Muslim Brotherhood. Ḥasan al-Bannā', using the Qur'ān 8:61, where Muḥammad speaks of jihād as an obligation for Muslims not as a means of aggression or for personal desires, he urges Muslims to fight rather than to be afraid of fighting. However, he makes clear that when they do fight they should do so for the right reasons (Cook 2005:97-99).

On the opposite side of the spectrum Abu al-'Ala al-Mawdūdī (d.1979), an influential scholar on radical Islam, also understood jihād as a proclamation of the truth, but for him jihād was completely unrelated to fighting. Mawdūdī witnessed and understood how the West and Christians had tried to distort and twist the meaning of jihād in order to convert Muslims to their beliefs. However, he was also dedicated to reinterpreting jihād as a way of speaking against corrupt rule. Mawdūdī spoke of jihād as being designed to confront unjust rulers that attempted to cause havoc and injustice in the world. In this sense, jihād moved beyond killing and physical fighting towards a more passive-aggressive rhetoric.

Lastly, Sayyid Ḳuṭb, an intellectual and activist from Egypt, was probably one of the most influential figures regarding jihād in the modern era and in the rise of radical Islam. Having visited the United States in the late 1940s, he was shocked by its unrestricted consumerism and the nation's capitalist mentality. What he perceived there shaped his political views, and upon his return to Egypt he joined the Muslim Brotherhood. Ḳuṭb became an influential figure within the organisation, and as a result of his activism he was frequently arrested and persecuted by the political authorities. Ḳuṭb was finally executed in 1966, but he left a legacy for many Muslims across the globe. Unlike many of the scholars who preceded him, Ḳuṭb was considered a martyr who died for speaking the truth. He struggled with the fact that Muslim societies were no longer governed by Islamic principles and had essentially turned their backs on their faith. Islam no longer existed except in believers' personal lives, and thus the world had reverted to the period known as *Jāhiliyya* (dark age, ignorance, barbarism). Ḳuṭb noted that it is necessary to revive Islam from its state in this period. For him, the starting point is to focus on the Ḳur'ān and the "unique Ḳur'ānic generation": the way that the first Muslim generation interpreted the text. As a result, he places importance on jihād, interpreting it as not merely defensive. He too sees jihād as a means for the proclamation of Islam, and a way to rid the world of those things that prevent the truth from reaching the world. Ḳuṭb also embraces the use of violence and military action as a method of accomplishing jihād, but he also addresses the issue of 'greater jihād', which he sees as a valuable part of jihād, but not as important as a militant or 'lesser jihād'. Essentially Ḳuṭb's teaching is to proclaim the message of Islam by any means possible (Cook 2005:102-106).

These contemporary thinkers and activists paved the way for a revival of jihād in the modern era. They helped to bring about an understanding of jihād that was relevant to a new age of Muslims. One of the first people to implement this revived way of thinking was

a Palestinian named ‘Abdallah ‘Azzam. He placed a great emphasis on jihād and martyrdom as a way of resurrecting Islam from *Jāhiliyya*, and marked jihād as having the same importance as the five pillars of Islam. For him, those who did not participate in jihād were living in sin. ‘Azzam was influential in gathering fighters to war-torn Afghanistan, and he was followed by a number of other influential radical Muslim fighters, one of whom was Usama bin Laden (Cook 2005:128-131).

The doctrine of jihād has been subject to a number of investigations over the centuries. Its implementation has more often than not been a product of its context, with more aggressive jihād or ‘lesser jihād’ being more prominent in times of political uncertainty, and introspective jihād or ‘greater jihād’ being more prominent during times of political stability. This had led to scholars being uncertain as to which form of jihād (‘greater’ or ‘lesser’) is the better form. While modern radical Muslims have often upheld the value of ‘greater jihād’, the impact that ‘lesser jihād’ has had in its implementation has provided a grander statement for those who espouse it. While the Prophet Muḥammad did refer to a spiritual form of jihād, his actions in his frequent conquests provided a greater example for the implementation of a “lesser jihād” throughout the centuries.

3.4 Muḥammad’s succession and the creation of divisions within Islam

The death of Muḥammad marked a significant point in the continuation of Islam. Muḥammad had established the foundations of the faith, and his influence in the region of Mecca had expanded substantially. He stressed the importance of right living, especially among the rulers of the existing tribes. This was for him more important than tribal allegiance. However, it was over this belief that the first schisms within Islam began to form. As Blankinship (2008: 35) notes, these schisms were political in nature, and the patterns that formed from such differences significantly shaped the way Islamic history and thought would play out. He continues to say, “Although the political ruptures took on ideological and religious overtones whose later fixity helped to define religious boundaries, it is very doubtful whether such differences can be considered essentially ‘spiritual’, especially in the earliest period, however strongly they may have been felt, since their origins lay in political contestations that had little to do with creedal or legal matters” (Blankinship 2008:35).

These early disputes led to sectarian divisions within the early Muslim community. These disputes were largely centred over differences over their belief in God and the afterlife, but

also over legitimate leadership. These disputes became heated shortly after the death of Muḥammad in 632 CE over the concern of who would succeed him in leading the Muslim community (Blankinship 2008:35).

On the one side of the schism, there was Abū Bakr. He was a respected member of the community and the father of one of Muḥammad's wives. With the support of the majority of the community he established himself as a commander, helping to maintain law and order among the people. He was opposed by a smaller group of the community led by 'Alī, the husband of Muḥammad's last surviving daughter Fāṭima (Blankinship 2008:35).

While many reasons exist for the differences between these two groups, one such reason was political. Abū Bakr and his supporters largely hailed from the Meccan region, and were thus more in favour of the Quraysh tribe that lived there (since it had also been Muḥammad's tribe). However, 'Alī and his supporters had found favour among the Medinans (Blankinship 2008:35).

For twenty four years after Muḥammad's death Abū Bakr (r. 632 - 4 CE) and the Meccans took administrative control of the Muslim community. They established successful caliphates, with Abū Bakr being succeeded by 'Umar I (r. 634 – 44 CE), who was in turn succeeded by 'Uthmān (r. 644 – 56 CE). However, as Islamic expansion slowed down, 'Uthmān was assassinated. This move brought 'Alī (r. 656 – 61 CE) to power (Blankinship 2008:36).

'Alī's reign was characterised by a long civil war between the two groups (656 - 61 CE), and during this period further disputes were established that solidified sectarian divisions. By the end of 'Alī's reign, four groups had been formed, namely: Mu'āwīya, 'Ā'isha, Khawāridj and Shī'a. Between 661 CE and 750 CE, Mu'āwīya maintained political control, while 'Ā'isha (the group that would later come to be known as Sunnīsm), the Khawāridj and the Shī'a (meaning 'faction') further grew and evolved during this time - but not without further divisions among them (Blankinship 2008:36).

During the Second Civil War (680 - 92 CE) the three groups that had been overshadowed before were now very vocal in their stance against Mu'āwīya. The supporters of 'Alī had become especially discontent with the reigning group after Mu'āwīya murdered 'Alī and took the land he had controlled, establishing the Umayyad dynasty. Among these

competing groups, there were some people who thought that the entire process was illegitimate. These Muslims became known as the Khārijites, and their strong stance against the caliphs (deputies of God) of the Umayyad dynasty, as well as their reliance on solely the Qurʾān for authority and not human political authority, started the debate over free will, determinism, and God's absolute power, within Islamic theology (Blankinship 2008:37-38).

Following the death of 'Alī, a loyal group of Shī'ites established a base in the city of Kūfa, Iraq. The belief among the Shī'a was that the growing history of disagreements between Muslims since the death of Muḥammad was as a result of the abandonment of the Prophet's own family. They believed that everything would return to normal if a leader of the Muslim community was divinely chosen from Muḥammad's own family (Blankinship 2008:40).

The belief in a divinely chosen leader from the house of Muḥammad would later develop into a messianic expectation among the Shī'a. This idea started when 'Alī's son al-Ḥusayn was brutally murdered in 680 CE. His death was avenged by his brother Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, who issued a revolt led by al-Mukhtār al-Thaqafī, against the Umayyads, which eventually failed. This revolt, however, was rich with messianic language (Blankinship 2008:40).

The early Shī'a were not a single unified group, but were very divided. The most moderate of the groups (according to Sunnī opponents) were the Zaydī. They originated from Zayd ibn 'Alī, who was considered to be the fifth and final *imām* according to his followers. They believed that an *imām* could be elected. This was for Sunnī Muslims acceptable (Blankinship 2008:41).

They were, however, in opposition to the Imāmīs (known commonly as the Twelvers). The Imāmīs held that after the death of the eleventh *imām* the twelfth *imām* went into hiding or "occultation". They believed that *imāms* were elected by their predecessor by special appointment. *Imāms* were considered infallible, and such leaders could only be chosen from the houses of 'Alī and Fāṭima (Blankinship 2008:41).

Lastly, there were the Ismā'īliyya, which recognised seven *imāms*, with the last being ibn Djā'far al-Ṣādiq. They were often considered to be an esoteric group, but in 878 CE a

significant change took place among the group, which resulted in them becoming one of the largest Shī'ite groups for a large portion of Islamic history (Blankinship 2008:41).

3.5 Ghulāt sects

Among Shī'a movements and traditions, a brand of Shī'ism started known for its extreme beliefs. These various groups came to be known as the ghulāt, which means extremists. Their beliefs, although often rooted in traditional Islam, were a deviation from mainstream Shī'ism (Moosa 1987:16).

One such group were the Druze. However, for the focus of this study, the groups known as the Alawites will be expanded on.

3.5.1 Alawites (Nuṣayrīs)

3.5.1.1 Historical Context

The origins of the Alawite sect can be traced back to the initial stages in the development of Islam in the split between Sunnī and Shī'a Muslims. Out of the fissure that was formed within the faith, a number of Shī'a sects developed with extreme beliefs, all characterised by the idea that ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Muḥammad, was divine. These groups were known as the ghulāt (Talhamy 2011a:220). The Alawites, known originally as the Nuṣayrī, formed part of this extremist movement (Talhamy 2008:895).

The founder of the sect, Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Namīri, was a follower of the eleventh Shī'a *imām*, al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskari. Amid the disunity and lack of organisation at that time, Nuṣayr broke away from the Shī'ites, and claimed that he was the '*bāb*', the gateway to Allāh. Thus, some scholars claim that Nuṣayr was not the founder of the sect, but rather the figure who was deified by it. Scholars, such as Friedman, point to al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣṣībī as the founder of the Alawite creed (Talhamy 2011b:23-24, Friedman 2010:91-93).

Khaṣṣībī, who was born in Iraq, and raised in a pious family, received a calling in 926 CE through *imām* Hasan al-Askari to continue the task of Nuṣayr in leading the Shī'ites, which at that time were in great confusion following the disappearance of the twelfth *imām* (Pipes 1989:430-431, Talhamy 2011b:24, Friedman 2010:91).

Khaṣībī, who possessed the spiritual leadership required, “did not regard himself as the leader of a Shī‘ite splinter group, but rather as a guide of the community that still followed the true path of the Shī‘a in accordance with the will of the *Imam* and his *bāb*, Ibn Nuṣayr” (Friedman 2001:91).

Khaṣībī’s message spread through Iraq but soon found opposition from the Islamic authorities in Baghdad. In response, Khaṣībī fled Iraq, while claiming, “the lord Messiah [Jesus] had rescued him, and that he [Jesus] was [the reincarnation of] Muḥammad”. While the majority of influence on Khaṣībī came from Islam, the influence of Christianity also had a part to play in his life (Friedman 2001:97-98).

It would appear that Khaṣībī’s radical beliefs and his persecution in Iraq led him to flee to Syria, where he found acceptance among the people there. Here he was able to establish a base, which would be the foundation for the formation of the Alawite sect (Friedman 2001:99).

3.5.1.2 Theology

Alawite doctrine is not a subject that has been extensively researched. In fact, it is a topic shrouded in mystery, largely because of the Alawite tribes’ secretive natures, but also owing to the sects’ long history of persecution. Much of the Alawite literature has been destroyed over the years by the sects’ opposition and enemies. Thus, much of the information we have today is either via oral sources or secondary sources.

A large portion of the tribes’ history has been dedicated to determining whether they are an independent religion, or if they are in fact a branch of the Islamic faith. While they may hold similar historical roots to the Shī‘ites, and share some of the same beliefs, they differ greatly from mainstream Sunnī Islam, which will be explained in this section.

3.5.1.2.1 Divinity

Alawite religion adheres to a strict monotheistic concept. Within their secret and often-vague beliefs, the idea of monotheism remains fundamental. Alawite sources define their perception of God as *anza’ batin*, which means an abstract and mysterious being that cannot be defined in anthropomorphic terms. It is sufficient for Alawite adherents to simply have faith in God. Actions and deeds are not required in order to gain access to the afterlife (Friedman 2001:101).

3.5.1.2.2 The Trinity

The Alawites believe in a Trinitarian concept of their own that is unlike the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Its name, A.M.S, is derived from the various entities incorporated into the Trinity:

‘A’ – stands for ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib

‘M’ – stands for Muḥammad (the Prophet)

‘S’ – stands for Salmān al-Fārisī (companion of Muḥammad)

‘Alī, who sits at the top of the trinitarian hierarchy, is considered as the ‘*ma‘nā*’, which means essence of God and source of all emanations. Muḥammad, who is only second in the hierarchy, is considered to be the ‘*ism*’, which is seen as the veil of the essence. This concept is separated, but not disconnected from the first. This is in order to stay within the confines of monotheism. Lastly, Salman is considered the ‘*bāb*’, which is the gate to the essence. Thus, Alawites could attain knowledge of the spiritual world through the ‘*bāb*’ to the ‘*ism*’ who conceals the ‘*ma‘nā*’ (Friedman 2001:101).

3.5.1.2.3 Metempsychosis

Tanāsukh, which is the concept of metempsychosis, or reincarnation, is an important concept in Alawite doctrine. Although commonly known as a Eastern religions concept (compare Hinduism and Buddhism), metempsychosis also exists as a part of Alawite doctrine. Nowhere in Islamic dogma does this concept exist, and among Sunnī and Shī‘ite adherents it is considered as shirk, or idolatry (Friedman 2001:72).

The Alawites believed that they were once stars from the realm of light, but in the event of them sinning they were punished for their wrongdoing and were given human bodies until they repented for their sin (Friedman 2010:73-77, Bar-Asher & Kofsky 2002:33-34).

This process of reincarnation in the theology of the Alawites continues for a number of revolutions in the process of purification. There are at least twenty-one cycles, with each lasting up to 1,077 years. After this process, they then return back to the world of light and become stars once again (Moiles 2012:10).

For Alawites, this concept is linked to that of reward and punishment. Therefore, the souls of those who were evil in life will be reincarnated as animals, while those who were righteous will achieve higher forms of human life (Talhamy 2011b:24).

The origin of metempsychosis among the Alawites is a disputed topic. While it is possible that its influence stretches from Hinduism as it sifted into Persian culture, it is more commonly accepted that it originated from Greek philosophy through the influence of Empedocles (Al-Tamimi 2012:184).

Although Alawites aim to return to the realm of light through the process of reincarnation, this is not the only process that must take place. A process of mystical initiation is necessary, along with a secret knowledge that must be studied (Al-Tamimi 2012:184).

3.5.1.2.4 *Taḳiyya* – religious dissimulation

The doctrine of *taḳiyya*, which literally means ‘concealment’, was a practice adopted by the Alawites for two reasons. Firstly, it was applied in order to protect the Alawite people from Sunnī opposition. Secondly, it was practiced in order to conceal the tribes’ esoteric and gnostic tendencies, which were kept secret from non-Alawite people (Al-Tamimi 2012:186).

Taḳiyya, when practised in times of persecution, allows Alawite members to dissimulate to another religion when their lives are under threat (Friedman 2010:115).

Taḳiyya also plays a role in the eschatological nature of the Alawites. In order to maintain the secret knowledge that the religion upholds, a believer must be in a constant state of *Taḳiyya*. Only at the end of time will the believer openly declare the secrets that they held, and the *Taḳiyya* will be broken (Friedman 2010:143).

Thus *Taḳiyya* acts as both a defensive as well as a secretive measure.

3.5.1.2.5 Further doctrine

Unlike in mainstream Islam, the Alawites do not have established mosques at which they attend prayer and teachings. However, they do attend religious ceremonies, which are not in dedicated buildings, but are normally held in private houses (Friedman 2005:354).

The religious ceremonies they attend are called ‘the Mass’, showing a striking resemblance to that of Roman Catholic doctrine. At these ceremonies they eat and drink consecrated bread and wine. Wine plays a sacred role in the lives of the Alawites, who see it as a representation of God (Bar-Asher & Kofsky 2005:61-62).

Consequently, the drinking of alcohol is permitted among the Alawites. This has been noted in historical accounts, with one British traveller commenting, "... All that is certain concerning them [Alawites] is, that they make much and good wine, and are great drinkers" (Talhamy 2011a:220).

It may be tempting to draw multiple parallels between the Alawite faith and Christianity. The trinitarian concept that has been mentioned is one such example. Other examples include certain Christian festivals such as Christmas, New Year's Day, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, and Palm Sunday. Similarly, many Christian saints are honoured, including John the Baptist and Mary Magdalene. The Christian idea of incarnation shown through Jesus also finds likenesses in the incarnation of 'Alī, who is depicted as the head of the trinity. The performance of 'the Mass' as well as the partaking of adherents in bread and wine all add to the idea that the Alawites might have some resemblance to the Christian faith. While it might be true that Christianity influenced the Alawite faith in many ways, it would be saying too much to propose that the Alawite faith might be a part of Christianity itself (Talhamy 2011b:24, Pipes 1989:431).

What is clear is that the Alawite faith, although independent, is a syncretistic religion. Influences from Sunnī and Shī'a Islam, as well as Christian, Gnostic and Hindu influence are all evident within the doctrine presented as that of the Alawites. Equally evident are the differences these above mentioned faiths have from that of the Alawites. Its multiple similarities with each religion in turn offer equal dissimilarities.

3.6 Conclusion

The formation of Islam was a turbulent period in the faiths history. Its beginnings, even under the leadership of the Prophet Muḥammad, were characterised by rejection, disagreements and fighting. However, after Muḥammad's death, the faith struggled to find a coherent identity: torn apart by feuds relating to the successive leadership of the Islamic community. An irredeemable rift had been formed within Islam, eventually leading to the establishment of two major groups: Sunnīs and Shī'ites. However, these groups themselves were unable to remain united. The Shī'a further divided into different groups, torn apart by their doctrinal differences. Some of these beliefs swayed far from the traditional Shī'a beliefs, and these sects came to be known as the *ghulāt*.

The Alawites of modern Syria form part of these extreme forms of Shīʿa Islam. While they have lived in the region of Syria for centuries, their existence in the country has almost always been among Sunnīs Muslims. The strong contrast in identity between the Alawites and Sunnīs of Syria has been as a result of centuries of sectarian tension between the varying forms of Islam. This is in part due to the difference in religious beliefs and practices, and in part due to the political constructs within Islam that tore the faith apart.

Chapter 4

Religious Kaleidoscope of Syria's Civil War

4.1 Introduction

As in most of the Middle East, Syria has a long history of religious development and expansion. Paired with the rise of civilisations, religions in these regions have expanded, thrived, been persecuted, eradicated, morphed, and replaced. As a result, this region holds a rich history with effects that have stretched to all corners of the earth, and which has helped to develop the philosophies and ingenuity that the world now possesses.

While religion in the Middle East has helped human development and innovation, it has likewise brought about hostility, animosity, and conflict. The expanse of beliefs and ideologies that religion has fostered has brought about tension not only between various religions, but also within the religions themselves. For this there are many contributing factors, including the theological, cultural, political, geographical, and historical. All of these must be considerations in trying to understand conflict in the Middle East.

These considerations should also be applied to the historical and modern conflicts in Syria. In dealing with the civil war currently raging in Syria, one cannot ignore all the various factors fuelling the conflict. From the perspective of a large portion of the international community, for example, the war in Syria may appear to be a purely political conflict. It may appear that citizens of Syria are fighting for their freedom against a corrupt and oppressive dictatorship, as was the case in other Arab Spring countries. But to other communities, the conflict may appear as a religious battle, with opposition to the government seen as fighting against heretics and fighting for Islam and the governance and law of God. Still, to other parties, such as countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran, Syria's conflict may be purely strategic and geographic, an attempt to maintain a firm grip on power in the region.

Syria's conflict is a multifaceted one, and cannot be limited to one single cause. The nation has a long history of geographic, religious, and political struggle, and this makes it difficult to label the current war as one single type of war (Kaplan 2009:102). There should be hesitance in calling it a religious war. And while it does hold many similarities to a religious war, religion is not the only factor causing and justifying the conflict.

