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It is argued that sectarianism is any type of religious or partisan barrier that is centered around inherited views, opinions, or beliefs against the 'other'. This means that sectarianism is about changing diversity into tension and conflict. In most cases, diversity within societies has resulted from political, ideological and economic disagreements. These conflicts could have rooted a long time ago, or they could have been recently created in accordance with the political, ideological and social economic changes within the society (Kaileh & Shams, 2020).

On a state level, this leads to the notion that sectarianism is the division of the state into distinct groups or communities based on their ethnic and/or religious affiliations (Bashkin, 2010), leading to "the promotion and deliberate deployment of sect-based allegiance in the pursuit of political ends" (Ayub, 2013). Furthermore, Hinnebusch argues that political systems in general play a vital role in shaping political structures, thus are vital to create, promote or eliminate sectarianism. On the other hand, governance implies the policies and tactics of the ruling elites as well as the state institutions they govern through; when these disappear or fall short, forms of non-state governance could prevail (Hinnebusch, 2019).

These notions and definitions show that sectarianism and good governance could have an inverse relationship in most cases, and that bad governance could easily inflame sectarianism especially when state institutions of a democratic system fail to practice their responsibilities (Alijla, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2019). In fact, it is widely argued that good governance is facilitated by a common and shared national identity within the state to bring cohesion to the social structure (Kaplan, 2009; Hinnebusch, 2019). When bad governance prevails, sectarianism becomes linked to a strong and specific cohesion only within the sub-state group, possibly causing hostility towards the 'other'. Therefore, sectarianism may be politically disruptive and could lead to exclusionary governance practices. Iraq, post-2003, is a demonstrative example of these ideas. (Al-Qarawee, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2019).

Having said this, it is important to clarify that religious diversity within the state could be a challenge to good governance, though it is not vital for the failure of good governance practices. Without considering the nature of the regime and the type of practices being conducted by it,

recent studies have shown that religious variety in a country can lessen democratic practices by only 8.4 percent (Connable, Robinson, Scotten, & Thaler, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2019). In many cases, the regime's nature and practices become the motive to empower and/or inflame sectarianism within the state.

Syria has gone through three distinctive stages concerning the dialectical relationship between governance and sectarianism. The first stage was from 1946 to 1963, when weak governance was accompanied with weak sectarianism; the second was from 1963 to 2010, in which weak governance was clearly associated with authoritarianism and while sectarianism played a small role at this stage, it became a crucial concept for a later period; the third stage being from 2011 onwards, wherein a combination of weak governance and strong sectarianism were effectuated.

Syrian independence from France in 1946 resulted in some sort of a state with limited formal democratic institutions. Syria faced several hurdles in its democratic establishment. Vindictive social tensions and clashes became common. Such tensions were provoked by a deep sense of insecurity among the population, based on economic inequalities and military intervention in political life (Tourkmani, 2016). This led to the destabilization of the state; thus, the newborn state has been seen by many Syrians as artificial. As a result of this, different trends of pan-Arabism, Nasserist, socialism, and pan-Syrianism have widely spread (Phillips, 2010; Tourkmani, 2016).

In an unstable country like Syria, where military intervention in social, economic and political life has become common and is accompanied by weakness of other democratic state institutions and practices, the belonging to own sub-state communities has rapidly increased (Tourkmani, 2016). This was obvious in the case of the Alawi and Druze communities (Krórkowska, 2011; Hinnebusch, 2019). In fact, many argue that the state's failed practices are an impact of the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon, even after the 1946 independence. This encouraged sectarian division and autonomy in the region (Dostal, 2014).

However, the 1950s witnessed the rise of a new generation. This generation is associated with embracing Arabism as a secular ideology based on the mutual language and shared history. This has been supported through education and increased literacy rates in the countryside as well as

in the big cities of Aleppo and Damascus. Due to these factors, this era is now recognized by spreading democracy in the society (Kurun, 2017; Hinnebusch, 2019). In fact, many scholars argue that the increased levels of education and political openness have led to the democratic golden era in Syria (Tourkmani, 2016).

Between 1954 and 1958, competitive elections meant that a fairly democratically elected parliament came to existence. The spread of the free press and media and the rise of left-wing parties, such as the Baath party, were also some of the main characteristics of this period (Kurun, 2017). However, it is worth mentioning that a class-based cross-sectarianism conflict, rather than a purely sectarian one, was a distinctive character of this phase (Hinnebusch, 2019). In the years coming to 1963, the Baath party was very successful in recruiting many Syrians under the panel of Arabism, though this process involved a high level of sectarianism (Tourkmani, 2016). The Baath's calls for Arabism and the goals for the social construct of the party encouraged minorities and the impoverished to join them, seeking equality in citizenship.

By 1963, a new era started whereby the Alawis represented an important component of the Baath party in Syria. The fragility of the Syrian political institutions and the imbalance of the recruitments within the Baath party also led to political instability and military coups; this ended in 1973 when Hafiz al-Assad ascended to presidency. However, it is argued that within this period, the struggle in Syria was still class-based as opposed to sectarian-based. Furthermore, this conflict caused the politicization of the army, so much so that the army's leadership and security forces have become dominated by minorities, particularly by the Alawis. This put the nation in a state of instability (Faksh, 1984; Tourkmani, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2019).

