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Ethnic Divisions and the Onset of Civil Wars in Syria

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ABSTRACT

Ethnic Divisions and the Onset of Civil Wars in Syria*

While most civil wars seem to have an economic basis, they are generally pushed by political, ethnic, and religious differences. This paper attempts to identify the drivers of the Syrian civil war of 2011 by investigating the role of ethnic divisions in starting a conflict. We integrate a variety of variables such as excluded population, power-sharing, anocracy, ethnic groups in addition to a number of economic factors. The main results indicate that ethnicity does not seem to be a very important factor in starting both the civil and ethnic conflict in Syria, but it shows that the lack of power-sharing to be the most significant factor. Therefore, where power in Syria was not inclusive and shared among different demographic segments, such as religious or urban groups, it created upheavals between different groups, as some groups disidentify with the state, paving the way to causing the conflict. Economic factors also provide an explanation of the onset of conflicts in Syria. The paper offers detailed policy suggestions that could serve as a recovery mechanism for the Syrian crisis and a preventive measurement for its reoccurrence.

JEL Classification: D74, F51, H56

Keywords: armed conflicts, ethnic conflicts, ethnic groups, power-sharing, Syria

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1. Introduction

Civil wars have predominately become the most occurring form of conflict, encouraging scholars to investigate their determinants. Driven by the fact that wars have devastated people's livelihood, economies, and their wellbeing, scholars have increasingly found interest in studying the causes of these unfortunate events, especially civil/intrastate wars that have predominantly occurred during the last few decades (Besançon, 2005). This paper seeks to identify the drivers of armed conflicts, by exploring the role of ethnic divisions in the Syrian conflict of 2011¹. In this regard, the paper primarily focuses on how the ethnic and political divisions may impact the onset of civil wars in Syria by accounting for different politically relevant ethnic groups. For instance, we define Kurds as ethnic Kurdish-speaking minority in Syria which is the second largest ethnic group in Syria with a 10% of Syria's population². Kurds primarily reside in specific regions in Syria, such as highlands northwest of Aleppo, Kobani region, Jazeera governorate and other neighborhoods such as the Hayy al-Akrad (Quarter of the Kurds) suburb of Damascus. Sunni Arab ethnic group, on the other hand, represent the majority of the remaining 90% whose first language is Arabic (Gambill, 2004).

Even though Syria witnessed a substantial improvement in economic performance as of the year 2000 when President Bashar Al-Assad (son of former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad, 1971-2000) took over power. The new economic era characterizes particularly by the substantial removal of tariffs that year and the introduction of massive privatization measures. These liberalizing measures led to relatively significant improvements in terms of living standards, and the national Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita (see Figure 1 in Appendix 1). However, the

¹ The Syrian conflict resulted in the biggest population displacement in the recent decades (i.e., Fakh and Ibrahim, 2016).

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kurds_in_Syria

fruits of this prosperity were hardly shared evenly among economic classes, widening income and wealth inequality in Syria. This, in turn, has contributed and aggravated the grievances within the Syrian society, especially regional ones between rural and urban areas (Burner, 2015). Several studies have linked extreme inequality levels in Syria to the control of the national economy by very few well-connected businessmen, especially those residing in Damascus and Aleppo (Goulden, 2011).

Several studies investigate the drivers and causes of armed conflicts. They suggest that the causes of civil conflicts range from ethnic and religious divisions, grievances, inequality, to natural resources. Esteban et al. (2012) claim that many civil wars were caused by ethnic lines, signifying that ethnic division substantially influenced social conflicts. Wimmer et al. (2009) argue that ethnically diverse societies are not inevitably vulnerable to civil conflicts. In fact, the authors maintain that marginalization and ethnic exclusion make it more probable for states to experience violent conflicts. Their findings suggest that an exclusive policy of both political and economic power can aggravate a country's problems, snowballing the chances of a civil war. Furthermore, they assert that having an armed confrontation is highly correlated with ethnically segmented power in which a greater proportion of the population is excluded from power. Likewise, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005) argue that ethnic fractionalization poses a negative effect on economic development and increases the possibility of a civil war occurring. They claim that the ethnic element can be circumstantial in many situations and it may not necessarily play a role in intensifying current upheavals. They suggest that ethnic fractionalization is not significant on its own with relation to civil wars, but it is jointly significant when added to other variables like grievances, low growth levels, and economic recessions. Similarly, Bodea and Elbadawi (2008) argue that political violence and ethnic fractionalization dampens the likelihood of long-term

economic growth. Furthermore, Fearon et al. (2007) show that states with leaders belonging to ethnic minorities are more likely to experience civil wars. The same case also applies to the government when controlled by minority groups. They examine these cases in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America.

Collier (2000) argues that grievances perpetuate conflicts, subjecting the conflict to becoming a protracted one if grievances are well-established in the society. These grievances might include political repression and ethnic and religious divisions. According to Collier (2000), these grievances exist in many low-income countries but do not usually elevate into full-blown conflicts, suggesting that these factors intensify ongoing conflicts but are not necessarily the catalyst. In recognizing the determinants of identity and non-identity civil wars, Sambanis (2001) argues that identity wars have been primarily caused by grievances. Furthermore, he suggests that ethnic heterogeneity is significantly and positively correlated with the onset of ethnic war. Humphreys and Weinstein (2008) attribute the civil war primarily to grievances, poverty, and political alienation. Also, they suggest other factors like frustration with government performance, greater vulnerability to political manipulation and frustration with peaceful protests. The authors argue that the involuntary recruitment of military mobilization appears to be a fundamental contributing factor in these types of civil wars. Dunne and Tian (2016) examine 134 countries by using the general greed-grievance model and find that conflicts have been usually caused by grievances, but greed amongst those benefiting from the war economically, socially and politically, is a fundamental factor that sustains these conflicts.

Finally, Besançon (2005) states that traditionally deprived groups have a higher tendency to engage in political and military conflicts, suggesting that civil wars and intrastate wars are only the results of various social and economic flaws in the status quo. He argues that having greater

political and social equality are among the best mitigating strategies when it comes to civil wars. The author recommends that institutional inclusion is a salient factor in mitigating civil wars, by addressing political inequalities and by maintaining equitable social contract between those governed and those governing. As for natural resources, Buhaug and Rød (2006) maintain that civil conflicts in West and Central Africa have been caused by several factors, including ethnic divisions, terrain and specific natural resources like diamonds. Governmental conflicts were found to be more driven by contextual events, such as famine and drought than by local geographical factors.

In this context, this paper seeks to study the drivers of the onset of civil wars by examining the role of ethnic divisions in the Syrian war of 2011. As discussed above, it is apparent that grievance, which can be manifested by several variables such as excluded population and power-sharing plays a role in the uprising of this civil war. Another potential driver of the revolt is the dominance of a partially democratic regime in the pre-conflict era of the Syrian rebellion, which is often referred to as an anocracy regime. Such systems are generally prone more to experience instability as their elections are built on ethnic parties contesting for their self-interests (Bodea et al., 2017). Therefore, we incorporate several variables to capture the demographic divisions and the level of political participation among different ethnic groups to explain the ongoing war. Specifically, we include variables such as the share excluded population, power-sharing, anocracy type of political regime, political junior partner, powerless political groups, and different ethnic groups in the country. We also control for a number of relevant macroeconomic variables that are utilized in the literature to have an impact on civil wars such as oil production per capita, GDP per capita and labor force participation rate. The included macroeconomic variables are control variables that aim to capture the changes in the labor market, since wars tend to drain labor markets

by offering an alternative path of employment outside the labor market. While several previous approaches of tackling the issue included a limited number of determinant variables, this paper contributes to the literature by utilizing a comprehensive approach that incorporates a variety of indicators for ethnic groups spanning over the period 1946-2010. Accordingly, the results obtained serve in establishing a concise policy framework that focuses on power-sharing avoiding policies that could lead to experience such prolonged conflicts.