This, however, does not mean that religion is not an important factor, and thus it is an essential element to investigate in the context of Syria. The vast religious landscape that Syria presents has proved in the country's historical context to have played an important role in the formation of the nation's political and social arena. It thus constitutes an essential part of the country's identity, which acts and reacts to the political, cultural, and geographic environment around it.

Thus, to understand how religion plays an important role in the ongoing conflict in Syria, an analysis of the religious factions present in the conflict becomes an essential process.

4.2 Religious makeup of Syria

It is difficult to give an accurate account of the demographics of Syria's religious world since it has changed so dramatically over the course of the nation's unrest. The ever-rising death toll, along with the vast number of refugees that have fled the country, make it difficult to give an accurate representation of Syria's current religious demography. Added to this is the influx of foreign fighters who have joined both the government's forces as well as the opposition's. To gauge the layout of Syria's religious makeup, figures from 2011 suffice as a representation of Syria's population when the conflict first began.

A US government report (Bureau of Democracy, Human Right and Labor 2011) explains that Sunnī Muslims are a vast majority in Syria's religious landscape, comprising roughly 74% of the entire population. Alawites, which debatably form part of the Shī'a demographic, but for the purpose of this study, are listed separately, make up roughly 12% of the population. The remainder of the Shī'ite segment of the population, including Druze and Twelver Shī'ites, form a mere 4% of the population. Lastly, Christians constitute roughly 10%, of the population, but this figure has most likely since changed dramatically. These statistics, with the exception of the Alawites, represent the broader category under which members of the population are listed. For example, Christians are further broken down into Greek Orthodox Christians and Armenian Christians, while Sunnīs are divided into Arab and Kurdish Sunnī Muslims (Lund 2012b:9).

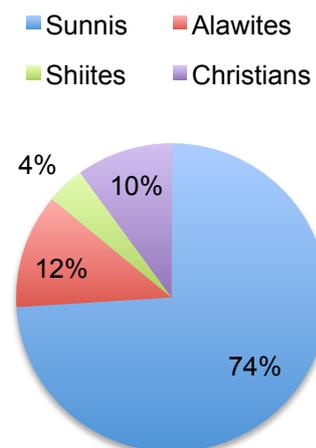


Figure 2: Syria's Religious Demography

From this breakdown it is evident that Syria's religious landscape is proportionately imbalanced, with Sunnī Muslims occupying the majority of Syrian land. As a result of historical governance of Syria, religious and ethnic divisions were made over the geographic landscape of the country that, while not enforced today, have largely remained intact. This sectarian division is depicted in figure 6, and shows Sunnī occupation over the majority of the nation. However, Sunnī occupation is also largely limited to non-coastal regions where minority groups such as the Christians and Alawites reside. Historically this divide has helped to foster tense and often bitter relations between the various religions in the country, which have since flared up in light of Syria's current civil war.

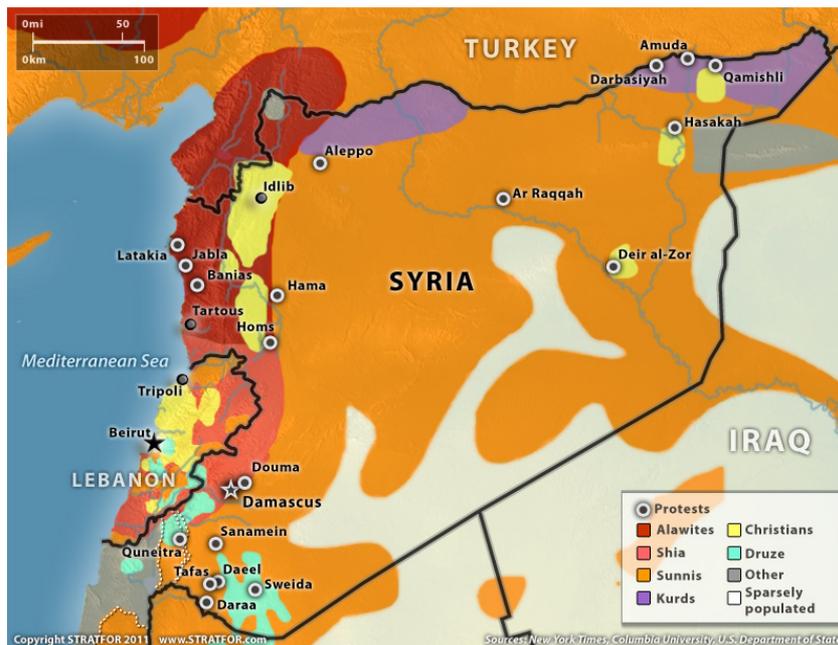


Figure 3: Sectarian divisions in Syria (joshualandis.com 2012)

4.3 Religion and Politics in Syria

Syria's past can be explained as a succession of conflicts over control of the country. The region has been in the hands of the Romans (64BCE – 633CE), the Ottomans (1516 – 1918), the French (1920 – 1944), and most recently, the Alawites. The perimeters that have formed Syria over the years have been determined by political struggle, in part owing to the strategic location of Syria as the land bridge between Europe, Asia and Africa (Drysdale 1992:350). However, Syria is also a country with a vast array of religious beliefs, all of which have their own ideological views. Some of these views extend beyond theological matters, bordering on political theories.

The Sunnī Muslim community of Syria forms the religious majority of the country, but is not in control of the country. Instead, the Shī'a-affiliated sect, the Alawites, control the government (Fearon et al. 2007:187). Kelidar (1974:17) points out that before 1970 and the rise of the Alawite leader Hafez al-Assad, no president of Syria had not been Sunnī Muslim.

Islam and politics are inseparable (Roy 2007:39). Unlike with Christianity, which was only adopted by the state centuries after its initiation, and later separated church from state, the link between politics and religion existed in Islam almost from the beginning, with no separate tradition for civic and religious laws. In Islam the system used for governance is called sharī'a (which has been discussed in the previous chapter), and although there are many different interpretations of sharī'a, it acts as the overarching body of governance, with its principles derived from the *Qur'ān* and other supplementary texts (Juergensmeyer 2008:47).

Sharī'a is considered perfect and sacred, and considers democratic governance as offensive to Islam because it puts control into the hands of people and not God. All forms of sharī'a consider *kāfirs* (non-believers) to be unequal to Muslims. Thus, there is a conflict of interests in Syria when, historically, Alawites have been labelled as heretics, *kāfirs*, and worse than the Christians and Jews by Sunnī Muslims (Warner 2009).

The Alawite government, which do not act under sharī'a law but rather secular ideology, stands in conflict with the principles and beliefs of the majority of the country. Bashar al-Assad, the reigning president of the country, stated explicitly that “religion is personal and not related to the government” (Lesch 2005b:238). This leaves a gaping hole in the political framework of Syria, where the majority of the country, who are Sunnī Muslims, think the nation should be governed by other means.

For many years the Syrian government fought against political Islamist groups, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, which, while being Sunnī Muslim, fought against the secular ideals of the Ba'th and for the implementation of sharī'a law in Syria. Today the Syrian government faces similar challenges in its fight against Muslim extremists and jihādists, all of which adopt strict Islamic principles (Lund 2012a:20).

As such, it is difficult to separate religion from politics when analysing Syria's ongoing conflict. For much of the opposition, religion and politics are deeply integrated, and what may be a political battle against the Syrian government has deep religious motivation and consequences. This should be taken into consideration when trying to understand Syria's situation.

4.4 Secularism

While not technically classified as a religion, the topic of secularism is an essential one in the understanding of religions and religious involvement in the Syrian civil war. Over the past few decades the topic of secularism has been made more prominent by certain Islamic reactions toward the West, often resulting in an attack against it (such as the case of 9/11) by Islamic extremists and jihādists. Certain Islamic factions have classified the West as evil as a result of not living under “God’s law” or *sharī‘a law*, but instead living under a secular state (Lewis 1990:2).

There is a growing concern by Western countries toward the problem of violent reactions toward secular nations. This concern is shared by non-Western nations, many of which are neighbouring or even hosting those groups that are violently reacting (Norris et al. 2013:290).

Syria is one of these nations, and for many years has felt strong opposition, both diplomatically and forcefully, to its secular government. Comprising a wide variety of religious beliefs and practices, the Syrian nation, which stands at the heart of the Islamic-dominated Middle East, is a secular state. A number of years ago this bureaucratic setup may have appeared to work quite well – almost unexpectedly well. In fact, in 2010, Syria was considered to be the fifth safest country (in terms of personal safety) in the world (Real Clear World 2010). This is an astonishing statistic, considering that just months later Syria began its descent into all-out war. Nevertheless, as long as there has been a secularist government in power in Syria there has also been opposition from religious-affiliated groups, specifically Sunnī Muslims. For many years the Muslim Brotherhood was the face of opposition to the Syrian secularist government. Its violent resistance against the Syrian government called for implementation of *sharī‘a law*, a strict religious form of governance, in place of a secular form of governance. Their force in the country culminated in the events of the Hama massacre in which government forces cracked down

on Muslim Brotherhood members and declared membership of the Brotherhood a capital offence (Khatib 2011).

Today, as in the time of the Muslim Brotherhood, it is again Sunnī Muslims that are responding not only to the governance of Bashar al-Assad, but to the secular ideology of the Ba’thist party. Juergensmeyer (2008:19) emphasises the idea that secularism is not necessarily an irreligious system, but that it is definitely an ideology of its own. It forms the backbone of a cultural belief system. Thus, in the case of Syria there are two ideologies set against each other, a religious ideology and a secular ideology.

Syria’s neighbour, Turkey, is also familiar with a secular constitution in a country predominantly populated by Muslims. The nation gained its secular status largely through the influence of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, and in 1923 became formerly recognised as the “Republic of Turkey”, no longer forming part of the collapsed Ottoman Empire (Keyman 2007:220).

One of the defining features of the new republic was the divide it drew between religious institutions and the state. Under the administration of the Ottoman Empire the Padişah (ruler) was considered the representative of God in the world and therefore had authority by divine right. However, the new republic made a distinction between political and religious institutions (Berkes 2013:13). It no longer declared Islam the religion of the state, but was rather a state of *laiklik* (secularism). This form of *laiklik* or ‘laicism’ not only indicated, “the ‘official disestablishment of religion’ from the state, but it also indicated the ‘constitutional control of religious affairs’ by the state” (Keyman 2007:222). The intention for ‘Laicism’ was to help link the objective and subjective processes of secularisation as a way of building a Turkish identity. But instead of religion fading in Turkish society, the role of religion still acts as a dominant ideology in the country (Keyman 2007:222-223).

Since its incorporation into the Turkish constitution, this form of secular society has had to delicately balance politics and religion, and at times has been used as a means to control religion, undermining the pluralistic and democratic values it espouses. Its misuse and perceived misuse have generally been against religious communities that as a result have demanded greater religious rights and freedoms (Keyman 2007:216-217). Instead of building a united national identity, ‘laicism’ has created an identity crisis as a result of its

“inability to respond effectively to the various Islamic identity claims to recognition and cultural-group rights” (Keyman 2007:223).

Syria faces similar challenges to Turkey. The nation’s current struggle is in part to do with the secular ideology it upholds. Syria’s separation of politics from religion has also created an identity crisis among a large portion of the Syrian population. For many Islamic groups the relation of politics to religion is inseparable, and therefore such a separation in the nation’s constitutional formation isolates a portion of the population.

It should not be forgotten that Syria’s secular ideology is not comprised entirely of atheist participants. In fact, the majority of Syria’s secularist adherents have religious backgrounds. These secularists include various types of Muslim adherents, as well as Christians, all of which are secular nationalists in the Syrian context.

For secularist adherents, as with religious adherents, the framework this ideology provides suggests “that there are levels of meaning beneath the day-to-day world that give coherence to things unseen; and they both provide the authority that gives the social and political order its reason for being. In doing so, they define for the individual the right way of being in the world and relate persons to the social whole” (Juergensmeyer 2008:20).

Thus, secularist ideology provides meaning for people in the same way that religious ideology does, but secularist ideology also runs the risk of the misuse of power by a leader or ruler. This ideology, as Weber (1972:78) has pointed out, ascribes loyalty to an authority, which then holds exclusive control over the use of force in that society. In a sense it demands submission to the rule of the leader.

Bashar al-Assad, along with his father Hafez al-Assad, have held a grip on the Syrian nation for more than four decades. In this time their rule has been characterised as a dictatorship, oppressive and authoritarian (Barany 2011:32). It has to be asked whether their form of rule is as a result of the secular nationalism that they espouse, or whether it is as a response to or defense from the religious ideology that encroaches on their secular ideology. Either way, the secular nationalist system matches their form of governance.

In Syria, both secular as well as religious ideologies have called for social order in their own ways. Today, much of the opposition to the government claims to represent the ultimate form of social order, and holding this claim as Juergensmeyer says (2008:21), “is

the right to give moral sanction for life-and-death decisions, including the right to kill”.

Holding secularist ideology to be wrong, Sunnī rebels have been convinced by their own religious beliefs to kill those who do not follow their ideology. Thus, Syrian secularism has been a provoker of sorts, disrupting religious balances in the country as a result of its own ideology.

Secularist nationalism’s well-established and strictly enforced set of beliefs has given it a unique ideology that strongly conflicts with other ideologies it engages with. This has led many scholars to label it beyond merely ideology, and closer to a religion itself (Juergensmeyer 2008:23). In this regard, secularism forms part of the religious fabric that characterises Syria, but which has also characterised its ongoing violence. It is thus an essential part of understanding the religious dynamic of the Syrian civil war.

4.5 Sunnī Muslims

Globally Sunnī Muslims account for more than 87% of the total Muslim population (Pew Research 2009). In Syria, Sunnī Muslims account for roughly 74% of the nation’s population, making them a vast majority in the Syrian demographic landscape. In other nations within the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia and Jordan, a majority that substantial generally means that the government is run and controlled by Sunnī Muslims. The same can be said for nations that have a majority Shī’ite population, such as Iran: the leadership of the nation is controlled by Shī’ite Muslims. But unlike the Shī’a, in the Sunnī tradition the legitimacy of political governance over a state is not perpetuated through a transcendental figure. There is also no particular type of state that is preferred – the only requirement of conservative leaders is that sharī’a be incorporated into the law (Roy 1996:29). Syria remains separate from such a trend, as many of its neighbours. While Sunnī Muslims are and have been a majority religious faction in the nation for centuries, their power and influence in the running of the country, and the implementation of Sunnī - based sharī’a law, have been minimal over the past four decades. This is not to say that all Sunnī Muslims in Syria wish for the implementation of an Islamic state, as many of the moderate Sunnīs fighting under the FSA banner are content with the continued promotion of a secular state.

Since the 1970s the governance of the Ba’th Party, and moreover the leadership of the Assad family, has severely limited the amount of Sunnī influence in the Syrian

government. Owing to many factors, this has in part been because of the ruling party's affiliation with the religious group known as the Alawites, a branch of Shī'a Islam.

Prior to the outbreak of war in the country, Syria's Sunnī community held no central leadership. It was deeply divided, as Donker points out, on, among other issues, the basis of religious jurisprudence (*fiqh*), the position taken towards the regime, and what family one was from (Donker 2010:438). Divisions were often drawn between Sunnīs from Aleppo and Sunnīs from Damascus, Syria's two largest cities. While Aleppo Sunnīs tended to be less attached to the regime and nurture more anti-regime activists, Damascus Sunnīs were more politically aligned with the government (Donker 2010:438). Yet, a sense of solidarity has remained between the various Sunnī communities.

The Sunnī community of Syria has seen many struggles against the government. This was especially true during the 1970s and 1980s, when political Islamic groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and the Fighting Vanguard formed a strong and forceful opposition to the regime. It was during this time that the Assad regime cracked down on an attempted coup by the Muslim Brotherhood, killing tens of thousands of Syrians in the city of Hama in what was later referred to as the Hama Massacre (Goldsmith 2012:187-188).

Since the Hama Massacre, the presence of political Islamic groups has been forbidden by the regime as a way of preventing such uprisings from reoccurring. Still, the presence of Sunnī activists in opposition to the regime remained in the country through religious, social, and contestably, political channels (Donker 2010:439).

Prior to the uprisings that sparked the civil war, Syria's Sunnī community was closely watched and monitored by the regime. The Syrian *mukhabarat*, (the national intelligence agency), kept a tight grip on Sunnī institutions and groups. Mosques were required to register at the Ministry of *Awqaf* (religious endowments), Sunnī charitable associations were required to register at the Ministry of Social Affairs and Labour, and Islamic education institutions at the Ministry of Education. The regime even held the right to bar religious leaders they deemed unfit for the position. These requirements would help the regime to better manage and control the Sunnī community, and to frustrate such organisations to the point that they might even dismantle (Donker 2010:439-440).

The tight grip that both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad held over their nation allowed the government to prevent uprisings and attempted coups. However, it also helped to develop a deep frustration within the Sunnī community of Syria that mounted tension among ordinary citizens of the nation. There was just no safe way to vent that frustration.

When what has been termed the Arab Spring sent waves of protests across the Arab world, Syria watched as thousands of Arabs in their own countries protested and successfully brought down their own corrupt leaders. These initial experiences of the Arab Spring were not limited by religious affiliation. In fact, in other cases of the Arab Spring, protests and uprisings had very little, if anything, to do with religion at all.

It did not take much longer than a month before Syrian citizens themselves had taken to the streets in protest against the leadership of Bashar al-Assad. Their frustration with their government was reason enough to see their president step down from power. Protests in the streets of Damascus, Homs and Aleppo saw thousands of protesters chanting the slogan, “the people want the overthrow of Bashar!” (Bazzi 2011). These protests were followed by a quick response from the government in the form of arrests. Security clampdowns were followed by the intervention of the military to try to disperse the ever-growing demonstrations, and in the process multiple demonstrators were killed (Human Rights Watch 2011).

As protests continued, the rhetoric that was carried through the chanting of demonstrators began to change from its initial form. Slogans that initially aimed at the ousting of Bashar al-Assad had changed to slogans such as “God is With Us” (Damon 2011), or “God, Syria, and freedom, only!” and “Martyrs are beloved of God!” (MacFarqhar 2011). These new slogans carried strong religious rhetoric, revealing a change in the minds and motivation of the protesters.

4.5.1 Free Syrian Army

Around the same time as the defection of Lieutenant Colonel Hussein Harmouth (a Sunnī Muslim) from the ranks of the Alawite-led Syrian Army, there came the beginnings of the group that would become known as the Free Syrian Army (FSA). At the time of his defection, Hussein Harmouth took 150 soldiers under his command, and fled to Turkey. From there he aimed to establish a unified military front that could counter the force of

Bashar al-Assad. He was joined by other smaller brigades from all around Syria, all happy to take up the brand of the FSA (Baker & Newton-Small 2013, Abouzeid 2011).

This new banner attracted thousands of men, untrained in military combat, who formed brigades of resistance in their own towns. These men, who were organised within their own communities, were mostly, but not strictly, Sunnīs. While soldiers mostly labelled themselves as Syrian nationalists who were fighting against autocratic rule, they also took great pride in labelling their struggle as a Sunnī Muslim one (Lund 2012b:15). In fact, all known leaders of the FSA were Sunnī Arab Muslims, which, as Lund (2012b:15) points out, makes the FSA an entirely Sunnī phenomenon.

Whether the FSA intentionally moulded Syria's uprisings into a sectarian war, or it just gave the already divided nation a Sunnī banner, the FSA helped in defining the Syrian conflict as a Sunnī versus Alawite feud.

4.5.2 Sunnī Extremists

As the rift between the Sunnīs and Alawites became evident to the rest of the world, a new element entered the conflict within the borders of Syria. Almost a year after the initial protests happened in Syria (Baker & Newton-Small 2013), a succession of suicide attacks, targeted against Syrian military forces, added a new form of offence not yet seen in the conflict. This form of attack was not typical of the moderate Sunnī stance that the FSA was perceived to hold. Instead it was characteristic of the Islamic extremist behaviour seen elsewhere, especially in conflict-ridden Iraq, with its sectarian divisions.

The extremists' entrance into the Syrian conflict did not come without the ideology on which the attacks were based and motivation to fight against the Syrian regime's forces.

4.5.2. Salafīst Jihād

Salafīsm is a resurgent Sunnī Muslim movement adopted by certain Sunnī communities that holds an ultraconservative theological outlook, and adopts and promotes the use and implementation of *sharī'a* law. The movement stresses the need for Sunnī Islam to return to its roots, and as such shuns innovations that do not stem directly from the *Qur'ān* itself. Their ideological framework seeks the revival of 'pure' Islam, which has only been seen among the first generation of Muslims known as the '*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*' (Lund 2013:5).

