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## Opposition Visions for Preserving Syria's Ethnic-Sectarian Mosaic

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# G I G A *Working Papers*

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Rustum Mahmoud and Stephan Rosiny

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# Opposition Visions for Preserving Syria's Ethnic-Sectarian Mosaic

## Abstract

The excessive violence that has spread across virtually all of Syria since the 2011 uprising against the regime of Bashar al-Assad has so far prevented a serious debate about feasible solutions. Most political factions fear that any talk of a compromise solution will undermine their own position among their followers and benefit the other side by granting it recognition. The opposition refuses to negotiate with a dictator who has too much blood on his hands, while the regime declines to negotiate with "terrorists." Fear of exclusion in a future order dominated by radical Islamist forces is keeping the minority groups and some secularists close to the regime. This vicious circle of repudiation and fear has strengthened threat perceptions and has caused a military stalemate.

However, there are also grounds for cautious optimism: as this paper shows, most actors from the moderate opposition acknowledge the need to take the minorities' fears seriously and to provide them with guarantees of participation in a future political order, while stopping short of the option of a power-sharing arrangement between community representatives.

Keywords: power-sharing, civil war, opposition, sectarianism, Syria

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# Opposition Visions for Preserving Syria's Ethnic-Sectarian Mosaic

Rustum Mahmoud and Stephan Rosiny

## Article Outline

- 1 Syria's Deeply Divided Society
- 2 The Syrian Opposition's Debate on Ethnicity and Power-Sharing
- 3 Power-Sharing Options for Syria
- 4 Future Prospects for Power-Sharing in Syria

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## 1 Syria's Deeply Divided Society

The Syrian Arab Spring began in March 2011 as a more or less peaceful movement against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad, which, in turn, attempted to suppress this movement with violence.<sup>1</sup> The protests transformed into a violent uprising in the summer of 2011, becoming a full-scale civil war and a regional conflagration by the end of the year. As

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1 This paper is a product of the comprehensive research project "Power-Sharing in Multi-Ethnic Societies of the Middle East. What Can Bahrain and Syria Learn from Iraq and Lebanon?" which was funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. We are grateful to Ghassan Rimlawi for his enormous effort in translating parts of this paper as well as to Ruham Hawash and André Bank for their most helpful comments and additions.

of September 2015, approximately a quarter-million people had been killed, over one million had been injured, four million had fled the country, eight million were internally displaced, and more than twelve million were in need of assistance inside Syria.

The conflict and civil war have dramatically altered relations between the country's many ethnic and sectarian communities. As most protesters and rebels are from the Sunni Arab majority and most members of the Alawite minority and the Christian communities have predominantly stayed close to the regime, the fighting has increasingly overlapped with sectarian stereotypes and acts of ethnic cleansing. Other minorities have often been trapped between regime troops who indiscriminately bomb civilian areas and jihadist militants who discriminate against and assassinate the members of minority groups. The image of a harmonious multicultural society in a united Syrian nation has been deeply scarred, if not obliterated.

This section focuses on the historical relationship between Syria's ethnic-sectarian communities and these communities' relationships with the regime. A special focus is placed on the dissension in the wake of the Arab Spring. In the second section we refer to the programmes and documents of the main opposition groups to evaluate their understanding of the ethnic-sectarian configuration as well as their conceptions of how to deal with this diversity. We also build our analysis on interviews with intellectuals and political and military leaders from the opposition to analyse their perspectives on the option of a power-sharing arrangement,<sup>2</sup> and we discuss two precedent-setting power-sharing arrangements – in the Kurdish province Rojava and in the Syrian town of Qahtāniyya. In Section 3 we outline the Syrian regime's possible reaction to a power-sharing agreement. A brief review of power-sharing arrangements in neighbouring Lebanon and Iraq, as well as some other countries, is used to refine our assessment of the Syrian case. In the final section, we suggest practical steps for overcoming the Syrian quagmire and offer some general recommendations for potential power-sharing in the country.

The Syrian population reached approximately 23 million in 2011 and has since dropped by four million due to flight abroad.<sup>3</sup> Syrian society is composed, both demographically and geographically, of overlapping ethnic, religious, and sectarian identity groups. Ethnically it is made up of 85 per cent Arabs (including some 500,000 Palestinians) and 10 per cent Kurds; other minorities such as the Turkmen, Armenians, Circassians, and Assyrians make up approximately 5 per cent. In terms of religious affiliation it is divided into Muslims (87 per cent) – who are themselves subdivided into Sunnis (74 per cent), Alawis (10 per cent), and Isma'ili and Twelver Shiites (3 per cent) – Christians (10 per cent), Druze (3 per cent), and some small communities such as Yazidis and Jews. The Sunni Arabs make up by far the largest

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2 Rustum Mahmoud conducted these interviews with political and military leaders from the opposition. The appendix contains a list of his interviewees and their respective functions and affiliations.

3 On 13 October 2015, the number of refugees registered by UNHCR was 4,185,302. For a regularly updated source, see UNHCR (no date).

single community, representing approximately 65 per cent of all Syrians.<sup>4</sup> This mosaic of presumably primordial entities is further subdivided due to geography, socio-economic status, rural–urban descent, religious creed and practice, collective memories, and political alignment. All these cleavages have generated both further divisions within the communities and solidarity groups that cross-cut primordial ties.

Historically, the Syrian territories were part of the Ottoman Empire, forming the provinces (*wilāyāt*) of Aleppo and Damascus, which included the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah, the coastal plains, and the eastern steppes (al-Bādiyya). Syria is the cradle of several heterodox Christian and Islamic sects, which found refuge in its mountainous areas. It also became a shelter for several waves of immigrants, such as Armenians, Kurds, and Palestinians, most of whom fled their home countries during the first half of the twentieth century. All this has made Syrian society rich and diverse in terms of its cultural, ethnic, and religious composition.

In the twentieth century, Syria was deprived of parts of its territory – namely, the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which was transferred to Turkey in 1938; Akkār, Tripoli, and the eastern Bekaa Valley, which became part of Greater Lebanon in 1920; and the Golan Heights, which were occupied by Israel in 1967 and annexed in 1981. French mandatory rule (1922–1946) further divided Syria into four local governments, roughly based on the distribution of sects: the states of Damascus and Aleppo became the Sunni majority territories; the Alawite state with its capital Lādhiqiyya held the coastal region; and the Druze Mountain (Jabal al-Drūz) stretched to the southern border with Jordan. In 1925, the mandate power reunited the states of Aleppo and Damascus to form the Syrian Union, and in 1942 it reintegrated the minority states of the Alawites and the Druze. The northern part of Syria had been settled by a Kurdish majority as a result of the division of the Ottoman Kurdish region between four states – Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria – in the aftermath of World War I.

In addition to this ethnic-territorial modelling, France conscripted members of the Alawites, Druze, Kurds, and Circassians in a disproportional manner relative to the Sunni Arab majority population, which it mistrusted because of its Arab nationalist aspirations. France bolstered the minorities' presence in the Troupes Spéciales du Levant, an auxiliary force of the French army that later became the nucleus of independent Syria's army (Fildis 2011; Fildis 2012; Neep 2012). This disproportion set the stage for future power struggles between the ruling Sunni bourgeoisie and the minorities that dominated the army (van Dam 2011).

