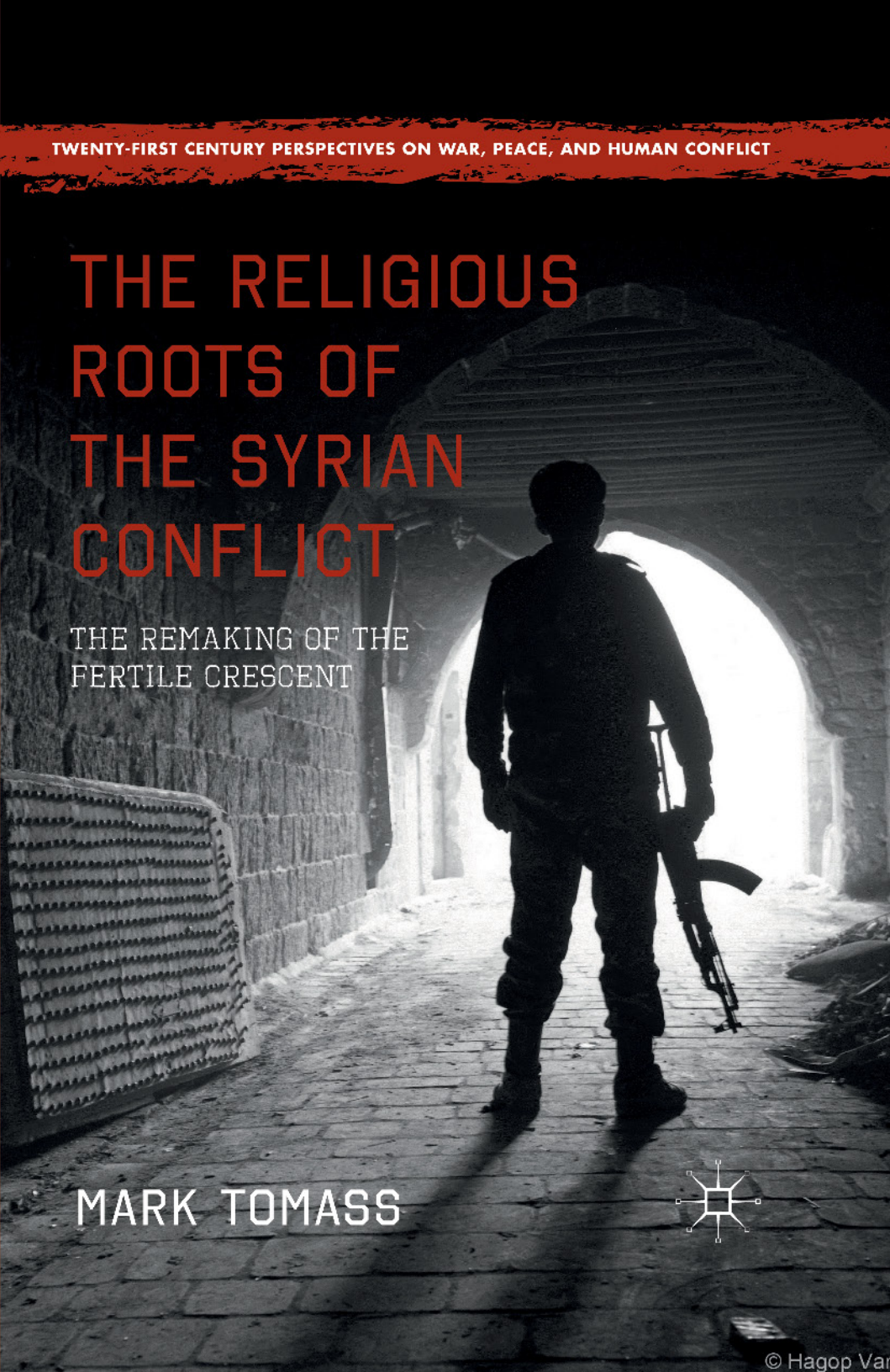
TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVES ON WAR, PEACE, AND HUMAN CONFLICT

# THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

## THE REMAKING OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT



MARK TOMASS

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**Twenty-First Century Perspectives on War, Peace, and Human Conflict**

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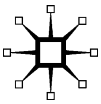

THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

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*In memory of the minds and bodies sacrificed on the altar of what was once upon a time the Cradle of Civilization*

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# Preface

This book is intended for Western college–educated readers seeking an alternative to the mainstream narrative describing the Syrian conflict. It is a broad interpretation of events offered by a Syrian native, born, raised, and educated in Aleppo, Syria. It accounts for key periods spanning the last two millennia that played a role in defining the current scene in Syria and the Fertile Crescent.

*The Religious Roots of the Syrian Conflict* is a new title for an old project that the author conceived in 1998 under the title "The Unmaking of the Nation-States of the Near East." The motive for the initial project was to contemplate possible scenarios that would lead to the breakdown of Syria and Iraq into sectarian states parallel to the sectarian breakdown of Lebanon following its 1975–90 civil war.[1] Conceiving a repeat of the Lebanese scenario was inspired by the rise of the satellite-based al-Jazeera television channel in 1997. Al-Jazeera ushered in a new era in public discourse by surmounting state censorship and making privately held religious beliefs public. Its legitimization of sectarian rhetoric at the expense of secular nationalist ones gave the first sign that the region could be heading toward sectarian discord.[2] That trend was amplified by the emergence of subsequent new Internet-based media. The combined effects of the politicization of the Shīa identity after the establishment of the Shīa theocracy in Iran, the US invasion of Iraq that undermined Sunni power, and the prevalence of informal sectarian institutions further weakened the fragile secular institutions of the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent and paved the way for an intra-Muslim civil war.[3]

Much of the groundwork for this book on the formation of sects and the social psychological origins of religious conflict was done between 2009 and 2010 in preparation for a course entitled Exclusionist Religious Identities and Civil Conflict in the Middle East taught in Spring 2011.[4] It aims to explain the importance and significance of religious and sectarian identification to the people of Geographical Syria in particular and of the Middle East at large. It employs historical narratives to outline the circumstances associated

with the formation of religious sects and uses ethnographic accounts to interpret the meanings that people attribute to their sectarian identities. Its methodology is based on the belief that shared experiences create a basis for comprehending the perspectives of others.

The author's descriptions and analyses draw from his direct observations, which have been gained through face-to-face interaction as well as documentary sources. On the basis of those observations, the author describes how sectarian identity affects an individual's interpretation of world events and his or her reactions to them. Experience has shown the author that Middle Easterners tend to speak candidly with those they trust. Such trust requires the kind of direct, repeated, and informal interaction that the author has had the privilege to experience.

Because this book's narrative regards religious identity as the dominant determinant of political allegiances in the Middle East, it does not tackle the presence of additional layers of conflict, especially a language-based nationalism that demarcates proponents of Arab, Armenian, Assyrian (Syrio–Aramaic), Kurdish, and Turkmen identities. Some readers may especially be dismayed by the absence of analysis of the Kurdish nationalist movement and its implication for the region of the Fertile Crescent. However, from the perspective of this book, the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurd's strive for a separate state does not obscure the religious identity of the Kurds, or the manner in which that identity is viewed in the region by non-Kurdish Muslims or by non-Muslims. While at the contemporary stage of their history, the overwhelming numbers of Kurds are prioritizing their Kurdish over their sectarian identities, the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq contains an array of religious groups that are susceptible to similar intra-Muslim discord that non-Kurdish Muslims are currently experiencing.

Moreover, because of the vast amount of literature that focuses on the Arab–Israeli conflict, this book does not engage that conflict directly. It provides a brief narrative of the formation of the Jewish identity and then confines its analyses to the implications of Israel's existence and military interventions in the region to the intra-Muslim sectarian conflict.

Finally, because of the sensitivity of the material discussed in this book, the author discloses that he is independent of any of the local or international propaganda outlets of the various forces that are engaged in the Syrian conflict and are influencing Western public opinion through news media, research centers, and think tanks. Furthermore, the author has not received any material or other form of support for the substance of this work from any Western or Middle Eastern political entity.

# Acknowledgments

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Many thanks to Hagop Vanesian for his contribution of 16 photos he captured of the war zone in old quarters of the city of Aleppo, Syria.

# Introduction

The Fertile Crescent's place in history as the Cradle of Civilization seems ironic, given the recurrence of sectarian violence. Recently, we have witnessed resurgences of the sectarian massacres that have periodically plagued the region in the past millennium.

Sectarian massacres have been launched to force religious conformity, punish apostasy, quell rebellion, or cleanse geographical regions of nonconformists. In each of those cases, the massacres have been called for by religious authorities, either independently or by solicitation of political authority, as in the sixteenth- and nineteenth-century Ottoman state solicitation of religious judgments against Alawī and Shīa Muslims of Syria. The late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century massacres and deportations of Armenian, Assyrian, and Greek Christians have also occurred prior to and briefly after the creation of the nation-state of Turkey.

Sectarian massacres were also carried out to preserve class and material privileges. For example, in the nineteenth century, a series of revolts by Maronite Christian peasants against Maronite Christian and Durūz feudal lords triggered a sectarian civil war. The peasant uprising failed to transform sectarian loyalties into secular ones similar to those claimed by nation-states. Class-motivated uprisings, aimed at securing civil and economic liberties, mutated in 1860 into a sectarian civil war in Mount Lebanon between Maronite Christians and Durūz. That violence was followed by a large-scale massacre of Christians in Damascus and the plunder of the victims' possessions, which echoed a similar massacre on a smaller scale in Aleppo ten years earlier.

The pattern of a conflict of a secular nature mutating into violence along religious and sectarian lines was repeated in the mid-1970s, when the Christian-led Lebanese army tried to curtail Palestinian militias who challenged the state's authority. The Lebanese state's attempt to disarm the Palestinian militias, the majority of whom were Muslim, quickly morphed into a civil war between Lebanese Christians and Muslims.

In Iraq, the United States' toppling of a dictator identified as a Sunni Muslim, though he repressed opposition from Sunni and Shīa

Muslims alike, triggered a bloody Sunni–Shīa conflict. In Lebanon and Iraq, these brutal trends have preceded even greater upheavals, in the form of sectarian cleansing as well as the institutional destruction of the Lebanese and Iraqi nation-states.

Most recently, in 2011, that which appeared as a youth revolt against Syria's secular police state quickly mutated into open sectarian hostilities between Sunna and Alawīyya, and further evolved into a full-blown sectarian war. Domestic groups and regional powers, in turn, took sides based on their sectarian affiliations. Their intervention emboldened both sides of the conflict, causing destruction on a scale unprecedented in Syria's history, and spreading to the Fertile Crescent at large through the creation of the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.

This book is a native Syrian's attempt to isolate the motivation for the ongoing violence and the process by which sectarian civil war may dissolve Syria, along with its bordering nation-states of the Fertile Crescent, into sectarian states. It begins with familiarizing the reader with the significance of sectarian identity to the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent and then explores both the historical origins of Syria's religious sects and their present-day dominance of the Syrian social scene. It identifies these groups' distinct beliefs and relates how the actions of the religious authorities and political entrepreneurs acting on behalf of their particular sects expose them to sectarian violence, culminating in the dissolution of the nation-state.

## WHY FOCUS ON SYRIA AND THE FERTILE CRESCENT?

Syria and the Fertile Crescent are an especially attractive case study of civil conflict for three major reasons. First, the author's personal history contributes to this book's interest in the Fertile Crescent. The author was born, raised, and educated in Aleppo, Syria, and is intimately familiar with the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent. His insights into sectarian conflict are informed by his own scholarly work and enriched by his firsthand experiences, ensuring that this study of Syria and the region will engage readers from every discipline.

Second, the multiple value systems found in the multi-sectarian nation-states of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon are vivid examples of the alliances and conflicts that emerge among distinct, internally cohesive, social groups. Within each of these nation-states, there are groups of varying sizes, each possessing distinct cultural norms and social ideals. Through an examination of how these divergent groups—and the political entrepreneurs who lead them—interact and compete for

influence, this book explains how the dynamics of sectarian groups culminate in civil war and spur the collapse of both state and civil institutions.

The third reason for focusing on the Fertile Crescent lies in its importance to US Middle Eastern policy. Failed US military interventions in Lebanon and Iraq highlight the adverse outcomes that can result from misunderstanding the dynamics of sectarian groups. Learning how these groups function in relation to one another makes it possible to discern the circumstances and past miscalculations that have undermined US operations in the Fertile Crescent.

## Background and Context in the Prevailing Literature

Two major authors recognize the centrality of religious identity in Middle Eastern societies. In *Greater Syria*, Daniel Pipes notes that "religious lines—not party politics, ideology, or geography—delineate the most basic and abiding political divisions in the Greater Syria region."[1] Moreover, in *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East*, Bernard Lewis also acknowledges that "the modern, secularized Westerner has great difficulty in understanding a culture in which not nationality, not citizenship, not descent, but religion, or more precisely membership in a religious community, is the ultimate determinant of identity."[2] However, while both writers appreciate the significance of religious identity to Middle Easterners, both books are devoted mainly to other subjects. While Pipes is concerned with proving that, since 1966, pan-Arabism has been a façade for the Syrian regime's quest to constitute a Greater Syria, Lewis focuses on allusion to a "clash of civilizations" between the Muslim world and the "Judeo-Christian heritage" of the West.

Samuel Huntington expanded upon Lewis's project in his renowned paper *The Clash of Civilizations*, and again later in a book bearing the same title.[3] Huntington's thesis states that conflicts between groups from different civilizations will become more frequent, more violent, and more sustained than conflicts that develop within a single civilization. Differences in civilizations are centuries long. They are more fundamental and profound than ideological differences, as conflicts between civilizations draw upon foundational aspects of society such as history, language, culture, and, above all, religion. As modernization broadens awareness of other civilizations, it weakens identification with the nation-state and separates people from their local identities. People must then relate to the world through religion, which emphasizes differences between groups.

With regard to the Middle East, Lewis and Huntington are primarily concerned with a clash between "Judeo-Christian" and "Islamic" civilizations along grand geographical fault lines. In contrast, this book is not concerned with external conflicts but rather maps out the internal processes that culminate in the implosion of a civilization. While Lewis and Huntington have correctly identified religious identity as a source of conflict, they primarily describe it as a source of interstate conflicts. However, differences in religious identity occur within states, as well as between states, as local beliefs and value systems are not monolithic. Rather, any overarching belief system, Islam included, is composed of a multitude of competing sectarian groups. Furthermore, even as religion incites discord between states, those large-scale conflicts only exacerbate domestic competition within the Middle East's multi-sectarian nation-states. Conflicts that arise from religious identity should therefore not be rendered only on the large scale, as clashes between "Judeo-Christian" and "Islamic" civilizations, but instead also as sectarian fissures within nation-states that eventually undermine their formal institutions.

Many books have appeared in the past three years that examine the Syrian civil war. Yet almost all of them tackle the conflict either as a dramatic struggle between a brutal dictator and his freedom-seeking masses or as a reaction to an alleged *recent* rise of political Islam.

The most notable of these books is Fouad Adjami's *The Syrian Rebellion*, which presents a repressive dictator and his son versus a people determined to throw off the yoke of oppression as the cause of the conflict.[4] Another book with a similar approach is *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* by David Lesch.[5] It describes the Syrian conflict in terms of the popular media-generated narrative of a "tyrant killing his own people." It treats the conflict as a direct result of Syria's president's mismanagement of it and thus suffers from a fatal misunderstanding of the sectarian and political structure of Syrian society. That diagnostic failure has led Lesch and others in the past four years to recurrent false predictions of an imminent collapse of the Asad regime, which have, in turn, emboldened the armed groups fighting the regime as well as their regional and international sponsors and prolonged the conflict.

The second, more realistic, line of reasoning in recent books on the conflict identifies it as arising between Islamist groups and a secular state. However, books espousing this argument have tended to examine the conflict only in its recent manifestations, from the time of the Muslim Brothers' revolt of 1976–82 up to its recent resurgence in today's Syria. An example of such works is Thomas Pierret's *Religion*

*and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution*.[6] Another example is Fanar Hddad's *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity*, which attempts to construct a general theory of sectarianism with a case study of Iraq and suggests a concept of a future nation-state that can surmount sectarian divisions.[7]

The present book explains the significance of religious and sectarian identities to the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent by delineating the social forces that led to their formation and the psychological forces that maintain them. With respect to the Syrian conflict, it argues that, for more than a millennium, the tradition of attributing infidelity (*takfīr*) and apostasy (*irtidād*) to religious communities that did not conform to the dominant Sunni orthodoxy led, in the best case, to the marginalization of those communities. As a result, the shunned communities, including the Alawīyya of Syria, lived through extreme hardship and uncertainty and faced long-term survival challenges. The military elite utilized those communities' fears of a return to a dreaded past to muster support for its continued rule. Accordingly, this book then suggests that the Syrian regime's resistance to political reform prior to the Arab Spring uprisings, as well as its recent resilience in withstanding the overwhelming economic, political, and lethal means deployed to topple it, cannot be explained without a grounding in the historical roots of the ongoing conflict.

## Outline of the Content

Chapter 1 argues that understanding religious identity is central to understanding the Syrian conflict. In the multi-ethnic, multi-religious, or multi-sectarian settings of the Fertile Crescent, wherein religious or sectarian affiliation is the predominant source for social values, individuals prioritize their religious and sectarian identities. Resources shared via the informal networks clustered around places of worship satisfy their members' needs to obtain security and protection, employment, aid, recognition, friendship, and life companionship. Those benefits, coupled with psychological bonding effects, induce group members to reciprocate the sharing of resources, thereby promoting continuous and stable relationships within the sectarian group. When membership in a sectarian group becomes a means for securing one's livelihood, sectarian ties are further strengthened at the expense of national ties.

Based on seventh-century Greek and Syriac chronicles, chapter 2 describes the perceptions of the sectarian Christian groupings in the Fertile Crescent of the Muslim Arab conquerors. Contrary to the common belief that Islam was spread in the Fertile Crescent by way

of the sword, the Syriac chronicles do not suggest that conversion to Islam was offered as an alternative to death or enslavement. While Muslim rulers rarely used violence against the Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians to encourage their conversion to Islam, that restraint did not extend to pagans and Arab Christians. However, tolerance of Jews and Christians also depended on submission to a multitude of repressive social rules that marginalized non-Muslims and further estranged the inhabitants from the concept of collective identity.