The ultimate aim of this movement is to establish an Islamic society and state based on the example of the *'al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ'*. Personal piety is promoted rather than social engagement, which as a consequence has led to high levels of intolerance toward secularism and other faiths, including other strands of non-Sunnī Islam. Still, most Muslims that adopt a Salafī ideology remain withdrawn from public life, choosing to live as much like the first Islamic community as possible (Lund 2013:43, Amghar 2007).

However, one strand of the Salafist movement uses a more forceful approach (unlike the majority of Salafists, who focus on preaching as a way of converting non-Salafist Muslims), believing that the spread of Islam and the implementation of *sharī'a* is attained through the use of violent jihād. A notable use of this form of Salafist Islam is by the group known as Al-Qaeda, which has claimed responsibility for multiple terrorist attacks across the globe over the last decade. Salafist jihādists' rejection of all forms of secularist ideologies, as well as their intolerance toward other faiths is based on their fervent allegiance to the global Muslim community, or *Umma*. This commitment and loyalty has fuelled their anti-Western stance, which has been seen in multiple attacks on the West over the past decade. For these Muslims, the West is sinful and profane (Lund 2013:42, Lund 2012a:108).

Syria's ongoing conflict has seen a growing insurgency of Salafist jihādists in response to the secular government of Bashar al-Assad, which they claim is anti-Islamic, and the people of his religious affiliation, the Alawites. These jihādists' fervent belief has set them on a path to change Syria into a *sharī'a*-controlled nation, and further to exterminate the Alawite tribe and religion, which Salafists classify as a heretical faith. This they support through the *fatwā* issued by medieval scholar Ibn Taymīya, who classified the Alawites as more heretical than the Jews and Christians, and ordered that they be annihilated (Parry 2013, O'Bagy 2012:17, Friedman 2005:351).

A number of groups that espouse the Salafist jihādists' ideals have found a place among the opposition groups in Syria.

4.5.2.2 Jabhat Nusra

The group *Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Sham Min Mujahideen al-Sham fi Sahat al-Jihad*, which means 'Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of jihad', revealed themselves in a video in January 2012 claiming to be the first

Syrian jihādīst group to enter the conflict (O’Bagy 2012:31). They are the best-known jihādīst group in Syria, having made news headlines frequently since their entrance into the conflict. The group claimed that its involvement in the Syrian conflict was in response to the calls for a jihādīst group to defend the people of Syria against the soldiers of the Assad regime. Using strong religious overtones in conveying their intention for the country, *Jabhat Nusra* revealed that they would “avenge the honour and the spilled blood of those who have been wronged [by the government of Bashar al-Assad]”, and return *sharī‘a* law to Syria (Tabler 2012).

Since their entrance into the conflict, other groups with similar ideologies have joined in the fighting. Unlike *Jabhat Nusra*, many of these groups are non-Syrian, and have infiltrated the nation’s borders from all sides (Lund 2012b:21).

4.5.2.3 Other Salafīst Jihādīst Groups

Groups such as the Ahrar el-Sham Brigades, Al-Qaeda in Iraq, Fath el-Islam (Conquest of Islam), Suqour el-Sham Division, Ansar Brigade, Umma Division (*Umma* describes a pan-Islamic state), Syria Revolutionaries’ Front, el-Mouminoun Yusharikoun (Believers Participate), Fajr el-Islam (The Dawn of Islam Movement), Abdullah Azzam Brigades, Suleiman Fighting Company, and Ansar el-Islam Gathering are all Sunnī militant rebel groups spread throughout the cities of Syria, and espouse and promote Salafīst jihādīst ideology. While some of these groups are newly formed as a result of the Syrian conflict, most have been active for a number of years, and as such have established substantial weaponry and funding through private or foreign state backers. Many also hold loose ties with Al-Qaeda, which has not sent a unified military force into the conflict as a result of Assad’s brutal crackdown on terrorist groups in the mid-2000s (Lund 2012b:23).

4.5.2.4 Hezb al-Tahrir

While they are a Salafīst group in opposition to the Syrian government, Hezb al-Tahrir does not participate in armed violence like other Salafīst groups operating in the country. Instead they participate in demonstration and protests using the argument that the regime of Bashar al-Assad should step down because it is not run under Islamic governance. Their passive approach in Syria is fuelled by their spread of Salafīst ideals across the Muslim world (Lund 2012a:109).

4.5.3 Religious symbolism and opposition brutality

Some of the initial sparks that fuelled the war in Syria began when 15 children graffitied anti-government slogans on the wall of their school, a symbolic act of defiance that would alter the course of Syria (Sterling 2012). This dissent was continued by demonstrations and protests by thousands of Syrians across the nation in which they chanted slogans calling for their president to step down from power. But as the conflict has drawn out, the symbolism that once carried the spirit of the Arab Spring has faded into religious rhetoric, conveying bigotry, extremism and sectarianism.

As already mentioned, political slogans transformed into religious war cries, quickly dividing the nation between the Sunnī opposition and regime-supporting minorities. The FSA has been under pressure about its leaders' initial decision to present the organisation as a secular opposition to the already secular government of Syria, with many in favour of them adopting a more religious stance as a way of defining itself. Apart from the fact that the opposition is comprised almost entirely of Sunnī Muslims, the tactical, financial, and symbolic advantages of representing oneself as a religious group have been proved by the overtly religious jihādīst factions represented in the conflict (Syria Conflict Monitor 2013). Not only have they been able to raise funds from foreign Islamic backers, but they have also struck fear in the hearts of the enemy through their religious demeanour and language (Noman Benotman 2013).

This has given rise to a trend among opposition fighters, especially from the FSA, of growing Salafist-style beards. While many of these men do not hold the Salafist ideology, they have grown the beards as a symbol of resistance, and as one FSA soldier described it, it gives them “the tough rebel look” (O’Bagy 2012:22). While this trend does help in building religious imagery, and possibly gaining support from Islamic financial backers, it does not necessarily reflect the beliefs and ideologies of those who use it. This has caused problems for global watchdogs like the United States, which, wanting to provide the Syrian opposition with support and aid, have found it difficult to distinguish between FSA members and Islamic extremists.

The ‘Syria Conflict Monitor’, a database for progressing trends in the Syrian war, suggests a growing trend within the FSA in the use of Islamist symbolism, paraphernalia and religious rhetoric (Syria Conflict Monitor 2013). This includes its justifications for fighting against the government.

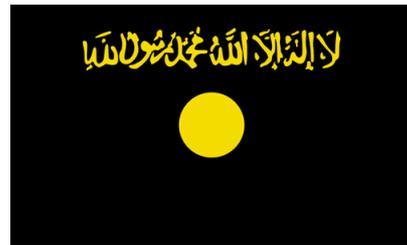
This stands in contrast to the overtly religious jihādists participating in the conflict, who have made their intentions of a religious Syrian future clear. Hard-line jihādists generally wear black or green headbands, with words such as “God” and “Muḥammad” on them, or with the *shahāda* (Islamic declaration of faith) inscribed on it (AFP 2012). On each group’s banner or flag is inscribed an Islamic statement, often with the seal of the Prophet on it.



Jabhat Nusra
(Support Front for the People of Syria from the Mujahideen of Syria in the Places of Jihad)



Islamic State of Iraq



Al-Qaeda in Iraq

Figure 4,5,6: Jihādist rebel group flags (Zelin 2011)

Each of these symbols depicts these groups as the Islamic jihādists they wish to be seen as, but they have also gone one step further, venturing into regions that the FSA moderate Sunnīs have not. The use of suicide bombers targeting government supporters has been one of the most effective weapons against the enemy, and remains a religious conviction among these Muslims as a way of sacrificing oneself for the sake of honour and for the promotion of Islam (Kruglanski et al. 2009:322).

When a video released online showed a rebel soldier pulling out the organs of a regime soldier and eating them, the world looked at Syria with disgust, seeing it as resorting to barbarism and cannibalism (Wood 2013). While these acts are obscene, their purpose is to strike fear into the enemy, and while they have no official religious backing, their motivation lies within the broader religious fervour that has been spread among the Sunnī rebels. However, the frequency of beheadings carried out by Sunnī rebels in Syria is an indication of the extent of Islamic extremism present in the country (Enoch 2013). These acts of brutality, carried out against Syrian Alawites, aim to mimic the actions of the early Muslim community in the conquest against *infidels* and the *Shī‘a* (Campbell 2006:589), and in so doing they heighten the religious fervour within the community, sharpening the divide between Sunnīs and Alawites.

4.5.4 Sunnīs in Support of the Regime

While it is clear that the majority of Sunnīs in Syria are in opposition to the government of Bashar al-Assad, there remains a minority of this branch of Islam that has stayed loyal to the regime. Their loyalty to Assad is no evidence of their allegiance to the Alawite faith, but instead this is because they are people with longstanding business relations and economic interests, and members of the government who have not defected (Syria Direct 2013). One such supporter of Assad is Grand *Mufti* Ahmad Hassoun, a Sunnī cleric who has spoken openly against the Syrian rebels fighting against the regime. Hassoun, who was strongly criticised for his support of Assad, is one of a few Sunnī clerics who have continually encouraged interfaith dialogue in the country (NPR 2013).

Although there are some Sunnī supporters of Assad, many remain loyal for personal reasons or for the sake of financial gain. However, there are some Sunnīs who still maintain that the Assad government should still rule the nation, or that the alternative (a Sunnī-controlled Syria) would be worse than the current regime. Either way, these Sunnīs remain few and far between when compared to those who oppose the government.

4.5.5 Internal conflict within the Syrian opposition

Although the vast array of Syrian Sunnī rebels groups are opposed to the government of Bashar al-Assad, tension and conflict within the opposition has still managed to find its way into their camps. Syria's rebels are comprised of a multitude of small brigades, many of which fall under the broader FSA banner. Apart from this, a varying degree of religious extremism exists among these rebels, with members ranging from moderate Sunnī Muslims to Islamic extremists. This exhibition of ideologies among the various rebels has led to a clash of opinions over the manner in which fighting should take place, as well as what the future of Syria should look like. For example, in the FSA, some members foresee the continuation of a secular state, while others hope for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate. The majority of FSA subscribers are moderate Muslims, but among the Salafists and jihādists present in Syria a more radical theology is adopted. With the strictly literal approach taken by these Muslims to reading the *Qur'ān*, the majority believe in the necessity of the establishment of a Sunnī Muslim caliphate, with many believing in the necessity to eradicate all religious and ethnic groups that do not hold the same ideology.

This tension has been specifically seen between FSA fighters and members of the Islamic State of Iraq (ISIS): ISIS soldiers attacked an FSA-controlled area, taking control of

it and labelling the FSA in that region war profiteers (Fisher 2013). Other instances of extremism have seen churches being defaced and children being taught the importance of fighting against *infidels* (Hubbard 2013).

These actions and teachings do not necessarily mix with the views of the more moderate Islamic FSA fighters. More important, though, is the FSA's continued struggle to receive sufficient funding from the United States and Europe as a result of extremist and terrorist presence among the opposition, and the West's difficulty in distinguishing them. The West and many moderate Sunnīs in Syria share a fear that the fall of Assad will give rise to an extremist Islamic country, which will be no better than the current regime.

4.5.6 Saudi Arabia and Qatar

Financial support has been vital for all opposition groups in the conflict. While early fighting in the conflict was little more than sporadic skirmishes, the mobilisation and organisation of opposition groups has allowed them to launch more effective attacks against regime troops. This has not, however, been possible without the provision of more advanced and larger quantities of weapons, as well as other necessities for maintaining a war.

The nations of Saudi Arabia and Qatar have provided rebels with these funds, both through state funding and private donors. But as more and more jihādist groups have entered the conflict, funding has become scarce among fighters in the FSA camps. An internal competition for financial backing has arisen between rebel groups.

Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have provided the majority of funds to rebel groups, are both strict Sunnī Islamic nations, espousing *shari'a* law. Their support for the opposition, which currently stands in the hundreds of millions of dollars (Cartalucci 2013), has been for multiple reasons. Firstly, their support for Sunnī rebels is as a result of also being strict Sunnī nations. Secondly, for Saudi Arabia, greater control over the Middle East lies in a strategic alliance with Syria, which they currently do not hold as a result of Bashar al-Assad's Alawite/*Shī'a* ties. A Sunnī-controlled Syria would give Saudi Arabia more control in the region, and less competition with its *Shī'a* rival Iran, which currently holds strategic alliances with Syria (Bhalla 2011).

Saudi Arabia and Qatar's history of nurturing and promoting Salafist ideology has also led to increased support for Syria's Salafist rebels (Lund 2012a:108). This has resulted in some FSA fighters joining the Salafist brigades in order to sustain themselves, while other

FSA fighters have resorted to making themselves look more 'religious' (growing beards and adopting Islamic banners and flags), in order to secure more financial backing from the funders.

Lastly, support from these Gulf nations has been as a result of ancestral ties that have ignited sympathy with those who have family relations with Syrian Sunnī Muslims. Through this, both monetary funding as well as soldiers have been sent to relieve the opposition in their task against the Syria government (O'Bagy 2012:21).

Thus, Saudi Arabia and Qatar's involvement in the Syria conflict is based on a combination of reasons, including the political, ethnic, and religious. Their connection with Sunnīs of Syria is one of the main driving forces behind their support for the Syrian rebels, but the fall of Assad would also help them to secure greater control in the broader Middle-Eastern region.

4.6 Shī'a-related Groups

Members of the Shī'ite branch of Islam, being a multi-factional group in itself, form roughly 15% of the Syrian population (Lund 2012b:9), and are largely outnumbered by the Sunnī branch. The various factions that form part of the Shī'ite branch often hold loose connections with this broader category, and theological beliefs differ widely between the various groups.

In Syria, the makeup of Shī'ites is largely dominated by the Alawite faction, which composes about 12% of Syria's population. Yet, other smaller divisions exist such as the Druze and the Twelvers, which make up the remaining 3% of the Shī'ite population of Syria.

Syria's traumatic history is filled with religious feuds and sectarian conflicts, but over these many years tension has rarely been between Sunnīs and orthodox Shī'ites. In fact, Sindawi (2009:83) observes that in general there is no discrimination between Sunnī and Shī'ites. He goes on to add that social integration between the two groups has been relatively high, with intermarriage being frequent and commonly accepted.

4.6.1 Alawites

Before war broke out in Syria, the Alawite tribe and religion was virtually unheard of outside Syria itself. This in part may be because Alawites in Syria comprise just over 10%

of the nation's population (heavily outweighed by the Sunnī community), but also, because of their minority status, Alawites had never featured in any globally historic event that had elevated their name. This was until 1970, when an Alawite man, Hafez al-Assad, ascended to power in Syria, elevating the name of his family and his tribesmen (Kelidar 1974:17).

Prior to this event, the Alawites of Syria were a marginalised people, often looked down upon for their peculiar religious beliefs and practices. Faksh (1984:133-134) points out that it was commonplace around the mid-1900s for Alawites to be maidservants of urban Sunnī families, which was indicative of their social status in society, and despite having the same linguistic and ethnic traits, they were still looked down upon by the Sunnī majority.

Over many years of inhabiting Syria, the Alawites attempted to alleviate their lower-class status. Being surrounded by Sunnī Muslims, this was attempted through their promotion of the Alawite faith, which they tried to convey as a legitimate form of Islam, and not merely a heretical offshoot of the Shī'ite branch (Al-Tamimi 2012:191).

The Alawites' ascendancy was marked by two significant positions. The first was the establishment of the Ba'th party. This nationalist party gave minority groups in Syria a foothold in the nation's political life, and unlike other political parties in the country it regarded these minorities, including the Alawites, as full Arab Syrian nationals, accepting their alternative religious identity as well (Faksh 1984:140-141).

The second was the institution of the military. The French, under their mandate in Syria following the First World War, found stiff and unwavering opposition from Sunnīs in the country, and because of this made use of minority groups in forming part of the military ranks that could counter such opposition. This helped to establish a sectarian rift between the various religious groups in Syria, especially between the Sunnīs and Alawites. It also became the first step (although appearing insignificant at the time) towards Alawites holding some form of power in the country. Years later, through the stepping-stone of the Ba'th, the military would once again become a foothold for the Alawites' ascendancy. In this institution Alawites found a respectable career and a sense of self-worth (Faksh 1984:140, Rabinovich 1979:697).

During the 1960s, Syria experienced a large amount of turmoil and instability, and through multiple changes in governance and a series of coups, the end of the decade saw the ascendancy of a young Alawite military officer to the position of president, who would lead the country for the next thirty years. Although the rule of Hafez al-Assad would last for three decades, his term as president was not without a fierce battle to maintain power. He found opposition to both his secular government and to his Alawite status.

In order to counter this, Assad set up the al-Murtada Association, which was dedicated to the promotion of the Alawite faith as a legitimate form of Shī'a Islam. Because he understood the opposition that faced him within the Sunnī religious leadership in the country, he began attending prayers at Sunnī mosques, and held dinner parties for Sunnī clerics (Sindawi 2009:87). This he hoped would transform the image held by Sunnī Muslims across the country of the Alawite people. Hafez also convinced a leading Twelver Shī'ite scholar from Lebanon, Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah, to work in Syria in order to uplift the name of the Alawites as Shī'a Muslims (Sindawi 2009:88). Assad also set up a 'Sunnification' project for Syria's Alawites, whereby he restricted Alawite leaders from promoting the excessive veneration of 'Alī (Al-Tamimi 2012:192). The new Syrian leader put all of these policies in place in order to be accepted by the Sunnī masses and to maintain and preserve the cultural and religious heritage of his own people while not becoming too incorporated within another.

While these policies did have some effect on the religious dynamic of Syria, not all Sunnīs were convinced by Hafez and his reforms. The Muslim Brotherhood was one such Sunnī Muslim group, fighting for many years against the regime of Assad until they were eventually banned from operating in the country. This was followed by a law that forbade the existence of another political party in Syria to hold a different ideology to its own. Although it was dominated by Alawite leadership, the regime under Hafez al-Assad fought fervently to keep religion and politics separate in the country (Sindawi 2009:83).

4.6.1.1 Bashar al-Assad

Syria's current president, Bashar al-Assad, came to power in part through chance. Son of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar was not the rightful heir to the presidency of Syria. Instead, his elder brother Bassel was meant to take the country's reins in place of his father. Bashar studied ophthalmology in the United Kingdom, and upon completion of his studies he

returned to Syria and began to practice his skill. But when his brother was killed in a car accident, Bashar was called upon to take his brother's position (Lesch 2005a).

The start of his presidency in 2000 was marked by much expectation following the death of Hafez. Bashar implemented a series of new reforms, dramatically changing the political platform that his father controlled. These new reforms came to be known as the Damascus Spring, and were greatly welcomed by the Syrian public, giving people a freedom of speech they had not yet experienced. Bashar al-Assad encouraged open debate, and allowed people to openly express their opinions about political life in Syria and about the Ba'thist government. However, the new regime was not prepared for the sheer magnitude of criticism it would receive from activists and pro-democracy groups, and as a result it reverted to clampdowns on organisations and political parties in order to maintain control of the nation. As a result, this clampdown was termed the Damascus Winter, and marked a new period of tension between the Syrian public and the Syrian regime (Ziadeh 2011:61-75).

Bashar's term as president can be labelled as a balancing act between keeping the Alawite elites happy by maintaining an Alawite control of the government, and trying to please the Sunnī majority of the nation. Bashar himself is not a devout adherent of his Alawite tradition. In an interview with David Lesch (2005a:238), Bashar was asked if he considered himself an Alawite or a Muslim, to which he responded, "If God wanted sects he would have sent sects and not one religion". This was followed by the question of whether or not he considered himself a devout Muslim, to which he replied, "Being good is the most important thing, and doing good things, not only praying and performing rituals. I am devoted because I want to be a good person – this is more important." Lastly, in response to a question of the role of religion in society, Bashar responded, "A secular society does not mean not being devoted to a religion. It means to accept the other regardless of religion. Religion is personal and not related to the government. Everyone is equal, and everyone can have their own rituals, churches, and synagogues."

It is evident from these responses by Bashar al-Assad that religion is not a crucial part of his life. The ambiguity in his statements seems to suggest that he is neither for nor against the Alawite faith, while his response on religion in society deeply conflicts with orthodox Sunnī practice, which is deeply engrained in political life.

At one stage it was perceived by the Alawite community that Bashar had abandoned his roots as an Alawite in favour of Sunnī tradition. This was most noticeable through his marriage to Asma Akhraz, a Sunnī from the city of Homs, and while many Alawites saw it as a threat to their privileged positions in the country, others took it as a strategic move to improve social integration between Sunnīs and Alawites (Goldsmith 2012:233-234). Bashar had made great progress in trying to reduce sectarian tensions between Sunnīs and Alawites, while still maintaining his Alawite identity.