2. Pre-conflict Social Contract in Syria

This section provides a number of insights that shaped the pre-2011 social contract in Syria. The accumulation of several factors, mainly over the last five decades, resulted in a non-inclusive political and economic regime in Syria. This, in turn, caused the breakdown of the existing social contract.

2.1. Political Aspects

Before dwelling into the details of the social contract's breakdown, it should be noted that the reasons behind the social contract failure discussed here are specific to Syria. As Tzifakis (2006) mentions, the nation's failure is context based in terms of its reasons, process, implications, and resolution. Focusing on the Syrian political dimension, it seems that it is characterized by the absence of power-sharing and the existence of non-inclusive governance. In fact, these factors are due to a number of historical events.

During the Ottoman Empire, the dominant ethnic/religious group was Sunni, while the other ethnic categories constituted the powerless political groups. Alawis, which were among the minorities in Syria, were underprivileged and marginalized. However, after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, and as the French mandate took over the Middle East in general, and Syria in specific, the ethnic and religious dominance had changed (Makdisi, 2002). After being suppressed

by the Sunni majority, the Alawis were given the opportunity to join the French colony (Hassan, 2016). This had prepared to a new Syrian era ruled by the Alawis. To be more specific, the author shows that as soon as the French mandate collapsed, the Syrian government was ruled by the Alawis starting 1963. This had threatened the social contract since the minority group, which is the Alawis, was in charge of the political system despite the fact that the dominant religious sect has been always Sunni. In 1971, Hafez Al-Assad, who is coming from an Alawite ethnic group, became President of Syria. Hence, this contributed to the emergence of a primary non-inclusive governance in Syria.

One facet of the non-inclusive governance under the Assad's institution was the regime's discrimination against the other ethnic groups (Balanche, 2006). Although Syria is a presidential country, it has been ruled by the same family forming an anocracy regime since 1971. Al-Assad's son, Bashar, came to power in 2000, yet the presidential transition after the death of Hafez Al-Assad was not democratic. As described by Stacher (2011), the constitution was amended to decrease the minimum presidential age to ensure the eligibility of Bahsar Al-Assad, in addition to prohibiting the opposition groups from entering Syria through closing the airport and the Lebanese border. These procedures were the stepping stone to anocracy and had further intensified political exclusion. Indeed, as Bormann et al. (2019) point out, the exclusion among ethnic groups, which abolished inclusive power-sharing, activated the intrastate war in Syria. In fact, power-sharing seems to be an indispensable dimension in determining the success of any social contract because even in the presence of inclusive economic opportunities, without political participation, the social contract is at risk of collapsing (Makdisi and Soto, 2019).

Another reason that caused the failure of the social contract is the development of a complex Syrian political identity. The first facet is the national political identity. Although

demonstrations began in specific regions in 2011, such as poor Sunni neighborhoods, they had national demands as protestors spoke for the whole Syrian people (Phillips, 2015). Second, the political identity has a sectarian dimension. According to Ismail (2011), sectarianism caused the national identity to fail, and thus national opposition to fail because while Alawis supported the political regime, most Sunnis and Kurds joined the opposition. Due to the emergence of the intertwined national and sectarian political identities, social contract broke; consequently, some tend to characterize it as a “semi-sectarian” civil war.

There are other factors that could explain the failure behind the social contract. First, the geopolitical risk is manifested by Iraq’s civil war in 2003. By that time, the majority of Syrians, which were powerless politically excluded Sunni groups, the aforementioned war intensified the sectarian tension. Second, third party intervention and external support has affected the rise of the intra conflict. In fact, the Sunni opposition group was supported by the Gulf countries and the international community, specifically after the severe violent military response of the political regime to the peaceful protests (Hassan, 2016). Therefore, sectarianism, political and economic exclusion, absence of power-sharing, wealth gap, external intervention are the main causes of the downfall of the social contract. Bashar Al-Assad government’s pursuit of anti-US policies in the region, particularly after the Iraq war of 2003, and its backing of a pro-Hamas and Iran practices, led to the imposition of severe international economic sanctions, that in turn negatively affected prospects of economic growth and further aggravated inequality levels (Friberg and Lyme, 2012). It is worth noting that many of Syria’s economically marginalized rural areas were the first to experience the 2011 uprising, signaling the salient role that marginalization has played in igniting the Syrian crisis. The strongly present graft rampant in public institutions further consolidated these grievances, by offering loopholes for those who could take advantage of prevailing practices

in such institutions, increasing the income inequality gap and leaving the average citizen with very little means to maneuver (Makdisi and Soto, 2019). Despite having a relatively well-vested secular system, sectarian prejudice in appointments to public positions, particularly in the army and intelligence has been strongly present, compounding sectarian tensions, especially among marginalized groups, which further intensified the resentment against the existing situation. This systematically disregarded the rural areas of Al-Hasakah and Qamichli. Suffering from extreme underdevelopment, and poorly designed infrastructure, oil-rich provinces, such as Deir ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah, were apparently barred from managing their own affairs (Friberg and Lyme, 2012).

2.2. Economic Aspects

Moving to the economic understandings of the pre-conflict social contract, there exists evidence of severe inequality, favoritism, and unsustainable reforms. The failure of the social contract in Syria provides further evidence on the interconnection among economic and sectarian factors in weakening the social ties (Karakaya, 2016). The oppression against ethnic groups continued, and sometimes it has been amplified under the new regime. The importance of economic inclusion, in terms of equal employment opportunities, that Makdisi and Soto (2019) emphasize on for the persistence of any social contract, was absent in the Syrian pre-conflict era.

During the governance of Bashar Al-Assad, economic opportunities have not been equally accessible by the Syrians. In other words, most of the significant job opportunities were mainly given to the Al-Assad's relatives and other Alawis in order to ensure loyalty to the ruling family (Ismail, 2011). As a result, wealth has been shared by Alawis as well as other Christians and Sunnis who strongly support the political system (Phillips, 2015), at a time were Syria has been suffering already from high unemployment rates. Moreover, the reforms that Al-Assad implemented, such as cutting subsidies, have intensified the income and economic gap because the main ethnic group

that was directly affected by this policy is the Sunni, as this group forms a major part of the population (Phillips, 2015). He notes that most of the Sunni population, who usually work in the agricultural sector, were subject to financial losses since they were no longer receiving monetary support from the government, given the problems that already existed in this sector such as droughts (Phillips, 2015). In a nutshell, economic favoritism, which had a sectarian dimension, contributed to the breakdown of the social contract and resulted in civil war. According to Alesina et al. (2016), the civil war occurrence in Arab Spring countries, that include Syria, is associated with high levels of ethnic inequalities. This ethnic favoritism was one reason behind the collapse of the social contract.