Chapter 3 presents a brief biblical narrative and subsequent historical accounts of the circumstances that formed the Jewish identity in the Fertile Crescent. Since at present the Jews who originally inhabited the Fertile Crescent predominantly reside in Israel or the West, this book only addresses the nation-state of Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict in terms of external shocks to the nation-states of Syria, Lebanon, and, when relevant, Iraq.

Chapter 4 provides historical context for the ongoing tension between sectarian identification and nationalism within the Fertile Crescent by describing the creation of Christian sectarian groups in the Middle East. The chapter establishes a timeline for the earliest emergence of Christian sectarian identities and isolates both the individuals who formed them and the purposes that led to their inception. It further shows that members of sectarian groups are conditioned to be suspicious of all foreign power, including any authority outside of their extended families and faith communities. Collective identities therefore form around those localized, informal institutions, not the formal institutions of modern nation-states. By discouraging nationalist identification, sectarian identity retains influence and power, rendering the formal institutions of the nation-states fragile and inefficient.

Chapter 5 traces the events and individuals that played a role in forming the Muslim sects in the Fertile Crescent and briefly outlines their belief systems. The chapter begins with the early power struggle over succession that split Muslims into Sunna and Shīa, and then continues to narrate the circumstances that led to the formation of the Muslim subsects, which prevail in today's Fertile Crescent. The discussion divides the Shīa into four groups: Twelver, Ismāīlī, Durūz (Druze), and Alawī; the Sunna are also divided into four groups: Mainstream, Sūfi, Wahhābi, and Muslim Brothers. A proper understanding of the substance of the rival beliefs and practices of these sects is necessary to understand the dynamics of the ongoing intra-Muslim conflict.

Chapter 6 examines the processes that Islamized the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent and their legacy for modern times. It follows

the emergence of a dominant religious orthodoxy by the twelfth century and the rise of a climate of opinion among religious authorities that discouraged the questioning of religious dogmas and attacked philosophers, discouraged the exercise of independent judgment in determining moral actions, and encouraged the reliance on clerics for religious interpretation and guidance. Consequently, those religious authorities established new religious schools that excluded the study of the logically intensive branch of Muslim theology and rational sciences. These schools produced the next generation of clerics, who issued religious judgments against Christians, Jews, and heterodox Muslims, and this had profound social implications that persist to modern times.

Chapter 7 analyzes the social and psychological roots of the religious cleavages that caused conflict between the sectarian groups in the distant past and those that have persisted, in various forms, to the present time. The chapter examines the reasons for the fading of religious conflict among the Christian sects of the Fertile Crescent and its persistence between the Muslim sects and between Muslims and Christians. It shows that dominant groups demanded conformity to the symbols of their identities and associated beliefs and value systems. Viewing nonconformists as heretics, apostates, or infidels inhibited assimilation, providing fertile ground for conflicts of a secular nature to be seen along sectarian fault lines and thus mutate into recurrent violent religious or sectarian conflict.

Chapter 8 explores the role of the new media in ushering in the decline of secular ideology and diverting the Islamic Awakening into an inter-sectarian competition in the Fertile Crescent. Because of its people's prioritization of religious identity, many political figures are religious authorities or sect leaders, who combine religion with political entrepreneurship in their quest for power and fame. In the past 20 years, the emergence of satellite media and internet broadcasting enabled these entrepreneurs to evade state censorship and become more effective in influencing public sentiments. The chapter suggests that by making privately held beliefs public the new media gave recognition to sectarian identifications that were previously unacknowledged publicly and therefore fueled sectarianism.

Chapter 9 describes the struggle of Syria's ruling elite in the past five decades to maintain a secular state while attempting to contain popular pressure to adopt Islamic values and that elite's ultimate failure to prevent religious sectarianism from fueling the political action that has culminated in violent conflict. The chapter argues that while the Arab Spring uprisings were seen in the West as a youth revolt

against tyrants, the vast majority of Syrians saw the Syrian uprising as a continuation of the unfinished confrontation of three decades earlier between Islamists and the secular state. The youth protests, aggravated by urban versus rural economic disparities, mutated into a Sunni rebellion and catalyzed sectarian cleansing that, unimpeded, will eventually divide the Fertile Crescent into sectarian regions.

Chapter 10 argues that the absence of abstract morality, manifesting itself in dominant kinship and sectarian loyalties, renders the abstract, impersonal nature of legal systems in the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent ineffective in regulating social and economic relationships because the power structures are not capable of enforcing them, nor is the population willing to abide by them. This has prevented the state from playing the positive role it has in the Western world. The chapter concludes that in the absence of secular values, the current international effort to divide the Fertile Crescent into sectarian regions will intensify a Sunna versus Shīa struggle to rule the Muslim world through both sides seeking legitimacy in confrontations with Israel, a process that will plunge the region into protracted wars.

# 1

# The Significance of Religious Identity

The concept of identity preconceives people who perceive themselves as both integrated into certain social environments and distinct from other ones. Through their identification with or separation from specific groups, people cultivate their sense of self and thereby give meaning and purpose to their lives. As this process of identity formation shapes human behavior and action, a detailed examination of its meaning and significance is imperative.

## What Is Identity?

The question "Who am I?" yields two different types of answers, depending on whether it is self-imposed or posed by an outside observer. From the distinction between those two responses, separate categories of identity, located in introspection or outside observation, begin to emerge. These categories are finalized by looking at the two types of personal data that may inform an internal or external assessment of the self: the subject's present place in society and his larger life history. An observer who examines the subject's current social status will see a different identity than another observer who is concentrating on personal experiences with the subject. Combining these criteria with the previously stated distinction between internal and external observation, four categories of identity are established.

As table 1.1 shows, the four categories are social identity, self-identity, personal identity, and ego identity.[1] My social identity is what *others* believe I am, based upon their interpretation of my publicly visible features, place, status, or role in society. My self-identity engages those same qualities, but through the lens of self-assessment. My personal identity is an external appraisal that is less concerned with present appearances and more concerned with experience, as the appraiser's

**Table 1.1** Categories of identity

| | | My Identity Based On | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | My Place in Society | My Life History |
| My Identity Defined By | Others | a. Social Identity | c. Personal Identity |
| | Me | b. Self-Identity | d. Ego Identity |

previous encounters with me collectively formulate my identity. Last, my ego identity is my personal evaluation of lifetime accomplishments. In the following sections, I elaborate upon the meaning of each of these four categories of identity and discuss how they break down in the social context of the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent as well as in the Middle East in general.

## Social Identity

Social identities are created as people observe and categorize each other. The resulting categories reflect physical attributes, such as gender, race, or color, and social factors, such as place of birth, religion of birth, nationality, and ethnicity. Observations related to social activities, such as occupations, hobbies, religious practices, or overall social status, might also contribute to social identity. In all these cases, social identity is constructed when outsiders use an individual's outward traits as social indicators. Simply put, social identity is a person's *social* identifications *by* others.

While the qualities that create social identities are often definite, social identity itself is nonetheless a subjective form of measurement. The meaning of a social identity emanates from the perceptions and interpretations of the observer as he appraises a subject's obvious traits. Furthermore, the observer's appraisal will be affected by his own value systems and unique experiences within the social environment, even when those conflict with the subject's own values and experiences. As a result, the subject retains little control over the personas and roles assigned to him by social identity. Even if the subject's socially recognized pattern of action and behavior is contradicted by his actual behavior, only the former contributes to social identity.

In the Middle East, religious identity takes precedence over all rival social identities. Middle Easterners primarily view themselves and others as members of religious communities, even when interacting with outsiders who don't prioritize religious identity. It was therefore unsurprising that Middle Easterners saw the US and British

invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq as revivals of the medieval crusades rather than secular military efforts to dismantle terror infrastructure and spread democracy in the Middle East, which was the impression given to the British and American public. This difference in interpretation was emphasized when anti-US intellectuals seized upon a comment by President George W. Bush that described the war as "a crusade." While Bush used "crusade" to indicate a desire "to pursue a matter with zeal," leading Islamist intellectuals regarded his phrasing as a validation of their own religious viewpoint. Consequently, the Middle East's characteristic fixation on religious identity, coupled with the former president's ignorance of that fixation, transformed the presumably secular campaign into a religious conflict that cast the West as a threat to local religious beliefs, thereby mobilizing greater opposition to the US invasion.

The following personal anecdote further demonstrates how Middle Easterners prioritize religious identity over competing forms of identification, such as racial identity. In the early 1980s, I often heard the name of the star basketball player Karīm Abd al-Jabbār mentioned in radio news reports. Not having his picture, I was unfamiliar with his appearance, but it was obvious to me that Karīm's name was Arabic. I did not know that there were African American Muslims with Arabic names, so I was puzzled by the possibility that an Arab could have become a basketball star. After all, the Arab world is not known for producing excellent athletes in general, much less exemplary basketball players.

Yet, having noticed that the majority of American national basketball league players were of African origin, I suspected that Karīm was also an African American. With all this in mind, I approached Ahmad,[2] a Syrian university student who had come to the United States from the city of my birth, Aleppo, Syria. When I asked him if Karīm Abd al-Jabbār was of Arab or African origin, Ahmad immediately replied, "He is a Muslim."

This didn't answer my question, and so I responded, "Yes, but is he of Arab or African origin?" Ahmad seemed to be perplexed, as if he did not understand my persistent confusion. I added, "Is he black American?" Ahmad paused and looked like he was in deep thought, then nodded.

With a soft and hesitant voice, he said, "Yes…yes," as if the information was as new to him as it was to me. Then he forcefully added, "But he is a Muslim," reaffirming his original point. One would think that Ahmad, a Syrian with a German grandmother and nearly blond hair, would recognize a racial distinction between himself and Karīm. Instead,

he attached more significance to their common religion than to their different races. To him, Karīm's religious identity was most significant.

My fellow townsman's response did not surprise me; noticing differences in skin color was a skill that I acquired only upon arriving in the United States. In Aleppo, race was a less prominent issue for me, as one particular memory demonstrates. While I was walking in the predominantly Christian, Assyrian Quarter of Aleppo with some friends, one of them singled out a passerby. "This is Suhail's father," he said, Suhail being a mutual friend who happened to be Muslim. "He is from Africa," he added.

At that time, the statement meant nothing to me. However, 40 years after the fact, I can finally make sense of it. I now realize that Suhail was black, and that Suhail's father probably did seem unusual to the friend who pointed him out. But at that time I attached no significance to the father's African origin or black skin, despite the fact that both qualities were unique within the Assyrian Quarter. Instead, my sense of his social identity only characterized him as a Muslim, even though there were no outward signs of his religious affiliation. It is only because of my years in the United States that I may add a racial dimension to his social identity, acknowledging that he was also black.

Explaining the particulars of how I recognized Suhail as a Muslim, but not as black man, is a task I will return to later. What is relevant to the discussion at hand is that, as a teenager, I unconsciously prioritized a religious identity over a racial one. In this case, as in the example of my confusion about Karīm Abd al-Jabbār, I am not alone. To illustrate this, I will offer two more examples of this common practice. One relates to the behavior of Christian masses, and the other relates to Sunni Muslim masses.

George Hāwi (1938–2005) was born to a Christian family and served for decades as the secretary general of the Lebanese Communist Party. After his assassination on June 21, 2005, his family and sect leaders buried him with a full Christian Requiem at a Greek Orthodox Church. A large crucifix was placed on his coffin for everyone to see. Despite Hāwi's decades of support for a secular communist ideology, his family, his sect's ecclesiastical order, his friends, and his followers chose to honor his religion of birth rather than his own fervent rejection of religious identity. He was born a Greek Orthodox and, even though he lived as an atheist, he died a Greek Orthodox. In the Middle East, religious identity ultimately overwhelms every other aspect of a person's life.

Another Greek Orthodox Christian, Michèl Aflaq (1910–89), was a leading intellectual in the Arab world who tailored the Baath Party

ideology, which supported the replacement of religious identification with national identification as a dominant source of social identity. He appropriated the concept of "*al-umma*," which traditionally refers to "the Islamic Community," to create "*al-umma al-Arabia*," meaning, "The Arab Community" or "The Arab Nation." As a Christian, he pursued a unified "Arab nation" because it carried the promise of equality between Christians and Muslims. That same ideal attracted various minority sects to the ranks of the Baath Party, at least in Syria. These participants, among them the Alawīyya, Durūz, and Ismāīlīyya, were regarded as heretical or apostates by the Sunni majority. In spite of this, Aflaq's party ruled Iraq until the Anglo-American invasion in 2003 and rules in Syria to this day.

Immediately after his death in Paris on June 23, 1989, Iraqi officials had Aflaq's remains flown to Baghdad for an Islamic burial, which was attended by thousands of Baath Party affiliates. Media outlets sponsored by the Iraqi government printed headlines that read, "*Aflaq shui'a musliman*," or, in English, "Aflaq was given an Islamic burial." On June 24, 1989, Iraq's Regional Command of the Baath Party sent a communiqué announcing that "the late Aflaq . . . embraced Islam as his religion" before his death.[3] Even his mainly secular Sunni followers in Iraq engraved Quranic verses into his mausoleum, ensuring that visitors would immediately recognize Aflaq's commitment to Islam.[4]

Yet while Aflaq's writings had shown admiration for Islam as a progressive revolutionary movement of its time and for the Prophet Muhammad as the inspiration for that movement, his alleged conversion to Islam was inconsistent with his life's work. In various speeches, Aflaq prioritized his support of a secular, nationalistic Baath ideology that called for mutual respect among people of various religions. Explaining the meaning of Baath, he wrote: "Arab resurrection is a nationalist movement that addresses all Arabs regardless of their religions and sects. It sanctifies freedom of faith and looks upon religions equally in terms of sanctity and respect."[5]

Despite the Baath Party's role in legitimizing Aflaq's posthumous conversion, it is possible that Baathists at large were not involved in the decision to fabricate his change of heart. Rather, that choice may have originated with Saddam Hussein alone. Even so, Saddam's distortion of Aflaq's religious identity would only confirm that religion is a stronger reference for political identification than Arabism. Aflaq's death occurred at a time when Saddam had already begun to manipulate Iraq's masses with his regime's Islamized rhetoric. That strategy would have been undermined if the people had been reminded that a Christian had created the Baath ideology, not a Muslim.

Aflaq's burial was not the only instance where his religious identity came to the forefront of politics. His leadership of the Baath Party was also a concern. In a series of interviews on *al-Jazeera*'s program *A Witness of the Epoch*, Ahmad Abū Sāleh, an exiled former member of the Regional Command of Syria's Baath Party, described the political atmosphere of Syria six months after the Baath party's ascent to power in 1963. In the first interview, he gave an account of events that took place in the sectarian mixed city of Banyās near the Mediterranean coast that called for the attention of the Baath leadership to resolve. He said "we gathered Alawī and Sunni schoolteachers who had a dispute over the curriculum. The Alawīyya had a view and the Sunna had another view. We tried to solve the dispute in many ways."[6] Then, he went to Damascus to attend a meeting of the Revolutionary General Command and inform them about the precarious matter that had occurred in Banyās. He told them, "For your information, people in the streets are calling us a government of *ADIS*. You may have heard it, but you do not want to admit it. *ADIS* means Alawīyya, Durūz, and Ismāīlīyya, which implies that it does not relate to the people [implying the Sunni majority]." Amin al-Hafiz, the first Syrian president under Baath rule, and other leaders interjected and wanted him to stop his narrative of the events by using sectarian labels presumably because "it is dangerous talk" and "a sectarian topic" should not be brought up by an Arab Socialist Baath Party. However, Abū Sāleh insisted on carrying on the line of discussion he deemed too important to ignore and said to the Baath founder, "Teacher Michèl, you are the only one that did not object to what I said" and then continued to make his case:

> "Your name is Michèl Aflaq [he laughed]; my name is Ahmad [he shook his head], if your name were Mustafa or Mahmoud, people would have accepted us more than they do now. People are rejecting us for reasons among which is that you are our leader. Your name is Michèl! Regardless of my personal opinion, whether I respect you or not, but your name is Michèl! This is the truth." He replied, "Look, Ahmad, what you said is 100 percent correct. If my name were Mustafa or Ahmad, people would have accepted the party more. . . . I reached the conclusion that the party chief should be a Muslim and a Sunni." This is [what] Michèl Aflaq [said]. Indeed, in the elections that took place afterward, he did not announce his candidacy. Munīf al-Razzāz became [General Secretary]. [I am saying] this for the sake of history.[7]

Abū Sāleh correctly captured the way religious and sectarian barriers separating the majority of the Sunni masses from the rest of the

Muslim sects, not to mention the Christians, appeared at the very outset of Baath rule. The abbreviated name *ADIS* was also a play on words, referring to the Arabic term for "lentil," which further reflected the general impression that the government's coalition of minority sects was unworthy of respect. Moreover, he was quite frank with regard to the significance of names in the formation of social identity. The case of the prominent Iraqi Baathist, Chaldean Christian Michael Yohanna (b.1936), corroborates Abū Sāleh's assessment. Michael Yohanna changed his name to Tāreq Azzīz, the name with which most people are familiar, in order to sound Arabic and make his Christian religious affiliation less visible. Moreover, in an interview with Azzīz published on April 18, 2013, he revealed that Saddam Hussein told him that "had he been a Muslim, he would have been appointed as Prime Minister." He in turn revealed that he "did not want to convert to Islam for the sake of a position."[8]

In the Fertile Crescent, inquiries about other people begin with the question, "What is he?" and end with the question, "Who is he?" The "what" inquires about a person's most important social identity—his religious and sectarian affiliation. The "who" inquires about less important social identities, such as a person's name, family reputation, profession, or wealth. Few ever ask, "What does he believe in?" Thus, the question that has the greatest bearing upon one's fate hinges upon the circumstances of one's birth, not the path of one's life since then. This prioritization of inherited affiliations has consequences not only for the individual, but also for the functioning of the formal institutions of nation-states.

## Self-Identity

Unlike social identity, where identifications of a person are formed *by* others, self-identity represents one's own identification *with* objects, individuals, or groups. Through a psychological orientation toward an object, another person, or group, a person determines the personal meaning of his or her own social role.[9] Such emotional associations with objects, people, and groups form one's true self-image, or self-identity.

Naturally, the personalized ranking of self-identities may differ from the ranking of social identities, which are not self-determined. A Middle Easterner may think of him- or herself as an atheist first, while still maintaining a social identity as a Christian or Muslim, regardless of his or her actual beliefs. Nonetheless, other people would still identify that secular, non-practicing Christian or Muslim by the religion of his or her birth, ignoring the person's own self-identity.