Shortly after the 9/11 attacks in New York, tensions rose again within Syria. A combination of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the Afghan and Iraqi wars saw a resurgence of Islamism in Syria after many years of strictly enforced secularism. This led to Syria being labelled a “rogue state” and placed on the “axis of evil” (countries thought by America to be involved in terrorist activity) (Goldsmith 2012:238, Lesch 2005a).

Bashar was forced to find a balance between not siding with the Americans (who were considered by many Sunnīs at that stage to be *infidels*), and not encouraging the rise of Islamism and Sunnī extremists, which was now encompassing much of the Middle East. It was in this time that major sectarian tensions began to take hold of Syria, in a political battle to maintain secular governance (controlled by the Alawites) over Sunnī-controlled *sharī‘a* law.

4.6.1.2 Modern Alawites

The story of the Alawites is in itself a tale of turmoil and instability. This has been reflected in history. Through much change in both cultural and political integration, the modern Alawites of Syria have themselves been transformed, in many ways no longer reflecting the strong cultish beliefs they once portrayed. According to Al-Tamimi, the Alawite faith in Syria has been in decline since the rise of the Ba‘th in 1963. The introduction of the secular state provided protection for the Alawite people, but the influence of this new political system also changed the beliefs of many of the Alawite people. Al-Tamimi comments that many Alawites today consider themselves atheists, and while they may have lost their faith, they are still welcomed into the broader Alawite community (Al-Tamimi 2012:191). This comment by Al-Tamimi may however be an exaggeration of the Alawite people. Unlike the dominant religious groups of Syria (the Sunnīs), Alawite religious practice is not as integrated with social life. Thus, the beliefs and practices of Alawite adherents may not be as evident as it is among Sunnī Muslims. This is consistent with the

Alawites esoteric nature, addressed in Chapter 3. There do remain, however, Alawites who form part of their community through bloodline and culture, and not through religious belief. Bashar al-Assad is a prime example of this, adopting the ideals of the secular state over those of his Alawite status.

This adds to the complexity of the Syrian conflict, in which disputes exist between Sunnīs and Alawites. With many Alawites having lost their faith (the heretical set of beliefs that conflict with Sunnī Islam), Sunnīs (knowingly or unknowingly) are no longer fighting against Alawite ideology, but rather secularism and atheism.

4.6.2 Twelver Shī'ites

While Twelvers remain a very small minority in the country, their allegiance has remained with the government of Syria, given the regime's Alawite links to the Shī'a. Equally so, Iran is comprised mostly of Twelver Shī'ites, and Iran holds strong political relations with Syria.

Since the Twelver community in Syria is so small, it is difficult to determine to what extent they have been a part of Syria's conflict. Most involvement by Twelvers in the Syrian conflict has been through external intervention. The role of Hezbollah and Iran has as a consequence involved Twelvers, but news reports have also mentioned the influx of Shī'ites (presumably Twelvers) into Syria to defend and protect the many shrines and mosques scattered throughout the country (Anadani 2012). Not only are these monuments a vital part of Syria's tourism industry, but they also serve as important landmarks for pilgrims of the Shī'ite strand of Islam (Sindawi 2009:86)

4.6.3 Hezbollah

Literally translated the "Party of Allāh" (Norton 2009:15), Hezbollah, an Islamic militant group, has become a key player in the Syrian conflict, fighting Syrian forces opposed to the government of Bashar al-Assad.

Hezbollah's influence in the Middle Eastern region has been significant over the past three decades, especially in its response to Israeli attacks on neighbouring countries. Its resistance to Israel is a result of the strong Islamic roots from which it was formed, as well as its key financial backers and ally, Iran, which have been fervently opposed to the state of Israel (Norton 2009:35).

However, as the Syrian conflict has progressed Bashar al-Assad's main militant opposition has not been neighbouring Israel, but instead has been a combination of Syrian Sunnī Muslims and foreign al-Qaeda-linked Sunnī fighters (Nakhoul 2013).

Hezbollah, which is itself a Muslim organisation, form part of the Shī'a branch of Islam (Norton 2009:6). Consequently, Hezbollah forces fighting for the Syrian government have been drawn into conflict with other Muslims.

Hezbollah's historical ideology holds multiple correlations with the ideologies and beliefs of Sunnī militant groups like al-Qaeda and the Salafists. Among these ideologies are anti-Westernism and anti-Zionism (Norton 2009:66). However, Hezbollah is an upholder of secularism, which their Sunnī-related counterparts are vehemently against (Norton 2009:15). On this point, however, Hezbollah and the Syrian government find agreement. Syria's longstanding secular state, born out of Arab nationalism, has been one of the main reasons for the contention between the Syrian government and those currently opposed to it.

Hezbollah has found its reason for support of the Syrian government predominantly through its strong relationship with Iran, which is a close ally of Syria.

Iran's struggle to gain and maintain control over Middle-Eastern trade will be severely hampered if the secular Syrian state is lost to Syrian opposition forces (which are largely backed and funded by Saudi Arabia).

It was only in April 2013, two years after the start of the Syrian conflict, that Hezbollah began playing an active role in the fighting in Syria. Commissioned by the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Hezbollah's presence in the Syrian conflict was immediately felt. The Syrian government was on their back foot in their fight against the Syrian rebels, and it seemed that Bashar al-Assad's power was in decline. However, Hezbollah's entrance into the course of the fighting shifted the Syrian government's stance from a losing position to a winning position in a matter of months. Hezbollah fighters, who were originally commissioned to assassinate military leaders among the Sunnī rebels and to protect the Shī'a population in Syria, became instrumental in reclaiming strategic cities vital for the success of the Syrian government (Nakhoul 2013).

The United States and most countries in Europe classify Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation, and while this may be the case in the eyes of many dissidents, the Islamic party has been the saviour of the Syrian government in the course of the conflict (Nakhoul 2013). While they may in part have been drawn into the conflict through the influence of Iran, Hezbollah also realises that something much larger is at stake that is worth fighting for. The very survival and influence of the Shī'ites in the Middle East is at stake. The defeat of Bashar al-Assad could give rise to a Sunnī-controlled Syria, which would alter the dynamic of the Middle East for religious minorities, and more importantly for Hezbollah, for the Shī'ites. This would explain the 'Party of Allāh's' drive toward the success of Bashar al-Assad and the Alawites of Syria.

4.6.4 Iran

Syria's ongoing conflict has seen many international backers supporting the Syrian rebels in their fight against the Syrian regime, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, the United States, and most of Europe. The same, however, cannot be said for the government of Bashar al-Assad, which has had very little support and sympathy from the international community. The Syrian government's main support has come from Russia, China, and Iran, and while Russia and China have played a large role in protecting the government, it is Iran that has been instrumental in its support, both financially and militarily, for the Syrian government.

Iran, a deeply religious nation comprised mainly of Shī'a Muslims and controlled by the supreme leader and Shī'a cleric Ayatollah Ali Hosseini Khamenei, has shared relations with Syria that stretch back to 1980, shortly after the Iranian revolution (Sindawi 2009:89, Goodarzi 2006:11-17). Its strategic partnership has helped to maintain a level of power in the Middle East that has strongly competed with the Sunnī-controlled Saudi Arabia. This has been a part of the broader perceived Sunnī–Shī'a conflict in the Syrian civil war, in which Sunnī rebels have attempted to bring down the Shī'a-related government of Bashar al-Assad.

Iran's role in the Syrian conflict has provided the government with strategic advice, finance and military equipment. It has also commissioned its military proxy Hezbollah to assist in the struggle against Sunnī rebels and jihādists (Fulton, Holliday & Wyer 2013). Syria's alliance with Iran helps to maintain Iran's control in the Middle-Eastern region, and helps to maintain a Shī'a presence in the region as well. The fall of the Assad regime and the rise

of Sunnī governance in Syria would stifle Iran's power in the region; giving rise to a broader Sunnī-controlled Middle East.

4.7 Christians

While war rages on in Syria in a battle largely between government forces (dominated by the Alawites) and opposition forces (dominated by Sunnī Muslims), one of Syria's largest minority groups, the Christians, has found itself caught in the conflict.

Syria's Christian community comprises roughly 10% of the entire population (Lund 2012b:2). Of the existing religious and ethnic groups they are essentially the only existing original inhabitants of the country, dating right back to the start of the Christian faith roughly two thousand years ago. But such a long history of occupation in Syria has not left Christians in the modern nation at the top of the political hierarchy. Instead, Christians have had a long history of trying to survive in a country that was once classified as their own. Centuries of political turmoil and the Muslim occupation of Syria under the Umayyad and Ottoman dynasties caused thousands of Christians to flee the nation or convert to Islam, leaving Syria's Christian population depleted (Hitti 2002:328).

Over the past four decades, Syrian Christians have experienced relative peace. The governance of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad under the secular Ba'th Party has extended favour to Syria's minority groups, all of which lie in the shadow of the country's Sunnī majority (Mousa 2012:1). This has limited the amount of persecution Syrian Christians have experienced, especially in contrast to many other Arab countries such as Egypt, where Coptic Christians have experienced continued persecution by Islamists (Zeidan 1999:61). The Syrian government's continued pressure on and banning of Islamist groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda, have over the past few decades provided shelter for Christians, allowing them to live freely and without repression.

This, however, has swiftly changed over the course of Syria's civil war. Revolts against the government by Sunnī opposition groups has left the Syrian government weakened and unable to exert the same amount of control that it was able to before war broke out. This has left a sense of insecurity among Syria's minority groups, which have become uncertain about the political future of the country (Khoury 2011:2). The drive of moderate Sunnī Muslim opposition, as well as the influx of Sunnī Muslim extremist groups, has raised concerns among Syrian minorities as to what the future of the country would look

like if opposition forces took control of the nation. While not all Sunnī Muslims share the same political outlooks, many foresee a Sunnī-controlled government based on *sharī'a* law. This is especially true in the case of the jihādists groups such as *Jabhat Nusra*, which, through their Salafist ideology, strictly espouse *sharī'a* law. Since the outset of the conflict in Syria, Christians in the nation have raised concerns about the amount of fanaticism that has presented itself through Muslim extremists in the Arab Spring, citing the levels of intolerance that have been shown toward Christians in these countries (Gallagher 2012). While many participated in the initial demonstrations against Bashar al-Assad (Karouny 2011), the changing face of the conflict to a more religious one saw Christians being attacked by the very people they were once demonstrating alongside.

Over the course of the civil war in the country, multiple attacks have occurred against Christian communities, with hundreds of cases reported of Christians being executed and beheaded. Islamic extremists, and not FSA fighters, have carried out the majority of these attacks, calling for Christians to convert or die, and shouting “Allahu Akhbar” (God is great) as they launch their attacks (Parry 2013). The beheading of Christians, including children and priests, has been used as a tool to strike fear into the Christians of Syria. Their associated support of Bashar al-Assad (and as a consequence, the support of the Alawite people) has meant that Christians are part of the enemy in the eyes of the opposition, and thus considered *infidels* and heretics who oppose the will of God. This justification has given jihādists in the country free rein to kill anyone who opposes their goals, including the Christian community. In 2013 an estimated 2,123 Christians were killed in Syria, either as martyrs or as a result of the broader fighting in the country. This is more than double the number in 2012 (Alter 2014). This indicates the severity of the persecution of Christians in Syria.

The Christians of Syria have primarily been in support of Bashar al-Assad and his government, especially given the fact that Sunnī jihādists have targeted them, but cases do exist of Christians supporting the rebel groups because of the violence that regime forces have displayed (Hogan 2012). This is also true for Christians fighting in the country. While the majority have not taken up arms, some Christian leaders, such as the Greek Orthodox Bishop Luqa al-Khoury, have called for Christians of the country to take up arms against opposition forces (Ya Libnan 2013). While a trend does exist for Christians in the country to support the Syrian regime but not partake in the fighting, exceptions do exist where Christians are supporting the opposition, or taking up arms.

The attacks on Christian-dominated cities and villages in Syria have seen thousands of Christians flee their homes and the country. The insurgence of rebels and jihādists has not only resulted in the deaths of Christians, but as a consequence it has also severely affected and threatened the rich Christian heritage that lies in Syria. Churches have been defaced, with rooftop crosses replaced with jihādist flags. Suicide bombs have reduced churches and Christian villages (some more than a thousand years old) to rubble. The town of Maaloula, which is considered a UNESCO heritage site, has faced continuous uncertainty as rebels have taken control, with regime forces fighting to reclaim it. This is a drive by the opposition to remove Christians from Syria (Assi 2013). It was reported in early 2012 for example, that in the city of Homs Islamic extremist forcefully removed Christians from their homes, reducing the Christian population of the city from 160000 to 1000 (CWN 2012). As these attacks continue, more and more Christians are escaping the country in order to find refuge, fearing for their safety and their lives.

While this behaviour by jihādists in Syria is not limited to Christians (including almost all minority groups in the country as well), the significance of violence and removal of Christians from Syria cuts the line of a long historical occupation by the faith in the country. There are a range of opinions on how many Christians have left the country, with some estimates saying a possible 450,000 of a total of 1,75 million, while others have estimated that at least a third of Christians have already fled the country (Spencer 2013). There is no confirmed figure, but what can be said with certainty is that this tally will continue to rise if jihādists persist in their fight for Syria.

Syria's Christians have been caught between a regime that many believe to be corrupt and an opposition that is fragmented and often oppressive. While many Christians believe change in governance is necessary, they also understand that the protection the government provides for them will probably be the one thing keeping them in Syria, and preventing them from being completely eradicated from the country. Their stance in favour of Bashar al-Assad in many ways reflects their own interests in survival in the country, as the perceived threat of an extremist Sunnī government lurks in the nation's near future. In light of the looming threat that is presented to Christians in Syria, the ideals of the Arab Spring that once seemed so hopeful seem to have since left them. Instead, as others have alluded to (Khoury 2011:1), their current situation and future seem more of a Winter.

4.8 Jewish involvement

Today, only a handful of Jews live in Syria, mostly in Damascus and Aleppo (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013). As such, Jewish involvement in the civil clashes in Syria is virtually non-existent. Beginning in the mid-1970s, over three thousand Jewish people fled Syria under repression from the government. Over a thirty-year period, this depleted the Syrian Jewish population to next to nothing. From this statistic it can be said that for citizens of Syria itself, the raging conflict is hardly a Jewish concern. This, however, does not mean that there is no Jewish voice in the Syrian conflict.

As the Syrian violence has escalated, the state of Israel has become increasingly vocal in its stance against the Syrian regime. Israel, which has not been without conflict with the nation in the past, shares its north-eastern border with Syria. Along this line is the strategic geographic region known as the Golan Heights, which has been fought over with much turmoil and animosity between the two states. In 1967, in a conflict known as the Six-Day War, Israel initiated attacks against neighbouring states including Syria, claiming strategic geographic regions bordering Israel itself. Among these locations was the Golan Heights. This move killed thousands of Syrian soldiers and drove out settlements in the region, displacing thousands of Syrians (Rabil 2003:119-126).

Since 1967's Six-Day War between Israel and Syria, other skirmishes have occurred over the strategic geographic region, including the Yom Kippur War of 1973, making this area between the two nations a volatile region (Rabil 2003:34).

Aside from the geographic disputes between Syria and Israel, tensions between the two nations lie largely in the alliances held with other countries. Most significant, especially as the Syrian conflict has escalated, is the alliance the Syrian government holds with Iran. The alliance that Syria and Iran hold is strategic for multiple reasons. For one, Bashar al-Assad's government, being run by the religious minority group known as the Alawites, is a perceived branch of the Shī'ite form of Islam. Iran, which is a Shī'ite Islamic nation, provides a sense of solidarity and support to the Syrian regime (El Hussein 2010:812).

Secondly, Syria acts as a bridge and safe haven for Iran's military proxy Hezbollah, which is based in Lebanon. Israel has on multiple occasions been on the receiving end of Hezbollah attacks, leading to much tension between the Jewish nation and those against them.

Lastly, Iran has been openly vocal in its views of Israel as a nation and its right to exist. Since the end of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, Israeli and Iranian relations have been warped and broken. In more recent years Iran's rhetoric toward Israel has been blunt and straight to the point. Former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, has made clear his views toward the Jewish nation, referring to Israel as the "Zionist entity" (Litvak 2006:275). He also on multiple occasions denied the events of the Holocaust, claiming that it might have been invented by the Allied forces of World War II to embarrass Germany (Küntzel 2007:1).

Over the Syrian crisis, Iran's dedication to the Syrian government has led to threats from Iran that it will launch a military strike against Israel if it attacks Syria (Paramagure, 2013). This, for understandable reasons, has led Israel to take a strategic interest in the happenings of Syria's current conflict. Not only might Israel be drawn into the conflict due to its strategic border regions (which could lead to skirmishes with Syrian forces), but more importantly, the possibility exists for a much larger attack that could be launched against the Jewish nation that might threaten the very existence of Israel itself.

The historical reasons for the existence of the modern state of Israel, much of which are religious reasons, could become the very reason for an attack against the people of Israel. Iran's statements regarding the Jewish nation strike at the very heart of Israel's existential being, and with Iran being closely allied with Syria, Israel's keen interest in the conflict is essential to its own preservation.

4.9 Conclusion

The ongoing conflict in Syria is driven by a vast array of ideologies and beliefs that make it difficult to tie the violence to one single cause. Religious and political factors are virtually inseparable in the conflict and both continuously reflect back on the historic and geographic factors that have defined them.

What is evident is the individual religious groups and entities that have revealed themselves in the course of the conflict. While some remain passive actors in the course of the violence, such as the Christians, the vast majority are active participants in their pursuit of control of the country. The most visible battle is between the Sunnīs and the Alawites, and while it is tempting to label this as a Sunnī/Shī'a conflict, the peculiarities of the

Alawite faith as an offshoot of the Shīʿa branch of Islam make it difficult and irresponsible to make this comparison.

However, one can say with confidence that the conflict certainly possesses a religious dynamic that is essential to its existence and that will be crucial to understand in the attempt to find a peace resolution.

Chapter 5

Analysis

5.1 Introduction

Syria is in the midst of a heated and bloody civil war that has resulted in over 100,000 deaths and seen countless others fleeing the nation in search of refuge (Kendall 2013). The question has to be asked: What kind of war is raging in Syria? Is it a political party fighting against the elected Ba'th party? Is it a Sunnī versus Shī'ite battle, a holy war and a religious war? Could it possibly be a religious drive against a secular state? Or does the possibility exist for it to be a combination of multiple factors, all of which contribute to the mess we see today?

When Syria's conflict started it was a continuation of the Arab Spring. The same spirit that was felt in the protests of Tunisia, Egypt and Libya carried through to Syria. Syrian protesters found courage in their masses to stand up to their leader and voice their concerns, just like demonstrators had done in the other Arab countries. While their concerns against their respective leaders may have differed, the people's end goals remained the same – the expectation for their leaders to step down from power.

This happened in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, in some circumstances peacefully and others forcefully. But in Syria, Bashar al-Assad, having learnt from what had happened in these other three countries, applied military force against protesters instead of stepping down (Bhalla 2011:1). This was a turning point for Syria, which altered its course from the rest of the Arab Spring. The ideals of the Arab Spring and the philosophical premise that it presented were lost for Syrians.

In this regard it cannot be denied that Syria's opposition against the government attempted a diplomatic political approach. Unlike in Syria's past, this was not an attempted coup d'état, nor was it military force imposed by an empire. It was not even presented as a religious dispute at the time. It began as demonstrations, which under the banner of the Arab Spring were perceived by the Syrian government as a threat to their rule of the country.

Nevertheless, Bashar al-Assad's concerns were not totally unjustified. Assad knew the dynamic of his country. He knew the religious composition of Syria, he knew the sectarian tensions that had gripped the country in the past, and he also knew the threat of terrorism his country was exposed to. So, with all of these things in mind Bashar's attempt to hold on to power was and has been to maintain the secular state of Syria. This would help to preserve both the secular ideals and the Alawite community to which he belongs.

From the perspective of Assad and his regime, these two things would be important to preserve. They are two matters that in the broader history of Syria have not been greatly accepted. Both the Alawites and secularism have had to fight hard to keep a foothold in the country. They are both scarce elements in the Middle East, and to a large degree both unwanted.