After Syria gained independence on 17 April 1946, Sunni notables ruled the country. This class was basically an extension of the Ottoman notables and comprised the triangle of landlords, merchants, and clergymen. Their authority was based on Land Law No. 3339 of 12 December 1930, which fixed the distribution of property and enabled the notables to seize vast territories from the former Ottoman Empire, which they rented to the farmers. The notables

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4 These are only rough estimates as there are no official statistics about the ethnic-sectarian composition of Syria since 1960.

were mostly from Damascus and Aleppo and, to a lesser extent, from Homs and Hamah. They did not feel any political or social obligation to share power with other groups, as they possessed the symbolic capital of the superior "Sunni" religion and "Arab" ethnicity as well as the demographic majority. They also possessed the physical capital through their dominance of the urban markets and their ownership of vast rural areas. Their absolute domination of the political order was only contested upon the rise of the army's importance in the wake of the 1948 war (van Dam 2011).

In the aftermath of the First Arab–Israeli War of 1948, several military coups shook the country: in 1949 the coup of Husnī al-Za`īm, then that of Sāmī al-Hināwī, and finally the takeover of Adīb al-Shīshaklī, who held onto power until the next military coup in February 1954 by Shukrī al-Quwwatī. Parallel to the rise of the military in Syrian public life, different nationalist ideologies that roughly reflected the country's social and ethnic fragmentation emerged: pan-Arab nationalism was favoured by the Sunni Arab majority, whereas the minorities preferred Syrian nationalism with different degrees of socialism. The latter considered Syria a distinct historical and territorial entity. The Syrian wing of the Arab Socialist Baath Party became an amalgamation of both trends.

The democratic interlude (1954–1958) was followed by another series of authoritarian rulers. This period began with the phase of Syrian–Egyptian unity, which saw political parties, independent newspapers and civilian organisations abolished. The unity failed and was dissolved in 1961. A Baathist military coup took place in March 1963, and subsequent struggles inside the ruling military elite led to another coup in 1966. The Alawite Hāfiz al-Assad then staged a coup in November 1970, after which all power was concentrated in his hands.

After the Baath Party coup in 1963 and throughout the reigns of Hāfiz al-Assad (1970–2000) and his son Bashār al-Assad (since 2000), Syria experienced half a century of political and social rigidity. The regime was secular to a large extent, as stipulated by the constitution of 1973 and the laws it decreed. It did not directly address ethnic-sectarian identities; rather, it depicted diversity – aside from its own folkloristic display – as a threat to and a distortion of its national mission, as delineated in the constitution's preamble:

The Arab nation managed to perform a great role in building human civilization when it was a unified nation. When the ties of its national cohesion weakened, its civilizing role receded and the waves of colonial conquest shattered the Arab nation's unity, occupied its territory, and plundered its resources. (Syrian Constitution 1973)

The only ethnic-sectarian provisions mentioned in the constitution concern the president of the republic, whose religion has to be Islam, and legislation. Article 3 states that "Islamic jurisprudence is a main source of legislation." The inclusion of these stipulations was a concession to religious conservatives within the Sunni community, who later challenged Assad's presidency as most Sunni Islamists do not acknowledge Alawites – and therefore the Assads – as Muslims (Kramer 1987).



The regime managed relations among the different communities with a set of informal divide-and-rule measures. It co-opted communal elites by granting them state positions and diffused services and control into the communities through them. These co-opted elites served the function of mediators between the regime and the various communities. The regime created a kind of balance between these communities by deliberately distributing nominal posts in cabinet, parliament, the civil service, and the syndicates among them. Hāfiz al-Assad permitted the Sunni trading class to dominate the financial and trade sectors while giving Christians and Druze the chance to participate extensively in the bureaucracy of the public civil sector. However, scores of leadership positions in the military and the security sector remained inside the Alawite community.

From 1979 until 1982 a mixture of popular uprising and terrorist operations by the Sunni Muslim Brotherhood and its radical offspring, the Fighting Vanguard (al-Talī'a al-Muqātila), shook this precarious balance. The regime crushed the uprising with a violent military campaign that saw the flattening of the rebellion of Hamah become a hallmark of modern Syrian history (Lefèvre 2013). Many observers recalled this event during the violent repression of the Arab Spring uprising (Lefèvre 2013).

Bashār al-Assad, who succeeded his father in 2000, continued to maintain the basis of power through the co-optation of community elites. However, he reduced the influence of the Socialist Baath Party and transformed the economy into a neo-liberal market economy, privatising state companies. This policy undermined established social security networks and patterns of power division among the communities (de Elvira and Zintl 2014). Many of the less-privileged people, especially within the Sunni community, lost their social security networks, which the socialist regime had previously provided. This gap was then partly filled by Islamic charities (Pierret and Selvik 2009). At the same time, the Alawite military and security sector elite, privileged through their kinship relations to the political elite, intruded into the trade and market economy sector, which had previously been the domain of the Sunni urban elite (Zisser 2006). Increased competition from the global market led to the decline of local artisans and industry. Climate change and dam projects in Turkey led to water shortages, the desertification of huge agricultural areas in Syria's north-east, a massive exodus towards the shantytowns of the big cities, and substantial food-price hikes (De Châtel 2014). Corruption, nepotism, favouritism, and regime mismanagement further added to rising discontent. All this led to the gradual collapse of the social and political foundation that had kept Syrian society together under Hafiz al-Assad.

The Syrian revolution broke out in March 2011, together with the other uprisings of the Arab Spring. The protests started in the periphery and mobilised predominantly the marginalised strata of society. Most of the protests remained non-violent on the part of the demonstrators. However, the severity of the regime forces' violent repression drove many soldiers to desert and to form, together with protesters who then took up arms, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in summer 2011. With the militarisation of the rebellion, the struggle turned more and

more into a civil war, as well as a proxy war between regional powers. Participants on both sides increasingly framed it in sectarian terms (ICG 2011a; ICG 2011b; ICG 2012). Foreign fighters have been supporting Salafist and jihadist militias since 2011, while the Lebanese Hizballāh, Iraqi militias, and Iranian military experts have been fighting on the side of the regime. In late summer 2015, Russian troops intervened massively in the war.

Several features exemplify how the social composition of the actors and their sectarian affiliation has affected the course of events: At the beginning the uprising had a strong socio-economic and political focus, with the rebels calling for freedom and dignity in the face of authoritarian rule. The rebellion mainly broke out in the rural and suburban regions, which have been characterised by deprivation and neglect and are dominated by Sunni Arabs (Leenders 2012; Leenders and Heydemann 2012). In contrast, the Sunni urban quarters of Damascus and Aleppo mostly refrained from participating in demonstrations or only joined later and with great caution. The non-Arab communities did not participate in the revolution to the same extent, while the overwhelming majority of Alawites and Christians opposed it because their areas were better connected to state infrastructure.<sup>5</sup>

With the passing of time, religious and sectarian catchphrases and stereotypes entered into the quarrel. The violent repression through the security forces and the pro-regime *Shabiha* ("phantom") militias, which were dominated by Alawite thugs, and the influence of Sunni Islamist actors within the opposition mutually enforced sectarian stereotypes and threat perceptions. Calls for jihad and demands for an "Islamic state" with sharia (Islamic) law proliferated, and the revolution transformed into what looked like a Sunni–Alawite civil war (Balanche 2015). In summer 2011, more and more demonstrations used Islamic symbols and catchphrases to mobilise protest, mourn the martyrs, and transcend the fear of assassination by security forces. Gradually, these symbols were transformed into an Islamist ideology that explained the causes of violence and suppression in religious terms – for example, as an "Iranian-Safawid" conspiracy or a "crusader invasion." Demands for Islamic rule were made even by those organisations that were still regarded as moderate, such as the FSA. The oppositional non-armed groups and militias began to split into a myriad of groups that in some cases even started battling each other. They have since demonstrated great volatility in their ideological orientations, methodologies, foreign affiliations, and alliance building.