Self-identity regards objects, people, and groups as extensions of the self, and so individuals are offended when personally meaningful items are cast in a negative light. Those items symbolize social roles and value systems, and the self-identity that they construct conveys those roles and values to others. For instance, suppose that one identifies oneself as an economist. On a basic level, identifying as an economist would describe one's profession, informing others about both the nature of one's work as well as the source of one's income. If being an economist defines a person's self-identity as well, however, then certain personal qualities are expressed through an affinity with that job title. If being an economist means a great deal to him or her, then that person cannot help but be offended when someone else casts economists in a negative light. Through that emotional reaction, it becomes apparent that being an economist is not simply that person's occupation, but also forms his or her self-identity.

The categories of profession and self-identity are therefore different, as profession offers a neutral self-description while self-identity carries a symbolic package of meanings. Accordingly, a person's profession may not also serve as a self-identity. For example, while Franz Kafka made his living as a full-time insurance agent in Prague, he was also a part-time novelist. Even though insurance work was his profession, his aspirations to be a novelist contributed far more to his self-identity. Since he identified himself as a novelist, that social role overshadowed his role as an insurance agent.

Therefore, identifications *by* others, or identifications *with* others, carry symbolic and subjective meanings. When one asserts his or her own identity, whether asked to do so or not, he or she inadvertently conveys socially significant statements to others. These statements express standpoints of empathy, distinctiveness, pride, superiority, inferiority, resentment, liking, disliking, or other positions. These standpoints may be asserted singularly or in combination vis-à-vis other individuals or groups. These standpoints are also codified in statements identifying social roles, such as religious belief, national origin, ethnic heritage, affiliation, profession, hierarchical rank, hobbies, or preferences. Others, in turn, interpret these standpoints, attaching their own sense of social significance to the qualities being expressed.

For example, when I once asked a Sunni Muslim classmate what judicial school (*mathhab*) he belonged to, he responded "Hanafi" before adding, "*wa al hamdu lillah*," which means "and thank God." His response implied that he was on the right track to secure God's mercy on Judgment Day. With such an answer, the young man revealed the significance of his self-identity to himself. He also conveyed a

standpoint of superiority vis-à-vis followers of rival judicial schools and members of rival Muslim sects, as well as non-Muslims. Since he did not choose to be part of a Sunni family that followed the Hanafi judicial school, but was born into one, he thanked God for placing him in the right place. Still, it was the right place merely because it was *his* school and *his* sect. Additionally, all the other students I conversed with displayed similar confidence in their own righteousness, regardless of their sectarian allegiance. No one shared regrets, for instance, about being a Shīa instead of a Sunni or about being a Christian instead of a Muslim. They were each proud of their religious and sectarian affiliations and identified their sects as uniquely righteous.

While social identities are separate from self-identities, it is possible to internalize social identities and transform them into self-identities. In aristocratic social formations, for instance, feudal lords persuaded peasants and artisans that their blood was inferior to the blood of their feudal lords. Likewise, in India's caste system, a peasant would even identify a destitute Brahmin as superior to himself. In both cases, those lower-ranking individuals are unable to generate self-identities that are unaffected by the beliefs imposed upon them by the social order.

Identifications with individuals or groups also affect our memories of them and our sympathy for their causes.[10] Furthermore, that affinity encourages us to pursue and retain more facts about those with whom we identify. For instance, people who identified with the inhabitants of Iraq viewed the more than decade-long UN embargo imposed on Iraq as indiscriminate, inhumane, and ineffective for deposing the country's ruthless dictator. Since these critics identified with Iraqis, they could not ignore the fact that hundreds of thousands of Iraqi people, most of them children, perished of malnutrition and disease as a result of the embargo.

Yet while international human rights organizations made news of those deaths public, citizens of countries that had supported the embargo behaved as if they were unaware of its effects. For ten years, the humanitarian catastrophe was never treated as newsworthy by the Western mainstream media. Westerners did not identify with the Iraqis, nor did they urge their governments to stop pursuing harmful policies against them. Indeed, more Westerners expressed outrage at the Taliban's destruction of two ancient statues of the Buddha than at their own governments' starvation of innocent Iraqis with an economic blockade.

The question of why observers fixate on the travails of one group, even as they ignore a more gravely afflicted group, is not easily answered. Events unfold through interactions between many actors,

and various nuances within those interactions may explain why one identifies, and therefore sympathizes, with one actor or victim and not another. Similarly, personal circumstances may affect one's own likelihood to identify with one side of a conflict and not the other.

How information about a group is presented is also important, as presentation may bias the observer toward one conclusion or another. Imagine watching a wildlife television program that orients its footage around a central story line. The program starts with a scene of eight wolves running through dry steppes. As the camera pursues them, the narrator comments that the wolves, each of which has been named, are on a desperate search for food following several days of hunger. After a few unsuccessful attempts, their search continues despite obvious signs of exhaustion. Soon the weakest members of the pack die, and it then becomes apparent that the rest will only survive if they can find prey nearby. As a viewer, by now you have identified with the wolves and vicariously experienced their pain. You are therefore relieved when they finally come upon a herd of deer, catching and devouring one that cannot outrun the weakened pack.

Alternatively, imagine that the program had begun with prolonged footage of a herd of deer grazing and caring for their young. When a pack of wolves suddenly attacks one of the deer, you identify with the deer and feel its pain as it is torn to pieces. Though the information presented in both documentary scenarios is the same, the sequencing and perspective of the footage determines which group of animals the viewer finds sympathetic. By including or excluding the wolves' plight or introducing the viewer to one group of animals before the other, the documentarians determine the moral valence of the pack's attack on the deer.

Similarly, individuals may sympathize with one side of an international or civil conflict simply because they enter the ongoing conflict at a specific moment. Even if both sides are morally dubious, one group may seem more sympathetic after a particularly brutal attack. If the observer becomes aware of the conflict at that point, he or she may immediately favor the suffering party and interpret all their subsequent behaviors through the lens of their victimhood. Consequently, a sense of justice would not only encourage identification with that group, but also morally absolve them in their future actions.[11] Yet simply by entering the conflict at a different point, the observer may favor the other side of a conflict and make an entirely different moral assessment of both sides.

Now imagine watching a film that relates a complex series of events through the perspective of a heroic figure. Even as the film takes place

against the backdrop of a wider conflict, it is primarily this individual's story. As an observer, you are likely to identify with this hero and therefore sympathize with his cause, predicaments, and desires. You feel his pain and may even shed tears of sadness or joy during his particularly emotional moments. He becomes *your* hero and, as such, you are more understanding of mistakes and transgressions that would otherwise contradict his heroic status. That willingness to overlook and forgive, stemming from self-identification with the hero, effectively creates a double standard within the context of the wider conflict. Therefore, the concept of self-identification is central to understanding why people develop double standards, forgiving and identifying with certain groups while condemning or ignoring others.

## Personal Identity

Personal identity is formed *by* others, of an individual, as past experiences with that individual generate an understanding of his or her character and behavior. That understanding can be expressed through statements that identify the individual as obnoxious or amicable, miserly or generous, temperamental or easygoing. Such statements describe character, conduct, and demeanor while drawing upon previous encounters to validate those assessments.

Whereas social identity impersonally evaluates people as members of larger groups, personal identity is formed through direct evaluation of a subject as an individual. Thus, a statement like, "She is a nice woman," conveys both the personal and social identity of an individual. Her personal identity describes her as "nice," which speaks to direct, personal interaction, while her social identity as a "woman" emerges from cursory observation and speaks to her membership in a larger group.

An individual's personal identity combined with his social identity may also create dissonant responses. For example, a politically liberal journalist who spent a day observing John Wayne at work found it difficult to reconcile the actor's social behavior with his conservative political stances. While the journalist found Wayne's right-wing ideals to be abhorrent, he nonetheless found Wayne to be personally amicable. Ultimately, the journalist couldn't understand how such a "nice" person could also be an icon for such "bad" beliefs and views about the social world.[12]

I personally experienced conflict between personal identity and social identity through a high school classmate name Fuād.[13] Though he'd previously been an apathetic presence in the school and displayed

weak academic performance, Fuād's demeanor changed when he began to exhibit Islamist tendencies in 1978, coinciding with the rising violent activities of the Muslim Brothers in Syria. I use the term Islamist to distinguish it from the term Muslim. While half of my classmates in the Christian high school I attended were Muslims, most were not Islamists. One can be a Muslim in terms of his social identity, but can be secular in practice and may promote secular causes. An Islamist, on the other hand, is one who seeks to promote a society dominated by an Islamic system of values. Fuād seemed to have become a born-again Islamist. Every morning before class started, Fuād would go up to the blackboard and write, in Arabic, "*B'ism il-lāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*," meaning, "In the Name of God the Compassionate, the Merciful." While the statement was commonly seen at the top of private letterheads and on the first page of any book authored by a Muslim, this was the first time I had seen the phrase displayed in a Christian school with a religiously mixed student body.

In principle, the statement was not a challenge to Christian students, as they similarly perceived God as compassionate and merciful. Still, Muslims commonly used the statement as a form of religious self-identification, infusing the words themselves with strong Islamic connotations. It therefore became common for Muslims to begin speeches and interviews with the phrase, signaling their allegiance to the Muslim community. Arabic-speaking Christians, accordingly, never used the phrase themselves, as they were mindful of its Islamic undertones. Thus, by presenting the statement every morning, Fuād was establishing his individuality. He had found new prominence among Muslims and non-Muslims by reimagining himself as a preacher and a torchbearer for his community.

It was during this period that Fuād gave a short speech chastising our mutual Muslim friends for their plans to celebrate New Year's Eve. Striking a didactic pose, he addressed his fellow Muslims by asking, "How do you justify your disregard of your religious duties?" He then pointed at me. "This one," he said, "is excused. He is Christian, and may God help him. But you, what do you have to say about yourselves? You are planning to welcome a new year with an evening of drunkenness instead of prayer!"

Despite his growing religious zeal, Fuād did not change his personal relationship with me. He still wished to visit me at home and be acquainted with my family, even though he disapproved of my family's Christianity. Still, when he said, "May God help him," he was indicating that I would not be spared on the Last Day. Since I would not acknowledge the Prophet Muhammad as my protector, the archangel

was bound to dispatch me to hell. So, much like the journalist who encountered John Wayne, Fuād had to cope with dissonance between my social identity, which for him was that of a Christian infidel, and my personal identity as his friend.

Last, dissonance between personal and social identities may emerge in the Middle East's business world, where the personal integrity of a partner takes precedence over social identity. In places where the judicial system and law enforcement are unreliable, businesspeople count on personal judgments of character and reliability to determine the trustworthiness of potential partners. Even when individuals retain stigmatized social identities, a pattern of integrity in their personal histories will identify them as ideal business partners. Therefore, it is advantageous for market traders to separate personal and social identity, if only as a survival mechanism within the realm of business. Toward that end, people rationalize beneficial relationships with nonbelievers, even when their scriptures encourage them to limit interaction with outsiders.

### Ego Identity

In contrast to personal identity, which is an appraisal of another person informed by previous experiences with that person, ego identity is a self-assessment of one's own life experiences. Ego identity demonstrates how personal accomplishments are used to evaluate life experiences, ultimately leading to evaluation of an entire lifetime as a success or failure.

Also unlike personal identity, which is based on external observation, ego identity is a psychological state that cannot be observed by others. Being an internal mode of judgment, insight into another person's ego identity is only gained through psychoanalysis.[14] Nevertheless, the effects of positive or negative ego identity are visible through behavior and actions. Since those visible behaviors and actions may help define personal identity, ego identity therefore has a direct influence upon personal identity.

## Identification and Group Formation

Self-identification with groups involves conscious and unconscious processes that define the individual's social, self, personal, and ego identities.[15] People encounter questions such as: Who am I? From whom do I draw inspiration? What constitutes a moral or immoral act? Am I confident enough in myself to answer these questions on my

own, or do I need someone else to answer them for me? Furthermore, am I comfortable with ambiguity, contradiction, or moral vagueness? Or, do I need a source of clear and definite answers to all of these questions? For some, inherited scriptural sources provide the desired unambiguous answers.[16] Others may find other sources, such as secular literature, interpretations of scriptures by religious authorities, or political leaders whose writings offer clarification, guidance, and inspiration. Different sources will give different answers. Each set of answers will have implications for people's lifestyles and relationships with others.

Moreover, as conditions surrounding people change, they can only maintain a firm identity by insulating themselves, their families, and their belief systems from the effects of those changes. These tactics may define social roles for men and women, including an insistence on strict dress codes, or may create groups with likeminded people. Together, these individuals may even seize power to establish a totalitarian system that defines and maintains identities, even when that requires imposing unwanted identities on others.

In contemporary times, such groups are labeled as religious fundamentalists,[17] but the same repressive methods have also been engaged under the banners of fascism, communism, and National Socialism. The recurrent nature of these tactics shows that people have always responded in this fashion to challenges aimed at identity. Also, as exposure to change becomes more frequent due to global mass communication, it becomes more difficult to defend against ideas that challenge preexisting identities. Consequently, the psychological phenomenon of identification will more often lead to the sociological phenomenon of group formation.

The processes that define social and self-identities group people within categories, dividing the social sphere into insiders and outsiders. Social and self-identities are therefore relevant to understanding *why* and *how* groups are formed. Personal and ego identities, on the other hand, help us understand what happens *within* groups after they are formed. They also explain the behavior and actions of individuals within the hierarchy of the group.

Individuals not only identify with groups, but also bond with the members of those groups. Unlike identification with a group, bonding is more than a feeling of close emotional association with a group's individual members. It also involves the formation of close personal relationships, especially through frequent or constant interaction. Individuals bond with groups for psychological or material reasons, including a sense of comfort gained through the security, continuity,

recognition, and material benefits derived from bonding with similarly minded group members. That identification and bonding leads to and affirms group formations. One way of conceptualizing the reciprocal process of bonding and identification that generates and maintains these groups is to refer to them as *identity-sharing groups.*

In the context of group formations, two kinds of bonding are of concern. The first and most common kind of bonding occurs when individuals affirm the *inherited* relationships of family, religion, religious sect, ethnic group, or race. These groups are *closed* identity-sharing groups, which members join upon birth. The second kind of bonding occurs when individuals *choose* to bond with a group for personal reasons, such as political, professional, or religious identification with other group members. These groups are *open* identity-sharing groups, which contrast with *closed* groups by providing new social identities.

Identity-sharing groups are an efficient form of organization because the bonding that occurs within them breaks the anonymity of individuals, including the anonymity associated with urban life. By undermining psychological barriers that limit human contact and communication, they enable members to transform formal contact and interactions into informal relationships that are better suited for the distribution of information. This is achieved as the group disseminates members' personal information through social interaction, replacing anonymity and distrust with familiarity that can lead to beneficial partnerships. Since individuals act in their best interest when they engage people whom they know, it becomes advantageous to create informal relationships with other group members, and this allows both closed and open identity-sharing groups to transform into *resource-sharing groups.* Resource-sharing groups may provide for their members various forms of security, such as physical protection, employment, aid, friendship, or marriage, creating further incentive to remain loyal to the group.

It may be self-evident that identity-based resource sharing provides group members with physical protection, employment, and aid.[18] This benefit, coupled with bonding effects, induces group members to reciprocate the sharing of resources, thereby promoting continuous and stable relationships within the group. Being aware of the principle of reciprocity, individuals are inclined to protect, employ, or help those whom they encounter in the group. Rather than acting only in their material self-interest, they are responding to their instinctive and self-benefitting drive to share resources with their group.

The formation of religious and sectarian identities in the Fertile Crescent involved the grouping of people around their common places of worship. In such locations, they could perform common rituals and

vocalize their beliefs in relative safety. Their repeated gathering would familiarize them with each other's personal identities and open channels for cooperation. In such a manner, a religious grouping spontaneously transforms itself into a network for sharing resources. This process is by no means particular to religious groups; however, Middle Easterners' prioritization of their religious identity makes it more likely that their cooperation will take place along religious lines.

In the Fertile Crescent, sectarian social associations of various kinds emerged around places of worship. Staffed by the equivalents of a board of trustees, these associations perform various indispensable functions including charity, funding for emergency healthcare, creating informal banking associations, and other social services.

These associations also harness webs of social relationships, such as friendships or lifelong partnerships, to create social networks. For instance, in the Fertile Crescent, individual members of sectarian groups who are eligible for marriage have access to means for informal introductions to potential mates. Some of these introductions serve as screening processes; others take them a step further to establish relationships that are intended to culminate in marriage. In addition, in places such as Lebanon and now in Iraq, where sectarian identity is formally politicized, sect memberships grant access to political posts.

In their social interactions, individuals bond with multiple identity-sharing groups. Faced with maintaining multiple identities, the energy and resources they allocate to an identity-sharing group indicates how highly they prioritize that identity. The higher they rank a group identity in their hierarchy of identities, the more resources they contribute to that particular group. For instance, in a socially homogeneous setting, individuals prioritize their local social identity and dedicate most of their resources to their association with that local social identity's symbols, such as its sport teams.

However, in multi-ethnic, multi-religious, or multi-sectarian settings, wherein ethnic, religious, or sectarian affiliation is a source for social values, individuals may prioritize one of those identities over local or national identities. If they prioritize their religious sectarian identity, they contribute resources to their own sectarian group, empowering that group to perform civic functions that are not fulfilled by national groups. Later, when membership in a religious sectarian identity-sharing group becomes a means for securing one's livelihood, sectarian ties are further strengthened at the expense of national ties. Consequently, prioritization of religious identity reduces the potential of national identity-sharing groups to become resource-sharing groups and provide civil services. Later, we will see how resource

networks in the Fertile Crescent cluster around places of worship that are inherently sectarian, thus weakening national institutions.

The process of transforming identity-sharing groups into resource-sharing groups is available to every social identity, as any specific social identity may be prioritized over all others.[19] In the multi-religious, multi-sectarian social setting of the Fertile Crescent, religion's status as a primary source of social values establishes religious identity as the predominant form of self-identification. But sectarian groupings have by no means been the only lines of demarcation among the inhabitants. In religiously homogeneous regions, these lines were and continue to be class or clan based. However, conflicts fueled by religious cleavages were more violent, more prolonged, and on larger scales than conflicts generated by secular cleavages. Acknowledging the importance of religious identity is therefore necessary to understand how the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent relate to each other. As we will see later, religious identification affects those inter-sectarian relationships by deflecting secular conflicts into religious and sectarian conflicts.