The Alawites' inhabitancy of Syria has been marked with much turmoil. Years of oppression by the country's rulers (almost always Sunnīs) involved many cases of violence between the Alawites and Sunnīs, as has been illustrated in the previous chapters. The Alawites' alternative theological views clearly set them apart from Muslims, and while the latter half of the twentieth century saw them more widely embraced as a form of *Shī'ite* Islam, in the eyes of many Sunnī Syrians they have never fully been accepted as true Muslims. As such, a tension exists between Sunnīs and Alawites. This can be seen in the years of military conscription when both Ottoman and Egyptian Sunnīs attempted to draw the Alawites into their military ranks and maintain firm control over them. The continuous resistance by the Alawites, along with the random raids they performed on towns and villages, emphasised the unwillingness of the Alawites to integrate themselves into Syrian society, which for military empires was nothing short of humiliation. It is understandable then that even at this stage in Syrian history that Sunnīs may have perceived Alawites as being outsiders and peculiar. For many years Alawites set themselves apart from the rest of Syria in order to protect themselves. The Alawites' contentment to remain in the mountainous regions maintained the gap between them and the Sunnīs, and while it may have been to avoid integration into the empire and maintain their Alawite identity and faith, it most certainly formed a rift between the two groups that is still visible today.

The French success in gaining control over (and the favour of) the Alawites would surely have been difficult for the Sunnīs to accept, but what made it worse was the fact that

Alawites had more rights under the French, and were used in their military ranks to control the Sunnī majority. This separation was further emphasised by the implementation of geographical borders to form provinces for the various ethnic and religious groups, drawing sectarian lines not only through historical events, but also through geographical boundaries.

The Ba‘th Party, which presented an opportunity for Alawites to become involved in Syrian political life, was not initially a barrier between Sunnīs and Alawites. Many Sunnīs were part of the Ba‘th, but it was the openness to all minority groups in the country that attracted the Alawites. In fact, the Ba‘th party was, for many people from minority groups, a way of narrowing the sectarian gap between them and Sunnīs. Thus, as more Alawites joined the Ba‘th, their influence in the party grew. Where most Sunnīs belonged to a tradition that followed Qur’ānic law, the Alawites, although they did have a stable religious tradition, were able to more easily adapt and adopt new political ideas. The principle of *taḳiyya*, which allowed Alawites to dissimulate their own faith in favour of another in times of persecution, meant that the Alawite people were accustomed to change. While this is in no way saying that *taḳiyya* was meant for political dissimulation, the influence the French had on the Alawites made significant political changes among many of the Alawites. As such, the ideals of secularism were passed on through the Ba‘th to the Alawites. The huge growth of Alawites in the Ba‘th, which promoted all Arabs as equal, pushed many Sunnīs away from the party. Sunnīs now considered the Ba‘th as illegitimate and anti-Islamic (Fildis 2012:155).

Concern rose among Sunnīs that not only was the country run under secular governance, but the government was also dominated by Alawites, which many considered to be non-Muslim.

Thus, two rifts were formed: one a religious rift, the other a political rift. However, both these rifts were interconnected, with Alawites strongly linked to secularist governance, while Sunnīs were linked to Islamic (*sharī‘a*) law. At the same time, Sunnīs, with the ideals of Islamic law, began to form strong opposition to the secularist/Alawite government.

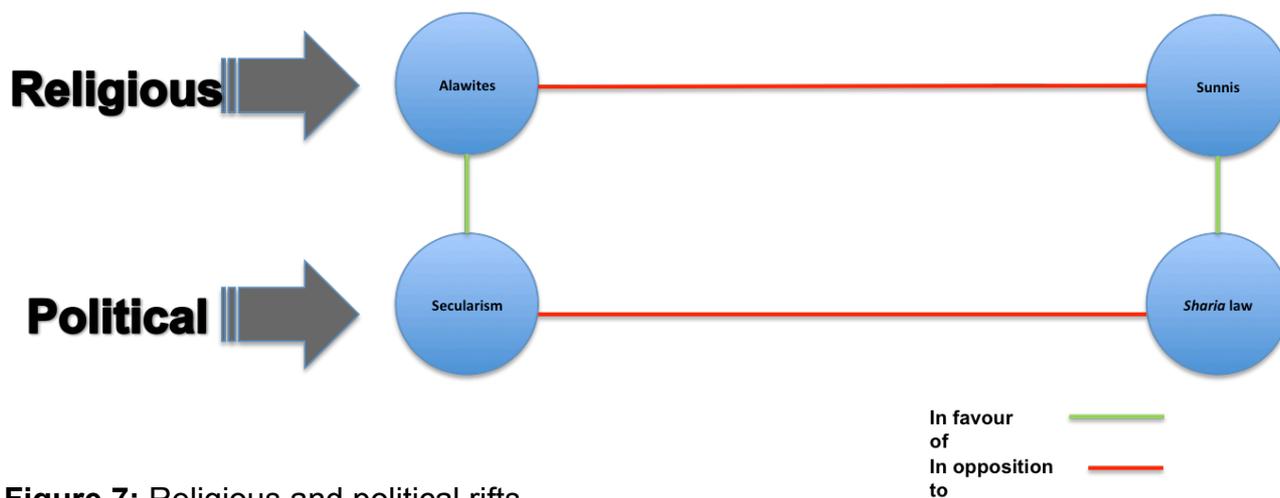


Figure 7: Religious and political rifts

This can be seen clearly through the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in the country. The Muslim organisation incited scepticism over the right of Hafez al-Assad to rule the nation, given the fact that he was not a Sunnī Muslim. Equally so, they found fault in the secular state, against which they protested (Kaplan 1993:5). This difference of opinion was expressed in the minds of the Muslim Brotherhood as a religious war, and while these differences were as much political as they were religious, the religious consequences they had for the ideological framework of the Brotherhood were significant. This so-called ‘religious war’ resulted in the Hama massacre, where thousands of Sunnī Muslims were killed. The Muslim Brotherhood was perceived as a major threat to the secular government and the Alawite people, and therefore needed to be cut down in order to preserve the government’s pre-existing ideals.

5.2 Theological differences between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites

Contention in Syria’s civil war has occurred for a number of reasons. One such reason is because of theological differences between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites. While Al-Tamimi (2012:191) has noted that many Alawites of Syria today are in fact atheists, this does not take away the connotation between such people and the faith. This is especially true for some Sunnī Muslims, who label all Alawites of the country as heretics. Thus, in comparing the theological differences between Alawites and Sunnīs it is important to incorporate all Alawites and their association with the Alawite faith.

The Alawite faith was born out of the split of Islam, as Talhamy has pointed out (2011:220), forming the *ghulāt* sects, which were known for the extremist tendencies in

their beliefs. Such beliefs were a deviation from the norms of Islam, especially Sunnī Islam. While it is visible that some of the traits of Islam remained in the doctrines and beliefs of the Alawites, such deviations were unacceptable for Sunnī Muslims.

The concept of *tawḥīd* is for Sunnī Muslims the pivot of their faith. Everything else rests on the fact that Allāh is unique and nothing can equate to him. The Alawite faith also claims to be monotheistic, and while it may claim this, the trinitarian doctrine that the Alawites hold is intolerable for Sunnī Muslims. While such a doctrine differs from that of the Christian trinitarian doctrine, it makes the faith, just like the Christian version, no longer monotheistic in the mind of Sunnī Muslims.

For Alawites, all that is necessary is faith. This differs extensively from Islam, which centres on the belief that action is necessary for true faith in God. The pillars of Islam are all action-based, and remain a requirement for every Muslim. However, such actions are not necessary in the Alawite faith.

The Alawites believe in the doctrine of reincarnation, also known as metempsychosis. Since this is not a doctrine of Islam, it is, for Sunnīs, considered *shirk* or sinful. However, even more sinful in the minds of Sunnī Muslims is the concept of religious dissimulation (*taḳīyya*), which the Alawite faith holds to. For Muslims, apostasy is considered the ultimate sin. To deny and abandon God is considered the ultimate *shirk*, and is punishable by death. For Muslims who do not believe the Alawites to be Islamic, such a form of jihād is justified and acceptable (Saeed & Saeed 2004:97). This is also true for the lack of *sharīʿa* law in place in the country and the use of secular law.

The theological differences between the Sunnīs and Alawites are vast, and while for Alawites this may not be important, for Sunnīs, their very theological premise rests on the laws and rules that they are given. It is for this reason that a *sharīʿa*-based government is important to the Sunnī community of Syria, and a non-*sharīʿa* based government is unacceptable.

5.3 Religious violence

Syria's civil war is driven by a combination of factors, including domestic political difference, as well as international interests. However, as has been argued in this dissertation, Syria's civil war is also driven by religiously motivated factors. As such, these

factors have resulted in religious violence. Religious violence, however, should not be confused with 'terrorism'. While 'terrorism' can form part of religious violence, and in Syria's case has done so in the country's civil war, not all acts of religious violence are acts of 'terrorism'.

Larsson argues that the concept of religious violence exists in a three-tiered division of the world: on the individual level, the group or societal level, and the state and international level (2004:30). Syria's own violence, it can be argued, exists on all of the three tiers that Larsson describes. For the purposes of not over-analysing Syria's case, the last two tiers are especially relevant. Syria's religious violence at its strongest and most obvious exists at the group/societal level. The most fearsome conflict that exists in Syria is between groups within the country. Both moderate and extremist Sunnī Muslim groups in Syria stand opposed to Syria's Alawites: two groups that have formed part of Syria's society for many years. Equally so, Christians who form part of Syria are experiencing religious violence by Syrian Islamist groups.

The lines become somewhat blurred given that some of the jihādist groups involved in the fighting stem not from Syria itself, but from neighbouring countries. These groups lie between societal and international religious violence.

International religious violence also exists from other countries or international groups toward Syria, but the lines once again become somewhat blurred when considering the extent to which violence actually exists.

Countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar, which have been discussed in the previous chapter, have provided both funding and fighters to assist the rebel groups in Syria. While these countries may not have intervened as a national military unit, they are both Sunnī Muslim states, and have therefore provided funding for the Sunnīs of Syria against the rulers of a non-Sunnī state, who happen to be Alawites.

On the other side of the spectrum, Iran, which supports the Assad regime, has provided assistance to the Syrian government in the form of their military proxy Hezbollah. Hezbollah is a Shī'ite military group, which, in fighting in Syria, stand against a Sunnī opposition.

Thus, international religiously affiliated groups are equally present in the fighting in Syria, and therefore form part of the religious violence that exists in the country.

But Syria is not only experiencing religious violence. It is also experiencing secular violence. While it may at times be difficult to determine where religious or secular violence is taking place in Syria, cases do exist where religious violence clearly exists. Larsson again points toward such a difference. He notes that the difference between religious violence and secular violence is that religious violence has a readily available legitimation for any action or reaction, however violent or unjustifiable (2004:32). Religion also “ensures that not all violence can be condemned, even that it may become an obligation and a duty” (Larsson 2004:32). This is what makes religious violence more dangerous than secular violence.

Such a case of religious violence clearly exists in the actions of Syria’s jihādīst groups. Their actions against regime forces, Alawites, and Christians are those of religious legitimation, and this has seen them use methods that may seem unjustifiable. Cases of suicide bombings, car bombs, and beheadings performed by Sunnī Muslim jihādīsts are all examples of religious violence.

Religious violence also exists between moderate Sunnī Muslims and Alawites. While it may be difficult to distinguish which moderate Sunnī Muslims use religious violence or secular violence, this may in fact not be clear within the minds of Sunnī Muslims themselves.

Many Sunnī Muslims in Syria see the nation’s future as being a Sunnī Muslim state like it once was under the Ottoman Empire and after the French Mandate. Such Muslims are not necessarily extremist Muslims, but the vision of a religiously governed nation means that there is a religious motivation for the fighting in the country, and as such it can be classified as religious violence.

The violence performed by regime forces and Alawites is not as easily defined as religious violence. While the majority of the regime forces are Alawites, many today, as Al-Tamimi notes (Al-Tamimi 2012:191), are atheists – they are ethnically Alawite, but do not necessarily hold the Alawites’ religious beliefs. This would be the case of Syrian president Bashar al-Assad, who, in an interview with David Lesch mentioned in Chapter 4 (Lesch

2005:238), separated his religious affiliation from his political stance, and insinuated his personal separation from religion.

If such is the case for the Alawites of Syria, then one cannot label the violence that the regime is performing as religious violence, but rather as secular violence. This would agree with the strong secular stance that the regime carries.

It may then be argued that Sunnī Muslim and rebel forces are not actually fighting against another religious group at all, but only a political dictatorship. While the Syrian regime may only represent the Alawites in ethnicity, for many Sunnī Muslims the regime and the Alawites still represent the Alawite religious beliefs. This is expressed mainly by Salafist clerics who use the ancient *fatwā* by medieval scholar Ibn Taymīya, who stated that Alawites are heretics, were they enemy of Islam, and should be annihilated. (Lund 2012a:109). This was reinforced in 2005 by jihādist theoretician Abu Moussaab al-Souri, who used the above *fatwā* to demonise Alawites and the Assad regime in an attempt to overthrow the Syrian government (Lund 2013:22). Thus, today Sunnī Muslims of Syria, especially those who belong to the Salafist branch, continue to believe that Alawites are heretics and should be removed from power in order to restore the legitimacy of Islam in the country. Fighting in the country therefore remains an issue between two different religions, as Sunnī Muslims are motivated in their fight against the regime based on the belief system that the Alawites belong to.

5.4 Opposition to the government

While it has been emphasised that rebel forces against the regime of Bashar al-Assad are almost entirely Sunnī Muslims, it is also necessary to emphasise the differences in the rebel camp. Caution should be shown toward painting all rebel groups with the same brush. While they may all be a part of one branch of Islam, differences exist between groups in the rebel camp, specifically related to their interpretation of the *Qur'ān*.

Rebel groups can be divided between moderate Sunnī Muslims and extremist Sunnī Muslims.

At the start of the violence in Syria, the opposition group known as the Free Syrian Army was formed. While this group had intentions of driving out the ruling political party, it soon became clear that they were almost all Sunnī Muslims. However, the violence they used

was not typical of jihādīst actions. The Free Syrian Army displayed signs of being moderate Sunnī Muslims. However, when suicide bombings, car bombs, and beheadings started being used against the regime’s forces, signs of extremist Sunnī Muslim activity became evident. Groups such as *Jabhat Nusra* and ISIS began to take responsibility for these actions.

While it might be easy to mistake the methods of one of the two groups as more effective techniques to kill the enemy, this is not the case. While groups like the FSA have been engaged in brutal conflict with regime forces, their actions against the enemy have been largely limited to conventional warfare. However, groups such as *Jabhat Nusra* and ISIS have used unconventional warfare techniques in their fight to control Syria. These techniques form part of the jihādīst framework to which they belong. Such actions are fuelled by the belief and interpretation of jihād that all non-Muslims should either convert to Islam or be killed. Thus, more effective and brutal warfare techniques have been used against the regime and its supporters to not only kill such people, but to instil fear among them. This is the very idea of terrorism: such actions strike fear and terror into the enemy’s minds (Larsson 2004:40).

Thus, clear distinctions can be seen between the different opposition groups present in the conflict. Their differences are emphasised by the religious beliefs they hold, whether they be moderate or extremist.

5.5 The minority dilemma in Syria

Both in Syria’s history and in its current conflict, religious minority groups have stood against the Sunnī majority in the nation. While at times this has been peaceful, it has inevitably led to conflict between the groups, not only because of doctrinal differences, but also because of the leadership and governance of the country.

5.5.1 Minority rule

The defence against the Muslim Brotherhood by the Syrian government was in order to preserve the secular state that existed in the nation. However, such a defence would not likely have been necessary if the existing government held the same ideological framework as the majority of the nation.

In Syria, as has already been mentioned, the religious majority is comprised of Sunnī Muslims, whose ideological beliefs differ significantly from those of other religious groups such as the Christians and Alawites. Therefore, the Alawites, who make up the majority of the government of Syria but as a religious faction in the country make up a small percentage, are considered a minority ruler. This is not an uncommon phenomenon. Such cases exist in other countries across the Middle East, as well as in India, where a minority group governs the rest of the nation, and similarly to Syria, has adopted a secular form of governance to ensure that the country would not be completely dominated by the ideals of the religious majority (Juergensmeyer 2008:11). Abdulhamid (2004) further illustrates that when a minority rule takes control of a nation, “a crisis of legitimacy for the government will naturally arise. However, after the initial crisis fades, the main objective of those rulers is to establish representative coalitions that function under their control and rules. The norm is that nearly everybody is eventually represented within a system of parochial interests. In order to democratise one cannot champion the cause of the majority, but must instead champion the cause of civic education and citizenship -- otherwise, the country will fall into the trap of sectarian politics.” Explained differently, the minority rulers, knowing full well that their legitimacy to rule is under constant scrutiny, have to find a way to control the majority. This is done through government-run services, which the majority of the country is heavily reliant on.

The government of Bashar al-Assad, along with that of his father and predecessor Hafez al-Assad, found itself in a position where, in order to maintain power in the country, they would have to provide certain services to the public that would satisfy the majority, and while this happened in part, the expectation from the country’s majority was not met, which was expressed in the protest and demonstrations that formed part of the Arab Spring. One of the greatest factors overlooked by the Syrian government was the religious factor and its incorporation into civil life. Instead of nurturing the religious needs of the masses, religion for the most part was suppressed. However, to preserve power, and to preserve the minority status of the Alawites, it became necessary in the mind of the Syrian government to apply force against the nation’s majority.

5.5.2 Violence against Christians

In the previous chapter an outline of the Christian faction was given with regard to its role in the Syrian war. With media focus predominantly placed on the tension between Alawites and Sunnī Muslims, little attention has been given to the effects the Syrian violence has

had on Christians within the nation. However, certain reports have emphasised the severity of the violence that has been directed at Christians.

From this the question of why such violence is happening to Christians can be asked. Why are Christians being persecuted so severely when they are not even part of the main groups fighting each other in the war?

The very fact that Christians are being persecuted in Syria emphasises the fact that the civil war in the country has a religious element driving it. Christians are not being attacked by mere political supporters of the opposition and rebel groups, but rather by Islamist and jihādist fighters determined to transform Syria into an Islamic state. The call for Christians by certain opposition members to convert to Islam or die, as has been mentioned previously, shows the intention of many opposition groups to completely transform the religious landscape of Syria rather than just changing the political system that is in place. These actions against Christians are not typical of moderate Muslims but rather are typical of more radical and extremist Muslims such as the Salafists, whose drive toward a 'pure' Islamic state calls for them to perform a jihād against all non-Muslims. Before the war in Syria started, the government of Syria worked hard at keeping 'terrorist'-associated groups out of the country. This was the case with the Muslim Brotherhood, the presence of which was seen as a threat to the existence of the Ba'th Party, and therefore it was banned from operating within Syria. As a result, minority groups, including the Christian population of Syria, were protected from the pressures of hardliner Islamist groups. As the war in the country has continued, the resources of the government have become increasingly strained, no longer allowing for the control the government once possessed. Instead, the emergence of jihādist groups from within the country, as well as the influx of such groups from outside of Syria's borders, has placed greater pressure on minority groups throughout the country. Christians, whose religious beliefs stand in stark contrast to jihādists and their ambitions for Syria, face a grave threat of eradication and genocide in the country.

Through the eyes of Salafist jihādists, Christianity is often associated with secularism and Western ideals, and is therefore considered evil. Not only does it become the purpose of such Muslims to bring about 'pure' Islam in the Syrian state, but as a consequence, it is also to eliminate non-Muslim peoples from Syria. While Christianity in Syria operates within a completely different culture to Christianity throughout the rest of the world, its

association with the West adopts the negative connotations of the West as well. These connotations have had a severe effect on Christians within Syria (Murawiec 2008:41-42).

However, the religious beliefs of Christians are not the only reason why such persecution against them is occurring. Another reason why such horrific acts are being performed against Christians is because of the current and historical support Christians have given the ruling government. As has been mentioned, the government of Bashar al-Assad has protected the minority groups of Syria, of which Christians form a part, and in turn has received support from these groups. Government opposition and rebels, including jihādists that have been fighting government forces, have thus encountered opposition from regime-supporting Christians, often resulting in brutal acts against them.

While Christians are definitely being attacked because of their beliefs, they are also being attacked because of their association with both the government of Bashar al-Assad and their association with the 'evils' of Western ideals, capitalism, and secularism. Unless a secular or moderate Islamic government replaces the Assad regime, the Christians of Syria risk complete eradication from the country because of their continued persecution by jihādist-related groups, which now have full reign over the country because of the dwindling power of the ruling government. The fall of the Assad regime would put the Christians of the country in a frightening position. If Sunnī Muslims took control, Christianity's survival in the country would depend on the relationship built between Christians and Sunnī Muslims.