The moderate Islamist tendency of the Muslim Brotherhood was increasingly surpassed in terms of radicalism and military success by extremist Salafist and jihadist groups. They framed the enemy and the purpose of the fight against the regime in Islamic terms and developed a narrative of universal, sacred salvation, according to which the rightful believers (*al-salaf al-sālih*) would be victorious over the apostates (*murtaddun*) and non-believers (*kuffār*). This trend expanded with the massive influx of foreign fighters, who mainly joined two jihadi Islamic movements, the Nusra Front (NF; Jabhat al-Nusra li Ahl al-Shām, the Front for Aid to

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5 On the interdependence between regional differences in service provision (or the lack thereof) through state patron–client networks and violent uprisings see De Juan and Bank (2015).

the People of Shām) and the Islamic State (IS; al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya), formerly known as The Islamic State of Iraq and Shām (ISIS; al-Dawla al-Islāmiyya fī-l-`Irāq wa-l-Shām).

The military balance as of summer 2015 mostly reflected the demographic distribution of the communities. The regime dominated an arch extending from the Arab Druze Mountain (Jabal al-Drūz) to Damascus, Homs, and most of the Mediterranean coastline, the so-called minority belt. The more moderate Syrian opposition dominated the regions with a predominantly Arab Sunni population: the provinces of Aleppo, Idlib and Dar`a. The radical Islamic groups controlled the sparsely populated provinces of al-Raqqā and Dair al-Zūr, but they had also made inroads into rebel- and regime-controlled areas such as Palmyra and the villages surrounding Aleppo. The Democratic Union Party (YPG) dominated the three Kurdish cantons of Efrīn, Kūbānī, and Cizīrê on the northern border to Turkey. Vast areas of Syria, such as the cities of Homs, Aleppo, Dair al-Zūr, and Idlib and their surroundings, are contested territories in which the political equation is continuously changing because they have lost much of their population and have become extremely volatile in terms of their political and ethnic-sectarian composition.

The reality on the ground for the various communities differs strongly between areas with several communities and areas where only one community dominates. In the multi-ethnic regions that remain under the authority of the regime, such as Damascus, Suwaydā', Lādhiqiyya, and Tartūs, daily life and the distribution of power have hardly changed. The regime maintains an invisible balance between the groups, while keeping actual power in the hands of members of the Alawite sect, as well as loyal Druze in Suwaydā'. The regions that are no longer under the regime's rule, which are regions with a Sunni Arab majority, are controlled by Sunni-dominated military groups. The provinces and regions completely beyond state control – Raqqā province, the northern countryside of Aleppo, and Dair al-Zūr – are under the rule of the "Islamic State" and other Sunni Islamist militias that differ mainly in the extent of their religious fanaticism, their intolerance towards other religions, and their (un)willingness to coordinate with other militias. None of them has engaged with or consulted different ethnic groups or sectarian communities. In the absence of state facilities, religious and tribal institutions have become the most effective at maintaining order and performing the tasks of local government. They often prevent civil institutions from taking over these functions out of the fear of losing their authority.

## **2 The Syrian Opposition's Debate on Ethnicity and Power-Sharing**

After years of alternating fortunes of war, military escalation, and massive destruction, the more moderate opposition has come closer to the insight that neither party can overcome the other by mere military force, that a continuation of war might bring more risks than opportunities, and that in the end a political solution has to be achieved. However, there are also enduring obstacles to a compromise solution given the deep mistrust between the oppo-

nents, spoilers who are still striving for military victory, external actors who fuel the tensions, and radical jihadist militias with the agenda of establishing Islamic rule far beyond the Syrian borders.

### *2.1 The Moderate Opposition*

The Syrian civil opposition is composed mainly of secular and non-sectarian, socialist, liberal, and nationalist intellectuals, parties, and non-governmental organisations. They were the first to take up the spontaneous initial protests and to convert them into demands, thereby providing the protests with a progressive face. This political discourse clearly dominated during the initial phase of the uprising, until Islamist ideology and sectarian sentiments started to overtake the political domain.

This civil opposition clearly stems from the “Damascus Spring” of 2000 and the subsequent years. When the young Bashar al-Assad succeeded his deceased father in 2000, he promised serious reforms and raised expectations of a fundamental transformation and the modernisation of the country. However, this momentum only lasted for a short while; the new regime soon returned to its former approach of repressing any dissent. On 16 October 2005, several opposition party representatives and intellectuals signed the “Damascus Declaration,” which called for a state where all “citizens enjoy the same rights and have the same duties, regardless of race, religion, ethnicity, sect, or clan.”<sup>6</sup> The declaration propagated a vision of a culturally pluralist society and an institutionalised civil state that respects cultural diversity and regards members of all communities as equal – without, however, offering an institutional arrangement that provides specific guarantees to single communities:

Our Arab civilization has been formed (...) through moderation, tolerance, and mutual interaction, free of fanaticism, violence, and exclusion, while having great concern for the respect of the beliefs, culture, and special characteristics of others, whatever their religious, confessional, and intellectual affiliations, and openness to new and contemporary cultures. No party or trend has the right to claim an exceptional role. No one has the right to shun the other, persecute him, and usurp his right to existence, free expression, and participation in the homeland. (Damascus Declaration [English] 2005)

The document’s demand to “guarantee the right of political work to all components of the Syrian people in their various religious, national, and social affiliations” could be interpreted as a step towards power-sharing, whereas the government elected “on the basis of the view of the political majority and its program” is clearly majoritarian and not consociational, as it does not demand grand coalition rule or veto power for minorities. The only exception to this in the document is the demand for a “just democratic solution to the Kurdish issue in Syria,” albeit “on the basis of the unity of the Syrian land and people” (Damascus Declaration [English] 2005).

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<sup>6</sup> See the “Damascus Declaration” in English (2005) and in Arabic (2005).

### 2.1.1 *The Syrian National Council*

With the outbreak of the Syrian protests in March 2011, the former members of the Damascus Declaration became the nucleus of the civil opposition's leadership inside Syria. But when the uprising transitioned into armed struggle in the summer of 2011, most of its leaders left the country. Among them was a group of 20 independent opposition activists, who gathered in Istanbul on 23 August 2011. They suggested forming a representative body that would unite all oppositional groups and figures. They thus invited a group of 70 opposition members to establish the Syrian National Council (al-Majlis al-Watanī al-Sūrī; hereafter referred to as the Council), among them members of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) and the Damascus Declaration, as well as additional democrats.

The Council intended to unite the many secular and moderate Islamist oppositional groups that had emerged inside and outside the country and to form a representative body for the Syrian people. On 20 November 2011 in Istanbul, the day it was founded, the group published its "Political Programme for the Syrian National Council" (Mashrū` al-Baranāmij al-Siyāsī li-l-Majlis al-Watanī al-Sūrī), in which – similarly to the Damascus Declaration – it stated the following as a goal: "to build a democratic, pluralistic, and civil state" (Syrian National Council 2011). In addition to "the national rights of the Kurdish people," the document also supported "national rights for the Assyrian people and a resolution to the Assyrian Syriac question (...) within the framework of the unity of Syrian territory and people" (Syrian National Council 2011). The Assyrians, the majority of whom live in the Kurdish area, were mentioned as an ethnic group and not a religious one in order to protect their minority rights in relation to Kurdish autonomy. A "civil and democratic system and constitution [that] provides the best assurance to all Syrians from all ethnic, religious, and sectarian backgrounds" would be the best guarantee for both minority protection and national unity (Syrian National Council 2011). While acknowledging the diversity of Syrian society, the Council did not explicitly name any consociational guarantees for minorities, such as the Alawites and Christians. Religion was only mentioned in the second article of the "general principles," which stated,

The new Syria guarantees for all its citizens what is declared by international laws in terms of human rights and basic freedom of belief, opinion, expression, assembly, the press, and other rights. In addition, all of its inhabitants will enjoy equal rights and duties without any discrimination on the basis of ethnicity, religion, or gender. (Syrian National Council 2011)