Despite the incidence of positive economic growth in Syria that started in 2000, the governmental policies had a vital role in the persistence of inequality. Based on the findings of Abu-Ismaïl et al. (2016), the Syrian pre-conflict economic growth between 1997 and 2007, which targeted the urban more than the rural areas, was not a pro-poor growth. They show that poor Syrians, who usually reside in rural areas, benefited the least from the generated economic revenues under the Al-Assad's institution. The authors reveal that even when the economic growth turned to be pro-poor after 2007, inequality has persisted in the regions that were excluded from the government's interventions. For example, northeastern Syria witnessed a significant government intervention. This implicitly indicates that ensuring economic growth solely does not guarantee equality. The pre-conflict social contract in Syria lacked the harmonious relationship between sustainable growth and institutional inclusion of all citizens practically in terms of reforms.

3. Data

In order to examine the drivers of civil wars in Syria, we use the Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset (Wimmer et al., 2009 and Cederman et al., 2010). This dataset represents all politically relevant ethnic groups and the extent of their representation in state power. The dataset covers 157 countries and 758 groups across the globe covering the period 1946-2010. It measures the degree of power-sharing, political discrimination, and exclusion from power. In this paper, we focus on the conflicts and ethnopolitical related variables for Syria for the period that ended on the eve of the Arab Spring. That is, our dataset for Syria covers the period from 1946 to 2010. The sample size of our data extends over a period of 65 years for 5 ethnic groups incorporating 325 observations at the country level where the data measures how members of the ethnic categories have access to executive-level state power.

3.1. Variable definitions

We use two dependent variables in order to identify the factors that may lead to armed conflict. These variables are defined as follows: 1) the onset of armed conflicts which takes the value of one if a new war starts within a year and zero otherwise, and 2) the onset of ethnic conflict which takes the value of one if a new ethnic war starts and zero otherwise.³

We integrate a variety of explanatory variables to understand the likelihood of conflict onset. These variables are classified into four drivers related to ethnic politics, ethnic groups, group representations in power, and economic factors.⁴

³ Our data spanning over the period 1946-2010 in which a number of conflicts were observed in Syria: 1954 (coup d'état), 1963 (coup d'état), 1966 (coup d'état), 1979-1982 (Islamist uprising in Syria). The latest conflict commonly known as the Arab Spring has started in 2010 and is still ongoing.

⁴ We use the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) to check the level of multicollinearity among our variables in the empirical model. According to Kutner et al. (2004), if the VIF's value is above 10, it indicates a multicollinearity problem. The results of the VIF test are reported in Table 2. We can conclude that our variables lack the problem of multicollinearity, given that most scores presented are below 10 and with an average of 3.44.

1. *Ethnic politics factors.* This category includes three variables that are defined as ethnopolitical determinants of conflict. (i) *Excluded population* variable measures the share of excluded populations relative to politically relevant ethnic groups. In other words, it is the population segment that is excluded from the central government as a percentage of the total population. It is worth mentioning that the increase in the portion of the excluded population bears a greater effect on the probability of conflict occurring at relatively lower levels of exclusion than at higher ones. Therefore, this paper employs a variable that is a logged transformation of the described variable. (ii) *Power-sharing* variable is also used in the empirical analysis to capture any arrangement that divides executive power among leaders who claim to represent particular ethnic groups and who have real influence on political decision making. *Power-sharing* measures the degree of center segmentation that is typically associated with higher conflict probability, by calculating the number of groups in a power-sharing arrangement that divides executive power among leaders who have real influence on political decision making amongst ethnic elites. This is done by assigning a dummy variable to capture how centralized is the government. Power-sharing partners typically range from 1 to 14 in most cases. (iii) *Anocracy* variable equals one if a country was ruled by one person/family for a given year and equals zero otherwise.
2. *Ethnic groups factors.* We include the different ethnic groups that exist in Syria and are in the power at different levels. More specifically, we use five variables which are *Alawi*, *Christians*, *Druze*, *Sunni Kurds*, and *Sunni Arabs*. These variables capture certain demographic groups in terms of either religion or ethnicity or both are used to assess the possible impact of ethnic/religious characteristics on civil wars.

3. *Group representations in power related factors.* We control for three variables that reflect the degree of how group representatives participate in power. We include: (i) *Political junior partner* variable is when the group representatives participate as junior partners in government, (ii) *Powerless political groups* variable is when the group representatives are not in central nor regional government (i.e., representatives do not hold any political power or do not have influence on decision making), and (iii) *Autonomy* variable is when the group representatives dominate regional/provincial government.
4. *Economic factors.* We rely on four macroeconomic indicators to assess the impact of economic determinants of the conflicts in Syria: (i) *Oil production per capita* variable provides a measure to how endowed a country is with natural resources and is used to assess the impact of resources on conflicts. In other words, it reflects the degree of influential participation in the governments based on the number and importance of the positions controlled by group members, (ii) *GDP per capita* which depicts national economic development level, (iii) *labor force participation rate* and (iv) *military expenditures as a percentage of GDP*. In addition, the outflow of capital, war-caused destruction, and the deteriorating exchange rate are all factors that affected GDP per capita. Accordingly, incorporating GDP per capita is a vital element for capturing the economic performance of the Syrian economy before 2011. These economic variables are taken from the World Development Indicators (WDI) database of the World Bank.

3.2. Sample characteristics

Table 1 shows the summary statistics of the entire sample used in our empirical study. We observe that the share of the excluded population, relative to politically relevant ethnic groups mean, rests at 7.88% of our sample. In other words, 7.88% of our population's sample is excluded. We also

find that the power-sharing mean is 32%, which reflects the fact that power is not equally shared among leaders who claim to represent particular ethnic groups. Also, the descriptive statistics indicate that anocracy's mean is 90%, reflecting the fact that the country was mostly ruled by one person/family. The statistics on political group representation shows that only 24% of representations are occupied by junior partner positions in the central government. The statistics on powerless political group variable show that 53% of group elites are not represented in the central nor regional government, while they show that only 2% group representatives dominate regional/provincial government. Finally, we observe that the average value of GDP per capita is approximately USD 2.55 thousand. The average labor force participation rate is around 44.37%. The military expenditure as a percentage of GDP scores a mean of 9.96% over the sample period.

Figure 2 shows the excluded population means by ethnopolitical group over the period 1946-2010. We observe that Alawis' is the group with the least excluded population, scoring a mean of around 0.09 compared to other groups. Moving into Figure 3, which illustrates the distribution of group representatives that occupy junior partner position, we find that Christians are the most ethnopolitical group represented by junior partner positions in the central government, followed by Druze, Alawi, Sunni Kurds, and Sunni Arabs. Figure 4 shows the average of powerless population, it indicates that Alawis' is the least group with powerless population compared to other ethnopolitical groups.

4. Empirical Results

This section presents first the impact of selected variables on the probability of wars occurring in Syria followed by a discussion and policy recommendations. Table 3 gives an overview of the results, while Table 4 (for the armed conflict onset) and Table 5 (for the ethnic war onset), in Appendix 2, show the detailed results along with the coefficients and significance levels. Table 4

shows the results when the armed conflict onset is used as a dependent variable, while in Table 5 the onset of ethnic conflicts is used as the dependent variable. It should be noted that in Tables 4 and 5, we present eight different models where we progress from a basic model in column 1 to gradually the full model in column 8.