While moderate Sunnīs might allow for the coexistence of Christians and Muslims, it is difficult to see the same coexistence between Christians and jihādists, because of the parochial and exclusive outlook that such Muslims hold (Barber 1992:60). Thus, as Christians in Syria look toward a future in their own country, such a possibility is dependent on the political outcome of a war that is religiously motivated. If the existing government remains in power, the Christians of Syria will in all likelihood be safe from harm, but if the existing government falls from power, the future for Christians in Syria is unknown.

5.5.3 Solution for minority groups

The religious minority groups of Syria, of which Christians have been discussed, face a worrisome future in the country. Their existence over the past four decades has been

relatively protected, after having found the favour of the Assad Regime (which, being Alawite, belongs to a minority group). However, the uncertain future of the country has created just as much uncertainty for these minority groups. The continual drive by Sunnī Muslims, both moderate and extreme, to overthrow the reigning government would, if successful, mean a change in stance toward minority religious groups. As has been discussed, Christians would risk being driven out of the country or even risk possible genocide against them, while Alawites, to which the president of the country belongs, risk similar, if not more severe, consequences to Christians. Such possibilities exist if a Sunnī-controlled government comes to power. Juergensmeyer (2008:231) alludes to this fact when he says that the possibility exists for “preferential treatment of majority community members in government hiring and policies, and the possibility that the minorities will be required to submit to religious laws that they do not respect”. He goes beyond that in saying that an apocalyptic fear for these minority groups also exists, with the potential existing for them being driven from their homes or even killed.

The possible change in politics in the country could in turn have devastating religious consequences, changing Syria from a site of religious diversity to a parochial and exclusive Islamic state. Such an outcome would have life-changing effects on the minority religious communities of Syria.

5.6 Religious intolerance

Religious violence has engulfed Syria since the start of its civil war in 2011. Violence has been seen between rebel Sunnī Muslims and Alawite regime forces. This violence has extended to international groups such as Hezbollah and jihādīst groups from outside Syria’s borders. However, such violence has not only been limited to those who are holding the guns. Civilians of Syria have also been caught in the violence of Syria, and form a large part of the ever-growing death toll of Syria’s war.

Many of these civilian casualties have been as a result of being caught in crossfire and military air raids, but other civilian casualties have been due to intended killings of civilians as a means to invoke fear among the enemy and to ‘cleanse’ the land of religious impurity. This is a form of religious intolerance that has been used in Syria mainly by Sunnī extremists.

The quest by some Sunnī Muslim groups to transform Syria into an Islamic state is not necessarily a form of religious intolerance, but the brutal force imposed by Sunnī jihādists in Syria is an attempt to clear Alawites and Christians from Syria and is a clear indication that religious intolerance is very much a part of the opposition's worldview.

The same can be said for the Assad regime, which itself may not necessarily be imposing a certain religious view, but which may be blocking a certain form of religious tradition from taking control of the country. For Sunnī jihādists to take control of the country would mean a drastic change of governance for the people of Syria, who are currently part of a secular state. Intolerance toward Islamic governance can therefore be classified as a form of religious intolerance. Thus, both sides can be said to be religiously intolerant toward each other. While for the one side victory would be to impose their ideology on the governance of Syria, for the other it would be to maintain their ideology in the governance of Syria.

5.7 What does the Syrian war compare to?

In an attempt to try to make sense of the ongoing conflict, various individuals and agencies have compared the war in Syria to other historical wars. This has been attempted at different levels, with some comparing casualty rates (Martin), others the level of international intervention (Fitzpatrick), while still others have compared it to other religious wars (Goldberg). These comparisons have helped to a degree in determining what Syria's conflict is and is not like, but the sheer complexity of Syria's situation makes it difficult to understand what is going on by focusing on just one aspect.

Syria's war is and is not like many historical wars, but what it has mostly been compared to is a religious war. The reason for this is because of the distinct religiously affiliated sects, namely the Sunnīs and the Shī'ites, who are perceived to be in opposition to one another. To describe this tension between religious factions, the term 'sectarianism' has often been used by the various sources reporting on the Syrian war.

Sectarianism is essentially the sharp divide that is visible between different subsections of a religious or political group, shown through hatred and violence toward one another (Berger 1984:467-470). In Syria's current conflict the motivation for the violence can be seen from both the religious and political sides. On the one hand, there are the people of the Alawite faith, associated with the Alawite president of the country, who are defending themselves against the Sunnī people of the country. On the other hand, there exists the

secular ideology imparted through the government, which stands in stark contrast to the *sharī'a*-based governance that many Sunnīs envisage.

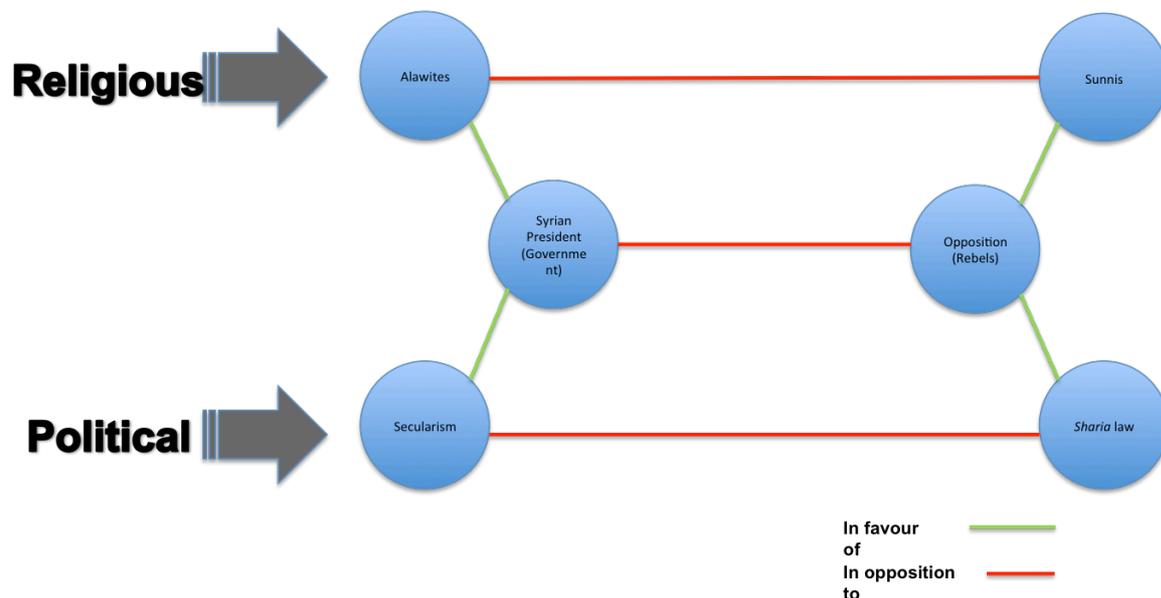


Figure 8: Religious and political rifts

It is evident, then, that the religious and political aspects of the conflict run parallel to one another, but are also intertwined with one another. This means that both the religious and political aspects are important in Syria's ongoing war, and calling the conflict a religious war should equally lead one to call the conflict a political war.

The sparks that lit the conflict that exists today were not religiously motivated ones. It was the Arab Spring, the wave of protests that spread through the Arab world between 2010 and 2011, and a series of events quite unique to Syria's historical conflicts that inspired Syria's own revolution. However, the Arab Spring was not religiously motivated, and while many of the protesters in the Arab Spring may have been religious, their uprisings and demonstrations were not religiously inclined. This was the same for the Syrian uprisings. While these had different circumstances to other cases in the Arab Spring, their origins were not religious.

It was only as Syria's demonstrations progressed and both sides used violence that Syria's conflict adopted a religious tone. This religious element is owed to the historical religious development of the country, the existing rift between Alawite and Sunnī groups,

and the unique religious standing of the government, all of which contributed to the political tension that existed.

5.7.1 Comparing Syria to Northern Ireland

Syria's civil war shares a number of similarities with the tension and conflict that Northern Ireland has, and continues to, experience. While these similarities exist, it must be clarified that Syria's civil war has experienced more casualties in its two years than Northern Ireland has in over three decades, and this factor in itself sets Syria apart from the Northern Irish 'Troubles' (Rogers 2010).

Still, a number of comparisons can be drawn between the two conflicts, in which similarities can be found.

Northern Ireland, which forms part of the United Kingdom, was divided ideologically by those loyal to the Northern Ireland's union with the United Kingdom, and those who preferred to form part of an independent united Ireland. This divide was drawn by both political and religious differences, with those loyal to the United Kingdom predominantly from the Unionist party, and predominantly Protestant, and those in favour of an independent united Ireland predominantly Roman Catholic (McKittrick & McVea 2001:5-6).

From the 1960s to 1998 (a period known as the 'Troubles'), Northern Ireland experienced a period of violence between Roman Catholics and Protestants, with the main dispute being that Roman Catholics wanted Northern Ireland to form part of an independent united Ireland (separated from the United Kingdom), while Protestants wanted to remain under the British banner (McKittrick & McVea 2001:5-6).

First and foremost, a major sectarian divide existed in Northern Ireland between Roman Catholics and Protestants (McKittrick & McVea 2001:5). Disputes in the country arose mainly between these two religious subsections. Syria's case is similar in that its tension exists between two of the country's largest religious groups, the Sunnīs and the Alawites.

The difference between Syria and Ireland in this regard is that while Catholicism and Protestantism are the two main subsections of the Christian faith, Alawites are not a main subsection of the Islamic faith, but rather a small sect of the Shī'ite branch of Islam, often considered heretical. Sunnīs, on the other hand, are a main subsection of Islam, blurring

the religious lines of Syria's conflict, unlike in Northern Ireland, which was clearly divided along defined Protestant and Roman Catholic lines.

Secondly, the main concern in Northern Ireland was a political issue. Roman Catholics wanted to break away from a London administered Northern Ireland, while Protestants wanted to remain part of the United Kingdom. In essence it was a concern over who controlled the country, Protestants or Roman Catholics. Similarities to Syria can be drawn in terms of this. Its own violence started as a result of a political issue with Sunnīs wanting the Alawite-controlled government to step down, and as the violence has continued, a move has been made for Sunnīs to take control of the country (McKittrick & McVea 2001:5-9).

Syria's situation differs to Northern Ireland in this regard, in that unlike Northern Ireland, Syria is not in a conflict over a change in national affiliation, but rather who will control the pre-existing nation.

5.8 Inter-religious or intra-religious conflicts

The violence seen in Syria between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites has been labelled a Sunnī versus Shī'ite war (Diab 2013). While violence between Sunnīs and Shī'ites has been taking place, it is not accurate to make this assumption based on the violence between Sunnīs and Alawites. Such an assumption (while easy to make) equates Alawites with Shī'a Islam. However, based on historical facts, which have been discussed in this dissertation, Alawites have been labelled as Shī'a Muslims largely in order to be accepted by Sunnī Muslims.

Firstly, Alawites have ties to the Shī'ites based on their origins. However, these ties were part of a breakaway movement from the Shī'ites, known as the *ghulāt* sects. These sects maintained beliefs that traditional Islamic branches did not, often retaining extremist beliefs. Thus, although Alawites have been associated with Shī'a Islam, their belief system is, in theory and in practice, different to it. One can conclude then that Alawites are in fact not an Islamic group.

The violence between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites is therefore not an intra-religious conflict but rather an inter-religious conflict. However, elements of Syria's war have led to intra-religious conflicts. The emergence of Hezbollah and the support of Iran have placed

Shīite Muslims against Sunnī Muslims. While this does not remain the primary conflict, it has in fact bred religious violence within the Islamic faith.

This has been further exacerbated by the conflict that has emerged within the opposition. Following a difference of goals and theological interpretations, Syria's moderate Sunnī opposition has been at the receiving end of violence by Sunnī jihādīst groups. Such fighting among Sunnīs themselves emphasises the vast expanse of beliefs that are present among the various groups in Syria.

The violence between Sunnī Muslims and Alawites is, however, not the only case of inter-religious violence. The violence against Christians by Sunnī Muslims also shows the diversity of inter-religious violence in the country. While for the most part Christians are not fighting back, the violence imposed on them is indicative of how their presence in country is not welcome.

Thus, a series of different conflicts is present in the Syrian war. While the main conflict does exist as an inter-religious conflict, the peripheral conflicts are a combination of inter- and intra-religious violence.

The inter- and intra-religious conflict is a combination of internal and external groups, from within and from outside Syria. Hezbollah and Iran have been mentioned, but other nations such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Israel and Turkey have all had a part to play in shaping Syria's conflict. These countries in particular, each of which possesses a visible religious dynamic, and each in close and strategic proximity to Syria, have influenced the course of the violence. While this influence has at times been as a result of its strategic interest in the nation's future, it has also been as a result of that nation's overarching religious ideology. Added to this are the interests of the United States and parts of Europe and Russia, which have been on opposite ends of the debate regarding Syria's future. While Russia has been fervently defensive of Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian regime, the United States, the United Kingdom and France have been vocal and active in their stance against the regime and for the rebels of Syria. While Russia's alliance with the regime has been fairly stable, the United States has been divided over its support for the opposition, which has split between moderate Sunnīs associated with the FSA and jihādīst groups backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The United States, which shares good relations with these

Gulf States, has been caught in the religious-affiliated tensions associated with the Syrian conflict.

As has been the case for Syria's dominant fighting groups, the various alliances that have formed internationally and locally have become integrated into the confusion that exists between religion and politics. The diagram below illustrates the mishmash and confusion of alliances and ideologies associated with Syria's conflict.

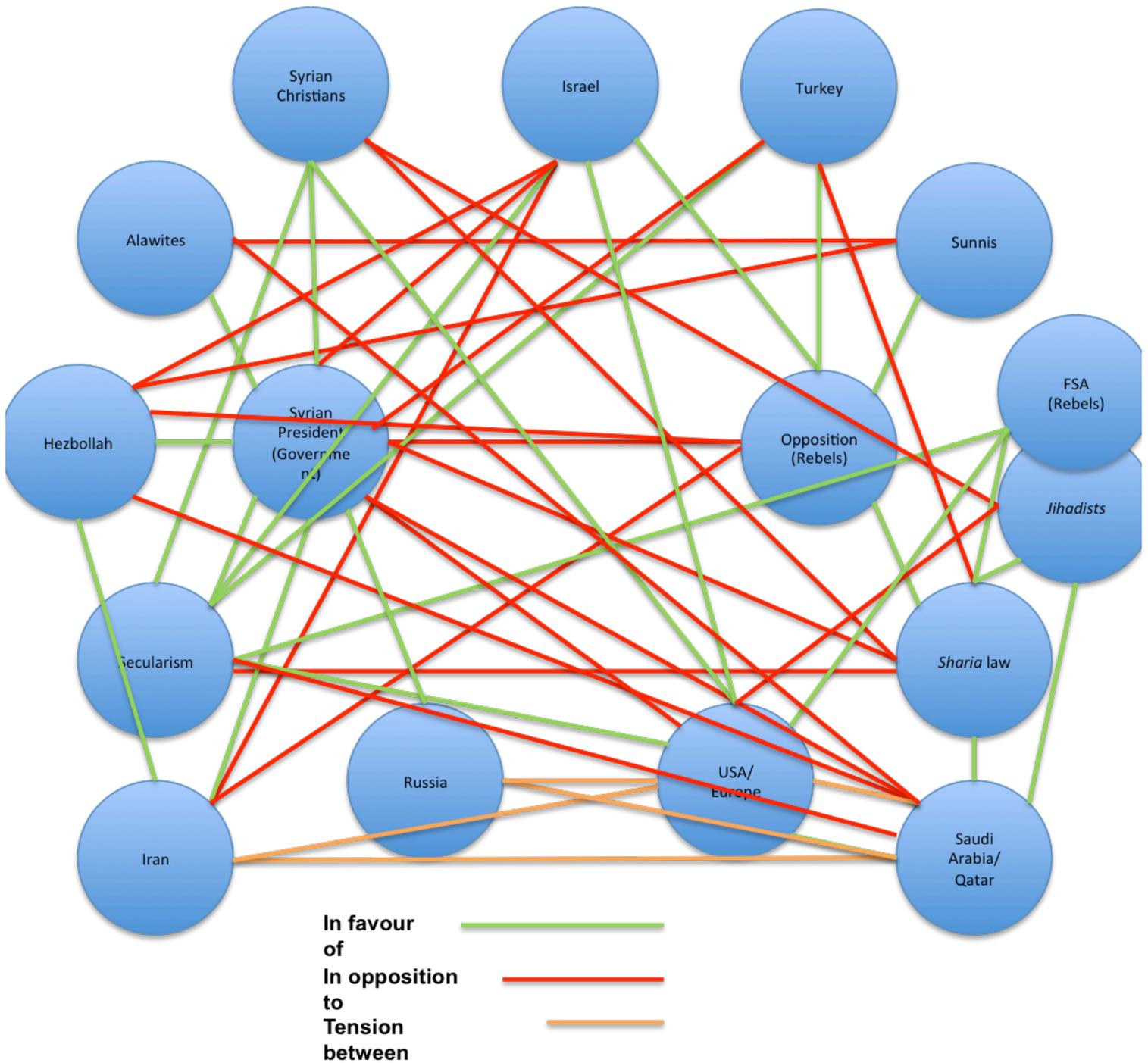


Figure 9: Spider's web of alliances in Syria

5.9 Difficulty in analysing the Syrian civil war from the perspective of Christianity

If you were to ask the average Christian from the West and the average Syrian Christian who is at fault in Syria's civil war, you would get two very different answers. The reason for this is not necessarily because of theological belief. While both will hold similar opinions on theological doctrine and belief, this remains irrelevant next to the fact that Syrian Christians are being killed every day in a civil war, while Western Christians are not.

Since the start of the civil war in Syria, the governments of countries such as the USA, Great Britain, and large parts of Europe have voiced their support for the rebel groups of Syria fighting against the government of Bashar al-Assad. These countries have labelled the Syrian government as a dictatorship that is tyrannical and oppressive, and have had their argument strengthened by the claim that the government used chemical weapons against its own people (Packer 2013).

This support for the rebel groups of Syria has captivated the attention of global media, and in turn has shaped the views of the West. What this support has achieved is to show the world what Syria looks like now in its barbaric and depraved state, but what it has failed to do is to foresee and predict how Syria will look if the rebel groups take power in Syria.

Syria's ruling government is currently in a defensive position, attempting to maintain power in the country. While this is partly to do with its rigid, strict and autocratic governance, it is also partly to do with its secular stance. The majority of Syria's population, which happens to be Sunnī Muslim, has rejected this secular notion, but what this secular stance has done for Syria is to protect minority groups in the country, such as the Alawites and the Christians.

While this is in no way promoting the use of autocratic rule in order to preserve minority groups, it does beg the question of what Syria would look like without its secular governance (to which autocratic leadership is attached in the country). Syria's moderate rebel groups, such as the FSA, have shown interest in Syria becoming an Islamic nation (Solomon, 2013), while extremist rebel groups such as *Jabhat Nusra* justify their presence in the country through Qur'ānic instruction. What this would do is push minority groups that have previously experienced religious freedom in Syria into a repressed state, in which they might be removed from the country or severely persecuted within it. Such actions are typical of many Islamic countries where religious minority groups are repressed.

Secondly, the emergence of the FSA rebels as the new Syrian government and the successful elimination of the current regime would not necessarily result in a peaceful Syria. Beyond this it may not even bring an end to Syria's civil war. Even within the current rebel groups there has been infighting. Extremist rebel groups have on a number of occasions opened fire on moderate Sunnī rebels. Such infighting among rebel groups is based on a difference of opinion with regard to the future of Syria and the extremity of violence that is used against its opponents (Hubbard, 2013). Thus, victory by rebel forces over the Assad regime would most likely not result in peace in Syria, but rather an attempt by other extremist rebels to take charge of the country.

This description depicts the difficulty that exists for Christians in taking a stance on Syria's violence. The fall of the Assad regime could result in a new government that becomes as oppressive as the current regime. It could also create a haven for Islamic extremists, nurturing and promoting terrorism around the world. The current regime has also protected minority groups such as Syria's Christians from persecution by majority religious groups in the country. Since the start of the war and the weakening of Syrian government, Syria's Christians have already felt severe persecution at the hand of Islamic extremists. On the other hand, the violence and brutality that the Syrian regime has used against the opposition cannot be justified either.

This leads to the question of what a Christian stance on the Syria violence should be, or if such a stance could truly be representative of the Christian faith. Under threat of persecution, Syria's Christians stand by the regime that has historically protected them, realising what their fate would be if the opposition takes power in the country. Most Christians outside of Syria are not experiencing such persecution, especially Christians from the Western world. Without such a threat looming, criticism of Syria's regime (based on popular media trends) does not always account for other groups that may be affected by the fall of the regime. Such a stance could have disastrous consequences for unprotected ethnic and religious groups in Syria.