Hafiz al-Assad institutionalized the Baath as a populist version of neo-patrimonialism in which he used sectarianism for totalitarian control on Syria. As argued by many, Hafiz ruled the country through an authoritarian system. This was characterized by subtle features of sectarianism on the surface, but a deep and long-term sectarian construct along with practices from within to serve his intentions of family control and power, even when this has, on many occasions, become at the expense of the Alawi community itself (Tourkmani, 2016). Hafiz promoted his regime as a

secular and social reformer, yet it was dominated by Alawis in positions of power. These practices were clearly combined weakly with good governance whereby corruption, injustice, and the lack of transparency were prominent (Faksh, 1984; Connable, Robinson, Scotten, & Thaler, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2019). Also, part of his strategy was to empower reliable cross-sectarian personnel with military and security forces while Sunni businesses were dragged down into the regime's cycle by intertwining their economic interests with the army and other regime institutions.

To avoid obvious sectarianism, Hafiz implemented a distinctive strategy to guarantee the representation of all sectarian groups within the politburo and the council of ministers, though the actual power was placed in the hands of few (Hinnebusch, 2019). The regime intended to trade political loyalties for benefits and advantages irrespective of sectarian affiliation: free higher education and government jobs for the salaried middle class; job security for industrial workers; land for the lower class; subsidized food for the urban masses; and considerable upward mobility for the rural populations of all sects ([loya](#), 2011; Hinnebusch, 2019). Being successful on an internal level, the regime was also successful to promote itself as an Arab national party standing against imperialism and Zionism (Hinnebusch, 2011; Tourkmani, 2016).

Even though the regime has increased its dependence on sectarian links, using the Muslim brotherhood uprising of the 1980s as a means to show it as a Sunni movement which threatens Syrian minorities as well as rich Syrian ethnic and religious fabric, the regime some form of cross-sectarian tie to create a cleavage in the relation between the different levels of Syrian classes, mainly the rural/ urban ones (Tourkmani, 2016; Hinnebusch & Valbjørn, 2019).

Moreover, during the time of Bashar al-Assad, and due to the decreased income, especially from oil, a new policy of liberalizing the economy emerged to sustain the regime with enough funds and to keep its populist inclusion. Yet Bashar's policies and changes have driven the society to a more valuable sectarian conflict due to the following reasons:

- 1 - Bashar's intention to mainly concentrate power in his hands has pushed his father's Sunni ties away from the political scene in Syria. Such attempts have been largely seen by many Syrians as

cleansing the house of governance from the Sunni segment (International Crisis Group, 2004; Pierret, 2014; Hinnebusch, 2019).

2 - The inflow of Arab investments and other internal investments have always ended up in the hands of the Assad family and relatives. These policies abandoned the previous long history of Sunni businessmen from sharing power and economic advantages with the regime. This caused a further divide between the Alawi and the Sunni segments of the Syrian society (International Crisis Group, 2004).

3 - The decrease of the welfare state, falling prices, and the cutting of subsidies, food and fuel aids, respectively, alongside a distressing drought, reduced the support of the regime from large majorities of its lower-class constituencies (Daher, 2018; Hinnebusch, 2019). These policies have created a general recognition that the regime is inclined to sectarian policies and evermore to a family's policies of power concentration. Such policies have also been accompanied by calls by the regime for non-Islamic politicized movements. In fact, and for many, such calls and policies were the firewood of the uprising of 2011 (Droz-Vincent, 2014; Wimmen, 2016).

There is a dominant argument that the Syrian uprising of 2011 was not of sectarian nature from the beginning. Even though the uprising has become inclined to a more sectarian conflict at later stages, class inequalities produced, caused by moving away from populism to crony capitalism, are seen as one of the key reasons for the 2011 uprising (Tourkmani, 2016; Wimmen, 2016; Daher, 2018). The beginning of the non-violent uprising has witnessed the involvement of the educated rural cross-sectarian backgrounds, with a cross-sectarian demand, calling for a democratic civic state against a non-inclusive regime (Hinnebusch, 2019).

Moreover, using the army and security forces that are both dominated by top Alawis in power against the uprising have shown a clear sectarian side of the regime. Thus, a new phenomenon of the regime has emerged to mark this period by weak governance and brutal sectarian practices by the regime. Even though some Alawi generals have not agreed to the use of the army against citizens i.e. the Alawi Chief-of-Staff, General Ali Habib, the hardliners were mostly Alawis. i.e. the President's brother, Maher al-Assad (Wimmen, 2016; Hinnebusch, 2019). Furthermore, this could be seen as a very interesting phenomenon whereby the Assad ruling system is using

sectarianism, mainly the Alawi sect, as a tool to enhance and reach his goals of the family's control and power.

On the other hand, Friday prayers have represented an important symbol of sectarian, social, and political grievances against the current system. The initial description of Jihadis, given to protesters by the regime, and later the regional Shia militias' supporters of Bashar's regime, represent another paradigm of the sectarian nature of the regime in 2011. Turning the uprising of 2011 into a conflict demonstrates that a crude type of sectarianism has become a major component of the current regime in Syria. Though, this form of Assad's sectarianism shows a secular, national, and populist side, hiding a deep sectarian side to serve the family-rooted regime as a final goal (Alex & Hof, 2013; Hinnebusch, 2019).

Syria is one of the unique countries as a home to diverse ethnic and religious groups. However, its recent history has witnessed three distinctive periods concerning the relationship between governance and sectarianism. The Baath party, which has been controlled by both Assads, i.e. the father and the son, has played a major role in maintaining weak governance institutions by utilizing the cracks in sectarianism to strengthen their grip of power and control.

The revolution of 2011 has revealed the long-simmering sectarian tensions that have been inflamed in different ways and to different degrees by the regime itself. Thus, the inverse relationship between sectarianism and good governance in Syria has always been fueled and increased by the regime to serve its own purposes of the family's power and control.

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