Table 3. Overview of results

| | Armed conflict onset | Ethnic conflict onset |
|--|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Power sharing | - - - | - - - |
| Anocracy | +++ | +++ |
| Alawi | | +++ |
| Druze | ++ | +++ |
| Sunni Kurds | - - - | - - - |
| Political junior partner | | - - - |
| Autonomy: dominate regional government | - - - | |
| Oil production per capita | +++ | - - - |
| GDP per capita | - - - | - - - |
| Military expenditure (% of GDP) | +++ | +++ |

Notes: - and + indicate negative/positive relationship. Number of signs indicates level of significance (Statistical significance: *=10%; **=5%; ***=1%). The detailed results are presented in Tables 4 and 5 in Appendix 2.

4.1. Armed conflict onset

In column 1, which is the basic model that captures the implications of the *ethnic politics variables* for the likelihood to start a civil war, we include three variables: *excluded population*, *power-sharing*, and *anocracy*. We find that the *excluded population* variable, that captures the extent and the proportion of the alienated population, does not determine the onset of armed conflicts. However, *power-sharing* is an important factor in preventing armed conflicts while *anocracy* turns out to be a strong driver of armed conflicts in Syria.

In column 2, we only include the four ethnic groups' variables (Alawi, Christian, Druze and Sunni Kurds); these are the *ethnic group variables*. Please note that the *Sunni Arabs* group is the reference group that we compare the results with and it is excluded from the model. We find that all the variables seem to be crucial factors in avoiding conflict onset relative to the *Sunni Arabs*

group. *Druze* and *Alawi* ethnic groups have a lower marginal impact on the armed conflict onset than the *Sunni Kurds* and *Christians* ethnic groups.

Moving to column 3, we include three new variables reflecting how different groups are represented in the power; these are the *group representations in power variables*. Specifically, we include the following: 1) *political junior partner* if the group representatives occupy junior partner position in central government, 2) *powerless political group* if the group representatives not in central nor regional government, and 3) *autonomy group* if the group representatives dominate regional/provincial government. We find that only *autonomy* is an important determinant for the onset of armed conflict, while the other two variables do not exhibit any impact on the civil armed conflicts in Syria.

The above results remain the same through columns 4 to 7. Moving into the full model (column 8), we add macroeconomic variables which are the oil production per capita, an interaction term between oil production and excluded population, GDP per capita, labor force participation rate, and military expenditure. We also find that power-sharing remains an essential determinant of the onset of armed conflict. Nevertheless, the notable contribution of anocracy to the Syrian armed conflict is preserved across all models, revealing that anocracy is a strong determinant of the civil war in Syria. As for the ethnic groups, only *Druze* and *Sunni Kurds* ethnic groups continue to be vastly correlated with the onset of armed conflict; however, the effect of the *Druze* sect on conflict occurrence becomes positive while that of *Sunni Kurds* ethnic group remains negative compared to *Sunni Arab* ethnic group. Moreover, we find that there is no association between the *Christians* ethnic group and the armed conflict onset in comparison with the *Sunni Arab* ethnic group. Relative to column 3, the effects of *political junior partner*, *powerless political group*, and *autonomy dominate regional government* remain the same.

Finally, we find that oil production per capita has a strong impact on triggering armed conflict onset. This may indicate that oil production by itself does not trigger war unless accompanied with inequalities between the people that is revealed by the interaction term presented in columns 7 and 8. The results also show that GDP per capita plays a critical role in alleviating these conflicts. Similarly, there is a noticeable correlation between the escalated government's military expenditures or oil production per capita and the onset of armed wars. The latter association is consistent with Buhaug and Rød (2006) findings in West and Central Africa.

In sum, our findings show that (i) *power-sharing* and *anocracy* regime, (ii) *Sunni Kurds and Druze* ethnic groups, and (iii) *oil production per capita* and *GDP per capita* are the most significant determinants of the onset of armed conflict in Syria. The next section investigates the impact of the same variables on the probability of ethnic conflict onset.

4.2. Ethnic conflict onset

In column 1, we can observe that the *excluded population* variable, which captures the extent and the proportion of the alienated population, is highly correlated with the onset of ethnic conflict, and this solid connection is persistent in column 4. However, the following correlation becomes negligible in the remaining models.

As for *power-sharing*, its association with the onset of ethnic conflict, across all models, provides evidence on the importance of this variable in preventing or limiting the possibilities of ethnic conflicts in Syria. In fact, a negative remarkable effect of *power-sharing* on the onset of armed war conflict has been also shown in the previous section as well. This indicates that power-sharing is an indispensable player in any conflict resolution scenario for Syria, which is aligned with the United Nations' recommendation on a convenient resolution for Syria involving power-sharing (Fakhoury, 2019).

In addition, our results indicate the existence of a strong correlation between *anocracy* and the onset of ethnic conflicts across all the models. Thus, *anocracy* seems to play a substantial role in sparking off both armed conflict wars and ethnic conflicts. This result is consistent with the history and political regime of Syria because it has been ruled by the same family (Al-Assad) since the 70s. The ruling family belongs to the Alawi sect, which has been a minority group in Syria, while the dominant ethnic group (Sunni) has been excluded from the regime (Balanche, 2006). In this context, and if this regime of excluding majorities and including minorities, it is expected for ethnic civil wars to have a higher occurrence probability. In fact, a scenario that encompasses power-sharing would implicitly limit the survival of the Syrian anocratic regime.

Other variables that represent our population's ethnic groups were added to the model. Similar to the armed conflict, we find that being member of Alawi, Christians, Druze, and Sunni Kurds ethnic groups reduce the probability of an ethnic conflict in Syria Compared to Sunni Arabs ethnic group. We infer that for any suggested new social contract to be effective, it should strongly account for the role of Sunni ethnic group in decreasing the likelihood of the onset of ethnic civil wars. *Druze* and *Alawi* ethnic groups have a lower marginal impact on the armed conflict onset than the *Sunni Kurds* and *Christians* ethnic groups.

Moving to group representative variables, i.e. *political junior partner*, *powerless political group*, and *autonomy dominate region government*, we find that these variables and the onset of ethnic wars are not important drivers of the ethnic conflict in all the models except for column 8 where only the correlation of *political junior partner* with the ethnic Syrian ethnic war is important.

In the full model (column 8), *oil production per capita*, *GDP per capita*, and *military expenditure* all heavily assist in hampering the occurrence of ethnic clashes in Syria. On the other hand, *labor force participation rate* and the *interaction of oil production with the excluded*

population are both unnecessary factors for the onset of the Syrian ethnic conflict. As indicated, our results stress on the strong ties existing between *GDP per capita* and the onset of ethnic conflict. According to the World Bank database⁵, the GDP per capita was roughly increasing between 1990 and 2010, so one would expect the probability of civil wars to decrease more in Syria; however, this was not the case. One possible justification for this is that inequality was growing in parallel with economic growth and wealth was not shared equally, therefore, triggering the civil war that erupted recently in Syria. This is consistent with the apriori expectations suggested by Burner (2015) on how the prosperity of higher national GDP post-2000 that was not shared equally led to widening the economic classes' gap.