On 27 March 2012, the Council issued its "National Covenant for a New Syria" (al-`Ahd al-Watanī li Sūriyya al-Mustaqbal) (Syrian National Council 2012b; Syrian National Council 2012a). Today, this covenant is still considered the basic document of the Syrian revolution, and most civil national parties refer to it. It states that the future Syria should be a democratic and civil state, declaring, "We, the Syrian people, are proud of our cultural mosaic and diver-

sity of our religious beliefs – Muslim, Christian and others” (Syrian National Council 2012a). The covenant explicitly honours several ethnic communities, broadening the scope of former programmes and stating that a future constitution “will ensure non-discrimination between any of the religious, ethnic or national components of Syrian society – Arabs, Kurds, Assyrians, Chaldeans, Turkmens or others,” with an emphasis on “the unity of Syria’s land and people” and the principle of “unity in diversity” (Syrian National Council 2012a). Thus, the covenant defines the Syrian people on the basis of a common territory and a pluralistic, tolerant culture. However, it does not elaborate on how it plans to achieve and guarantee cultural pluralism, especially for the heterodox Islamic communities. The provision that “The new Syrian state will guarantee the protection of individuals and groups and it will work on a nationwide reconciliation process, based on justice and tolerance” (Syrian National Council 2012a) can be interpreted as addressing the Alawite community’s fear of collective persecution in case of the Assad regime’s collapse.

The largest meeting of the Syrian opposition to date took place in Cairo on 2–3 July 2012. The “Cairo Documents” agreed upon there consider the transitional phase the most dangerous and list a set of conditions including transitional justice, a fact-finding committee, and a transitional government to carry out the daily functions. The “National Compact,” the fundamental document of the Cairo meeting, suggests a new constitution for Syria where

People are the source of legitimacy and sovereignty which are achieved through a democratic, republican, pluralistic, civil system, where law prevails and is based on institutions. Monopolization of power or inheriting it under any form is not allowed. (Syrian National Council 2012c)

This draft constitution stipulates “the right for fair participation of all ideological and political currents” in elections. The document takes pride in Syria’s civil, cultural, and ethnic diversity, stating that “Any citizen has the right to occupy any position in the state, including the post of President of the Republic, regardless of his religion or nationalism either man or woman ” (Syrian National Council 2012c). However, it does not contain any power-sharing guarantees for minorities.

### 2.1.2 *The Syrian National Coalition (SNC)*

Strong competition among the Council’s leaders and the group’s lack of influence inside Syria led to its weakening. Therefore, on 11 November 2012, the Syrian National Coalition for Opposition and Revolutionary Forces or the Syrian National Coalition for short (SNC; al-Ittilāf al-Watānī al-Sūrī) was founded in Doha, Qatar, as a new umbrella organisation representing the moderate opposition. It connected the Syrian National Council with several other political parties and personalities. The Friends of Syria group recognised the SNC as the legitimate representative of Syria, and the latter organisation took over the Syrian seat in the Arab

League (AL) in 2013 and the Syrian embassy in Doha, Qatar. Nevertheless, the SNC was not allowed to attend the annual AL assembly in 2014.

In its "Doha Agreement" of 11 November 2012, the SNC states "The Coalition will set up technical and specialized committees" and "form an Interim Government after receiving international recognition" (Syrian National Coalition 2012a; Syrian National Coalition 2012b). Except regarding its own composition – "The Coalition's Statutes shall make clear each side's proportion of representation" – there is no mention of any power-sharing or minority rights, as the agreement focuses on organisation, not on content. On 12 March 2013, the members of the SNC elected Ghassān Hītū as the prime minister of the provisional government. On 6 April he announced that he would form a government that would take action in the liberated areas of Syria. In November 2013, this government moved its office to Gaziantep, Turkey, to be closer to the Syrian border. It is still headquartered there.

### 2.1.3 *Further Groups and Actors*

In September 2013, the newly founded Union of Syrian Democrats (Ittihād al-Dīmūqrāṭiyyīn al-Sūriyyīn), led by Michel Kilo and affiliated with the SNC, drew upon the former moderate opposition's vision of a secular state in its "Constitutive Document" (Bayān Ta'sīsī). The document emphasised that

there is no firm minority and majority between the citizens, and all are Syrians. The religious, sectarian, and ethnic plurality is a source of richness for Syria. (...) The value of citizenship is based on equality of the rights and duties among all components of the Syrian people, without discrimination on the basis of religion and creed, gender, race, colour or region. (...) The state that the Union will try to establish in freedom is a democratic state for all its citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, linguistic or cultural heritage, social or class affiliation. (Union of Syrian Democrats 2013)

Other organisations and alliances that make up the moderate Syrian opposition include the National Coordination Committee for the Forces of Democratic Change (Hai'at al-Tansīq al-Watanī li-Quwā al-Taghyīr al-Dīmūqrāṭī al-Sūriyya), Building the Syrian State Current (Tayyār Binā' al-Dawla al-Sūriyya), the Local Coordination Committees (Lijān al-Tansīq al-Mahalliyya), and additional civil society organisations. Their demands concerning a civil state are all within the spectrum of the other moderate opposition groups. Yet over the course of the civil opposition's successive transformations, these key bodies of the opposition have become more and more isolated from many processes taking place inside Syria.

In addition to the political agreements made between opposition groups, Syrian civil actors have elaborated on and presented two political programmes with the support of Western academics and political advisory councils. A number of Syrian academics and activists cooperated with the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) in preparing "The Day After Project" in 2012 (USIP and

SWP 2012). The Syrian Expert House presented the Democratic Transformation Roadmap in 2013 (SCPSS 2013). Neither programme focused on the ongoing struggle in Syria or provided a final solution for a future Syrian state; rather, they focused on ways to end violence and improve Syria's living conditions, economy, and education system. The projects may well present useful concepts, especially regarding issues of local government and how to deal with those who engaged in criminal violence during the transitional stage. However, as many of the programme participants are based in the West, it is still uncertain whether these programmes will be able to effectively influence further developments in Syria.

The field commanders who deserted the Syrian army and joined the rebel militias constitute relevant players in Syria's foreseeable future, as many of them will demand to have a say in politics. Hence, their views concerning power-sharing between popular groups are of special importance for the general Syrian debate.<sup>7</sup> The Syrian regime does not allow its field commanders to express their political views – doing so is restricted to the political leadership – as any violation of consensus might disrupt the functional coherence of its front. Because the conflict started in the peripheral areas, those who deserted were usually from the rural, poor, and mostly illiterate strata of society. Therefore, many of today's armed opposition leaders who deserted the army lack political knowledge, especially regarding a future state order and the distribution of power.

## *2.2 An Evaluation by Syrian Intellectuals*

Syrian intellectuals are usually more diverse and differentiated in their argumentation regarding a future order for Syria than the parties who are more dependent on internal compromise and foreign donors. They can more easily formulate political visions without adapting them to tactical considerations. However, there is often a blatant gap between their official statements and the more realistic statements they make in confidential talks. For various reasons, but particularly because they consider this topic to be very sensitive, they did not want their names to be mentioned in this article.<sup>8</sup>

The secular opposition members – most of whom are leftist nationalists or liberals – still tend to dodge the idea of allowing sectarian groups to become political entities. This is due to their conviction that imperialist powers and the regimes of Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad have used sectarianism as a political tool by adopting divide-and-rule policies. Furthermore, coming up with a compromise solution that acknowledged the ruling clique as a potential party in negotiations would be considered a sign of weakness and treason at this moment. Therefore, nobody is willing to take the first step and show acceptance for a compromise solution.

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7 Rustum Mahmoud conducted interviews with several military leaders; for a list please see the appendix.