Because religious groups are the basic social blocks upon which vital institutions and social structures are built in the Fertile Crescent, chapters 3, 4, and 5 are devoted to describing the creation of sectarian groups there, providing historical context for the ongoing tension between sectarian identification and nationalism and the ongoing religious wars. These chapters establish a timeline for the earliest emergence of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups, and isolate both the processes and purposes that led to their inception. The chapters also cover the sub-religious, sectarian groups that spawn from those traditions, including the initial meeting with Islam during the Muslim-Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent. This formative encounter is important not only for its fortifying effect upon sectarian groups, but because it serves as a model for understanding the Fertile Crescent's historical response to formal institutions and nationalism. As chapters 2–5 show, members of sectarian groups are conditioned to be suspicious of all foreign power, including any authority outside of their extended families and communities of faith. Collective identities therefore form around those localized, informal institutions, not the formal institutions of modern nation-states. By inhibiting secular nationalist identification, sectarian identity retains influence and power, as the formal institutions of the nation-states are rendered fragile and inefficient.

# 2

# The Fertile Crescent Meets the Muslim Arabs

The earliest evidence in the written history of the Fertile Crescent reveals that urban civilizations emerged first in Mesopotamia, between the Euphrates and the Tigris Rivers, around the end of the fourth and the beginning of the third millennium BC in the form of independent city-states. They were followed by city-states emerging along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean to the west of the Euphrates River during the third millennium BC, to which we commonly refer as Geographical Syria (see figure 2.1). The imperial forces of the pharaohs subsequently subjected the city-states of the Nile to their rule, while the imperial forces of the Sumerians, Akkadians, Babylonians, and Assyrians subjected the Mesopotamian city-states to their rule as early as the third millennium BC. Yet except for the Kingdom of Ebla that subjected at its height (2600–2240 BC) more than two-thirds of Geographical Syria to its rule and for other occasional periods of loose confederation between few city-states, the Phoenician city-states along the eastern Mediterranean and the city-states in the Syrian hinterland, from east of the coastal cities to the Euphrates River, remained independent from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Empires and independent from each other. While connected to the outside world through trade, their political independence generated for them distinct local identities, some of which persist to the present day in continuously inhabited cities such as Aleppo, Beirut, Damascus, Hama, Homs, Sidon, and Tyre. With the advent of the second millennium BC, those city-states began to lose their political independence to a succession of invading imperial forces and were eventually incorporated into at least 15 different empires.

The Phoenician and Syrian city-states were first incorporated into the Egyptian Empire (1900–1550 and 1467–1300 BC), who fought the Hittites from 1650 to 1250 BC over the control of Geographical Syria. In the absence of a dominant empire, the Israelite tribes

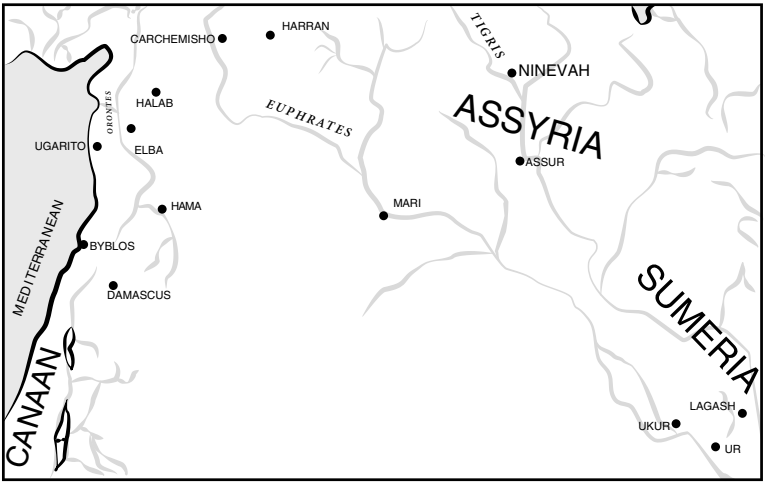


**Figure 2.1** Map of the Fertile Crescent of antiquity, 4000–1500 BC.
*Note*: Map drawn by Zakeus Emanuel Tomass, July 1, 2015.

established an independent state in Palestine, the southwestern part of Geographical Syria, sometime during the first millennium BC. Then all of the city-states of the Fertile Crescent were incorporated again into the Neo-Assyrian Empire (875–612 BC), followed by the Babylonian (612–538 BC), the Persian (538–333 BC), the Hellenistic (333–64 BC), the Roman (64 BC–AD 395), the East Roman or Byzantine (AD 395–637), again the Persian (AD 609–629), again the Byzantine (AD 629–637), the Arab (AD 637–833), the Circassian and Turkish Mamlūk domination within the Arab Empire (AD 833–1095), the third Byzantine invasion of western Syria (AD 969–1070), the Seljūq Turks (AD 1070–80), the European Crusaders (AD 1095–1291), the Mamlūk (AD 1282–1516), the Ottoman Turks (AD 1516–1916), and the French and British (AD 1920–46).[1]

The nature of the relationship between the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent and the foreign powers that dominated them were not always the same. Some empires sought booty and tax revenue, but often let the conquered people worship their own gods. Others, such as the Neo-Assyrian Empire, pursued policies to assimilate the conquered people through adopting a unifying Aramaic language and a polytheistic religion, culture, and value system.[2]

However, the advent of an evangelical monotheism left little room for tolerance of diverse religious beliefs. After the Roman Empire's

adoption of Christianity as a state religion, the notion of one empire–one God replaced polytheism. The *Christianized* Roman Empire with its new capital, Constantinople, commonly referred to as the Byzantine Empire, expected total conformity from the peoples in its dominion.[3] Religion became the dominant identity of the empire, and thereafter successive emperors perceived religious nonconformity as a threat to the empire itself and a challenge to their authority.

Syrian and Mesopotamian religious elites resisted the Byzantine expectation of religious conformity through theological dissent. Their endorsement of theological positions incompatible with the official Byzantine Church generated distinct religious identities that have endured to the present day.[4] The religious identities that emerged in the fifth century have survived to date because members of religious groups formed exclusive social and economic networks that enabled them to maintain their autonomy. The boundaries of these groups were patrolled spontaneously by group insiders as well as deliberately by clerics whose task was to control all forms of interaction with outsiders in the event that the spontaneous process of exclusion failed.

On the eve of the Muslim Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, the vast majority of its inhabitants were Christian. Some, also, were Jews, who lived in major cities, predominantly in Mesopotamia. There were also small pockets of pagan communities in North Mesopotamia and in the isolated northwest mountainous regions of Syria. They all spoke various dialects of Aramaic with the Syriac dialect of Edessa dominating the classical literature and liturgy of the Christian churches. Some people were bilingual, and for them Greek, the language of the Byzantine Empire, was their secondary spoken language, but it also was their primary written language. Moreover, Syrian and Mesopotamian Christians were divided into three churches with independent religious hierarchies. One conformed to the Byzantine Church and was loyal to its emperor and was therefore called Royalist, or Melkite, from Aramaic *malka*. The other two nonconformists were the Jacobite and the Nestorian Churches. The former had followers in the Byzantine-occupied territories (left side in figure 2.2), while the latter's followers lived in the Persian-occupied territories (right side in figure 2.2). The subsequent Muslim Arab conquest presented the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent with different challenges, depending on whether they were conformists or nonconformists to the Byzantine religious doctrine.

In the decades before the Arab conquests of Syria and Mesopotamia, dominion over both regions repeatedly passed between the Persians and the Byzantines, as the two foreign powers vied for control of

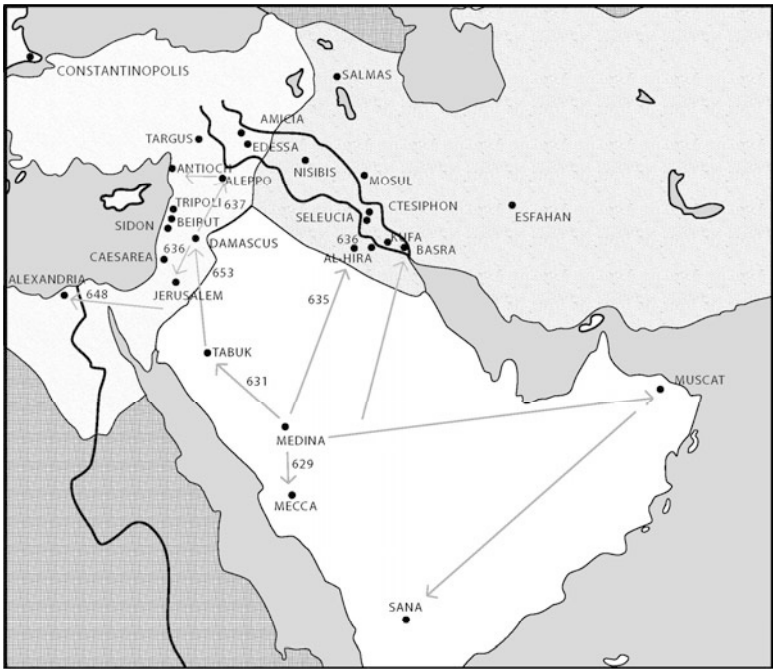


**Figure 2.2** Map of the Fertile Crescent divided between the Byzantine and Persian (Sasanian) Empires on the eve of the Muslim Arab conquest, AD 635.

*Note*: Map drawn by Zakeus Emanuel Tomass, July 1, 2015.

the Fertile Crescent. During this period, from 606 until 629, Syrians and Mesopotamians saw Byzantine rulers give way to Persian replacements, only to once again find Syria and North Mesopotamia under Byzantine rule in 629. This trend of rapidly changing foreign rulers made the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent suspicious of all foreign power. As their homes became stations for external powers that came and went with the rise and fall of empires, they came to associate foreign powers with violent upheaval and transient authority. Support and stability, then, could only come from local groups organized around common rites, rituals, symbols, and the sharing of vital resources.[5] This insistence upon local institutions prevented the formation of collective, empire-wide identities, and thus society within the Fertile Crescent was defined by local and religious groups.

That lack of empire-wide identification facilitated the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, as Syrians and Mesopotamians were neither eager nor able to resist the Muslim Arab conquerors when the latter

arrived to expel the Byzantines and seize control of the land. In cities where no Byzantine troops were stationed, opposition to the Muslim Arab invaders was almost nonexistent. For the most part, residents of the cities regarded the Muslim Arabs as unknown figures rather than self-evident threats, and so the harshest reactions to the Arab conquest came from Greek sources authored by Greek-speaking clergy of the Byzantine Church. As those clergy derived their own power from the Byzantine presence, they regarded the defeat of Byzantine troops by Arabs as an indirect threat to their own standing and influence. As such, their accounts of the Arab conquest tended to be polemical in nature.

Contrary to the common belief that Islam was spread in Syria and Mesopotamia by way of the Muslim Arab sword, the Syriac chronicles do not suggest that acceptance of Islam was offered as an alternative to death or enslavement. In fact, at the time of the conquest Syrians and Mesopotamians seemed to be oblivious to the existence of the Arabs' religion and unaware of their conquerors' desire to propagate their beliefs.

In December 634, the Arabs attacked Palestine and interrupted the annual pilgrimage to Bethlehem. Their attacks prompted Sophronius, the Damascus-born Byzantine Patriarch of Jerusalem (634–639), to deliver his famous "Christmas Sermon," in which he said "the army of the godless Saracens[6] has captured the divine Bethlehem and bars our passage there, threatening slaughter and destruction if we leave this holy city [Jerusalem] and dare to approach our beloved and sacred Bethlehem."[7] In a subsequent sermon on the "Holy Baptism," delivered in 636 or 637, Sophronius enumerated "atrocities" the Arabs had committed in conquering the rest of Syria and Mesopotamia and said the anger of Christ toward his followers was manifest in the violence of the Arab invaders.

> That is why the vengeful and God-hating Saracens, the abomination of desolation clearly foretold to us by the prophets, overrun the places which are not allowed to them, plunder cities, devastate fields, burn down villages, set on fire the holy churches, overturn the sacred monasteries, oppose the Byzantine armies arrayed against them, and in fighting raise up the trophies [of war] and add victory to victory…These God-fighters boast of prevailing over all, assiduously and unrestrainably imitating their leader, who is the devil.[8]

Jerusalem fell to the Arabs in 638, and Sophronius died soon after he negotiated the terms of its surrender. Sophronius's student, the Melkite theologian Maximus the Confessor (d. 662), maintained the

hostile tone of the Greek-speaking writers toward the Arab conquerors. Maximus later fled to Asia Minor after the Persian invasion of Syria before moving on to Carthage, where he remained until fleeing to Rome after the Arab conquest of North Africa. While writing from Rome, he echoed his mentor's tone:

> For indeed, what is more dire than the evils which today afflict the world? What is more terrible for the discerning than the unfolding events? What is more pitiable and frightening for those who endure them? To see a barbarous people of the desert overrunning another's lands as though they were their own; to see civilization itself being ravaged by wild and untamed beasts whose form alone is human.[9]

Yet as time passed and the Arabs established themselves as permanent rulers, the Melkites and other Christians saw past their preconceptions of barbarism and godlessness. They discovered that the Arabs were not godless after all, but rather possessed a new religion. A text cautiously attributed to the Melkite theologian Saint John of Damascus (675–749) described the development of Islam and presented it as the last of a series of erroneous beliefs.

> [U]ntil the times of Heraclius they [the Muslims] were plain idolaters. From that time till now a false prophet appeared among them, surnamed Muhammad, who, having happened upon the Old and New Testament and apparently having conversed, in like manner, with an Arian[10] monk, put together his own heresy. And after ingratiating himself with the people by a pretense of piety, he spread rumours of a scripture brought down to him from heaven. So, having drafted some ludicrous doctrines in his book he handed over to them this form of worship.[11]

Expressed almost a century after the conquest, John's view of the alien religion is typical of a believer who skeptically assesses a rival belief system while remaining confident that his own faith represents the truth. However, unlike the Christians of the Fertile Crescent who had been excommunicated for heresy, the Muslim Arabs were too powerful to expel. Instead, the Melkites could only come to terms with the differing beliefs of their new masters, and so the sect ultimately used a claim of common Semitic descent to shift from an Aramaic or Greek identity toward an Arab identity.

As far as the Syriac-speaking people were concerned, their cities were once again an object of desire for foreign forces. In a series of chronicles, Syriac-speaking monks monitored the events unfolding before them and bequeathed their perspectives on the Arab conquest

to their followers. In the chronicles, the monks imbued the invasion with a divine element by informing their followers that God had sent the Arabs to punish them for their sins and to punish the Byzantines for persecuting them.

Owing to their unique perspective of the Arab conquest, the Jacobite Syrian clergy seem to have determined the need for common grounds with the Muslim Arabs decades earlier. A conciliatory attitude could be discerned from Jacob of Edessa's (633–708) comment: "The Muslims too, although they do not know nor wish to say that this true Messiah (Jesus), who came and is acknowledged by the Christians, is God and the son of God, they nevertheless confess firmly that he is the true Messiah who was to come and who was foretold by the prophets; on this they have no dispute with us."[12] Yet, as we shall see below, the chronicles of the Syriac-speaking clergy were concerned more with the impact of the conquest on their communities and whether the conquest would disrupt their control of those communities. Even in the midst of Arab rule, sectarian rivalries were of greater concern than the presence of the new Islamic belief system.

While the records of the monks seem to be accurate, the events of the chronicles are nonetheless narrated in a distinct tone that highlights the subjective beliefs of the monks and the communities they presided over. The tone of these chronicles also suggests that they were intended for members of the monks' respective communities, not outsiders. They may have been primarily intended to strengthen communal boundaries by defining their communities through their shared opposition to a new enemy. The excerpts below from some of the chronicles shared chronologically in the order of their authorship to let the readers see for themselves how the intellectual elite of the native Syriac-speaking inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent viewed the Muslim Arab Conquest of their dwellings.

In his Book of World History, dated between 686 and 693, Yōhannan Bar Penkāyē writes that "the Arabs were only interested in raiding, taking captives, and levying tribute in return for which they were willing to allow their new subjects to believe anything they wished."[13] That same attitude toward non-Muslims seems to have extended to lands that were not under permanent Muslim control, as Bar Penkāyē adds elsewhere that "their robber bands went annually to distant parts and to the islands, bringing back captives from all of the peoples under the heavens. Of each person they required only tribute, allowing him to remain in whatever faith he wished. Among them were also Christians in no small numbers: some belonged to the heretics [Melkites and Jacobites], while others to us [Nestorians]."[14]

About 80 years later, the anonymous Jacobite monk who authored the Chronicle of the Monastery of Zuqnīn (near today's Diyār Bakr in Turkey) in 774 described the Arabs as

> very libidinous and carnal people, and any law framed for them (by) Muhammad or by some other God-fearing person which is not framed to appease their own desires they have ignored and set aside. But any law which fulfils their own wishes and desires, even though it be framed by the most contemptible of their number, they pledge allegiance to it and say, "This was framed by the Prophet, the Messenger of God, and, what is more, he framed it at God's command."[15]

Like other chronicles, history of the period 582–842 by the Patriarch of Antioch's Dionysius I of Tel-Mahrē (d. 845) also conceives of the Arabs as a new foreign power that dominated the local inhabitants.[16] Like his predecessors, he also did not inform his readers that the acceptance of Islam was an option that allowed inhabitants to avoid paying tribute to the conquerors.[17] Tel-Mahrē started his narrative of the Arab conquest with a description of an Arabian merchant named Muhammad, who traveled to Palestine and became familiar with its monotheistic religion:

> [Muhammad would say,] "If you listen to me, you too will have a good land, flowing with milk and honey, as a gift from God." To back up this claim, he gathered those who were amenable into a band and began to lead them up to raid the land of Palestine, returning unscathed with a load of captives and booty. [ . . . ] One raiding expedition to Palestine and back was naturally followed by another. And of course, when the uncommitted ones saw Muhammad's disciples enriching themselves so royally, [ . . . ] they flocked to him. Later, when his followers had grown into a great army of men and when he himself occupied the seat of honour in his own city of Yathrib, he no longer permitted them to carry out (mere) raids. Nor could little Palestine be satisfaction enough for long, once forces of this kind had been unleashed. They ranged much further afield, killing openly, taking captives, laying waste and plundering. And even so it was not enough for them, unless they had reduced the population to subjects who were obliged to pay regular tribute. In this way they grew by degrees in strength and extended their territory, until they were powerful enough to conquer all but a few of the Roman [Byzantine] territories and the Persian Empire as well. From this hegemony was born an established empire with one ruler following another in regular succession. And God, whose purpose was to chastise us for our sins, nodded in assent while this empire waxed in power.[18]

Tel-Mahrē's association of the Prophet Muhammad and his followers with plunder and violence continues in his descriptions of Arab conduct in northern Syria. "A year later [in 636], King Umar sent word and appointed Muāwiah b. Abī Sufyān over all Syria," he wrote, "[and Muāwiah] took Antioch by siege and plundered the villages around, leading the people away as slaves."[19] Further descriptions of Muāwiah's conquest of Asia Minor carry the same tone.