While fighting will only lead to great atrocities, a solution cannot be found through the persistence of violence. However, neither side will concede the other's right to rule in the country, creating a stalemate between the two sides (Steele 2013). A solution must be found that accommodates both parties, understanding that neither will be fully satisfied with the outcome. As has been argued throughout this dissertation, religion is deeply

engrained in Syria's political landscape. On this basis, a solution to the violence must be found that can accommodate this religious element.

While one such solution may be to create a separate state for regime supporters to become a part of, this solution is not sustainable, as it restricts a new state to geographic limitations such as natural resources. This solution would further divide the Middle Eastern region into a more sectarian landscape, which is not sustainable in terms of to peace in the region.

Secularism is a form of governance that is able to protect all religious groups within a country. It is therefore essential to have such a system, which can safeguard all groups. However, this alone will not appease Syria's opposition groups, as they have experienced the effects of a secular nation. It, however, would appeal to the religious minority groups of Syria to be able to live in a religiously free nation. However, governance can no longer come from a ruler whose religious affiliation detracts so greatly from the majority of the nation's. In this regard, the president of Syria can no longer be someone from the Alawite community. For too many Muslims the idea of a leader who is a 'heretic' is unacceptable. A new leader of Syria should be someone from the Muslim community of Syria, preferably Sunnī. Such a leader would gain an element of legitimacy and acceptance by the majority of the country. A leader who runs a secular government but comes from a Sunnī Muslim background may have a chance at fostering cooperation and peace among the various religious factions of the nation.

A Christian standpoint on the Syrian civil war should not be equated with the choosing of one side. Both sides have committed great atrocities, of which neither can be justified. One cannot simply choose the lesser of two evils in order to find a solution. A solution to the conflict can only be found through which the masses will be content and the minorities protected. With neither of these two elements present, violence and sectarianism will only continue.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

“The dark shadow we seem to see in the distance is not really a mountain ahead, but the shadow of the mountain behind – a shadow from the past thrown forward into our future. It is a dark sludge of historical sectarianism. We can leave it behind us if we wish.”

(Trimble 2005:114)

The words of Nobel Peace laureate David Trimble as ring true in Syria today as they did for Northern Ireland in the 1990s. Syria is shrouded in a blanket of historical sectarianism that has prolonged its war and prevented a sustainable solution from being reached. The war seen today in Syria is complete disorder, with little vision for the foreseeable future. Elements of Syria’s past have begun to emerge, drowning its people in a wave of unresolved issues. These issues have been inflamed by the religious connotations they carry, which has divided Syria’s people on the basis of belief.

Syria has been divided on two levels. On the top tier, it has been divided by political differences. The majority of the country has stood opposed to the ruling government of Syria led by Bashar al-Assad. His rule, which was inherited from his father, has been classified as tyrannical, autocratic, and dictatorial. Secularism has also been the form of governance used by the ruling Ba’th party. This form of governance has stood opposed to the Islamic system of governance, *shari‘a*, which aims to join religion (Islam) and state instead of separating the two as secularism does. As such, secularism and *shari‘a* stand opposed to one another, creating a rift between the ruling party and the majority of the country.

On the bottom tier is a division of religious belief. While Syria is home to a number of religious factions, the two largest factions stand in opposition to one another. The religious majority of the country, which is Sunnī Muslim, has reacted against the religious faction known as the Alawites (to which the leadership of the country belongs). While the Alawites have at times been thought to be an Islamic group, their system of beliefs is very different to that of Sunnī Muslims, allowing for the questioning of their being associated with Islam at all. This has led to Sunnī Muslims labelling Alawites as heretics. Syria, which was once only allowed to be ruled by a Muslim leader, is now led by a non-Muslim, and a so-called ‘heretic’.

A clear link can be seen between the political tier and the religious tier. This is partly a consequence of the ruling party's affiliation with the Alawite religious faction. However, Syria's strong Islamic presence has made this link understandable and expected. There exists an inseparable link within Islam between religion and politics, which in Syria has led to Sunnī Muslims becoming dissatisfied with the existing political structure. As a result, the Sunnī Muslims of Syria have reacted against their government in an attempt to change the system of governance, which under the rule of the Assad regime has not met the criteria for legitimate leadership.

The polarity that exists between Sunnī Muslims in Syria and the Alawite government is not something that recently flared up in the last few years. Such a rift has been formed over a long period, which allowed it to grow and diverge over the years. The rift between Alawites and Muslims began as early as the initiation of the Alawite faith, and arguably at the beginning of the split between Sunnī and Shī'ite Muslims. The Alawites' founder, Muḥammad Ibn Nuṣayr, met with opposition to his movement early after its formation, but it was the emergence of the Ottoman and Egyptian empires that created the most resistance to the Alawite faction. Both the Ottomans and Egyptians were Sunnī empires, and their respective rules over the Syrian region were largely successful, except for the resistance they met from the people who lived on the mountain: the Alawites. Both empires, with their great armies and weaponry, struggled to conscript and control the Alawite community, who refused to be ruled by the two empires. The resistance the Alawite people gave to the Ottomans and Egyptians resulted in thousands of deaths among their own people, and many casualties for the two empires as well, which was a humiliation to such great forces. This was the first major rift that developed between the Alawites and the Sunnīs.

The collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the start of the twentieth century saw Greater Syria divided into various states. While the British had a hand in this, the French were charged with the control of what is now modern-day Syria. In a reversal of roles, it was now the Sunnīs of Syria who became difficult to manage by the French, and as a result the French found favour with the Alawites and other religious minority groups, using such groups to help to control the Sunnī majority. The Alawites, who had formerly been reserved and disobedient to their overlords, found protection and special treatment from the French. This was seen in both vocational positions, as well as geographic positioning. The French further divided the new Syrian region into smaller provinces, basing each province's

population on demographic and sectarian lines, allowing for further control of Syria's population. Alawites were given a lush coastal region, while Sunnīs were given a landlocked, desert region. Alongside this, the Alawites, who were compliant with the French, held the majority of military positions, giving them greater control over Syria's Sunnī population. During this period, Sunnīs became discontent with their position within Syria. They became especially discontent with the treatment the Alawites received from the French, and the authority the French gave the Alawites within the country. This period was the second major rift that formed between Sunnīs and Alawites of Syria.

The third and final major rift came with the establishment of the Ba'th party in Syria. After World War II in 1945, Syria gained its independence, and while there was no stable government for more than two decades, Syria was again controlled by Sunnī governments. During this time, the formation of the B'ath party created new opportunities for minority groups in Syria: it offered equality in the country on the basis of being Arab, not Sunnī. This new political party became very attractive to Syria's religious minority groups, especially the Alawites. As Alawites became more incorporated within the Ba'th party, their numbers grew, and so did their ranking in the party. After some time, a number of Alawites held leadership positions with the Ba'th, one of these leaders being Hafez al-Assad. During the political instability that was present at the time within Syria, Hafez al-Assad, in a daring coup, took control of the country, and in 1970 he became president of Syria.

His rule, which brought the first set of structure Syria had seen in a number of decades, was a great victory for the Alawite faction, who experienced freedom greater than they had ever witnessed. Hafez, who before becoming president was a military man, had great control over the country's military. This allowed for the control of Sunnīs and protection of minority groups. As a result, Alawites and other minority factions began to take the jobs of Sunnī businessmen. Sunnīs saw his rule as unequal and discriminatory. The topic of Muslim presidency surfaced multiple times in his reign, with Hafez attempting to downplay the role of religion in the secular state he now ran. This topic resulted in numerous violent demonstrations by the Sunnī population, and was a strong reflection of the importance of religion for the people and within politics. This also stirred up the debate over whether Alawites were Muslim or not. The president made use of allied Muslim scholars to try to legitimise his presidency as that of a true Muslim, and while this helped to calm raging crowds, it never fully satisfied them.

The dissatisfaction of Sunnīs was most clearly expressed by the Islamist group the Muslim Brotherhood. The Brotherhood used aggressive tactics to try to oust the president of Syria, provoking the regime into the bloodbath known as the Hama Massacre. This tragedy took the lives of thousands of Sunnī civilians, and created a huge rift between Alawite regime forces and Sunnī Muslims in the country.

However, Syria was on the path to recovery and reconciliation when Hafez' son Bashar took control of Syria in 2000. Bashar saw the faults of his father's reign and tried to correct the wrong that had been done. Bashar's presidency began with the Damascus Spring, a time of open and welcomed criticism against the regime. This, Bashar thought, would help to reform the political environment of Syria, and help in gaining the trust of Sunnī Muslims. However, the amount of criticism Bashar received was overwhelming, and soon he felt the need to take a firmer grip on the country. He did this by cracking down on political and religious protests by Sunnī Muslims, who wanted control of Syria for themselves. This was characteristic of his rule up until the start of Syria's civil war, which started in 2011.

It was the series of protests that rippled across the North-African and Middle-Eastern region that sparked Syria's unrest. The Arab Spring saw thousands of protesters in Egypt, Tunisia and Libya topple their respective governments as a result of corrupt dictatorships. Syria's began with similar protests, but after Bashar al-Assad cracked down on demonstrators, Syria descended into sectarian violence between Sunnīs and Alawites that spread across the country in a matter of days.

Syria's Sunnī/Alawite divide is clearly visible through the country's history. In a continual reversal of roles, Sunnīs and Alawites have dominated and subjected each other to violence and hatred.

While Alawites have over the years taken on a Muslim stance, their doctrine clearly differs from that of Islam on even the most fundamental basis. In a country that is mostly populated by such Sunnī Muslims, the political system demands a form of governance that suits the masses.

Such a demand becomes difficult when trying to protect the minority groups of Syria and allowing such groups to have a voice in the country. Alawites, Christians, and other minority groups of Syria have over the country's extensive history been at the mercy of Sunnī Muslims. While sectarianism has been enflamed without the religious majority being

in control of the country, a Syria without a form of governance such as secularism is devoid of protection and human rights for all religious groups. This is why Juergensmeyer (2008:23) ventures to call secularism a basic type of religion. Secularism, which protects all religions instead of the dominance of one religion in a political environment, essentially preserves faith (National Secular Society 2014).

The effects of religious violence against minority religious groups have already been seen in the Syrian civil war. This is as a result of the historical feuds that have engulfed Syria, but it is also as a result of the rise of Islamic extremism in the country. Before Syria's war started, president Assad dedicated a large amount of resources to keeping extremism and terrorist activity out of the country. However, with the weakening of the regime a growing number of jihādists that hold to radical/extremist Islamic doctrine have infiltrated the battlefield. This has added a new element of violence to the war. Jihādist activity has added a new level of brutality and cruelty that is justified by the beliefs and doctrines of such Islamic extremists. Such actions have clearly given a religious character to Syria's civil war.

The jihādists in Syria have also revealed the intention of the international community to become involved in Syria's war. Funding for rebel groups, especially Salafist jihādists, has come from Sunnī countries such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar. Israel, a characteristically Jewish nation, has been vocal in its stance against Syria's regime, which it has fought on numerous occasions over the past few decades. Iran (a Shī'ite, not Sunnī nation) has shown its support for the Syrian regime, and has provided its military proxy Hezbollah, who are an openly Shī'ite Muslim military group. Other countries such as Russia and the USA have been involved in Syria's war, but Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Iran and Israel, who have had the largest influence in Syria's war, also have a religious backing for their stance within Syria.

Syria's civil war has become a complex mess of religious affiliation and political expression. Its political motivations, whether they be for or against the Syrian regime, seem to be shrouded in religious violence and intolerance. Such violence has led to brutality in murder, torture and rape, as well as the destruction of much religious heritage, much of which is fuelled by religious justifications and fanaticism.

This study has looked at the historical aspects of Syria's violence, understanding that religious affiliation has played a large part in forming the ongoing conflict. However, this study is also limited to what it can foresee for Syria's future. Both Syria and the international community have had a large role to play in finding a sustainable solution to Syria's conflict, not only in its present war, but also as a way of preventing future sectarian rifts from arising. In order for any kind of solution to be found, Syrians need to champion the causes of human rights and dignity toward each other. Only when this takes priority can diversity of religious belief in Syria be truly accepted, and the religious factions of Syria live without intolerance toward each other.

Works Consulted

Abd-Allah, U. F., 1983, *The Islamic Struggle in Syria*, Mizan Press, Berkeley.

Abdulhamid, A., 2004, 'When Minorities Rule in the Middle East', in *The Washington Institute*, viewed 26 October 2013, from <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/when-minorities-rule-in-the-middle-east-part-i-syria>

Abouzeid, R., 2011, 'In blow to opposition, a dissident Syrian army officer is captured', TIME, viewed 3 October 2013, from <http://content.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,2093441,00.html>

Abukhalil, A., 1990, 'Syria and the Shiites: Al-Asad's policy in Lebanon', *Third World Quarterly* 12(2), 1-20, viewed 11 May 2012, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/3992256>

AFP, 2012, 'In Syria, a fine line between Jihadists and opposition', *Al Arabiya News*, viewed 4 December 2012, from <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2012/12/04/253244.html>

Agg, J., 1817, *Lord Byron's Pilgrimage to the Holy Land, a poem [really by J. Agg]. To which is added The Tempest, a fragment*, London.

Al-Tamimi, A. J., 2012, 'Looking At Alawites', *The Levantine Review* 1(2), 181-199, viewed 27 March 2013, from <https://0-ejournals.bc.edu.innopac.up.ac.za/ojs/index.php/levantine/article/viewFile/3049/2668>

Alter, C., 2014, 'Deaths of Christian 'martyrs' doubled in 2013', *TIME*, viewed 10 January 2014, from <http://world.time.com/2014/01/08/deaths-of-christian-martyrs-doubled-in-2013/>

Amghar, S., 2007, 'Salafism and Radicalisation of Young European Muslims', *European Islam: Challenges for Public Policy and Society*, Brussels: Centre for European Policy Studies, 38-51.

Anadani, S., 2012, 'Sunni Syrian rebels burn Shiite mosque', *Reuters*, viewed 25 October 2013, from <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2012/Dec-14/198504-sunni-syrian-rebels-burn-shiite-mosque-video.ashx#axzz2j7DNDD4b>

'Are Islamists targeting Christians in Homs? Catholic groups dispute cause of exodus', CWN, 27 March 2012, viewed 24 October 2013, from <http://www.catholicculture.org/news/headlines/index.cfm?storyid=13804>

Armstrong, K., 2007, *Islam: A short history*, Random House LLC, New York.

Assi, A. R., 2013, 'Syria: Fate of Historic Christian Town Still Unknown', *Alakhbar*, viewed 20 September 2013, from <http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/16969>

Baker, A. & Newton-Small, J., 2013, ' Syria's Other War', *TIME*, viewed 3 October 2013, from <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,2152445,00.html>

Barany, Z., 2011, 'The role of the military', *Journal of Democracy* 22(4), 24-35, viewed 10 August 2013, from http://0-muse.jhu.edu.innopac.up.ac.za/journals/journal_of_democracy/v022/22.4.barany.html

Barber, B., 1992. 'Jihad vs. McWorld', *The Atlantic Monthly* 269(3), 53-65.

Bar-Asher, M. M. & Kofsky, A., 2002, *The Nuṣayrī-'Alawī Religion: An Enquiry Into Its Theology and Liturgy*, Brill Academic Publishing, Leiden.

Bar-Asher, M. M. & Kofsky, A., 2005, 'Dogma and ritual in "Kitāb al-Ma'ārif" by the Nuṣayrī theologian Abū Sa'īd Maymūn b. al-Qāsim al-Ṭabarānī', *Arabic* 52(1), 43-65, viewed 29 May 2013, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4057715>

Bazzi, M., 2011, 'Gathering clouds for Syria's Assad', in *Council on Foreign Relations*, viewed 5 April 2013, from <http://www.cfr.org/syria/gathering-clouds-syrias-assad/p24688>

Ben-Tzur, A., 1998, 'The Neo-Ba'ath party of Syria' *Journal of Contemporary History* 3(3), 161-181, viewed 22 March 2013, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/259704>

Berger, P. L., 1984, 'The sociological study of sectarianism', *Social Research* 51(1), 367-385, viewed 29 August 2013, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40970942>

Berkes, N., 2013, *The development of secularism in Turkey*, Routledge, United Kingdom.

Bewley, A., 2008, *Islam: Its basic practices and beliefs*, Ta-Ha Publishers Ltd, London.

Bhalla, R., 2011, 'Making sense of the Syrian crisis', *Geopolitical Weekly*, viewed 13 July 2013, from http://relooney.info/SI_ME-Crisis/Syria_23.pdf

Blankinship, K., 2008, 'The early creed', in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 35-42.

Brill Publishing, *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Volumes 1-12* [online], [Accessed 14 July 2014].

Bureau of Democracy, Human Right and Labor, 2011, in *Syria*, viewed 22 October 2013, from <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/193119.pdf>

Campbell, L. J., 2006, 'The use of beheadings by fundamentalist Islam', *Global Crime* 7(4), 583-614, viewed 13 October 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17440570601073384>

Cartalucci, T., 2013, 'In Syria, within the "opposition" there are no "moderate rebels"', in *Global Research*, viewed 14 October 2013, from <http://www.globalresearch.ca/in-syria-within-the-opposition-there-are-no-moderate-rebels/5350647>

Chittick, W. C., 2008, 'Worship', in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 222.

Cobb, P. M., 2010, 'The empire in Syria, 705 763', in C. F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam volume 1: The formation of the Islamic world sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 257.

Cook, D. B., 2005, *Understanding Jihad*, University of California Press, Los Angeles.

Damon, A., Husseini, N., Ghattas, K., Abdelaziz, S., Doueiry, T. & Maddox, J., 2011, 'As Syria seethes, protesters chant 'God is With Us'. *CNN*, viewed 6 August 2011, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2011/WORLD/meast/08/05/syria.unrest/>

Dānā, N., 2003, *The Druze in the Middle East: Their faith, leadership, identity and status*, Sussex Academic Press, Brighton.

Denny, F. M., 1985, *An introduction to Islam*, Macmillan Publishing Company, New York.

Devlin, J. F., 1991, 'The Baath party: Rise and metamorphosis', *The American Historical Review* 96(5), 1396-1407, viewed 20 March 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/2165277.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Diab, K., 2013, 'Syria's Sunni vs. Shia myth', *The Huffington Post*, viewed 3 October 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/khaled-diab/syrias-sunni-v-shia-myth_b_3508176.html

Donker, T. H., 2010, 'Enduring ambiguity: Sunni community-Syrian regimedynamics', *Mediterranean Politics* 15(3), 435-452, viewed 5 November 2012, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/13629395.2010.517112>

Drysdale, A., 1992, 'Syria and Iraq —the geopathology of a relationship', *GeoJournal* 28(3), 347-355, viewed 31 October 2013, from <http://0link.springer.com.innopac.up.ac.za/article/10.1007/BF00817911#page-1>

El Husseini, R., 2010, 'Hezbollah and the axis of refusal: Hamas, Iran and Syria', *Third World Quarterly* 31(5), 803-815, viewed 31 October 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com/innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436597.2010.502695>

Enoch, N., 2013, 'Beheaded in front of children, Assad's thugs are dragged to their doom and butchered like animals in some of the most brutal scenes to emerge from Syria's civil war', *Daily Mail*, viewed 13 October 2013, from <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2420263/Syrian-civil-war-rebels-behead-Assads-thugs-children-really-sides.html>

Faksh, M. A., 1984, 'The Alawi community of Syria: A new dominant political force', *Middle Eastern Studies* 20(2), 133-153, viewed 5 November 2012, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com/innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/00263208408700577>

Fearon, J. D., Kasara, K. & Laitin, D. D., 2007, 'Ethnic minority rule and civil war onset', *American Political Science Review* 101(1), 187-193, viewed 31 October 2013, from http://0-journals.cambridge.org/innopac.up.ac.za/download.php?file=%2FPSR%2FPSR101_01%2FS0003055407070219a.pdf&code=942e9ab70384b543e5fb4dfe7e2a40f0

Fildis, A. T., 2012, 'Roots of Alawite-Sunni rivalry in Syria', *Middle East Policy* 19(2), 148-156, viewed 20 March 2013, from <http://0-onlinelibrary.wiley.com/innopac.up.ac.za/store/10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00541.x/asset/j.1475-4967.2012.00541.x.pdf?v=1&t=hr7tqwh7&s=3e5327ce3a4a9ff1cc780c51d9e842b3a0fcdfd4>

Fisher, M., 2013, 'In secular Syria, top Muslim cleric picks sides in civil war', *The Washington Post*, viewed 19 September 2013, from <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/worldviews/wp/2013/09/19/did-we-just-get-a-glimpse-of-syrias-second-civil-war/>

Firestone, R., 1999, *Jihad: The origin of holy war in Islam*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Fitzpatrick, M., 2013, 'Five reasons military intervention in Syria is wrong', *ABC News*, viewed 3 October 2013, from <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-08-28/fitzpatrick-syria/4918406>

Friedman, Y., 2001, 'al-Husayn ibn Hamdân al-Khasîbî: A historical biography of the founder of the Nusayrî-'Alawite sect', *Studia Islamica* (93), 91-112, viewed 18 January 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/1596110.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Friedman, Y., 2005, 'Ibn Taymiyya's fatawa against the Nusayri-Alawi sect', *Der Islam* 82(2), 349-363, viewed 27 May 2013, from <http://0-www.degruyter.com.innopac.up.ac.za/view/j/islm.2005.82.issue-2/islm.2005.82.2.349/islm.2005.82.2.349.xml>

Friedman, Y., 2010, *The Nuṣayrî-'Alawîs: An Introduction to the Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Brill Academic Publishing, Leiden.