8 Rustum Mahmoud interviewed several intellectuals under the condition of confidentiality in order to learn what is being discussed in internal circles that is not expressed publicly, and about their ideas concerning the future relationship between the communities and the option of a power-sharing arrangement along ethnic-sectarian lines.



There is consensus among the political intellectuals that a model of future rule in Syria must include a ruling party that has broad-based legitimacy among the different communities. These observers agree that the absence of such a party is the largest obstacle to any political proposition, and that such a proposition alone could open the way to addressing the complications of Syria's violent quagmire. The interviewees acknowledged that the blood spilled since the outbreak of the revolution prevents the Alawites from believing in the possibility of co-existence within a state and society where the Sunni majority holds political and military power. Without receiving some kind of self-rule in the regions in which they constitute a majority, the Alawites would not give up their loyalty to the Assad regime.

Most of the intellectuals interviewed for this study agreed that the key factor complicating the Syrian conflict is the desire of the regional powers – namely, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey – to dominate the country. These regional powers are supporting their local proxies with money, weapons, logistical supplies, military training, and diplomatic backing. External financing has greatly influenced the agendas of the Syrian actors, because they have learned to rely on outside support instead of seeking a compromise solution. If Syria is preserved as a territorially united state, a military victory for one side could mean that the regional power supporting the losing side is deprived of its influence within Syria. Thus, their desire to hang onto power inside Syria could drive these external players to accept a compromise.

The Kurds are the group that has publicly proposed some form of power-sharing, since their political institutions are already highly inclusive when it comes to the various communities and because their common national identity is stronger than their sectarian divisions. The Kurdish politicians we interviewed expressed the most concern about radical Islamist groups. Furthermore, based on bad previous experiences, they would not trust any Arab majority rule. They emphasised that Turkey is the regional power that most stringently refuses the establishment of power-sharing within Syria. Its border areas would be in the immediate vicinity of the areas dominated by the Kurdish and Alawite minorities enjoying cultural and even political autonomy. The centralised Turkish state likely regards this a threat to its national security, as the Syrian example could possibly lead its own minorities, such as the Alevis or the Kurds, to demand similar rights.

The Syrian intellectuals and sociologists stated that future power-sharing arrangements should take place on three levels, which Syrian politicians usually muddle together: At the territorial level, the Alawites would enjoy a special status in the west, the Kurds in the north, and the Druze in the south. Within the legislative councils, the second level, every ethnic and sectarian group would receive a specific quota to prevent any monopolisation of the legislative institutions by the nominal majority. The same quotas would apply for the third level, consisting of executive posts within the various institutions, especially in the army and the security forces.

### 2.3 *The Kurdish Areas and Actors*

The three enclaves Efrīn, Kūbānī, and Cezīrê (al-Jazīra) in the north of Syria are called Rojava (Western Kurdistan) by their majority Kurdish inhabitants. The Kurds' territorial compactness, ethnic "otherness" in terms of language and culture, and proto-nationalist identity distinguishes them from other Syrian opposition groups. However, Assyrian Christians, Turkomans, and Arabs, among others, constitute relevant minorities in these territories. Therefore, the Kurdish areas mirror Syria's mosaic structure, and their modelling and practice of power-sharing could influence a future political order.

#### 2.3.1 *Kurdish Parties*

Kurdish parties and militias mostly propose a future Syria that is based on granting the Kurdish regions local self-rule within the Syrian state. However, they do not generalise these propositions for the whole of Syria. Two main branches can be identified from their overall programmes and activities: The Kurdish National Council in Syria (KNC) was founded on 26 October 2011 in Erbil, Iraq, under the supervision of the Kurdish Regional Government of Iraq as a union of 15 Syrian Kurdish parties. In its "Provisional Program" of 21 April 2012, it made the following demands for a future Syria:

To constitutionally recognise the existence of the Kurdish people and their national identity in Syria and to considering their language an official language in the country, and their legitimate national rights as a basic component [of society] according to the international charters and conventions. (KNC 2012)

The other main actor in the Kurdish arena is the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD; *Partiya Yekitiya Demokrat*), which is the Syrian branch of Turkey's Kurdish Workers Party (PKK). The KNC and the PYD formed the Kurdish Supreme Committee (SKB; *al-Hai'a al-Kurdiyya al-'Ulyā*) in July 2012 as a "power-sharing solution" (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace 2015), with a parity distribution of five seats for each. On 12 December 2012, the KNC joined the SNC "on behalf of the Supreme Kurdish Council of Syria" under the premise that Kurdish representatives would hold 15 per cent of the seats and the position of vice president. The KNC also requested that the Syrian *Arab* Republic be renamed the Republic of Syria (KNC 2012).

Yet tensions between the two Kurdish branches caused them to follow contrary paths. When the KNC joined the SNC, the PYD started creating committees with individuals whom the KNC disliked. In Syria's Kurdish region, the PYD adopted a form of federal communalism with democratic self-rule, a concept designed by the leader of the PKK, Abdullah Öcalan. In September 2013, the PYD unilaterally announced the establishment of administrative and governmental structures and set up an "Interim Committee" in Qāmishlī that was tasked with preparing an administration plan. In November, the PYD announced the creation of a joint interim administration including local and legislative assemblies and govern-

ments, and of a general assembly including Kurdish, Arab, Syriac, and Assyrian representatives from all three cantons. In January 2014, autonomy was declared and the first local governments began work in Cezîrê and Kûbânî.

### 2.3.2 *The Kurdish Enclaves of Rojava*

Since the end of 2013, the Kurdish PYD has ruled the territory under its control as an autonomous entity. The "Social Contract of Rojava Cantons" of 29 January 2014 is the most elaborate political concept implemented in a particular region of Syria and contains some power-sharing components. Article 12 describes the autonomous regions as "an integral part of Syria" and "a model for a future decentralized system of federal governance in Syria" that may expand through voluntary association as "All cities, towns and villages in Syria which accede to this Charter may form Cantons falling within Autonomous Regions" (Art. 7) (PYD 2014). In its third article the contract stipulates, "The canton of Jazirah [Cezîrê] is ethnically and religiously diverse, with Kurdish, Arab, Assyrian, Chechen, Armenian, Muslim, Christian and Yazidi communities peacefully coexisting in brotherhood." Article 9 states that the official languages are Kurdish, Arabic, and Assyrian. All national communities have the right to teach and be taught in their respective native languages.

Everyone has the right to freedom of worship, to practice one's own religion either individually or in association with others. No one shall be subjected to persecution on the grounds of their religious beliefs. (PYD 2014, Art. 31)

Article 32 recognises the Yazidi religion and demands its protection under the constitution – a strong statement against Salafi radicalism, which considers Yazidis "worshippers of the devil" and outlaws. Women and men enjoy guaranteed participation ("at least 40% of either sex") in parliament (Art. 47) and in "all governing bodies, institutions and committees" (PYD 2014, Art. 87).

However, the text does not go into detail regarding a specific formula for power-sharing among the local communities in the region. Furthermore, the PYD has failed to achieve political consensus on its project, as it was unable to attract major Arab or Assyrian forces. These groups are thus not participating in the PYD project, which they regard as granting Kurds a dominant influence. The Assyrian Democratic Organization, the most influential Assyrian political party, even considers the agreement to be one made between the Syrian regime and the PYD, as it did not win the consent of the Kurdish people, many of whom support the Syrian revolution. Even the KNC does not recognise the cantons and deals with them as a *fait accompli* without officially acknowledging them, thus making the autonomous entities appear to be a political project solely of the PYD.