Our findings for ethnic conflict show that (i) *power-sharing* and *anocracy* regime, (ii) *Alawi, Sunni Kurds and Druze* ethnic groups, and (iii) *oil production per capita* and *GDP per capita* are a significant determinant of the onset of ethnic conflict in Syria. Accordingly, our findings will be discussed in the following section within previously established work on civil conflicts to draw relevant policy implications.

4.3. Discussion and policy implications

Acknowledging that the nature of Syrian latest civil war in terms of designing a post-civil war reconstruction plan, the foundations of this plan should be multidimensional that considers three necessary elements: political, economic, and sociological (Collier et al., 2008; Makdisi and Soto, 2019). They show that in terms of sociological factors, ethnic and income inequalities have aggravated the conflict in Syria. Their arguments agree with our results that suggest that power-sharing and anocracy regime in Syria are the most important drivers for the onset of armed conflict and ethnic conflict which led to the failure of the Syrian social contract. Accordingly, a new social

⁵ Retrieved from <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.PP.CD?locations=SY-LB>

contract should be built in line with these results. As argued by Louis (2019), the optimal solution would be ensuring that the power-sharing is inclusive, and that the aim of the government is a better future of the country. Sambanis (2019) differentiates between three forms of power-sharing (inclusive, dispersive and constraining) and discusses the necessary conditions for each type of power-sharing and their implications for the reoccurrence of a conflict in the future. Inclusive power-sharing implies that different Syrian groups get to participate in the future decision making as they become part of the prevailing governmental system. This is also in line with our results that showed a negative and strongly significant effect between power-sharing and the onset of a civil conflict.

The implementation of this potential scenario in the post conflict transition requires the participation of the international community such as the international organizations to assist in reconstruction plans. This solution is feasible if it guarantees, for instance, the integration of all ethnic groups into the Syrian regime in order to reduce the probability of conflict occurring. Given this scenario, parties that would abide by the contract are the excluded population, which are the Sunnis and other religious minorities. Nevertheless, there are two major obstacles for the implementation of this solution. First, current political elites in power (Alawis) might not accept it because they could have fears of the history repeating itself. In other words, they are afraid of becoming excluded and discriminated against if the Sunnis start retrieving their power again due to their inclusion. Although a power-sharing scheme that counts on the inclusion of the excluded groups may reduce the likelihood of conflict, concurrently it will amplify the possibility of indoor governmental fighting (Bormann et al., 2019). A reasonable explanation behind this issue is that the conflict, that used to exist outside the governmental boundaries between the current parties participating in the government and the excluded, will most likely be carried on to government

after the participation of the excluded ethnicities in the government (Roessler, 2011). If so, this may indicate a democracy deficit as articulated by Elbadawi and Makdisi (2017). The second barrier falls in the international context as it is not only the decision of the current political regime to approve or reject the suggested social contract. For instance, Al-Assad's political regime would account for the views of its international supporters, so it is rather a complex situation involving numerous players and multiple interrelated regional and global agendas.

Plans for the reconstruction of the country should, therefore, critically view the dynamics of Syria's social and economic policies in the years prior to 2011 which noticeably enhanced the power of small ethnic group of well-connected, resulting in crony capitalism and intensifying inequality levels. This suggestion is in line with different studies that investigated the effect of religion on the onset of armed conflict. Basedau et al. (2016) show that armed conflict might be nourished by several religious components such as grievances of religious groups against each other. Similarly, Humphreys (2003) shows that countries suffering from grievous inequality among their different ethnic components are more likely prone to experience conflict. Accordingly, efforts should be focused on rebuilding while increasing equality and not depriving large sectors of society of the benefits of rebuilding the country. This needs to be fundamental to follow knowing the current reconstruction dynamics.

In addition to enhancing power-sharing between the different ethnic groups and the ethnopolitical configurations of power, policy-makers and politicians should respect the demands of their citizens by paying more attention to their daily suffering. In this regard, Fakhoury (2019) refers to the weak responsiveness of political personnel to people's demands as a governance trap and shows that it's strongly correlated to political sectarianism. Hence besides enhancing power-sharing and taking note of what people are demanding, it is essential that policy-makers take all

the necessary measures that lessen the sectarian influence on the functioning of the country. On top of those measures is ensuring that proficiency is the only metric to be taken into consideration when people are to be hired in the public sector which suffers from highly corrupted acts. Another important measure is the enforcement of the rule of law. Fearon (2011) studies the effect of four out of six of the International Country Risk Guide (ICRG) governance indicators on the onset of a civil war. The four measures are: “investment profile,” “corruption,” “rule of law”, and “bureaucratic quality”. Fearon (2011) concludes that all four measures are effective in reducing the probability of war, with the rule of law and corruption being the sturdiest among the four indicators. Similar results were obtained by (Makdisi and Soto, 2019) who argue that corruption was a key driver behind the Arab uprisings in the MENA region. Leaning forward on the findings of this research, Fearon (2011) shows that the improvement in the investment profile indicator – defined by the ICRG to be a measure of the political stability of a country – lessens the possibility of the occurrence of a civil war. Accordingly, policy-makers are encouraged to ensure the existence of long-term political stability which in turn stimulates investments as a result of an increase in investors’ confidence in the country. This is particularly relevant for Syria to attract foreign investments that will aid in the restoration process of the country’s infrastructure.

5. Concluding remarks

Intrastate and civil wars have been the most dominant form of conflict for many years. Studies have been focused on examining the factors of these types of conflicts and suggest that the causes range from ethnic to religious tensions. The literature appears to suggest that mitigating various types of grievances and adopting inclusive policies can greatly reduce the risk of civil wars. This paper tackled the Syrian unrest that began in 2011, following the spread of the Arab Spring uprisings that prompted pro-democracy movements in many parts of the Arab World. This unrest

developed into a full-blown civil war that has been fueled by political repression, uneven distribution of wealth, the drought of 2006, upheavals among different religious and ethnic groups, among other factors.

This paper attempted to determine the drivers behind the onset of civil wars using the case of the Syrian civil war of 2011. It focuses on investigating the role of ethnic divisions in starting this war. We integrate a variety of explanatory variables, such as excluded population, power-sharing, anocracy regime, different ethnic groups, groups' representation in the government, oil production per capita, GDP per capita and labor force participation rate. Our empirical results, utilizing sample from 1946 to 2010, showed that ethnic divisions did not seem to be an important variable in starting the conflict in Syria, but mainly it is the lack of power-sharing appears to be the most important driver for the onset of starting a conflict.

Due to the complexity of the Syrian civil war Syrian's civil war, the consideration of a multidimensional development plan is deemed crucial to tackle the numerous problems the country is currently facing in order to achieve a comprehensive plan that caters to all these problems (Elbadawi et al., 2008; Makdisi and Soto, 2019). Accordingly, the paper suggests a number of recommendations emerged from our findings and discussions presented in the previous section:

1. **Power-sharing:** The lack of a power-sharing plan that achieves inclusive economic growth and development ignited the civil war in Syria. Hence, a power-sharing plan is crucially needed to restore peace and prosperity back to the country by establishing a novel and inclusive social contract.
2. **Further research on power-sharing:** It was recognized in the literature that a power-sharing plan suffers from a critical drawback represented by the appearance of indoor governmental fighting. This may indicate a gap in the power-sharing structure which in turn opens the door

for further research and investigation to better understand the necessary and sufficient conditions that ensure a stable long-term power-sharing.