> Muāwiah besieged Caesarea with vigorous assaults, taking captives from the surrounding country and laying it waste. He sustained the hostilities by night and day for a long time until he conquered it by the sword. All those in the city, including the 7,000 Romans [Byzantines] sent there to guard it, were put to death. The city was plundered of vast quantities of gold and silver and then abandoned to its grief. Those who settled there afterwards became tributaries of the Arabs.[20]

Tel-Mahrē's narrative then continues, describing "the Barbarian force" of Muāwiah as it conquered Cyprus, plundered it, enslaved its Greek-speaking inhabitants, and razed the fortress city on the island of Arwād off the Syrian coast.[21] A year later, the Arabs captured South Mesopotamia after the battle of al-Qādisīyah. In the same year, they marched unopposed into Persia's capital Ctesiphon, after Yazdegerd III and his imperial court had deserted it. On their way north, Maruta, the Jacobite bishop of Takrīt, took the side of the Muslims and opened the gates of Takrīt's citadel to them.[22] In 638, like the other cities of North Mesopotamia, Edessa offered no resistance. They accepted and paid the tributes exacted from them and were spared destruction. The rest of North Mesopotamia was conquered in 641, with the capture of Mosul on the west bank of the Tigris River, opposite to Nīneveh, the site of the ancient capital of Assyria.[23]

When Tel-Mahrē summed up the impact of the Muslim Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, he had in mind the well-being of those whom he considered *his* people, the members of his Jacobite sect, and the infrastructure of his church. These were the elements of his communal identity that he sought to preserve by accommodating the Muslim Arabs. He had believed that his community was rescued from two centuries of pressure to conform to Byzantine religious doctrine and therefore was free at last. Yet, it was now subject to a foreign people not to his liking, but with whom it nevertheless negotiated its safety and survival. He wrote:

> God, who exacts his due and who determines sovereignty among people on the earth, will give power to whom He chooses. He may appoint

> even the dregs of mankind to be their rulers. When He saw that the measure of the Romans' [Byzantine] sins was overflowing and that they were committing every sort of crime against our people and our churches, bringing our Confession to the verge of extinction, He stirred up the Sons of Ishmael and enticed them hither from their southern land. This had been the most despised and disregarded of the peoples of the earth,[24] if indeed they were known at all. Yet it was by bargaining with them that we secured our deliverance. This was no small gain, to be rescued from the Roman [Byzantine] imperial oppression.[25]

Tel-Mahrē viewed the initial impact of the Arab conquest on the inhabitants of Syria and North Mesopotamia as the exchange of Roman rule for Arab rule. During that shift in leadership, *his* people, the members of his Jacobite (modern Syrian/Syriac/Assyrian) sect, and the infrastructure of his church remained foremost in his mind. Those priorities, along with the overarching desire to preserve his communal identity, informed his response to the Arab conquest and his willingness to accommodate the Muslim Arabs. On one hand, he and his constituents felt they had been rescued from two centuries of pressure to conform to Roman religious doctrine. His people had become the subjects of rulers who hated the Christians, but nevertheless allowed the Christians to negotiate for their safety. Tel-Mahrē was also adamant that the problems of Arab rule could not be resolved through negotiations with the Arabs, but rather through understanding the divine purposes behind the suffering of Christians.

> Everything the poor can produce vanishes like smoke. There is no saviour and no king whose door is open. Worse still, God has turned His Face away. When we call upon Him, He does not listen. We have angered Him by our evil deeds . . . and because of such practices, God has delivered the Christians into the hands of the enemy and they are ruled by those who hate them. They oppress us in order to extinguish that nobility which used to be displayed in the Christian way of life . . . but which of our people repents in the slightest?[26]

The Muslim Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent produced an array of challenges for all Muslims and non-Muslims, including Christian and Jewish adherents. While Muslim rulers used violence only on rare occasions against the Aramaic-speaking Jews and Christians of Syria and Mesopotamia to encourage their acceptance of Islam, that restraint did not extend to pagans and Arab Christians. Furthermore, once an individual had become Muslim by choice or by birth, the cost for renouncing Islam was death. Even theological or

ritualistic variations from the mainstream orthodoxy drew the charge of apostasy, earning nonconformists among Muslims capital punishment. Tolerance of Jews and Christians also depended on submission to a multitude of repressive social rules. Those rules regulated social interactions between Muslims and both Christians and Jews, moderating mundane exchanges, such as greeting, touching, and trade, as well as more serious matters, such as taxation, serving in government office, intermarriage, and criminal conduct.[27]

Chapters 3 through 6 will demonstrate that as a result of those social regulations, non-Muslims and alleged apostates found themselves marginalized within the Muslim Empire and further estranged from the concept of collective identity. Yet though practices of intimidation, humiliation, segregation, and anti-apostate military campaigns were meant to encourage conformity to an orthodox Muslim belief system and its rites and rituals, such tactics only deepened non-Muslims' and apostates' reliance upon local sectarian groups. To those nonconformists who refused to convert to Islam or to conform to the dominant Muslim orthodoxy, sectarian groups offered access to otherwise unavailable resources, relief from periodic oppression by the empire, and the ability to maintain their sectarian identities. Consequently, the religious leaders of Jewish, Christian, and Muslim apostate sectarian groups were able to use the circumstances of Muslim rule to attract stronger commitments to their sects and consolidate power within local communities. Even while pressuring non-Muslims to abandon their religions and adopt a unified Muslim identity, the Muslim rulers only cemented the sectarian attitudes of the Christian, Jewish, and apostate communities and also preserved an antagonistic relationship between sectarian groups and the ruling empire. That mosaic of sectarian communities persists in the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent to this day, rendering their institutions ineffective and unable to carry out their functions in a manner similar to the modern nation-states of Europe and North America.

# 3

# Formation of the Jewish Identity

Though Jewish communities regarded the Romans, Byzantines, and Arab conquerors from the perspective of natives facing foreign invasion, biblical tradition describes the Jewish people as a group who themselves found and conquered a Promised Land located on foreign soil. The Bible informs us that the family of Abraham, father to the tribes of Israel, left Ur in South Mesopotamia and settled in the city of Harrān in North Mesopotamia.[1] Abraham and his family then fled Harrān after he had burned the temple of idols.[2] Around 1200 BC, the family traveled southwest to the Promised Land, settled among the Canaanites around Jerusalem (Aramaic: Ur Shalim, "city of Salem"), and paid tribute to Melchi-Sedek (Aramaic: "Righteous King"), the Canaanite priest-king of the god named Salem. After a period spent in Egypt, the biblical figure Joshua would conquer the Promised Land, dividing it among 12 tribes that were said to have descended from Abraham's family.

Judah was the most powerful tribe among the 12, and accordingly the Bible prophesied that the Messiah would come from Judah. The tribe of Judah and part of the tribe of Benjamin settled to the south of Jerusalem, while the others, including the other part of the tribe of Benjamin, settled to the north in what became known as the kingdom of Israel. The biblical narrative asserts that, around 1000 BC, the Judean known in the Bible as King David unified the 12 tribes under the kingdom of Israel. He then conquered Jerusalem, making it a capital of Israel and replacing worship of Salem with worship of Yahweh. After the death of David's successor King Solomon around 922 BC, Israel was separated into the kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel. The northern kingdom comprised all of the territories of ten tribes and part of the territory belonging to the tribe of Benjamin, whereas Judah only absorbed Benjamin's remaining territories.

From around the mid-eighth century BC, the biblical narrative finds support in archeological evidence that documented the histories of the inhabitants of the region. In 734 BC, the rift between the kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel became most apparent, when King Ahaz of Judah refused to enter an alliance with Israel and the city-state of Damascus (Arām) against the Assyrian King Tiglath-pileser III during Assyria's conquest of southern Syria and Palestine. Ahaz would instead petition Tiglath-pileser III for support against Israel, and so Israel was soon forced to surrender a large portion of its territories to Assyria in 733 BC.

Israel's capital city of Samaria later rebelled against the Assyrian Empire between 724 and 721 BC, and the city was then placed under siege by the Assyrian King Shalmanassar V. The siege ended after Sargon II took control of Assyria in 721 BC and, thereafter, made Israel an Assyrian province. He then mandated the deportation of the Samarian upper class to Persia and repopulated Israel with colonists from Syria and Babylonia, effectively erasing the northern kingdom of Israel's presence by dispersing its ten tribes. The end of the northern kingdom became finalized as its members assimilated with other groups and lost their own Israelite identities. In essence, the "Ten Lost Tribes of Israel" were erased because of their inability to adapt to a new political reality and end their resistance to Assyrian rule. Conversely, Judah remained in existence by adapting to newfound circumstances and paying tribute to Assyria in exchange for independence.

That resilience and adaptivity enabled the remaining Jews to survive future misfortunes, such as the Babylonian conquests of 597 BC and 587 BC that culminated in deportation of the Jewish elite to Babylon and the destruction of the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem.[3] Once Babylon fell to the Persians in 538 BC, many of the Jews returned to Jerusalem and later rebuilt the temple in 515 BC. Later, following the First Jewish revolt of AD 66–70, the Romans destroyed the Temple of Solomon and almost the entire city of Jerusalem. After the Second Jewish Revolt of AD 132–135, the Romans completely destroyed Jerusalem and erected their own city of *Aelia Capitolina* upon its ruins. They also built a sanctuary to Jupiter on the site of the Temple of Solomon, imported a large foreign population into Jerusalem, and forbade Jews from entering the city altogether, thereby annihilating the geographic center of Jewish identity. In doing so, the Jewish population faced the same challenge of dispossession that had previously eliminated the northern kingdom of Israel.

From AD 70 until AD 135, many of the Jews spread into major cities in Syria and Mesopotamia, but nonetheless viewed themselves

as an extension of the Land of Israel.[4] The resilience of Jewish identity in spite of the community's displacement was due to its having transformed itself into networks for sharing resources. Its members developed tools of survival after Rome dispersed them and they began resettling as minority groups in new diaspora.[5] The development and use of those tools for sharing resources enabled Jews to survive adversity by cooperating with their religious brethren. Since their religion served as the basis of their resource-sharing groups, the Jewish community's loss of Jerusalem and newfound reliance on those religion-based groups only increased the importance of Jewish identity in their lives.

Jerusalem regained its original name in the fourth century following the Roman Empire's adoption of Christianity as its official religion. However, when Jerusalem's gates opened to the Caliph Umar I in 638, "the stipulation was made that no Jew might live in Jerusalem. The covenant was set down in writing and endorsed by all parties."[6] While this record does not state who made the stipulation, a different source, a "Judeo–Arabic fragment" of a manuscript states that Umar I negotiated with "the [Melkite] patriarch [Sophronius] and his companions" on behalf of a "group of the Jews" to allow 70 families to relocate from around Tiberias, the city on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee, to "the market of the Jews" in the south of Jerusalem.[7]

The Christian animosity toward Jews stemmed from the perceived incompatibility of Christian and Jewish doctrine. Christians overwrote Jewish doctrine with their own, thereby replacing the Old Testament's God of justice with their New Testament's God of love. Moreover, the greatest point of tension lay in the Jews' denial that Jesus was the Messiah along with the Christian belief that Jews had played a significant role in his crucifixion. While the Gospel's narrative about Christ indicated that he had sought both the crucifixion and resurrection to fulfill biblical prophecy and establish Christianity's core article of faith, that conviction did not mitigate the Christian antipathy toward the Jews. Instead, and until recently, Christian authorities were determined to view Jews with hostility because they had asked Pilate to "Crucify him, crucify him" and said that "His blood shall be on us and on our children!"[8] The Christians transformed the Jews' role as facilitators of the prophecy of the crucifixion, the necessary condition for the resurrection, to a perpetual guilt passed on from one generation to another.

Naturally, when the Muslim Arab conquest ended the Roman Christian (Byzantine) reign, the Jews of the Fertile Crescent benefited from the change in rule. Compared to the Byzantines, the Arabs

were more tolerant of the Jews, at least in the Fertile Crescent, and recognized them as a self-governing religious community. As a result, Jewish identity and resource-sharing groups were allowed to thrive. Through their use of secure trade routes that had been established by the Arabs, those Jewish groups were able to call upon their fellow Jews in business and form complex networks across the large territories under Arab dominion.[9] Having a common language, a common legal system, and a common identity, Jewish merchants could count on the hospitality of their coreligionists to facilitate their trade activities over large territories. Jewish merchants not only felt secure within fellow Jews' homes but also knew that their religious brethren would pay ransom on their behalf if they were to be captured by pirates or outlaws. Even with the shift from inhospitable Byzantine rulers to the Arabs, greater government tolerance only made Jews more reliant upon identity-based, resource-sharing networks as those networks flourished and became more able to guarantee safety and prosperity. Jewish communities, and indeed all residents of the Fertile Crescent, would always trust their own resource-sharing networks above foreign rule and formal authority.

As Jews felt safer among fellow Jews, Jewish quarters spontaneously emerged in urban residential neighborhoods. Where possible, those Jewish communities bolstered their sense of security by residing within walled neighborhoods and installing gates to bar outsiders.[10] As important as it was to form groups with religious brethren, it was equally important to segregate those groups from society at large. Other communities shared this belief, and so segregated enclaves of religious and ethnic groups were—and still are—common across the cities of the Fertile Crescent.

Since neighborhoods and social groups organized themselves around common religious beliefs, religion became the ultimate source of identity under both Byzantine and Arab rule. Religious identity therefore came to determine social standing, and anyone who did not share the dominant religious identity was invariably considered second class. However, even a minority identity was indispensable to the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent, because it would still define their rights and obligations while also granting them access to shared resources.

Due to the emphasis on religious identity, figures imbued with religious authority also occupied positions of power within their local communities, as was the case with rabbis within the Jewish quarters. When the Arab rulers allowed Jewish communities to govern themselves, the choice meant allowing rabbis to sit at the helm of Jewish

communities and represent them before the Muslim state or rival religious groups.[11] Rabbis also used their relationship with the Muslim state to exert influence over their Jewish communities, and that power was often exercised to suppress dissent and reinforce religious authority. In that fashion, rabbis suppressed schismatic movements within Judaism in the eighth century with the help of the Muslim state. One movement that survived was the more powerful Karaism (Hebrew: Qaraim, "to read"), which challenged rabbinic authority by sanctioning personal interpretations of the Scriptures. The Karaites survived because they ultimately fled to Byzantine-controlled territory.[12]

The Jews continued to migrate in and out of the Fertile Crescent, depending on prevailing economic and security conditions, while maintaining their Jewish identity and internal organization. The total number of Jews in Syria and Mesopotamia before World War I, excluding those in Palestine, was about 150,000 with the majority of them living in the major cities of Iraq. However, with the creation of Israel in 1948, the Jewish population in the Fertile Crescent declined. The flux of Palestinian refugees into Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq led to hostilities toward Jews at both the official and grassroots levels. The local Muslim population no longer viewed them as *dhimmis* who merited protection, and Christian anti-Jewish sentiments persisted. In response, Zionist networks, especially in Iraq, encouraged and organized their exodus.[13] The overwhelming majority of Jews left Iraq between 1950 and 1951.[14] A few, who were strongly attached to the Arabic language and literature, insisted on staying behind at first, but eventually even those departed.[15]

In the 1960s, the Syrian government imposed constraints on its Jewish citizenry to limit their movement within the country and ban them from crossing out of its borders. Furthermore, the government mandated that national ID cards note the religious affiliation of Jews with a line identifying them as "Mousawi," in Arabic: "Follower of Moses." This term was presumably chosen because the common term "Yahudi" had gained a negative connotation in the Arabic vernacular. Despite restrictions to their movement, many Jews escaped from Syria with the aid of underground networks. When the ban on their travel abroad was eased, almost all the remaining Jews seized the opportunity to leave Syria.

In Lebanon, no place existed for Jews within the country's sectarian system. The Jewish exodus from Lebanon started after the civil war of 1958 and increased at the beginning of 1967 in response to the rising influence of the PLO. By the civil war of 1975, Jewish migration was almost complete.[16] As of today, outside Israel, Syrian and

Mesopotamian Jewish populations have nearly dwindled to the point of nonexistence.

Since the Jews of the Fertile Crescent now predominantly reside in Israel or the West, this book will only address the nation-state of Israel and the Arab–Israeli conflict in terms of external shocks to the nation-states of Syria and, when relevant, its neighbors.

# 4

# Formation of Christian Sectarian Identities

After the Byzantine Empire's adoption of Christianity as its state religion, the new Christian world in its dominion was divided into four Sees: Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, and Alexandria. Each See was an archbishop's seat of authority. The See of Antioch was the religious capital of the Byzantine-controlled part of the Fertile Crescent. However, the Christians of the Fertile Crescent were not united by a sense of shared beliefs and mutual dependence. The Christological schisms of the fifth century eventually divided them into four separate sects: the Nestorian, the Jacobite, the Maronite, and the Melkite.

At the grassroots level, the religious and social affairs of these sects were regulated by separate ecclesiastical orders. Clergy emphasized their distinct religious doctrines, liturgy, and canon law and then translated those foundational beliefs into rules that maintained group cohesion by controlling individual behavior. Rules that set aside days for fasting created a constant awareness of sectarian identity, and daily observance of those rules reaffirmed one's commitment to the sect and deference to the clergy. Interaction with group outsiders was also subject to limitations, as the communities' resources and social associations were strictly denied to outsiders. Furthermore, intermarriage and business relationships with members of other sects were discouraged or intensely regulated to maintain segregation. Rival groups were denounced as heretics, or at best outsiders, thus providing fertile ground for intergroup prejudice. Therefore, on an official level, most sources indicate that the boundaries, whether for church–state, inter-church, or relations between church and other religions, were theoretically kept tightly closed. However, on an actual day-to-day level, there was considerable interaction among members of different churches in all spheres. The evidence for such interaction is found in incidental passing references in chronicles or the lives of saints.[1] In rare

cases, it was also possible not to take sides openly in the Christological controversies. For instance, in the Greek Dionysian Corpus, produced in Syria around the fifth century, whether the author is pro- or anti-Chalcedon is impossible to determine. Moreover, in the Syriac literature, there is the example of Jacob of Serugh, who is regarded as a saint in both the Syrian (Jacobite) and Maronite Churches. Only on publication of his letters, which included one that responded to some hardliners, was he obliged to state openly his dislike of Theodore of Mopsuestia's and other Dyophysite approaches to Christology. Other examples of interaction can be found in hagiographical and monastic texts that cross ecclesiastical boundaries, such as the Life of Chalcedonian patriarch of Alexandria John the Merciful/Almsgiver, whose Life is available also in Syriac manuscripts. There are also several East Syriac seventh-century monastic authors, such as Martyrius/Sahdona and Shubhalmaran, who were read in Chalcedonian circles and sometimes in Syrian ones as well.[2]

Although clergy generated and exploited discord out of managerial self-interest, their positions of power also made them targets when violent conflicts arose. As representatives of their groups, they were first to face the wrath of the dominant, and often invading, military powers. Depending on the standards of the times, they faced perils that ranged from humiliation to physical torture to brutal execution. Yet their suffering, and even their deaths, heightened their status within their communities and could end by elevating them to the position of saint and martyr. Once a religious authority obtained such a rank, he would be incorporated into his group's liturgy and become another facet of that group's sectarian identity.