### 2.3.3 *Power-Sharing in the Town of Qahtāniyya*

Qahtāniyya is a town in the north-east of Hasaka Province and is located 30 km east of the city of Qāmishlī. It has a population of approximately 30,000 that includes Kurds, Arabs, and Assyrians. After the withdrawal of Syrian regime forces in July 2012, skirmishes erupted between the Arabs and Kurds in the city, but all parties reached and signed an agreement on 23 February 2013 (al-Turba Sibbiyya 2013). The document emphasised the maintenance of public security and the necessity of political accords between all parties. It also led to the formation of a joint committee to run the city's general affairs. This committee was composed of 10 Kurds, 10 Arabs, five Assyrians, and five Yazidis. The Relations Committee of the Supreme Kurdish Council represented the city's Kurds, and the Arab National Council represented the Arabs. The Assyrian Democratic Organization and the Assyrian Unity Party represented their community.

The interesting point within the agreement is that the third article states, "All of these components ensure the protection of the city in coordination with each other, each according to his ability" (al-Turba Sibbiyya 2013), while article 4 states, "The committee doesn't interfere in the affairs of the YPG checkpoints erected around the city because they protect the city at the present time given the presence of danger, which is a temporary situation" (al-Turba Sibbiyya 2013). Nevertheless, this agreement became virtually ineffective when the YPG, which is considered the armed wing of the PYD, took control of the region in 2014.

## 2.4 *Islamist Actors*

Over the course of the violent escalation, the distinctions between the moderate Islamist, Salafist, and jihadist groups have become blurred, as the Syrian battleground remains an arena of constantly shifting methods, allegiances, and targets. This is related to the circle of violence that has radicalised many groups – through external funding from Gulf Arab donors, who provide incentives for the Islamicisation of behaviour and discourse, and through the influx of global jihadist foreign fighters bringing in their own agendas. A rough categorisation of the Islamist spectrum can be undertaken by distinguishing the groups according to their political language: More moderate Islamists such as the Muslim Brotherhood (MB) adopt their language to modern political thought, and they deem concepts such as parliamentary democracy, parties, constitutionalism, and the separation of powers to be consistent with Islam. Salafists and jihadists (the latter actually constitute a subtype of Salafism) utilise a strictly Islamic language, which they inflate with citations from early religious sources, especially from the Qur'an and the Hadith collections. They repudiate modern instruments of political rule as "Western" and "un-Islamic." In their ideology and their ultimate aim of building an Islamic state under the rule of a caliph, Salafis do not differ from the jihadists. Basically, they vary in terms of their time frame for achieving this goal. The various Islamists also differ with regard to their image of the enemy: Moderate Islamists use political categories to describe their opponents, whereas Salafis and jihadists judge them in religious terms

as “apostates” and “unbelievers.” Jihadists are fighting a transnational, global jihad, whereas most Salafi groups still focus on Syrian territory. In contrast to radical jihadists, they are willing to cooperate with other oppositional groups – even if only temporarily and for tactical purposes – and not all of them use violent measures to reach their goals.

The political visions and transformations of the MB in Syria have been important and influential, since the group is the most popular front among the Sunnis, especially the middle and urban classes in the four major cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Hamah. In the first article of its fundamental document of 25 March 2012, “A Covenant and a Document,” the MB calls for a “modern civil state founded on the basis of a civil constitution that stems from the will of the Syrian people and is based on national agreement” (Muslim Brotherhood in Syria 2012). It proclaims respect for the freedom of creed and worship, and calls for strengthening the spirit of dialogue, tolerance, and opening up to the other. Although it does not clarify what it means by a national agreement, it clearly indicates that this entails the political participation of all Syrian popular groups, and not dominance by one group. In its third article, the covenant calls for “a state of citizenship and equality that treats all ethnic groups, religions, religious schools and trends equally, based on the principle of citizenship that defines their rights and duties” (Muslim Brotherhood in Syria 2012). It recognises the Syrian people’s ethnic, religious, and sectarian pluralism; however, it does not propose any form of power-sharing between the various groups.

Most of the Islamic organisations that were founded at the beginning of the Syrian uprising were not primarily concerned with explaining their visions of a future Syria. The Syrian Islamic Front (SIF; al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya al-Sūriyya), which includes the five largest Islamic militant factions, among them Ahrār al-Shām, is an example. The SIF announced its formation on 21 December 2012, in a video published on YouTube. In its charter, which was announced on 17 January 2013, the SIF clearly promotes the “co-existence of the elements of Syrian society” and the vision of “building a civilised Islamic society in Syria ruled by the law of God, with which He graced mankind” (Syrian Islamic Front 2013b; Syrian Islamic Front 2013a). SIF supports “da’wa [Islamic preaching] and the reform of morals” according to “the approach of the ahl al-sunna (Sunnis)” and accepting “the recognised schools of Islamic thought (*al-madhāhib*).” The statement that “Islam is the religion of the state, and the principal and only source of legislation” marks the beginning of a section on non-Muslims. It states that all members of society can participate in that society, but that “the integration and mixing of religions and sects is rejected according to sharia [Islamic law].” Territorial decentralisation and autonomy are strictly rejected (Syrian Islamic Front 2013b; Syrian Islamic Front 2013a). The most problematic part of the charter with regard to Syria’s religious composition is what it conceals – namely, the presence of non-Sunni Islamic sects such as the Alawite, the Druze, the Isma’ilis, and the Twelver Shiite, which are not regarded “recognised schools of Islamic thought” by Salafis, as well as religions such as the Yazidi that are not mentioned in

sharia. In Salafi and jihadist nomenclature the Islamic sects are considered “rejectionists” (*rāfida*) of the right way of the *ahl al-sunna*, and therefore outlaws.

On 22 November 2013, SIF merged with other Islamist groups to form the Islamic Front (al-Jabha al-Islāmiyya), which then released its main programmatic document, “A Nation’s Project” (Mashrū` Umma) (Islamic Front 2013). This document, like its predecessor, calls for the establishment of a state whose sole political and legal reference is Sunni Islamic sharia. It expresses the Front’s position on minorities in one single sentence: “The Syrian soil is home to a diverse fabric of ethnic and religious minorities who have shared it with the Muslims for hundreds of years under the glorious sharia, which preserved their rights” (Islamic Front 2013). In the fourth chapter, the Front stipulates that secularism and separation between religion and state are anti-Islamic. It also states that the Syrian Kurds should attain their rights under Islamic rule and that they should give up any plans to divide Syrian soil on national or ethnic grounds (Islamic Front 2013).

The Islamic Liberation Party – Province of Syria (ILP; Hizb al-Tahrīr al-Islāmī – Wilāyat Sūriyā) is a Salafist Islamic party that calls for the re-establishment of the Islamic Caliphate and the unity of all Muslims under its umbrella. It was established in Jerusalem in 1953 by the Islamic judge Taqī al-Dīn al-Nabhānī and used to be active underground. With its history of programmatic elaboration, it is an exception among the Salafi trend that has emerged in Syria over the last decade. According to the party’s publications, it believes in political and ideological activities and avoids what it calls “materialistic actions” such as armed struggle to achieve its goals. In its “Constitution for the Caliphate State” the party acknowledges non-Muslim citizens’ right to practice their religious rituals and duties. However, it does not provide any guarantees for their political participation or cultural autonomy (Hizb al-Tahrīr – Sūriyya, no date).