Fulton, W., Holliday, J. & Wyer, S., 2013, 'Iranian strategy in Syria', in *Institute for the Study of War*, viewed 29 October 2013, from <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/IranianStrategyinSyria-1MAY.pdf>

Gallagher, T., 2012, 'Christians in Syria struggle amid violent clashes', *National Catholic Reporter*, viewed 14 September 2013, from <http://ncronline.org/news/global/christians-syria-struggle-amid-violent-clashes>

Galvani, J., 1974, 'Syria and the Baath Party', *MERIP Reports* (25), 3-16, viewed 20 March 2013, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3011567>

Gilsenan, M., 2012, 'Recognizing Islam: Religion and society in the modern Arab world', in J. Kreinath (ed.), *The anthropology of Islam reader*, Routledge, New York, p. 55.

Goldberg, J., 2013, 'Syria's religious war', *National Review Online*, viewed 3 October 2013, from <http://m.nationalreview.com/article/350124/syrias-religious-war-jonah-goldberg>

Goldsmith, L., 2011, 'Syria's Alawites and the Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: A Khaldunian Perspective', *Middle Eastern Studies* 3(1), 33-60, viewed 18 January 2013, from http://www.orsam.org.tr/en/enUploads/Article/Files/2011713_Leon%20Goldsmith.pdf

Goldsmith, L., 2012, 'The Politics of Sectarian Insecurity: Alawite 'Asabiyya and the Rise and Decline of the Asad Dynasty of Syria' PhD thesis, University of Otago.

Goodarzi, J. M., 2006, *Syria and Iran: Diplomatic alliance and power politics in the Middle East*, Tauris Academic Studies, London.

Hafiz, Y., 2013, 'Syria conflict indicates Armageddon, say one third of Americans', *The Huffington Post*, viewed 12 September 2013, from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/14/syria-conflict-armageddon_n_3923123.html

Haleem, M. A. S., 2008, 'Qur'an and hadith', in T. Winter (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to classical Islamic theology*, Cambridge University Press, New York, pp. 22-24.

Hassan, K., 2012, 'Making sense of the Arab Spring: Listening to the voices of Middle Eastern activists', *Development* 55(2), 232-238, viewed 22 March 2013, from <http://0-www.palgrave-journals.com.innopac.up.ac.za/development/journal/v55/n2/pdf/dev201213a.pdf>

Haykal, M.U., 2008, *The life of Muḥammad*, Islamic Book Trust, Selangor.

Hitti, P. K., 2002, *History of Syria: Including Lebanon and Palestine*, Gorgias Press, New Jersey.

Hogan, C., 2012, 'Syrian Christians feel pull from both sides in civil war', *The Washington Times*, viewed 28 September 2013, from <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/oct/1/syrian-christians-feel-pull-from-both-sides-in-civ/?page=all>

Hubbard, B., 2013, 'Qaeda Branch in Syria Pursues Its Own Agenda', *The New York Times*, viewed 1 October 2013, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/02/world/middleeast/in-pushing-its-own-agenda-for-syria-a-qaeda-franchise-turns-rebels-into-enemies.html?_r=0

Human Rights Watch, 2011, "*We've never seem such horror*", viewed 10 October 2013, from <http://www.hrw.org/reports/2011/06/01/we-ve-never-seen-such-horror>

Juergensmeyer, M., 2008, *Global rebellion: Religious challenges to the secular state, from Christian militias to al Qaeda*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Kaplan, R. D., 1993, 'Syria: Identity crisis', *The Atlantic*, viewed 18 January 2012, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1993/02/syria-identity-crisis/303860/>

Kaplan, R. D., 2009, 'The revenge of geography', *Foreign Policy* (172), 96-105, viewed 31 October 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/20684874.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Karouny, M., 2011, 'Syria Christians fear for religious freedom', *Reuters*, viewed 15 September 2013, from <http://in.reuters.com/article/2011/05/18/idINIndia-57100120110518>

Kayali, H., 1997, *Arabs and young Turks: Ottomanism, Arabism, and Islamism in the Ottoman Empire, 1908-1918*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Kelidar, A. R., 1974, 'Religion and state in Syria', *Asian Affairs* 5(1), 16-22, viewed 5 November 2012, from http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/03068377408729692#Uu_SxXeSwTQ

Kendall, B., 2013, 'Syria death toll now above 100,000, says UN chief Ban', *BBC*, viewed 2 November 2013, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-23455760>

Kermani, N., 2010, 'The aesthetic reception of the Qur'ān as reflected in early Muslim history', in M. Siddiqui (ed.), *Islam: Volume three*, SAGE Publications Ltd, California, p.15.

Keyman, E. F., 2007, 'Modernity, secularism and Islam: The case of Turkey', *Theory, Culture & Society* 24(2), 215-234, viewed 4 June 2014, from <http://tcs.sagepub.com/content/24/2/215>

Khatib, L., 2011, *Islamic revivalism in Syria: The rise and fall of Ba'hist secularism*, Routledge, New York.

Khoury, D., 2011, 'Is it winter or spring for Christians in Syria?', *Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung-Middle East Office*, viewed 22 May 2013, from http://www.tajaddod.org/img/file/Doreen_Khoury-Is_it_Winter_or_Spring_for_Christians_in_Syria.pdf

Khoury, P. S., 1981, 'Factionalism among Syrian nationalists during the French Mandate', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 13(4), 441-469, viewed 12 May 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/162909.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Khoury, P. S., 1991, 'Continuity and change in political life: The nineteenth and twentieth centuries', *The American Historical Review* 96(5), 1374-1395, viewed 12 May 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/2165276.pdf?&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Kreinath, J., 2012, 'Religious practices of Islam', in J. Kreinath (ed.), *The anthropology of Islam reader*, Routledge, New York, p.112.

Kruglanski, A. W., Chen, X., Dechesne, M., Fishmas, S. & Orehek, E. 2009, 'Fully committed: Suicide bombers' motivation and the quest for personal significance', *Political Psychology* 30(3). 331-357, viewed 13 October 2013, from <http://0-onlinelibrary.wiley.com.innopac.up.ac.za/store/10.1111/j.1467-9221.2009.00698.x/asset/j.1467-9221.2009.00698.x.pdf?v=1&t=hr83cftp&s=10a66cc4853d2af0de3cafecab62b326d2e752bd>

Küntzel, M., 2007, *Unholy hatreds: Holocaust denial and antisemitism in Iran*, Vidal Sasson International Center for the Study of Antisemitism.

Larsson, J., 2004, *Understanding religious violence: Thinking outside the box of terrorism*, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington.

Lesch, D. W., 2005, *The new lion of Damascus: Bashar Al-Asad and modern Syria*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Lewis, B., 1990, 'The roots of Muslim rage', *The Atlantic*, viewed 31 October 2013, from <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1990/09/the-roots-of-muslim-rage/304643/>

Litvak, M., 2006, 'The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism'. *Journal of Israeli History* 25(1), 267-284, viewed 26 September 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/13531040500502874>

Lund, A., 2012a, 'Divided they stand: An overview of Syria's political opposition faction', *Brüssel: Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, viewed 12 October 2013, from <http://www.feps-europe.eu/uploads/documents/20120510-syrian-opposition-aron-lund.pdf>

Lund, A., 2012b, 'Syrian Jihadism', *Swedish Institute of International Affairs* 13, 1-49, viewed on 28 August 2013, from <http://www.ui.se/upl/files/77409.pdf>

Lund, A., 2012c, 'Syria's Salafi insurgents: The rise of the Syrian Islamic Front', *Swedish Institute of International Affairs* 17, 1-50, viewed 17 September 2013, from <http://www.ui.se/eng/upl/files/86861.pdf>

Ma'oz, M., 1972, 'Attempts at creating a political community in modern Syria', *Middle East Journal* 26(4), 389-404, viewed 12 May 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/4324985.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Macfarqhar, N., 2011, 'Tense calm prevails in Syria as latest crackdown victims are buried', *The New York Times*, viewed 16 August 2013, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/04/world/middleeast/04syria.html>

Martin, P., 2013, 'How deadly is the conflict in Syria, really?' in *Norman Paterson School of Internation Affairs*, viewed 6 September 2013, from <http://npsia.wordpress.com/2013/06/20/how-deadly-is-the-conflict-in-syria-really/>

McKittrick, D. & McVea, D., 2001, *Making sense of the Troubles: A history of the Northern Ireland conflict*, Penguin, Chicago.

Mohammad, N., 1985, 'The doctrine of Jihad: An introduction', *Journal of Law and Religion* 3(2), 381-397, viewed 18 June 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/1051182.pdf?&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Moiles, J. C., 2012, 'Unity, freedom and socialism: The Assads, the Ba'ath and the making of modern Syria', *Grand Valley Journal of History* 2(1), 1-13, viewed 27 May 2013, from <http://0-scholarworks.gvsu.edu.innopac.up.ac.za/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1021&context=gvjh>

Moosa, M., 1987, *Extremist Shiites: the ghulat sects*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse.

Mousa, S., 2012, 'To protest or not to protest? The Christian predicament in the Syrian uprising', *Syrian Studies Association Bulletin* 17(2), 1-5, viewed 31 October 2013, from <https://0-ojcs.siue.edu.innopac.up.ac.za/ojs/index.php/ssa/article/viewFile/2802/754>

Murawiec, L., 2008, *The mind of jihad*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Na, A. & Ahmed, A., 2009, *Islam and the secular state: Negotiating the future of Sharia*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Nakhul, S., 2013, 'Hezbollah gambles all in Syria', *Reuters*, viewed 3 October 2013, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/26/us-syria-hezbollah-special-report-idUSBRE98P0AI20130926>

National Secular Society, 2014, *What is secularism?*, viewed 13 January 2013, from <http://www.secularism.org.uk/what-is-secularism.html>

News, B., 2013, 'Either you convert to Islam, or you will be beheaded', in *Breitbart*, viewed 29 September 2013, from <http://www.breitbart.com/Big-Peace/2013/09/09/Maaloula-Syria-rebels>

Norman Benotman, R. B., 2013, 'Jabhat al-Nusra', in *Quilliam*, viewed 4 October 2013, from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/jabhat-al-nusra-a-strategic-briefing.pdf>

Norris, P., Kern, M. & Just, M., *Framing terrorism: The news media, the government and the public*, Routledge, London.

Norton, A. R., 2009, *Hezbollah: A short history*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

NPR, 2013, *In secular Syria, top Muslim cleric picks sides in civil war*, viewed 13 October 2013, from <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thetwo-way/2013/03/12/174098975/in-secular-syria-top-muslim-cleric-picks-sides-in-civil-war>

O'bagy, E., 2012, 'Jihad in Syria', *Institute for the Study of War* 6, 1-42, viewed 11 October 2013, from <http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Jihad-In-Syria-17SEPT.pdf>

Packer, G., 2013, 'Negotiating Syria', *The New Yorker*, viewed 2 November 2013, from http://www.newyorker.com/talk/comment/2013/09/30/130930taco_talk_packer

Parry, R., 2013, 'Why Syrian rebels may block CW plan', *OpEdNews*, viewed 12 October 2013, from http://www.opednews.com/articles/Why-Syrian-Rebels-May-Bloc-by-Robert-Parry-Chemical_International_Military_Rebels-And-Radicals-130912-678.html

Pew Research, 2009, *Mapping the global Muslim population*, viewed 9 October 2013, from <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/10/07/mapping-the-global-muslim-population/>

Pipes, D., 1989, 'The Alawi capture of power in Syria', *Middle Eastern Studies* 25(4), 429-450, viewed 5 November 2012, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263208908700793>

Quataert, D., Bacque-Grammont, J. L. & Dumont, P., 'A Provisional Report Concerning the Impact of European Capital on Ottoman Port and Railway Workers, 1888–1909', *Economie et societies*, 459-470.

Rabil, R. G., 2003, *Embattled neighbors: Syria, Israel, and Lebanon*, Lynne Rienner Publishers, London.

Rabinovich, I., 1979, 'The compact minorities and the Syrian State, 1918-45', *Journal of Contemporary History* 14(4), 693-712, viewed 13 May 2013, from <http://0-www.jstor.org.innopac.up.ac.za/stable/pdfplus/260182.pdf?acceptTC=true&acceptTC=true&jpdConfirm=true>

Real Clear World, 2010, *Top 5 most personally safe countries*, viewed 6 October 2013, from http://www.realclearworld.com/lists/top_5_personal_safety_countries/syria.html?state=stop

Riddell, P. G., 2003, *Islam in context: Past, present, and future*, Baker Academic, Michigan.

Rippin, A., 1990, *Muslims their religious beliefs and practices volume 1: The formative period*, Routledge, London.

Robinson, C. F., 2010, 'Conclusion: From formative Islam to classical Islam', in C. F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam volume 1: The formation of the Islamic world sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 687.

Robinson, C. F., 2010, 'The rise of Islam, 600-705', in C. F. Robinson (ed.), *The new Cambridge history of Islam volume 1: The formation of the Islamic world sixth to eleventh centuries*, Cambridge University Press, New York, p. 186.

Rogers, S., 2010, 'Deaths in the Northern Ireland conflict since 1969', *The Guardian*, viewed 6 October 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/news/datablog/2010/jun/10/deaths-in-northern-ireland-conflict-data>

Roy, O., 1996, *The failure of political Islam*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge.

Roy, O., 2007, *Secularism confronts Islam*, Columbia University Press, New York
Chichester.

Saeed, A., & Saeed, H., 2004, *Freedom of religion, apostasy and Islam*, Ashgate Publishing, Burlington.

Sindawi, K., 2009, 'The Shiite turn in Syria', *Hudson Institute* 8, 82-107.

Sîwan, E., 1990, *Radical Islam: Medieval Theology & Modern Politics*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

Solomon, E., 2013, 'Syria rebels reject opposition coalition, call for Islamic leadership', *Reuters*, viewed 9 October 2013, from <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/25/us-syria-crisis-opposition-idUSBRE98O0LA20130925>

Spencer, R., 2013, 'Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarch says nearly a third of Syria's Christians have fled the country' in *Jihad Watch*, viewed 24 October 2013, from <http://www.jihadwatch.org/2013/10/melkite-greek-catholic-patriarch-says-nearly-a-third-of-syrias-christians-have-fled-the-country.html>

Steele, J., 2013, 'Uneasy stalemate: Syria caught in deadlock as war of attrition drags on', *The Guardian*, viewed 3 December 2013, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/oct/03/syria-deadlock-war-ceasefire-assad-regime>

Sterling, J., 2012, 'Daraa: The spark that lit the Syrian flame', *CNN*, viewed 13 October 2013, from <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/>

Syria Conflict Monitor, 2013, *FSA affiliation and levels of Islamism in armed opposition formations*, viewed 13 October 2013, from http://static.squarespace.com/static/515e36fbe4b03ae0a115c3f8/t/52378e57e4b0f8996a8db745/1379372631714/FSAIslamismTrends_SCM.pdf

Syria Direct, 2013, *Under sectarian surface, Sunni backing props up Assad regime*, viewed 13 October 2013, from <http://www.syriadirect.org/main/30-reports/583-under-sectarian-surface-sunni-backing-props-up-assad-regime>

Tabler, A., 2012, 'Fluid alliances: The Syrian Government's Support For and Complicity in Terrorism', in *Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, viewed 11 October 2013, from http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/opeds/Tabler20120630_Janes.pdf

Talhamy, Y., 2008, 'The Nusayri leader Isma'il Khayr Bey and the Ottomans (1854–58)'. *Middle Eastern Studies* 44(6), 895-908, 5 June 2014, from <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00263200802426013>

Talhamy, Y., 2010, 'The Fatwas and the Nusayri/Alawis of Syria'. *Middle Eastern Studies* 46(2), 175-194, viewed 5 November 2012, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/00263200902940251>

Talhamy, Y., 2011a, 'American Protestant missionary activity among the Nusayris (Alawis) in Syria in the nineteenth century'. *Middle Eastern Studies* 47(2), 215-236, viewed 18 January 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/00263206.2011.540380>

Talhamy, Y., 2011b, 'Conscription among the Nusayris ('Alawis) in the nineteenth century', *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 38(1), 23-40, viewed 18 January 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/13530194.2011.559001>

Teitelbaum, J., 2004, 'The Muslim Brotherhood and the 'struggle for Syria', 1947–1958 between accommodation and ideology', *Middle Eastern Studies* 40(3), 134-158, viewed 5 November 2012, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/0026320042000213492>

Thomas, M. C., 2002, 'French intelligence-gathering in the Syrian Mandate, 1920-40'. *Middle Eastern Studies* 38(1), 1-32, viewed 12 May 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/714004430>

Trimble, D., 2005, 'Nobel Lecture', in I Abrams (ed.), *Peace: 1996-2000*, World Scientific Publishing, London, p.114.

Van Dam, N., 1973, 'The struggle for power in Syria and the Ba'th Party (1958–1966)', *Orient* 14(1), 1-20, viewed 21 March 2013, from <http://www.nikolaosvandam.com/pdf/article/19730301nvdamarticle01us.pdf>

Variso, D., 2012, 'Islam obscured: The rhetoric of anthropological representation', in J. Kreinath (ed.), *The anthropology of Islam reader*, Routledge, New York, p. 325.

Walpole, F., 1851, *The Ansayrii (or Assassins) with travels in the Further East in 1850-1851: including a visit to Nineveh*, Richard Bentley, London.

Warner, B., 2009, 'A short overview of Sharia law', in *Political Islam*, viewed 30 October 2013, from <http://www.politicalislam.com/blog/a-short-overview-of-sharia-law/>

Weber, M., 1972, *Politics as a vocation*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis.

Wieland, C., 2006, *Syria at bay: secularism, Islamism and "Pax Americana"*, Hurst, London.

Williams, J. A., 1971, *Themes of Islamic civilization*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

Wood, P., 2013, 'Face-to-face with Abu Sakkar, Syria's 'heart-eating cannibal'', *BBC*, viewed 8 August 2013, from <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-23190533>

Ya Libnan, 2013, 'Syrian Christian cleric declares war on rebels', viewed 16 December 2013, from <http://www.yalibnan.com/2013/12/07/syrian-christian-cleric-declares-war-on-rebels/>

Zeidan, D., 1999, 'The Copts—equal, protected or persecuted? The impact of Islamization on Muslim-Christian relations in modern Egypt', *Islam and Christian–Muslim Relations* 10(1), 53-67, viewed 31 October 2013, from <http://0-www.tandfonline.com.innopac.up.ac.za/doi/pdf/10.1080/09596419908721170>

Ziadeh, R., 2011, *Power and policy in Syria: intelligence services, foreign relations and democracy in the modern Middle East*, I.B. Tauris, New York.

Zurcher, E. J., 1999. *Arming the State: Military Conscription in the Middle East and Central Asia, 1775-1925*, I.B. Tauris, New York.

Figures and Maps

Figure 1: Nationalinterest.org, 2013, *The Alawites, Ethnic Cleansing, and Syria's Future*, view 5 October 2013, from <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-alawites-ethnic-cleansing-syrias-future-9149>

Figure 3: Shahada, n.d. photograph, viewed 5 October 2013, from <http://www.arabic-calligraphy.net/shahada/>

Figure 3: Joshualandis.com, 2012, *Five Reasons Why There Will Not Be an Alawite State*, viewed 5 October 2013, from <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/will-there-be-an-alawite-state/>

Figure 4,5,6: Zelin, AY, 2011, *On Flags, Islamic History, and al-Qa'ida*, photograph, viewed 5 October 2013, from <http://aaronzelin.com/2011/11/06/on-flags-islamic-history-and-al-qaida/>