3. **International assistance:** The participation of international organizations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is necessary for the reconstruction era to ensure a successful and fast economic recovery and to slow down the continuous devaluation in the Syrian Lira.
4. **Respect the demand of the public:** The weak responsiveness of politicians to the public demands is recognized as a governance trap that is directly linked to political sectarianism. Thus policy-makers and political personnel should take into account all the necessary procedures that ensure the openness of politicians to the public calls.
5. **Corruption:** Corruption can be abundant in different forms, among of which is the political highering (i.e., clientelism) of people in the public sector for electoral purposes. The consequences of such type of acts range from increasing the hatred between the accepted un-proficient politically affiliated personnel and the rejected proficient but non-politically affiliated people. Accordingly, it is recommended that politicians be banned from practicing these acts by ensuring the legislation and implementation of severe limitations on political highering.
6. **Rule of law:** The absence of rule of law enhances the belief of injustice within society. Consequently, the implementation of the rule of law should be taken into consideration to enhance fairness and reduce conflicts. A necessary element that preserves the rule of law is having a strong and independent judiciary system that guards the court judges against being vulnerable to political pressures that deviates them away from practicing justice objectively.

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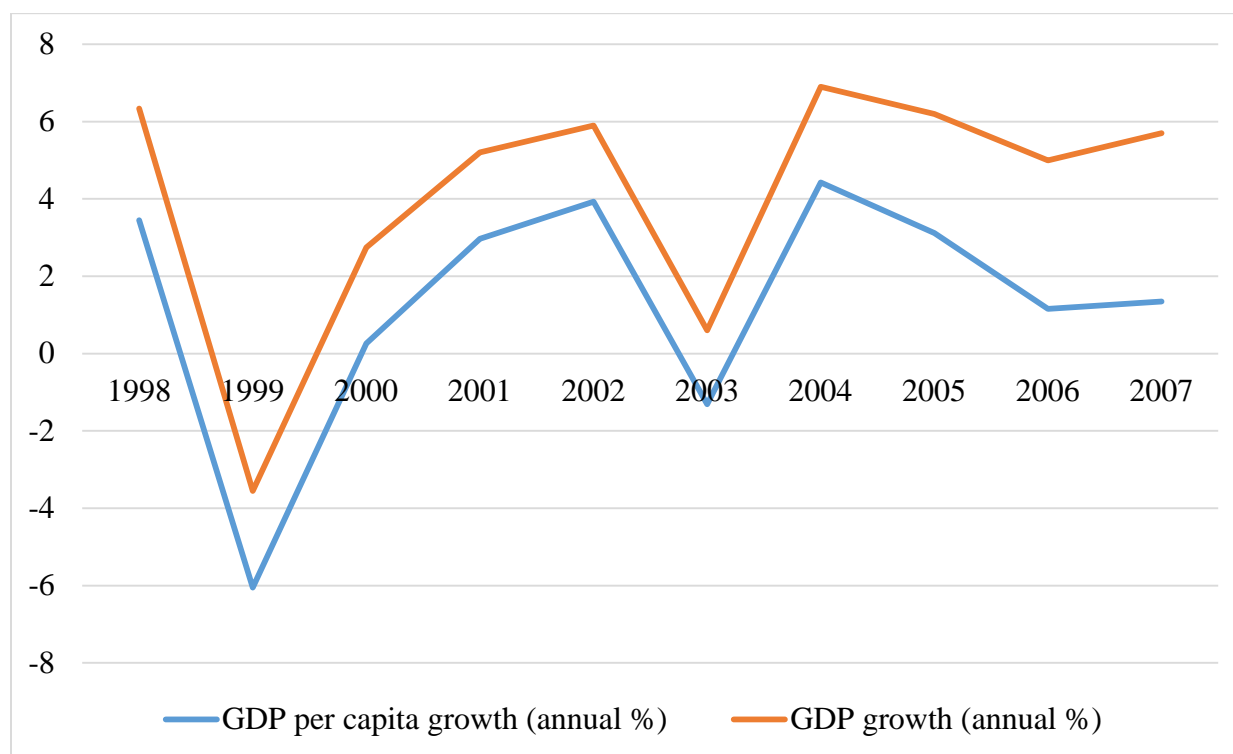
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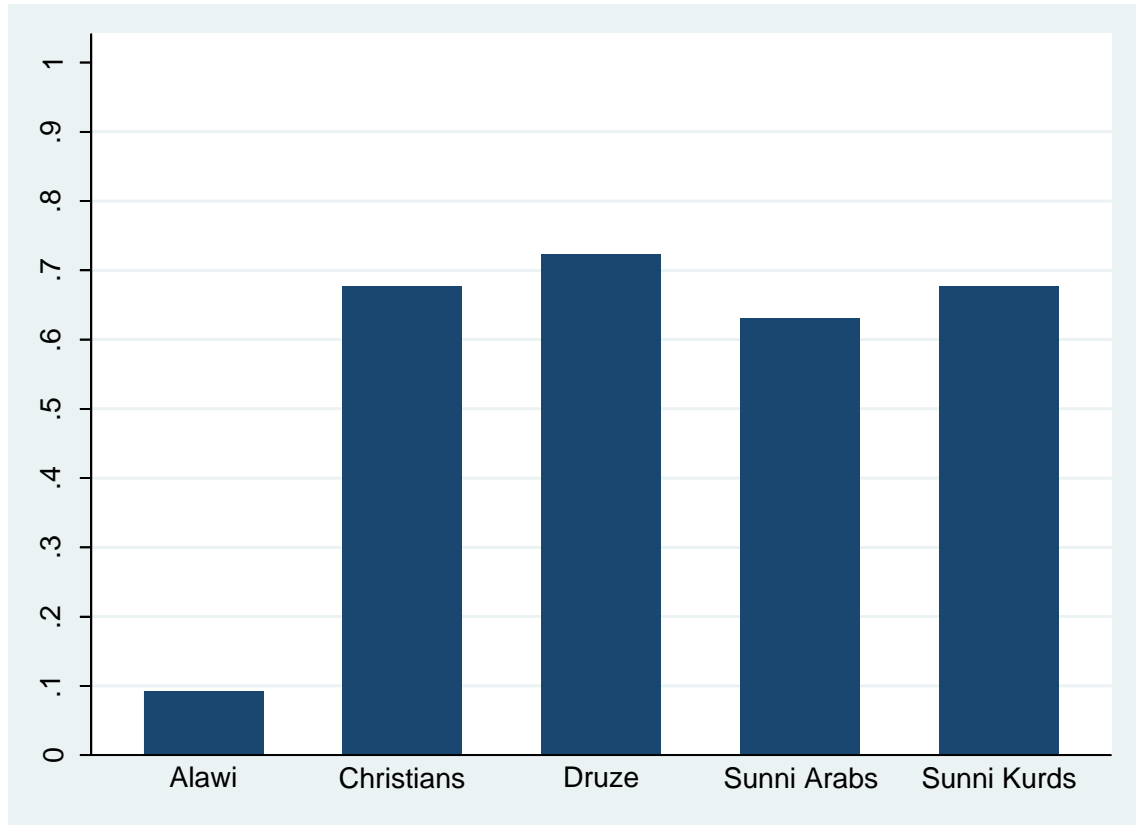
Appendix 1