Prior to the Muslim Arab conquest, the vast majority of the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent was Syriac-speaking Christians. The rest of the Christians were Greek natives or Hellenized Aramaeans who largely lived in the major cities near the Mediterranean coast. Syriac, the Edessan dialect of Aramaic, was the liturgical language of all Christians, except for the Greek natives. One third of the male Christians lived a monastic life,[3] which explains why the surviving records from that period come from Syriac-speaking monks and the proliferation of monasteries throughout the Fertile Crescent.

While Syriac-speaking monks were exposed to Greek thought as they translated Greek texts into Syriac, they were also influenced by their native tradition through Syriac literature and poetry, some of which they translated into Greek.[4] In fact, the Christian communities that came into existence in the second century possessed a shared cultural and religious identity distinct from that of the Byzantines and

the Greeks. They channeled their native artistic traditions into their liturgy and annual commemorations of their martyrs, church leaders, and benefactors, thereby infusing Christian rites with elements of their pre-Christian cultures.

For instance, polemicizing against Greek cultural chauvinism, the logician and astronomer Severus Sebokht (d. 667) gives us an example of cultural sensitivities between Syrians and Greeks. After alluding to the Babylonian origin of Ptolemy's astronomy, he states: "That the Babylonians were Syrians I think no one will deny, so those who say that it is in no way possible for Syrians to know about these matters [astronomy] are much mistaken."[5] Elsewhere, he concludes his work with a similar comment: "Being an unlearned Syrian, I am putting these small queries to you to convey to those who assert that the whole knowledge exists only in the Greek tongue."[6]

In the period after Emperor Constantine (312–337) made Christianity the state religion, Syriac-speaking Christians were expected to conform to Constantinople's definition of Christian orthodoxy. That orthodoxy was concerned with the relationship between the divine and human natures of Christ, a subject that modern theologians refer to as Christology. Subscribing to Byzantium's position on the matter soon became a proof of loyalty to the empire. Conversely, dissent became synonymous with opposition to the Byzantine state, and so the Syrian and Mesopotamian Christians opposed Byzantine orthodoxy to demonstrate a broader rejection of Byzantine authority. Since the point of contention was not subject to analysis or refutation of facts, the Byzantine emperor forced the official faith upon the leading clergy and often excommunicated, imprisoned, or exiled those who dissented.

Partly in resistance to Byzantine expectations of religious conformity and partly in pursuit of their own political ambitions, prominent Syrian and Mesopotamian clergy engaged in the theological discussions of the time. In a chronicle dated between 686 and 693, a monk observed that the affairs of the believers "were conducted in orderly fashion as long as pagan kings were in control."[7] Fear of the Byzantines ensured "that the lax and lazy were not allowed to remain amongst us, owing to fear of our persecutors."[8] However, after the Byzantine Empire's adoption of Christianity, "corruption and intrigues entered the churches, and there were a great many creeds and assemblies [of bishops], seeing that each year they made a new creed. Peace and quiet thus brought considerable loss upon them, for lovers of fame did not fail to stir up trouble, furtively using gold to win the imperial ear, so that they could play about with the kings as if they were children."[9]

When it became evident to the dissenting Syrian and Mesopotamian clergy that they would not be able to control the church while under Byzantine rule, they sought to establish their own churches. They were joined in this endeavor by a flock of loyal followers who willingly disassociated themselves from the Byzantine Church at the behest of their newly excommunicated leaders. After separating from the dominant form of Christianity, the dissenting groups came to identify themselves through their disagreements with popular orthodoxy. Religious identity no longer reflected an overarching Christian identity, but rather adherence to a dissenting Christological position. The two main dissenting groups in the Fertile Crescent were known as the Dyophysite Nestorians and the Monophysite Jacobites. In addition to those two groups, the Fertile Crescent also contained the Melkites, who remained in conformity with Byzantine orthodoxy, and the Maronites, who vacillated between conformity and nonconformity.

## THE CHURCH OF THE EAST (NESTORIANS)

For fifth-century Christians, the chief questions of Christology were, first, whether or not Jesus Christ possessed both a divine and human nature and, second, how the contradictory features of humanity and divinity could coexist in one person. The Nestorians argued Christ's divinity and humanity were independent of each other, which allowed them to insist upon the full humanity of Christ's human nature. They also objected to the title of God-bearer (Greek: *Theotokos*), which the Byzantine Church had bestowed upon Mary, mother of Christ.

The namesake of the Nestorians was Nestorius, a Syrian-born bishop of Constantinople who had been excommunicated in 431 by the Council of Ephesus allegedly for endorsing two heresies. Nestorius supported the doctrine of two Sons in two persons, which posited that Christ was composed of a full God and a full human. The God and human were united morally, but not in terms of their nature. The anti-Nestorians charged that this doctrine considered Christ as God-inspired rather than God-made. Moreover, the doctrine's objection to Mary's status as God-bearer seemed to confirm that Nestorius believed Christ was only God-inspired, lending further justification for the charge of heresy.

In reality, Nestorius's excommunication was the outcome of political maneuvering by Cyril, bishop of the See of Alexandria (412–444). Cyril stressed the *unity* of the divine and human in one person, and he insisted that Mary be called God-bearer to emphasize that intimate union of the two natures within the Incarnation. He also felt

threatened by Nestorius's prominence and Constantinople's prestige over Alexandria, and so Cyril plotted to remove Nestorius from the See of Constantinople. Cyril's scheme succeeded when he managed to convene the Council of Ephesus and condemn Nestorius before the bishops sympathetic to him could arrive at the council and affect the outcome. Two years later, Cyril would accept a compromise with the See of Antioch that stressed the distinctness of Christ's two natures within his one person.

Though Nestorianism was perceived as a challenge to all Christians and easily eliminated from the Byzantine Empire, the theology nonetheless survived after finding a foothold in the East. To escape the Byzantine emperor's reach, Nestorian clergy spread into the Persian-controlled region of Mesopotamia and to the East of the Tigris, where they were accepted by local Christians who would eventually adopt the Nestorian identity for themselves.[10] The growth of Nestorianism within the East was not just a consequence of the Christological debate and Nestorian migration, however, but was also encouraged by clashes between the Byzantine and Persian Empires as well as the internal dynamics of the Persian Empire.

By the end of the second century, Christianity had begun to penetrate the Persian-controlled part of Mesopotamia, via traders passing through Edessa. Early Christian communities soon began to form and attract Christians fleeing Byzantine persecution.[11] In the fourth century, the Byzantine Emperor Constantine made Rome a Christian empire, moved its capital to Byzantium, and considered all Christians to be his subjects. This spawned another source of tension with the Persian Empire, which was already struggling with Rome for the control of North Mesopotamia and its fortress cities of Edessa and Nisibin.

The Zoroastrian priestly caste that dominated Persia's religious institutions, the Magians, had thus far tolerated Christianity and Judaism because they viewed them as separate religions rather than heretical offshoots. However, when Christianity became the religion of its Byzantine neighbor, and later Byzantine enemy, Christians within Persia began to be regarded as potential accomplices of the Byzantines and traitors to the state.

Adding fuel to the fire, Armenia's conversion to Christianity made bordering Zoroastrian Persia more insecure about its religious identity and, therefore, even more distrusting of its own Christian population. The Sasanian dynasty that ruled the Persian Empire reacted by strengthening the Zoroastrian religious order, the Magians, and that strength was swiftly directed to the systematic persecution of

Christians. The fusion of state and religion by the Sasanians had, as in Byzantium, given rise to the notion of "one empire—one religion." In Persia, religion had also become the dominant overarching identity, and religious dissent had come to be seen as a threat to the empire itself. What followed was the violent persecution of Christians and destruction of their churches, culminating in the execution of Catholicos Mar Shimun I Bar Sabbai in 341.[12]

The Christians' conditions improved during the reign of Yazdegerd I (399–421), who changed Persia's stance on Christianity. Following decades of persecution, Yazdegerd released Christians from captivity and permitted them to rebuild churches that had been destroyed by his predecessors. Also, while previous kings had been wary of Byzantium's affinity with Persia's Christians, the new king embraced that relationship by sending out several Persian diplomatic missions, headed by bishops and patriarchs, to the Byzantine Empire. Instead of fearing sabotage by Christians at the behest of Byzantine enemies, Yazdegerd used Christian subjects to open regular channels of communication with the Byzantines. In doing so, he attempted to partly defuse the tensions with Byzantium and insure the loyalty of the Christians by making the church hierarchy an organ of the state.

However, because of the increase in converts from Zoroastrianism to Christianity, the Sasanian nobility and the Magians resisted Yazdegerd's tolerance of Christians and forced him to revisit the former repressive policies.[13] The Magians, whose livelihood depended on religious services, were particularly threatened by the decline in their power base and sole source of income. Nonetheless, after Yazdegerd's son and successor, King Bahrām V (421–438), had waged two unsuccessful wars with the Byzantines (421–422), the Persian Empire made peace with Byzantium and granted freedom of worship to the Christians.

The Christians again became subject to persecution during the reign of Yazdegerd II (438–457), the son and successor of Bahrām V, in 448. Doubting their loyalty to Persia, Yazdegerd II declared war on Christians and organized massacres of the Christian population throughout the empire. Church chronicles claim that, in Karka (modern Kirkuk, Iraq) alone, ten bishops and 153,000 clergy and laypeople were executed.[14] In such a manner, Zoroastrianism drove Christianity out of public life and gave the Magian caste supremacy over the entire population. However, the forced conversion lasted only until Christianity was again tolerated.

By that point, the Christological controversies had reached the Mesopotamian Christians of the Persian Empire. Persecution was

ongoing, although confined to imprisonment and the burning of churches, and Catholicos Babowai, the head of the church (457–484), had been imprisoned during 470–480. In addition, within the church, controversy arose over Catholicos Babowai's desire to impose celibacy upon his bishops and clergy.

Among the leading objectors was Bar Soma, archbishop of Nisibin (457–496?). In addition to his ecclesiastical position, Bar Soma was an enterprising businessman who was favored by the Persian King Fīrūz I (457–484) and commanded troops on the eastern flank of the Persian Empire. Earlier in 447, he had either departed from the School of Edessa or been expelled for his Dyophysite position on Christology, which entailed a belief in the two natures of Christ, in defiance of the Monophysites. Later, Bar Soma captured a letter from Catholicos Babowai to the bishops of the Byzantine Empire. In that letter, Babowai encouraged the bishops to use the Byzantine emperor's influence over King Fīrūz I to end the king's persecution of Christians. While describing the suffering of his brethren, Babowai lamented, "God has given us over to an accursed kingdom." Perhaps because of his expulsion from Edessa, Bar Soma sent Babowai's letter to King Fīrūz I, who then executed Catholicos Babowai by hanging him "by his ring-finger till he expired."[15]

With Babowai out of his way, Bar Soma persuaded Fīrūz I to legitimize the so-called Nestorian heresy within the Church of the Persian Empire, thereby divorcing the Christians of the Persian Empire from the religious dogma of its enemy. Convinced by his argument, Fīrūz I let Bar Soma and his troops march across the Empire and force Christians to accept Nestorianism and all its accompanying beliefs. Those who stood in Bar Soma's way, among them the Monophysites of Nisibin and Nineveh, were ruthlessly crushed. Bar Hebraeus put the total death toll of the campaign at 7,700.[16]

If it were not for King Fīrūz's premature death in battle, Bar Soma may well have become patriarch. Instead, Fīrūz I's brother and successor, King Balāsh (484–488), appointed Acacius, Bar Soma's schoolfellow at Edessa, as Catholicos (485–496). Beginning with Acacius, the Church of the Persian Empire officially accepted the Nestorian identity. The Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (486) confirmed the separate natures of the divinity and humanity of Christ and declared that "while the divinity remains preserved in what belongs to it, and humanity in what belongs to it, it is to a single Lordship and to a single (object of) worship that we gather together the exemplars of these two natures, because of the perfect and inseparable conjunction that has occurred for the divinity with respect to the humanity."[17]

While the Byzantine Church had already condemned Nestorianism in 431 and 451, they did not uniformly regard Christians in Persia's dominion as Nestorian until the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon made its formal declaration. Following the council's statement in 486, Byzantium summarily condemned the Persian Church as heretical. Much to the relief of the Christian clergy and laypeople living under Persian rule, this latest Byzantine condemnation enabled the Christians to officially separate their religion from that of the Byzantine Empire. After generations of persecution, their loyalty to Persian rule could no longer be questioned on the basis of their Christian identity.

Those Nestorians who later resisted conversion under the Muslim Arab conquest of the seventh century and then survived the invasion and ensuing reign of terror of Tīmūr Lang (1369–1405) fled through northern Iraq up into the Hakkārī Mountains to the west of Lake Urmia. There, the position of the catholicos was made hereditary in 1450, presumably to prevent interference from outsiders regarding who should be appointed head of the church and also to prevent internal power struggles over the leadership position. The office went from uncle to nephew.

In the sixteenth century, a faction of the Nestorians subsumed themselves to the Church of Rome. In 1551, when the patriarchal See became vacant, that faction refused to acknowledge the nephew of the deceased, Shimūn VIII Dankha, as the new patriarch, the new title replacing catholicos. They were led by a bishop named Yohannan Sulaqa, who secured his consecration as Mar Shimūn VIII Yohannan Sulaqa (1553–55), Patriarch of the Chaldeans, from Pope Julius III (1550–55).[18] In exchange for the pope's recognition, Sulaqa declared himself a Catholic and established the Chaldean Church. However, it was not until the nineteenth century that a functioning Chaldean Patriarchate of Babylon was established. Its half a million adherents are called Chaldeans; they are headquartered in Baghdad but spread throughout the world. In 1968, another power struggle among the clergy disguised over the adoption of the Gregorian calendar, split it again to give rise to the Ancient Church of the East that favored remaining with the Julian Calendar.[19] The latter claims to have about 100,000 followers and is headquartered in Baghdad, Iraq.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, a national Assyrian movement among Nestorians and Jacobite intellectuals attempted to recast their religious identities in ethnic terms. Based on their appellation in the Syriac language as *Suryāye* or *Surāye*, which is etymologically related to the term Assyrians,[20] they adopted the latter term, *Surāye*, as an ethnic identity with encouragement from Western Protestant

missionaries and scholars. During World War I, about one-third of the Assyrian population died in massacres. In Iraq, where most of the survivors had fled, they were massacred again in Simelel (Arabic: Summayl) in 1933, when the British mandate ended.[21] In that year, the patriarchate moved to San Francisco and then in 1973 to Morton Grove, Illinois, in the United States, where the hereditary patriarchate ended.

On January 11, 1994, Pope John Paul II and Mar Dankha IV, the patriarch of the Nestorian Church, which by the twentieth century had adopted the name "the Assyrian Church of the East," signed a joint declaration that dismissed their churches' Christological differences as a "misunderstanding" unworthy of the "anathemas" from which many had suffered in the past.[22] However, the impetus for that dramatic dismissal of differences as a "misunderstanding" between the clergy of the two churches lay more in the fact that, by the twentieth century, the Christians of Mesopotamia had become an insignificant minority. The Magian order and the Sasanian state that the Nestorians had needed to accommodate no longer existed. Instead, as their Assyrian Church of the East spread throughout the world, the elite of its hierarchy were seeking acceptability from the most powerful Christian order left in the world.

In all, as of year 2000, the Assyrian Church of the East counts about 400,000 members dispersed around the world. Prior to the US invasion of Iraq, it had a presence of slightly over 100,000 in the Syrian and Iraqi regions of Mesopotamia and about 5,000 in Beirut.[23] In 2014 and 2015, those who fled Iraq after the Simelel Massacres in 1933 and settled around the Khabour River in Syria and those in the Iraqi Nineveh Plains have been targeted by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant and other Jihadi groups;[24] survivors have fled from those settlements to refugee camps to the north of those regions. Hundreds are still held captive and are being gradually executed in small numbers.[25]

## The Syrian Church (Jacobites)

Twenty years after the Council of Ephesus (431), other Syrian and Mesopotamian clergy repudiated the bishops, who had supported the Synod of Chalcedon (451) in affirming the dual, divine and human, natures of Christ. This belief that the human and divine natures of Christ were united in one person, but remained distinct after the union became known as the Orthodox Christological position of the Byzantine Church. In opposition, leading clergy in Syria and North

Mesopotamia held that Christ was not one person expressed *in* two separate natures, but one person created *out of* two combined natures. Those clergy were thus called Monophysites, and they in turn referred to the Chalcedonians as Synodites.[26]

The Monophysite position was later articulated in the doctrine of the Greek theologian Severus, patriarch of Antioch from 512 until 518. After Severus was elected to the position by the Monophysite bishops, the Chalcedonians deposed and exiled him to Egypt for his alleged heresy. The Chalcedonian bishops then appointed their own patriarchs, starting with Paul I (518–521). The Monophysite bishops did not recognize the appointment, and the Monophysite Chronicle of Zuqnin later accused Paul I of unleashing a campaign of persecutions throughout Syria and North Mesopotamia.[27]

The Monophysites continued to recognize Severus as their patriarch until his death in 538, during his exile in Egypt. Following Severus's death, the Monophysite bishops sought to establish their own church. The bishops were not solely passive monks who provided moral or emotional support and guidance, but also included active clergy with connections to powerful individuals. The most prominent of the latter was Jacob Baradaeus, the son of a priest in Tella, North Mesopotamia. He was known as *Būrdʿōnō* (Syriac for "the one with the rough garment," Latinized as "Baradaeus"), a name that referred to the rough, saddle-like garment he wore throughout his life. Jacob moved with another monk, Sargius of Tella, to Constantinople, where his political skills earned him the protection of Empress Theodora for 15 years.