Due to their own lack of political vision, most Salafi groups resort to options similar to those of the MB. The more radical movements seem uninterested in developing any political vision for Syria, which they consider merely one of the open fronts of jihad that will later include all Muslim territories, as the leader of the Nusra Front, Abū Muhammad al-Jūlanī, explained in an interview with al-Jazīra on 25 May 2015 (al-Jūlanī 2015). The extreme groups legitimise the killing of everybody they regard as an apostate (*murtadd*) or unbeliever (*kāfir*). This religious verdict can also be applied to Islamists who do not follow their narrow understanding of “true Islam” or who refuse to pledge allegiance to their emir or caliph. Christians may be depicted as “crusaders” or “agents of the West” in order to neglect the protected status they enjoy under sharia as *ahl al-kitāb* (people of the book). Salafis and jihadists discredit the Alawi community and their Shiite supporters, such as the Lebanese Hizballāh and Shiite auxiliary militias from Iraq, as well as all members of the Syrian Shiite communities as “rejectionists” (*rāfida*). They accuse them of not accepting the first three caliphs (632–656 AD) and the “pious forbears” (*al-salaf al-sālih*), whom Salafis regard with special reverence.

None of the pamphlets and political statements of the jihadist groups active in Syria, such as the Nusra Front and the Islamic State, indicate that they would recognise any community other than the Sunni Muslims for political rule. A statement on the Nusra Front website entitled "Introducing Jabhat al-Nusra li-Ahl al-Shām" does not even mention the existence of non-Sunni communities in Syria, let alone state anything about "sharing power" among communities (Nusra-Front 2012). Its publications are mainly concerned with military operations and its relationships with other militant Islamic organisations. IS is even more radical, as it systematically plunders, displaces, enslaves, and assassinates the members of all other communities. The Nusra Front appears to be slightly more tolerant, as it offers the Muslim sects, basically the Alawite and the Druze, the opportunity to repent and return to "true Islam" if they renounce their "polytheist" (*shirk*) beliefs and denounce the Assad regime.

### 3 Power-Sharing Options for Syria

In this section we evaluate the interests of the Syrian regime and its supporters concerning power-sharing. We then make suggestions based on power-sharing models and experiences from Lebanon, Iraq, and some other existing cases in order to derive lessons for Syria.

#### 3.1 *The Syrian Regime's Reform Proposals*

The Syrian regime does not rely on any traditional model of power-sharing between ethnic-sectarian communities. Prior to the new Syrian constitution of February 2012, no constitutional or legal document had mentioned or recognised any community. Therefore, the idea of transforming identity groups into legal entities is very controversial. There is a type of post-traumatic anxiety about this in Syria, as the country has experienced various fragmentation events, losing the Sanjak of Iskandariyya, the northern and eastern parts of today's "Greater Lebanon," and the Golan Heights. As a kind of ideological compensation, Syria has always been a centre of Arab unitary nationalism, and most of the nationalist and Islamist actors refuse to consider any dissolution of central state power. Any discussion of dividing power on a sectarian, ethnic, or regional basis evokes fears of additional fragmentation and separation.

After the first few months of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian regime, in a nominal response to the demands of the demonstrators, proposed the formulation of a new constitution. It formed a committee of legal experts, all close to the regime, who drafted the document. It was approved by a vast majority of voters in a referendum on 26 February 2012 (Syrian Constitution [Arabic] 2012). Although it maintained the presidential monopoly over legislative, executive and judicial power, the new constitution introduced certain changes: it withdrew the Baath Party's sole leadership of the state and society and stipulated that the president should be chosen through elections instead of a referendum. Article 9 of the new constitution made the following guarantee:

The protection of the cultural pluralism of Syrian society in all its components (...) is a cultural heritage that enhances national unity within the framework of the unity of territories of the Syrian Arab Republic. (Syrian Constitution [Arabic] 2012)

This was the first time that the Syrian authorities recognised that Syrian society is made up of different communities. It had previously claimed that all Syrian citizens were of the same Syrian Arab identity. The regime further tried to open up new channels for expressing discontent and broadening social participation with the implementation of Law No. 54 for Organising Peaceful Demonstrations on 21 April 2011 (Arab Syrian Republic 2011), the Information Law on 28 August 2011, and Electoral Law No. 5 on 24 March 2014 (Arab Syrian Republic 2014). Article 51 of the Electoral Law states that "Each candidate or political party enjoys full freedom to express his opinion and develop his platform." However, there are no guarantees for certain groups to participate in governing.

There are three potential reasons for the regime's refusal to issue any decree or law supporting a power-sharing arrangement between the Syrian communities:

- Firstly, the Syrian regime may still have believed that it was able to terminate all hostile action by force, or at least to weaken it decisively, and thus that it did not need to offer any concessions.
- Secondly, given the regime's secular Arab nationalist ideology and legitimisation strategy, any talk about power-sharing between religious, sectarian, or ethnic communities would undermine its official discourse.
- Finally, a power-sharing agreement that would implement proportional representation or negotiated shares between the communities would seriously undermine the privileged position of the Alawite community and, to a lesser extent, of the Christian and Druze communities.

However, this stubbornness could soon evaporate as the military, economic, and social costs of the war are now becoming too great. The regime is losing territory and the support of the people. In addition, its external supporters, Iran and Russia, may lose patience and confidence in the regime, which they have stood behind for a long time. They may realise that the price of defending the regime – intensifying the Sunna-Shia divide, fuelling Sunni Arab resentment against their countries, international isolation, the threat of jihadi terrorist attacks – may exceed the value of maintaining regional partnerships and alliances. Furthermore, both Russia and Iran have previously and recently proposed power-sharing measures as a possible solution to the Syrian crisis (Malbruno 2012; Rosiny 2013a; Barnard 2015).

### *3.2 Lessons from the Lebanese and Iraqi Cases*

Taking the ethnic, religious, and sectarian composition into consideration, we can compare the Syrian case with the Lebanese and Iraqi cases for similarities and differences, and draw some lessons for a prospective Syrian power-sharing design. The criticism is often made that



these countries are not comparable due to their demographic, historical, and political specificities.<sup>9</sup> However, power-sharing has some flexible elements that may be adapted to different local circumstances.

The demographic distribution of communities in Syria is certainly unfavourable for power-sharing. The Alawite representatives of the political and military elite are well aware that any power-sharing arrangement will diminish their privileged position, while the (Arab) Sunni majority is convinced that power-sharing would restrict their chances of dominating the country through majoritarian democracy or sheer power. Yet neither group can impose its maximalist approach without suffering massive losses itself. The Alawite community has reached an impasse in defending its privileged position by force and faces the threat of being completely excluded from power, if not physically expelled from Syria or even exterminated by radical actors. Sunni representatives cannot simply outnumber and overrule the smaller communities because this could lead to separatist movements. The massive emigration of minority members could threaten the economy, as the minorities are often better educated and specialised. These dilemmas may lead the participants to recognise the “self-negating prophecy” of conflict escalation and thus to accept that there should be “no victor, no vanquished” – an idea which stands at the core of power-sharing.<sup>10</sup>

Both Iraq and Lebanon have power-sharing arrangements, and their demographic constellations are similar to that of Syria. The Shiite community in Iraq comes very close to the proportion of Syria's Sunni Arabs, with approximately two-thirds of the population. Its attempt to dominate political rule by majority under Prime Minister Nūrī al-Mālikī is regarded as the main cause of the Sunni community's alienation from the central state. Many Arab Sunnis therefore tolerated or even supported the Islamic State as a protecting force for their sect. In Lebanon, Muslim communities account for 60–65 per cent of the population, thus causing the Christians to worry about being excluded. However, the further emigration of Lebanese Christians and a loss of human and financial capital would be a disaster for the country.

To reduce the risks of excluding a huge segment of society, the Iraqi and Lebanese power-sharing models have introduced the tripartite separation of key state power: the Maronites, Shiites, and Sunnis in Lebanon and the Shiites, Arab Sunnis, and Kurds in Iraq each hold one of the “three presidencies”: the president of the state, the prime minister, and the president of parliament. Even though this arrangement is not part of the constitution in either country, and is instead a gentlemen's agreement, it grants a certain degree of veto power to each community's representatives. Such a political compromise solution could be adopted in Syria as it is already in place within some of the leading institutions of the moderate opposition and the regime.