Figure 1: GDP per capita and GDP growth in Syria, 1990-2007



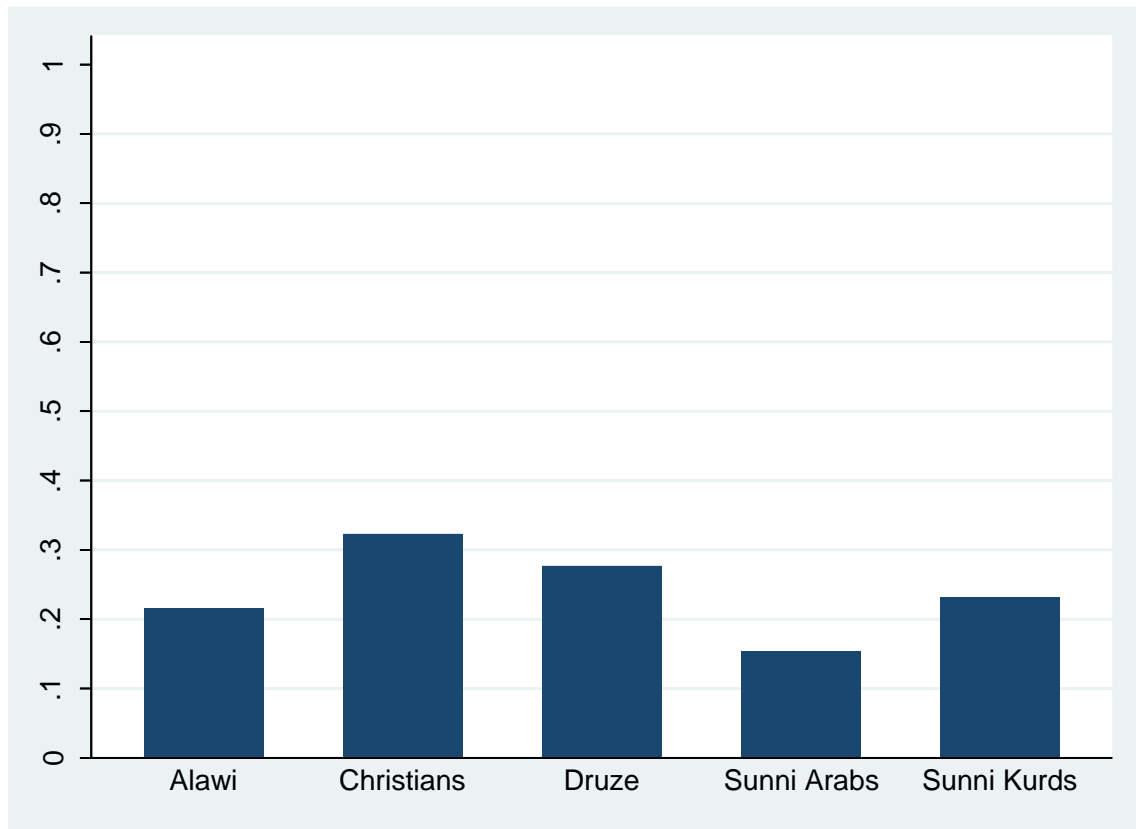
Source: World Bank Development Indicators (WDI).

Figure 2: Excluded population means by ethnopolitical group in Syria, 1946-2010



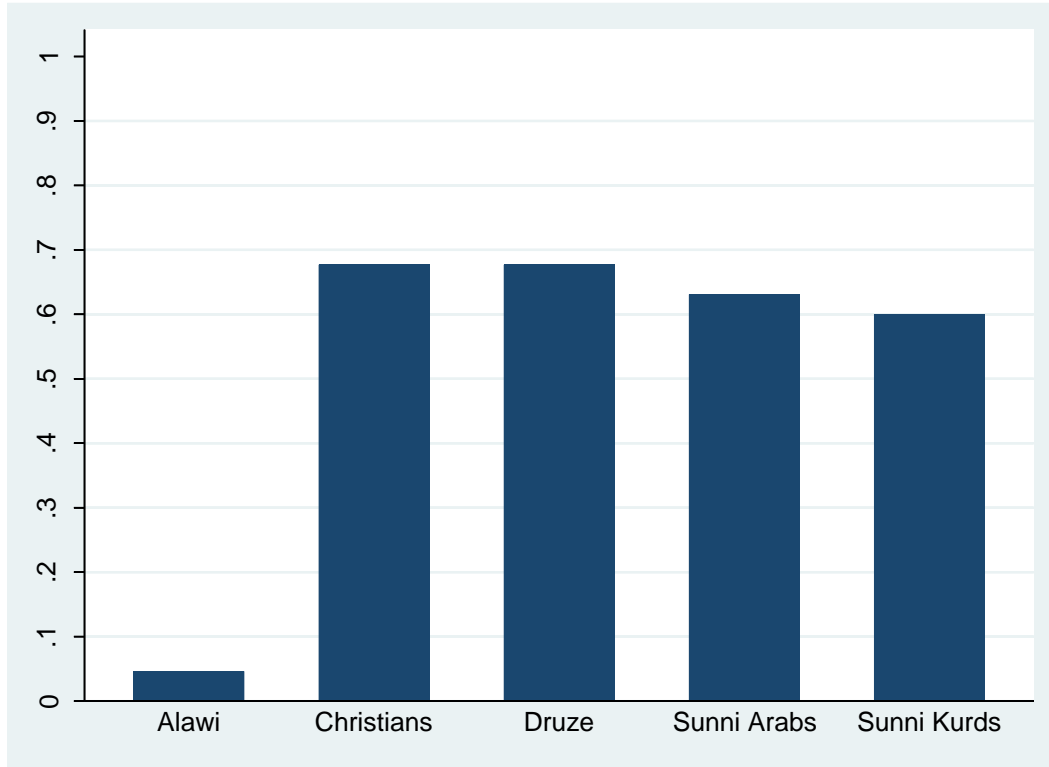
Source: Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset.

Figure 3: Political junior partners means by ethnopolitical group in Syria, 1946-2010



Source: Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset.

Figure 4: Powerless population by ethnopolitical group in Syria, 1946-2010



Source: Ethnic Power Relations (EPR) dataset.