Jacob also enjoyed the backing of the Arab king of the Ghassānids, Hārith ibn Jabala.[28] The Ghassānids were the Arab tribes who inhabited the buffer zone between Syria and the Arabian Peninsula. They had been converted to Christianity by Syrian monks centuries earlier and later became military allies of the Byzantines, from AD 490. Ibn Jabala persuaded Theodora to consecrate Jacob as bishop of Edessa (543–578). Theodora did so and gave him jurisdiction over Syria and North Mesopotamia, a move that slighted the official incumbent backed by the Byzantine Church.

Thereupon, with the financial and human support of his lay followers, Jacob traveled extensively to organize an independent Monophysite Church. During that time, he is said to have ordained two patriarchs, 26 bishops, and thousands of priests. Most of them resided in the countryside, where Constantinople had no proxy representatives.[29]

It was during Jacob's initial activities in 544 that he, along with other bishops, appointed his colleague Sargius of Tella as their first Monophysite patriarch of Antioch. That action solidified opposition

to the Chalcedonian patriarchs and marked the beginning of the new Syrian Monophysite Church. A new, independent identity was therefore born, with Jacob as its founding father.[30] For this reason, Syrian and Mesopotamian Monophysites were henceforth known as Jacobites, a new identity distinct from that of the Armenian, Egyptian, and Ethiopian Monophysites. To date, the church they founded continues to carry out the function of a nation on behalf of its followers, but without particular geographical boundaries.[31]

Through Monophysitism, Syrians and North Mesopotamians expressed their resistance to Constantinople's imperial rule. Indeed, until the seventh-century Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, each Byzantine emperor had to cope with the separatist inclinations that lay behind the alleged heresy. Successive Byzantine emperors could only force Monophysites to conform through violence or adopt the Monophysite heresy as their own belief.

To reassert his authority in the West, the Byzantine emperor needed to devise a formula that would satisfy Western orthodoxy without alienating the Monophysites. The last of those attempts to take place before the Arab conquest was made during the reign of Emperor Heraclius (610–641). On several occasions, Heraclius invited the Monophysites to reunite under the principle that Christ had two natures but only one will. This was the Christological position that Sergius I, patriarch of Constantinople (610–638), formulated to help Heraclius resolve the political problem that had fragmented the Byzantine Empire and undermined his authority over Syria and Mesopotamia. Sergius claimed that Christ had two natures, one being divine energy (monoenergism) and the other being his divine will (monotheletism), but he had no human will. Believing that this compromise was acceptable to the Monophysites, because Christ's energy and will were thus understood to be divine and therefore one, Heraclius visited Edessa in 628 and offered it to the Monophysites.

In response, Isaiah, the metropolitan of Edessa, confronted Heraclius during Communion and said, "Unless you first anathematize the synod of Chalcedon and the Tome of Leo in writing, I will not give you Communion." In the words of Dionysius I of Tel-Mahrē, patriarch of Antioch, the emperor then "flared up in anger and expelled the bishop from his church, handing it over instead to his own coreligionists, the Chalcedonians."[32]

A year later, in 629, Heraclius attended a ceremony in Mabbūgh (modern Manbij, near Aleppo), where he celebrated his victory over the Persians and was given back the Wood of the Cross from Shahrvaraz, the new king of Persia.[33] While in Mabbūgh, he summoned the

patriarch of Antioch, Athanasius I Gammolo (595–631), who came to the emperor alongside 12 bishops of Syrian and Mesopotamian cities. Again, Dionysius I of Tel-Mahrē renders the outcome of the meeting:

> They remained in his [Heraclius's] presence for twelve days, debating. He required from them a written statement of their belief and they gave him the document reproduced above. When he had read it, he praised their Faith and asked them to give him Communion and to accept the charter which he had drawn up, confessing two natures unified in Christ, one will and one energy, in accordance, so it was alleged, with Cyril (of Alexandria). When they saw that it was in agreement with Nestorius and Leo they did not accept it and Heraclius was angered. He circulated instructions throughout the empire that it was a duty to cut off the nose and the ears and to loot the house of anyone who was not a supporter of the Synod of Chalcedon. This persecution went on for a long time and many monks gave their support to the synod. The monks of the House of Maron, of Mabbugh, of Emesa [Homs] and (of) the southern region revealed their dastardliness: many of them, by accepting the synod, unjustly obtained possession of [ . . . ] the majority of churches and monasteries. Heraclius would not admit the Orthodox [Jacobites] into his presence, nor would he allow them to present their case in the matter of the unjust transference of church-ownership.[34]

As Tel-Mahrē's narrative shows, animosity between the religious groups did not stay confined to Christology, but grew into a conflict over resources as well as theology. The Chalcedonians and the monks of the Monastery of Marōn stood accused of acquiring church property that had been wrongfully seized from the Jacobites, and that accusation continues to be a source of tension to this day among the three groups.

After the Arab conquest, Jacob of Edessa (633–708) (not to be confused with the aforementioned Jacob, bishop of Edessa [543–578]), contributed canon laws regulating ecclesiastical affairs and also oversaw the social affairs of the Monophysite community during its first encounters with Islam. The primary concerns of the community involved interaction between Christians and Arab Muslims within civilian and military contexts. Jacob's Canon Law was intended to reduce friction with the newcomers and to accommodate the demands of the new political order. However, he still sought to maintain social spheres and the religious symbols of their identity. His rules dictated proper interaction with Muslims, Jews, Pagans, and apostates—who wished to repent. In general, he saw openness to anyone needing help as the

key to his community's survival. In this light, he sanctioned priests to give the blessing of the saints to non-Christians, to teach their children, and to serve in the army (if they were forcibly recruited), as long as they did not kill anyone.[35]

In the seventh century, the Arabs identified the Syrian Jacobites as such (Arabic: *Al-Suryān al-Ya'āqiba*). The Arabic term is an adaptation of the Syriac one with which the Jacobites identified themselves as *Suryōyē*, or *Suryāyē*, depending on the dialect. The latter term is a Syriac variation of the terms Syrian and Assyrian.[36] In today's Arabic, they are *Suryān*. In English, they are Syrian, but in the past few years, they have switched to Syriac. In the United States, some identified themselves until the late 1960s as Assyrian, then switched to Syrian, and then again to Syriac.[37] Official Arabic documents in Syria refer them as *Suryān Qadīm* (Old *Suryān*). Their members are estimated to be around 600,000 worldwide, about one-fifth of whom still reside in Syria and Iraq with their headquarters in Damascus, Syria.

In the seventeenth century, Catholic missionaries in Aleppo were able to attract Jacobite clergy and their followers to be in communion with Rome. In 1783, Michael Jarweh, bishop of Aleppo, led a splinter group of Catholic sympathizers to Lebanon and established the Syrian Catholic Church by gaining recognition of his patriarchate from the Church of Rome, which continues to date. They refer to themselves in Arabic as *Suryān* Catholic. They are estimated to be around 100,000 scattered around the world, half of whom still reside in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq with their headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon.

Today, like other Syrian and Iraqi Christians, those who are unable to flee from their homes toward government-controlled territories and are caught by Salafi Jihadi groups, including the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant,[38] are given the option to "be killed and the women and children enslaved, [released as an inducement to convert to Islam] or ransomed,"[39] or pay the infidel tax "on the back of their hands while in a state of humiliation."[40]

## The Maronites

The ecclesiastical history of the Maronites (Syriac: *Moronōyē*)[41] is in dispute, as is their ethnic origin, and previous accounts from historians show how the self-identification of scholars can influence their identification of others. For instance, Matti Moosa, an American of Jacobite origin, believes that the Maronites are of Aramaean stock and of Jacobite religious origin. Moosa states, "By faith, liturgy, rite,

religious books, and heritage, the Maronites were of Syrian Orthodox (Jacobite) origin until the very end of the 16th century, when they became ultramontane followers of the Roman Catholic Church."[42] Moosa then sets out to prove his assertion in *The Maronites in History*, which employs thorough analysis of almost all written evidence on the subject.

Kamal al-Salibi, on the other hand, born to "Arab Protestant" converts, believes that the Maronites are people of "authentic Arab" stock who "during the first or second year of the reign of the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Muāwiah 680–83 . . . split from the Melkite Church."[43] Salibi claims that substantial Arab migration into Syria and Mesopotamia had already taken place during the first century. Among those migrants were the modern Maronites.[44] They are "from the racial aspect, of *Nabat al-Sham*, who lived in the countryside and worked in agriculture. Among them were shepherds and mountain tribesmen, who probably were authentic Arabs" of Yemenite and Qaysi origin.[45]

In terms of their faith, seventeenth-century Maronite historians believed that the Maronites had always adhered to the same faith as the Church of Rome and that the first Maronite patriarch was a Frank.[46] In terms of ethnic origin, they believed they were descended from the Maradite, a people of obscure origin from the Amanus Mountains in the northwest of Syria. Meanwhile, recent Maronite historians believe that they are Aramaeans, or Phoenicians. In rare cases, such as that of the late Lebanese president Elias al-Hrawi, some have claimed that they are indeed Yemenite Arabs.

Due to the lack of Maronite Church historians of late antiquity and medieval times, scholars rely on references to the sect in writings by Jacobite, Melkite, and Nestorian historians to trace Maronite origin and the development of their faith. These historians' accounts suggest that the term Maronite is derived from the Monastery of Marōn, which is believed to have been located on the Orontes River near the city of Hama in northern Syria. Hundreds of monks inhabited the Monastery, and followers dwelled in the surrounding cities and in northern Mount Lebanon.[47] According to the chronicle of Dionysius I of Tel-Mahrē, the monks of the Monastery of Marōn were Monophysite Jacobites, who had been coerced into accepting the Monothelite doctrine that Heraclius had imposed in Syria and North Mesopotamia around 629–630. Accordingly, they became a distinct group from the Monophysite Jacobites.[48] However, the Maronites subsequently rejected the Sixth Ecumenical Council of 680–681, which condemned the Monothelite Doctrine and deposed

the Chalcedonian patriarch of Antioch Macarius (656–681) for his Monothelitism.[49]

According to Tel-Mahrē, the Monothelite monks living in the Monastery of Marōn appointed the first patriarch from the monastery in 745, creating their own ecclesiastical order and therefore the Maronite Church. Tel-Mahrē interprets the selection of the unnamed patriarch as a declaration of independence in response to the Melkite Patriarch Theophilact's attempt to incorporate them into his Melkite Church.[50]

In 969, Maronite independence was threatened as the Byzantines recaptured Antioch and major parts of northern and central Syria, including the Orontes Valley, which was largely populated by Maronites. The Byzantine reoccupation of Syria lasted 100 years and resulted in the expulsion of the Maronites from the Orontes Valley. Presumably as a result of Byzantine persecution, the Maronties retreated to Mount Lebanon and settled next to local Christians. Aleppo has remained the only place outside of Mount Lebanon where a Maronite presence persists to date, mainly because the Byzantines did not capture it.[51]

Maronite contact with the Church of Rome began during the first Crusader campaign into Syria, and some Maronite warriors offered their services to Crusaders as the campaign went through Tripoli in 1099 on its way from Antioch to Jerusalem. Throughout the Crusaders' 200-year occupation of Syria, the Maronites intermittently attempted to unite with Rome, but internal dissent among the Maronites forestalled the unification. In 1268, Pope Alexander IV conferred the "honorary title" of "Patriarch of Antioch" upon the Maronite Patriarch Shimun II for providing refuge to the European settlers after the Mamlūk Sultan al-Zāhir Baybars' (1260–77) campaigns to oust the Crusaders and Mongols from Syria.[52] From then on, the Church of Rome sought to strengthen ties with the Maronites by Latinizing them. The Maronites, in turn, sought European protection through their union with Rome after falling out of favor with the Mamlūks. Yet while the Maronites were willing to acknowledge the supremacy of the pope, they insisted on retaining their Syriac liturgy and Monothelitism. Consequently, Rome felt that their loyalty to the Roman Church was superficial and insisted on total conformity to its doctrine, liturgy, and rites.

However, around the time the Maronite Church united with Rome in the sixteenth century, alternative accounts of Maronite history emerged from within the Maronite Church's hierarchy to distance the Maronites from the Monophysite Jacobites in terms of ethnic origin and doctrine. Jibrāīl ibn al-Qilāī (1447–1516), who had served

as a Roman Catholic missionary to the Maronites before becoming bishop of Nicosia, Cyprus, claimed that the Maronite community had always been in line with Catholic orthodoxy. In his *Madihah ala Jabal Lubnan*, also known as *Zajalīyāt*, he claimed that the Maronites had always been united in faith with the Church of Rome and that the first patriarch was Yuhanna Marōn, a man of Frankish origin:

> We shall tell you about Maron. He knew the law. He was from Antioch. His father was an Agathon. He became a Metropolitan with the *Suryān*. He came to Tripoli, spoke with the Cardinal, and greeted him. The Cardinal thought he was skillful, knowledgeable, and a teacher. He took him to the seas with him. He told the pope about him, about his reliability and knowledge of mysteries. The pope appointed him as patriarch, gave him a shield, and told him to get ready. He told him to avoid Melkites, Jacobites, and Copts. In Mount Lebanon you will have a parish. In Kfar Hay that chosen one died.[53]

This poem became the basis of later Maronite accounts of the history of the Maronite Church, which dated Yuhanna Marōn's appointment to either 685 or 686.[54] While the Church of Rome had no record of its pope making this appointment,[55] Maronite clergy and writers who studied at the Maronite College in Rome narrated similar accounts on the same theme. This was consistent with the mission of the Maronite College, which was to Latinize the Syriac liturgy of the Maronite clergy and educate them in Roman Catholic orthodoxy and canon law. Subsequently, in 1596, the Synod of Qannubin announced major reforms of the Maronite Church to facilitate its conversion to Catholicism. The graduates of the Maronite College began to assume the Maronite patriarchal See from 1606 on.[56]

The first graduate of the Maronite College to produce an account of Maronite history based on al-Qilāī's poem was Istefan al-Duwayhi, patriarch of Antioch (1670–1704). Al-Duwayhi restated that the Maronites had never deviated in faith from the Roman Church and affirmed that "the son of Agathon," who became known as Yuhanna Marōn was "a nephew of Charlemagne," the king of the Franks.[57] However, al-Duwayhi's subsequent claim that Pope Sergius (687–701) appointed Yuhanna Marōn as the patriarch of Antioch in opposition to the Monothelite Macarius, makes his earlier claim that he was a nephew of Charlemagne in error, as the latter lived between 768 and 814.[58] After that appointment, al-Duwayhi states: "Many Jacobites obeyed him [Marōn] and preached two natures and two wills. He then came to Mount Lebanon . . . The country accepted him with cheers and his people separated themselves from the Jacobites and the *Rūm* [Melkites]."[59]

Al-Duwayhi and a contemporary of his Murhij Nirūn al-Bani (Faustus Nairon, d. 1711) in his *Dissertatio de origine, nomine ac religione Maronitarum* also claimed that the Maronites are the descendants of the Maradites.[60] Moreover, Nirūn was the first to claim that the Maronites derived their name from a fifth-century ascetic named Marōn (d. 410?).[61] Later, Guiseppe Assemani (d. 1768), in his *Bibliotheca Orientalis Clementino Vaticana*, added that the Maradite bishops, not a pope, appointed Yuhanna Marōn of the Monastery of Marōn as their patriarch, from whom thereafter they were called Maronites.[62] But who are the Maradites?

The Maradites are Christians of disputed ethnic origin who inhabited the Amanus (Turkish *Gāvur*: "infidel") Mountains in northwestern Syria.[63] Living in the seventh century in a buffer zone between the Byzantine and the Muslim Arab conquerors, they served as soldiers for the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV (668–685), who recruited them to fight the Arabs. Between 660 and 680, they led military campaigns and occupied parts of Lebanon and northern Palestine. Tel-Mahrē informs us that in the ninth year of Constantine's reign, "certain Byzantines launched an invasion of Mount Lebanon from the sea, landing on the coasts of Tyre and Sidon. They were called the 'Maradites' and they controlled the heights from Galilee to the Black Mountain, sallying out all the time into Arab territory to plunder and destroy."[64] They remained in Lebanon until 685, when Emperor Justinian II evacuated "12,000 Maradites in Mount Lebanon, not including runaway levies and slaves" to Armenia after concluding a treaty with the Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. The agreement stipulated their removal in return for an annual tribute of "one thousand dinarii, one horse and one slave each day for ten years" to the emperor.[65]

Nevertheless, from the sixteenth century onward, Maronites have sought to distance themselves from the rival Christian sects of the Fertile Crescent on religious as well as on ethnic grounds. Given this, Matti Moosa's arduous research demonstrating that the Maronites had been Monophysites before their conversion to Catholicism has no practical consequence within modern times. Whereas Christology once established lines of demarcation between various religious groups, it is no longer a focal point of the modern Maronites' identity.

In a contemporary account of Maronite history, Butrus Daww, himself a Maronite cleric, claimed that the Maronites are a "nation" with three ethnic roots: "the Phoenician Lebanese people, the Aramaean Syrian people, and the Sea People."[66] At present, some Maronites refer to themselves as Maradites, but most laypeople claim they are Phoenicians. They are estimated to be around three million spread all

over the world and headquartered in Bkerky, Lebanon, where a third of them currently live.

## THE MELKITES

The Melkites were Christians from Syria and North Mesopotamia who conformed to Byzantine Christological Orthodoxy, both in its Chalcedonian and its Monothelite forms. Prior to the seventh century, the nonconformists of Syria and Mesopotamia referred to the Melkites as Chalcedonians or Synodites. Then, in 628–629, Heraclius imposed the Monothelite Doctrine in the Byzantine territories of Syria and North Mesopotamia, thereby dividing his Christian subjects into two groups: those who adhered to the Monothelite Doctrine (i.e., the Chalcedonians and the monks of the Monastery of Marōn) and those belonging to the outlawed Jacobites.

When the Byzantines realized that they had permanently lost Syria and Mesopotamia, and especially Antioch and Edessa, to the Arabs, they reconsidered their Monothelite Christological Doctrine. The Byzantine Empire was relieved from the pressure to compromise on the Chalcedonian Orthodoxy that continued to alienate their Western subjects. At a time when Constantinople was under constant attack from Arab ships in the Bosporus—from 674 until Muāwiya's death in 680—the Byzantine emperor's embrace of his Western subjects was more crucial than ever. Since the West was Constantinople's only source of physical support, resolving the Christological disputes and reinforcing Rome's relationship with the West was of primary importance.