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9 For the differences and similarities between the Syrian and Lebanese experiences see Rosiny (2013a).

10 “Lā ghālib – lā maghlūb” was the famous formula that ended the Lebanese civil wars of 1958 and 1975–1990.

Syria's geographic distribution does not resemble that of Iraq, where each group clearly dominates one geographical region, thus creating geographical regions that roughly mirror ethnic-sectarian divisions. Nor does it resemble the close intermingling of the communities in Lebanon, where the division takes place at the level of the political institutions. A potential Syrian model would need to be a mixture of the Iraqi federal system and the Lebanese community-level model due to the specific ethnic-sectarian distribution within each region. Northern Ireland provides an example: The Good Friday agreement that ended the conflict there provided for a specific election key for Protestants and Catholics of either an ordinary majority of 50 per cent of both groups or a qualified majority of 60 per cent of the parliament that includes at least 40 per cent of each community. Such an arrangement could be transferred to the federal order in Syria, whereupon all laws would need majority or at least a certain level of approval in all provinces (*muhāfazāt*). If this were to become the case, provinces such as Tartūs, Suwaidā', and al-Hasaka, where the minorities constitute an overwhelming majority, could veto laws that contradict their interests.

The Belgian model – as well as the Lebanese model – grants ethnic, linguistic, and sectarian communities a high degree of cultural self-rule, which is not geographically limited, regarding issues such as education, language, and culture. The Syrians could adopt a similarly mobile, deterritorialised power-sharing key. This would allow for much better social mobility and domestic migration, and it would consider the situation of those communities, such as the Christian denominations, who tend to be scattered around the country. Adopting bicameralism could provide another guarantee of participation for the minorities: all ethnic groups would be represented in the Senate (Majlis al-Shuyūkh), irrespective of their size. This particular chamber would thus be given far-reaching authority for cultural and societal issues.<sup>11</sup>

The Syrian conflict is intricately connected with other regional conflicts that are awaiting a solution. The expansion of radical jihadism in the form of the Islamic State, an escalating regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran, a revived and intensified Sunna–Shia divide, and deep frustration within the population due to the failed promises of the Arab Spring are serious challenges that transcend national borders. Syria's power vacuum and the ideological radicalisation of its militias have led to a regional conflagration that threatens many neighbouring countries. This should ideally give rise to the insight among regional powers that power-sharing might be a viable exit strategy (Rosiny 2013b).

#### 4 Future Prospects for Power-Sharing in Syria

Syria's popular uprising of 2011 has become a violent civil war between actors who frame the other in heavily ethnic-sectarian terms. The excessive violence has carved the population into

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11 The "Tā'if Agreement" (1989) to end the Lebanese Civil War proposed such a bicameral parliament in order to gradually overcome political sectarianism. However, bicameralism was never implemented.

victimised groups who are estranged from and mistrust one another. In this situation of disintegration, ethnic-sectarian groups have taken up the function of solidarity communities and fortifications of identity. A mutual fear of being dominated, or even exterminated, in the event of military defeat keeps the vicious circle of violent escalation turning. Syria's self-perception as a harmonious, mosaic-like society of ethnic communities and religious sects – which was always more a myth than reality – has lost its persuasiveness. The country will need clear rules and institutional protection to find a new form of co-existence. A future Syrian constitution must grant the minorities a guaranteed share of power and the right to veto laws that violate their vital interests. It must also grant them cultural autonomy.

Our findings indicate that, in their programmes, the Syrian civil opposition parties have increasingly come to agree on the need to recognise the pluralism of Syrian society. They are increasingly aware of the pertinence of addressing ethnic-sectarian cleavages in the ongoing Syrian crisis. Still, they reject any form of power-sharing that is based on ethnic-sectarian affiliation. However, these statements should be regarded less as political visions for a future Syria and its institutions and more as programmes that are appealing for unity against the current authoritarian rule. Most of these statements were made in the period 2011–2013. Since then, events have increasingly turned the civil war into one with strong sectarian inclinations. Within this context, the political forces of the opposition have mostly lost their influence over the actual fighters on the ground. Therefore, pragmatic considerations in the direction of a “no victor, no vanquished” compromise solution could become more realistic than rigid principles in order to regain control over the main political agenda.

There has still been no discussion between communal leaders on a formalised and comprehensive power-sharing arrangement. The regulations suggested by the political parties and alliances regarding the granting of cultural rights to minorities may not meet the latter's demands for institutionalised, political guarantees against marginalisation under Arab Sunni majority rule. Furthermore, none of the programmes studied here acknowledges the Alawite community as a separate social group, which may arouse suspicion that addressing and including the other minorities would exclude the Alawites from politics in the future. A widespread discourse of extermination regarding the “Nusairī rāfida” community, which transcends the radical jihadist groups and has reached the mainstream in Syria, feeds this fear.

In this situation of deep mistrust between the communities, an agreed-upon division of power among the different identity communities may be a first step in overcoming the existential fear of being repressed or even exterminated. The formal, agreed-upon sharing of power aims to transform existential enemies into respected opponents, and potentially even into future partners. A power-sharing arrangement would foster ownership among the local stakeholders who have to negotiate the rules. As this paper has shown, such a model is not an alien idea imposed by external powers, but rather one that could build on the moderate opposition's political awareness, has precedents inside Syria, and may profit from different power-sharing experiences in the region.

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## Appendix

### List of Interviewees

Rustum Mahmoud conducted interviews between 2012 and 2014 with the following political activists and military leaders:

`Abbās, Hussān, Syrian researcher and writer, former director of the French Institute of Oriental Studies in Damascus (IFPO)

Abbūd, Hussān, commander of Harakat Ahrār al-Shām al-Islāmiyya and a former prisoner in Sidnāyā who was released shortly after the revolution started

Ahmad, Afāq, Syrian, former commander of the Air Force Intelligence in the office of the famous officer Suhail Hassan. He broke away from the regime.

`Aita, Samīr, Syrian writer and economics analyst, former director of the Arab version of the French magazine *Le Monde diplomatique*

Allūsh, Zahrān, Salafist and prisoner in Sidnāyā from 2010 until shortly after the revolution, commander of Liwā' al-Islām

Baidūn, Ahmad, Lebanese historian

Būlūt, Fāyiq, Turkish historian

Ghalyūn, Burhān, Syrian professor of political sociology at Sorbonne University, Paris, and former head of the Syrian National Council (2011–2012)

Idrīs, Salīm, Syrian Army general who defected in July 2012 and became a FSA commander

Īsā, Ahmad, commander of Suqūr al-Shām, released from Sidnāyā prison shortly after the revolution started

Kawākibī, Salām, Syrian academic and politician

Khalīl, Raidūr, field commander of the Kurdish Quwwāt Hāmiyyat al-Sha`b (YPG)

Kiddū, Sālīh, Hizb al-Yasār al-Dīmūqrātī al-Sūrī

Kīlū, Mīchel, Ittihād al-Dīmūqrātiyīn al-Sūriyīn

Qudmānī, Basma, Syrian academic

Sāghiyya, Hāzīm, Lebanese academic

Saif, Riyād, Syrian economist, former member of the Syrian parliament, president of the National Council for the Damascus Declaration since 2005

al-Sālīh, Abd al-Qādir, former grain and food trader until he joined the armed rebels in 2011 as a commander of Liwā' al-Tawhīd

Sulaimān, Ahmad, Politburo member and political relations official of the Kurdish Democratic Progressive Party in Syria

Tawīla, Abd al-Bāsīt, commander of the FSA and a defected commander of Special Forces Battalion 879

Tu`ma, Ahmad, prime minister of Syria's provisional government



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