Appendix 2

Table 1: Summary statistics of variables, 1946-2010

| | Mean | Standard Deviation |
|---|-------|--------------------|
| Dependent variables | | |
| Onset of civil war (dummy) | 0.03 | 0.17 |
| Onset of ethnic war (dummy) | 0.05 | 0.27 |
| Independent variables | | |
| <i>Ethnic politics variables</i> | | |
| Excluded population | 7.88 | 11.29 |
| Power sharing | 0.32 | 0.47 |
| Anocracy | 0.90 | 0.30 |
| <i>Ethnic group variables</i> | | |
| Alawi | 0.20 | 0.40 |
| Christians | 0.20 | 0.40 |
| Druze | 0.20 | 0.40 |
| Sunni Kurds | 0.20 | 0.40 |
| Sunni Arabs | 0.20 | 0.40 |
| <i>Group representations in power variables</i> | | |
| Political junior partner | 0.24 | 0.43 |
| Powerless political group | 0.53 | 0.50 |
| Autonomy: dominate regional government | 0.02 | 0.13 |
| <i>Economic variables</i> | | |
| Oil production per capita | 0.82 | 0.71 |
| GDP per capita | 2.55 | 0.76 |
| Labor force participation rate | 44.37 | 5.46 |
| Military expenditure (% of GDP) | 9.96 | 3.68 |
| <i>N</i> | | 325 |

Table 2: Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

| | VIF | Tolerance (1/VIF) |
|--|------|-------------------|
| Excluded population | 3.26 | 0.31 |
| Power sharing | 10.1 | 0.10 |
| Anocracy | 2.03 | 0.49 |
| Alawi | 2.88 | 0.35 |
| Christians | 1.70 | 0.59 |
| Druze | 1.71 | 0.58 |
| Sunni Kurds | 1.61 | 0.62 |
| Political junior partner | 3.66 | 0.27 |
| Powerless political group | 5.89 | 0.17 |
| Autonomy: dominate regional government | 1.44 | 0.69 |
| Oil production per capita | 5.48 | 0.18 |
| GDP per capita | 4.55 | 0.22 |
| Labor force participation rate | 1.78 | 0.56 |
| Military expenditure (% of GDP) | 2.11 | 0.47 |
| Mean | 3.44 | |

Table 4. Determinants of the onset of armed conflict in Syria, 1946-2010 (probit regression, marginal effects)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Ethnic politics factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Excluded population | -0.007 (0.005) | | | -0.007 (0.005) | -0.001 (0.008) | 0.003 (0.008) | 0.003 (0.008) | -0.063 (3.542) |
| Power Sharing | -0.290*** (0.047) | | | -0.290*** (0.017) | -0.270*** (0.024) | -0.275*** (0.020) | -0.375*** (0.025) | -0.235*** (0.011) |
| Anocracy | 0.296*** (0.042) | | | 0.295*** (0.008) | 0.300*** (0.009) | 0.298*** (0.014) | 0.398*** (0.009) | 0.340*** (0.101) |
| <i>Ethnic group factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Alawi | | -0.002*** (0.000) | | -0.001* (0.001) | 0.010 (0.020) | 0.009 (0.020) | 0.009 (0.020) | 0.008 (0.016) |
| Christians | | -0.024*** (0.000) | | -0.026*** (0.002) | -0.025*** (0.010) | -0.027*** (0.009) | -0.027*** (0.009) | -0.003 (0.011) |
| Druze | | -0.002*** (0.000) | | -0.002*** (0.000) | 0.005 (0.006) | 0.005 (0.006) | 0.005 (0.006) | 0.016** (0.007) |
| Sunni Kurds | | -0.023*** (0.000) | | -0.021*** (0.002) | -0.020*** (0.004) | -0.020*** (0.003) | -0.020*** (0.003) | -0.025*** (0.006) |
| <i>Group representations in power factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Political junior partner | | | -0.013 (0.016) | | -0.002 (0.028) | -0.001 (0.026) | -0.001 (0.026) | -0.025 (0.017) |
| Powerless political Group | | | -0.007 (0.015) | | 0.007 (0.024) | 0.006 (0.024) | 0.006 (0.024) | 0.007 (0.020) |
| Autonomy: dominate regional government | | | -0.270*** (0.052) | | -0.320*** (0.034) | -0.320*** (0.036) | -0.344*** (0.008) | -0.188*** (0.055) |
| <i>Economic factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Oil production per capita | | | | | | -0.027*** (0.004) | 0.639*** (0.015) | 0.201*** (0.059) |
| Oil*Excluded population | | | | | | | -0.149*** (0.002) | -0.042 (0.030) |
| GDP per capita | | | | | | | | -0.518** (0.213) |
| Labor force participation rate | | | | | | | | -0.004 (0.008) |
| Military expenditure (% of GDP) | | | | | | | | 0.032*** (0.007) |
| N | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 |

Notes: We control for time fixed effects in all columns. Sunni Arabs category is the reference group for ethnic group variables. Statistical significance: *=10%; **=5%; ***=1%. Robust standard errors are clustered by ethnic group and reported in parentheses.

Table 5. Determinants of the onset of ethnic conflict in Syria, 1946-2010 (probit regression, marginal effects)

| | (1) | (2) | (3) | (4) | (5) | (6) | (7) | (8) |
|---|----------------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Ethnic politics factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Excluded population | -0.006*** (0.002) | | | -0.006*** (0.002) | -0.000 (0.005) | 0.005 (0.006) | 0.005 (0.006) | -0.051 (0.039) |
| Power Sharing | -0.306*** (0.058) | | | -0.306*** (0.012) | -0.285*** (0.030) | -0.296*** (0.023) | -0.398*** (0.033) | -0.140*** (0.047) |
| Anocracy | 0.307*** (0.054) | | | 0.306*** (0.007) | 0.314*** (0.010) | 0.316*** (0.015) | 0.418*** (0.009) | 0.293*** (0.098) |
| <i>Ethnic group factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Alawi | | -0.003*** (0.000) | | -0.002*** (0.000) | 0.012 (0.013) | 0.010 (0.011) | 0.010 (0.011) | 0.013*** (0.004) |
| Christians | | -0.024*** (0.000) | | -0.027*** (0.000) | -0.026** (0.011) | -0.028*** (0.010) | -0.028*** (0.010) | 0.003 (0.008) |
| Druze | | -0.002*** (0.000) | | -0.002*** (0.001) | 0.007 (0.008) | 0.007 (0.008) | 0.007 (0.008) | 0.028*** (0.004) |
| Sunni Kurds | | -0.024*** (0.000) | | -0.023*** (0.001) | -0.022*** (0.004) | -0.022*** (0.004) | -0.022*** (0.004) | -0.025*** (0.008) |
| <i>Group representations in power factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Political junior partner | | | -0.015 (0.017) | | -0.002 (0.032) | -0.002 (0.029) | -0.002 (0.029) | -0.034*** (0.010) |
| Powerless political Group | | | -0.006 (0.006) | | 0.008 (0.007) | 0.007 (0.006) | 0.007 (0.006) | -0.007 (0.016) |
| Autonomy: dominate regional government | | | 0.000 (0.000) | | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) | 0.000 (0.000) |
| <i>Economic factors</i> | | | | | | | | |
| Oil production per capita | | | | | | -0.034*** (0.005) | 0.676*** (0.015) | -0.018*** (0.006) |
| Oil*Excluded population | | | | | | | -0.158*** (0.002) | -0.001 (0.042) |
| GDP per capita | | | | | | | | -0.591*** (0.177) |
| Labor force participation rate | | | | | | | | -0.003 (0.008) |
| Military expenditure (% of GDP) | | | | | | | | 0.036*** (0.005) |
| N | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 | 325 |

Notes: We control for time fixed effects in all columns. Sunni Arabs category is the reference group for ethnic group variables. Statistical significance: *=10%; **=5%; ***=1%. Robust standard errors are clustered by ethnic group and reported in parentheses.