In this historical context, Emperor Constantine IV (668–685) summoned the Sixth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (680–681). The council condemned the Monothelite compromise doctrine and condemned Pope Honorius (625–628) as a heretic for supporting Monothelitism. Thus, the council returned the Byzantines to the Orthodox Christological Doctrine as declared by the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The council affirmed "that Christ's volition *qua* man is to be distinguished clearly from his volition *qua* God, although the two volitions were never at variance."[67] Since the Jacobites, the monks of the Monastery of Marōn, and the Nestorians were not represented in the Council of Constantinople, they rejected it and identified those Syrians and Greek-speaking Byzantine captives who conformed to the new Byzantine orthodoxy as Melkites (from Syriac *malko*, "king" and *malkōyē*, "the king's men").[68]

In addition to the Hellenized Melkite administrators and civil servants retained as recordkeepers by the Arab rulers, other groups of

Melkites came to Syria after the Arab conquest. Following frequent Arab raids deep into Byzantine territories within Asia Minor, an influx of Greek-speaking captives who adhered to the Chalcedonian Doctrine settled in Syria.[69]

In 969, the Byzantines returned to and occupied major parts of northern Syria for one century, expelling the Maronites within the Orontes Valley in the process. As the Maronites retreated to Mount Lebanon, they were replaced in the Orontes Valley by an influx of Melkites.

Following their conquest, the Arabs identified the Melkites as *al-Rūm* (Arabic: Byzantines) and later *al-Malakiyyūn* (the Arabic version of the Syriac *malkōyē*). The latter label was used in a pejorative sense, as it implied Melkite loyalty to the Byzantine king. Being the coreligionists of the Byzantines, the Melkites suffered persecution, which ultimately motivated a dramatic shift in their self-identity toward the Arab identity, though they still referred to themselves in Arabic as *Rūm*.

In 1724, Patriarch of Constantinople Jeremias III (1716–26, 1732–33) excommunicated Melkite Patriarch of Antioch Cyril VI, who was seen as sympathetic to the Church of Rome, and appointed the Greek monk Sylvester as patriarch of Antioch (1724–66) in his place.[70] Greeks continued to be appointed to that position until Meletius II Doumani (1899–1906) was appointed to end the Greek succession and restore the "Arab" patriarchs. Meanwhile, the followers of Cyril VI established the Melkite Catholic Church, which continues to date as a separate church from the Orthodox Church. The new church refers to itself in Arabic as *Rūm* Catholic, mirroring the original *Rūm* Orthodox. In English, they are referred to as Greek Catholic.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Melkites led intellectual organizations responsible for inspiring an "Arab Awakening" movement that resisted the rise of Turkish nationalism within the Ottoman Empire. The Melkites attempted to construct an Arab identity founded upon an Arab-Islamic civilization, but also capable of treating Christians and Muslims as political equals. With the exception of Maloula and a few adjacent villages, most modern Melkites identify themselves as pure Arabs who were, for some time in the distant past, Hellenized. However, other Melkites chose to promote a rival identity that distanced them from Arabism and promoted a Greater Syrian national identity that encompasses the Fertile Crescent. Both movements survive to date. Members of both Melkite Catholic and Orthodox Churches are estimated to number one million, headquartered in Damascus, Syria.

# 5

# Formation of Muslim Sectarian Identities

The Muslims who settled in the Fertile Crescent and those who converted to Islam did not retain a unique Muslim identity. A power struggle over succession eventually bifurcated Muslims into Sunna and Shīa. This conflict started at the beginning of the reign of the fourth caliph, Alī (656–661), between the Prophet Muhammad's family and his companions over the right to rule the new Muslim world.

Alī was raised by his cousin, the Prophet Muhammad, from about the age of ten. Muhammad took him in after Alī's father, Abū Talib, fell into poverty. Alī later married Muhammad's daughter Fatima, who gave birth to Hasan (625–670) and Husayn (626–680). These two boys were believed to be Muhammad's only surviving grandchildren. Muhammad is said to have named them and raised them as his own children. When Muhammad died in 632, Alī was 32 years old. Succession went to Muhammad's companions Abū Bakr (632–634) and Umar (634–644) and then later to a wealthy merchant of the powerful Umayyad clan of Mecca, Uthmān (644–656).

During the life of Muhammad, Alī was acknowledged for his fighting skills, his command of the army, and his knowledge of the Quran. However, after Muhammad's death, Alī's role in the new Muslim state declined. During the reigns of the first three caliphs, Alī did not play a significant role in battles or in the administration of the affairs of the state.

It was in Alī's absence that Abū Bakr was elected to succeed Muhammad. Muhammad's companions endorsed the succession of Abū Bakr while Alī was away preparing his cousin's body for his burial.

Shīa sources claim that Muhammad intended Alī to succeed him and that Abū Bakr's succession was in defiance of the Prophet's wish. Alī resented Abū Bakr's succession, and for six months following his election, Alī refused to acknowledge it. After Muhammad's death, Abū Bakr's refusal to distribute Fatima's share of her father's inheritance

contributed to Alī's discontent with him. Abū Bakr justified withholding Fatima's share by claiming that Muhammad had declared that he had no heirs.

Alī was also not on good terms with the second caliph, Umar. He disagreed with Umar regarding the distribution of the revenues gained from the conquests of Syria, Mesopotamia, Persia, and Egypt. Alī believed that the treasury should distribute all of its holdings without keeping any reserves. Moreover, Shīa sources claim that Umar was also responsible for a miscarriage suffered by Alī's wife Fatima. They claim that in an attempt to force Alī to attend the meeting endorsing the election of Abū Bakr, Umar violently broke through the gate of Fatima's house and accidentally struck her belly.[1]

Alī disagreed with the third caliph, Uthmān, too, on various religious, administrative, and political affairs.[2] In 656, Uthmān replaced the governor of Egypt and his aides with officials belonging to his own clan. Those who were deposed traveled to Medina and murdered Uthmān. In the following days, many Muslims, including the murderers of Uthmān, pledged allegiance to Alī.[3] Uthmān's tribe, the Umayyad, fled Medina, removing the obstacle of their opposition to Alī's becoming the fourth caliph.

Alī's main rival for the caliphate was the governor of Syria, Muāwiah. Muāwiah was the second cousin of Uthmān and the son of Mecca's wealthy merchant Abū Sūfyan, who had been Muhammad's archenemy until the latter marched victoriously into Mecca. Muāwiah refused to acknowledge Alī's election to the caliphate, claiming that he was protecting Uthmān's murderers.

Alī prepared a campaign against Muāwiah, to force him to submit to his rule, but was distracted by a rebellion led by Muhammad's wife Aisha, the daughter of Abū Bakr, along with her father's cousin al-Zubayr and his kinsman Talha, who had been Muhammad's companions. The armies met near Basra in South Mesopotamia, where Alī defeated them in the Battle of the Camel in 656, named after the camel that Aisha rode. The two companions of Muhammad were killed in battle, and Aisha was escorted back to Medina.

When Alī's attempt to force Muāwiah's submission failed, both men mustered over 200,000 soldiers and met at Siffin on the east bank of the Euphrates in North Mesopotamia. There, they fought several battles over the course of two months with the combined death toll of both sides reaching 60,000–70,000 men. On July 18, 657, Muāwiah saw that he was losing the battle.[4] He had his soldiers raise copies of the Quran on their spears and called for arbitration that would consult the Quran for a resolution to the dispute.

Alī reluctantly agreed to resort to arbitration to settle their rival claims to the caliphate. However, some of Alī's followers believed that not pursuing the battle against the rebels to its end was sinful, for it deprived them of their loot. About 4,000 of them split from Alī before the arbitration was concluded. These were referred to as *al-Khawarij* (Arabic: dissenters).

When the arbitration was decided in favor of Muāwiah, Alī refused to accept it, on the grounds that Muāwiah had tricked him and rigged it in his own favor. Alī set forth to pursue Muāwiah again. But Alī wanted to persuade *al-Khawarij* to join him. Most of them refused and demanded that he declare himself guilty of impiety for accepting the principle of arbitration in a matter that was only for God to determine, in the course of the battle. Alī rejected their demand and engaged with them on July 17, 658, in the battle of al-Nahrawan near the Tigris River, where his army wiped them out. Some of Alī's followers then deserted him, because they believed *al-Khawarij* were unjustly massacred. As Alī's army dwindled, he abandoned his campaign against Muāwiah and returned to al-Kufa, the garrison city in South Mesopotamia.

When further arbitration failed to resolve the conflict over the caliphate, Muāwiah's armies took advantage of the weakness of Alī's army and marched unopposed into more territories. Soon after, their rivalry ended, in 661, with Alī's murder by one of *al-Khawarij* in revenge for the deaths of his comrades killed at the battle of al-Nahrawan.[5] The men who escorted Alī in his funeral procession were thereafter referred to as *Shīat Alī* (Arabic: followers of Alī), or simply Shīa.

## The Shīa

After Alī's murder, both his son Hasan and Muāwiah laid claim to the caliphate. Instead of engaging in battle, Hasan abdicated, in return for a substantial payment from Muāwiah and his promise that the caliphate would return to Hasan after Muāwiah's death. Accordingly, Muāwiah became caliph and ruled the Muslim Arab Empire from Damascus.

Hasan retreated to Medina. He is said to have taken throughout his life 60–90 wives and hundreds of concubines, thus earning the title "the divorcer." In 670, Hasan died of poisoning. Some sources maintain that Muāwiah had him poisoned by one of his wives in return for a payment and a promise to marry her to his son and heir to the throne, Yazid.[6]

Hasan's wish to be buried next to his grandfather Muhammad was not granted. Muhammad's wife Aisha and a cousin of Uthmān,

Marwan ibn al-Hakam, who later became an Umayyad caliph (684–685), refused to allow it. Aisha's refusal to allow Hasan to be buried next to his grandfather, while allowing her father, Abū Bakr, and Umar and Uthmān to be buried next to him, continues to be a source of Shīa resentment of Aisha and of the Sunna who elevate her to the level of the "Mother of the Believers."[7]

After Muāwiah's death in 680, his son Yazid succeeded him. Hasan's brother, Husayn, refused to recognize Yazid's succession. He departed from Mecca with about 50 of his supporters, along with their wives and children, and traveled to al-Kufa, where he asked the Shīa of al-Kufa for their allegiance to him. Husayn believed that they would join him in rebellion and support his bid for the caliphate.

Upon hearing of Husayn's challenge to his authority, Yazid ordered the governor of Basra to kill Husayn and his supporters. Husayn called for the Kufans' help, but none came forward. Despite his knowledge of the overwhelming power he faced, Husayn confronted Yazid's army with his small band of supporters, including his half-brothers, at Karbala near al-Kufa.

Husayn and his supporters were slaughtered and decapitated. Husayn's body was mutilated and his head was sent to Yazid as a trophy.[8] The surviving women and children were led to Damascus in shackles. On their way to Damascus, they were paraded in the Mesopotamian and Syrian cities they passed through with their husbands' and fathers' heads placed on spears.

To this day, the Shīa, especially the Twelvers among them, pass on to their children the guilt of failing to rescue the Prophet Muhammad's grandson through an annual ritual reenacting the killing, decapitation, and parading of Husayn's body. The ritual is followed by a procession, during which males stroke their self-inflicted forehead wounds or beat their chests to symbolize guilt and self-reproach while chanting "*Labbayka Ya Husayn*," a phrase that literally means, "O Husayn, we are answering your call." Today, that ritual is also practiced regularly in *al-Husayniyyāt*, houses dedicated for this purpose in regions where Shīa communities live.

In his own words, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hasan Nasrallāh, who also claims to be a descendent of Muhammad through Fatima and Alī, explained the significance of the chant:

> *Labbayka Ya Husayn* means that you should be present for battle even if you are alone, even if people have renounced you, even if people have accused you, even if people have forsaken you… *Labbayka Ya Husayn* means that a mother pushes her son to fight and if he were martyred,

> beheaded, and thown to his mother, she places him on her lap, wipes the blood and dirt off his face, and tells him with satisfaction: May God brighten your face as you have brightened my face before Fatima *al-Zahra* on the day of resurrection.[9]

The implied message is that if Husayn's mother Fatima, "the Mistress of Heaven's Women," had watched her son's slaughter from the heavens and endured such pain, then surely any woman would be honored to be bonded with Fatima through her own son's similar fate.

Once invoked, identification with Husayn's martyrdom gives the Shīa inner strength to mobilize them in the face overwhelming power. That occasion for martyrdom unites the Shīa with Husayn in his courage and absolves them of their guilt, passed on through generations, for not coming to his aid when he most needed them.

In this context, one may also understand the significance of Hasan Nasrallāh's televised address during the July–August 2006 Israeli attempt to invade Lebanon and destroy Hezbollah. Addressing Husayn, he said, "We will not say that we shall be torn apart and die for you, but we will say that we are being torn apart and dying for you."[10] Associating the consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon with the price the Shīa have paid to be united with Husayn affirms to them that their sacrifices were for the sake of what they had been seeking throughout their existence, the occasion to attain the honor of martyrdom and to wash off the guilt they inherited.

It was after Husayn's slaughter that the formation of the Shīa as an identity-sharing group gained momentum. Many non-Arab Muslims of Mesopotamia and Persia joined the Kufans in their identification with Alī and his descendants through Muhammad's daughter Fatima as the legitimate successors of the Prophet and leaders of the Islamic community, whom they refer to as Imāms.

Identification with Muhammad's family (*Ahal al-Bayt*), resentment of Alī's exclusion from power, and reenactment of the persecution of Muhammad's family are three central key elements of Shīa identity. The Shīa elevation of Alī to the status of a friend of and communicator with God (*walī*) is part of their belief that Muhammad's family has a privileged understanding of the Quran.

Non-Arabs identified with Alī because, unlike Muāwiah, he took the Prophet Muhammad's edict that "there is no difference between an Arab and a Persian but in piety" earnestly and acted in that spirit. Some even make a disputed claim that Alī had his son Husayn marry Shahrbanu, the daughter of the last non-Muslim Persian king, Yazdegerd III, and she gave birth to the fourth Imām, Alī Zayn al-Ābidīn.[11]

The largest Shīa sect is the Twelvers, who recognize the legitimacy of a succession of 12 Imāms, beginning with Alī and ending with Muhammad al-Mahdī (869–940). From the Twelvers, additional sects emerged. The Ismāīlīyya split after disputes over succession and then dissented on some elements of Shīa theology. The Ismāīlīyya also gave rise to the Durūz, who in turn differentiated themselves on theological grounds. Finally, the Alawīyya emerged directly from the Twelvers Shīa and developed a distinctive theology as well. Disputes over succession also gave rise to other Shīa sects that emerged outside the region of the Fertile Crescent and therefore will not be discussed below.

The legitimacy of the Shīa in the eyes of the majority Sunni Muslims varied depending on their subsect and on the struggles between empires over territories. For instance, in 1516, the Ottoman Sultan Salim I (1512–23), solicited two religious judgments (*fatwā*) to justify his conquest of Syria: one against the Sunni Mamlūks, who ruled Syria; the other against all of the subsects of the Shīa. The latter was issued by a Damascus based cleric named Nuh al-Hanafi al-Dimashqi, where he stated that "the reason for the obligation to fight them and kill them is both their atheism and evil" as they do not accept the succession of the first two caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar and they curse the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha. "All these bad characteristics are found in those people who have gone astray. Whoever has one of these qualities is an atheist who should be killed whether they repent or not . . . their women and children may be enslaved."[12]

## The Twelvers

The Twelver Shīa currently make up the majority of the populations of Iran, Iraq, and Southern Lebanon. For the Twelvers, the Hadīth literature includes the sayings of the Imāms, in addition to those of the Prophet Muhammad. Two works ascribed to the Imāms themselves survive. They are *Nahj al-balāgha*, which is compiled from sermons and orations attributed to the first Imām, Alī, and *al-Sahifa al-Sajadiyya*, which contains the prayers of the third Imām, Alī's grandson through Fatima, Alī Zayn al-Ābidīn.

The Twelvers' religious practice does not differ in any essential way from that of the Sunna. The fasting and the pilgrimage are the same, but there are minor differences in their prayers. The Shīa, however, place a great emphasis upon the pilgrimage to the tombs of the Imāms in Najaf, Karbala, Mashhad, Qum, and other sanctuaries.

As for other questions of Muslim Law (*Sharīa*), the Twelver Shīa differ from the Sunna in demanding the "one-fifth" tax, in addition to

the alms-giving tax, and in permitting temporary pleasure marriage. The Twelvers also condone disguising one's faith when its manifestation would endanger one's person.

The Shīa's sources of law are nearly the same as the Sunna, namely: Quran, Hadīth, consensus (*ijmā*), and deduction (*qiyās*), except that consensus is connected with the view of the imām and more freedom is given to deduction than by the Sunna.

The role of the imām is the essential doctrine that separates Shīa from Sunna. According to the Twelver Shīa, revelation has an external and an inner aspect. The Prophet Muhammad is believed to possess both. In being a prophet, his external function brings to people divine law; in being an ally of God (*walī*), his internal function reveals the inner meaning of religion. With the death of Muhammad, the cycle of prophecy ended. However, according to the Shīa, the cycle of God's allies (*al-walāya*) continues in the person of the imām. The imām has three functions: to rule over the Islamic community, to explain the religious sciences and the law, and to be a spiritual guide to lead people to an understanding of the inner meaning of things. He is appointed through the designation of the previous imām by divine command. Moreover, the imām must be infallible to be able to guarantee the survival and purity of the religious tradition and to guide people in their daily and spiritual needs.

The Twelvers Shīa believe that God has hidden the twelfth imām, al-Mahdī, from humankind. His state of occultation will continue until the Day of Judgment, when he will reappear along with Jesus to end tyranny and injustice. They divide the occultation into a minor and a major one. During the minor occultation, al-Mahdī spoke to his community through his deputies or "gates" (*bāb*). The major occultation began when his last gate, Alī al-Sāmarrī, died in 941.

The gate of interpretation (*ijtihād*) is always open. In the absence of the Mahdī, every observant Twelver must follow a living interpreter (*mujtahid*), who in every generation reinterprets the Sharīa in the light of its immutable principles and the particular situation in which the community finds itself. The interpreter thus performs as the representative of the imām. In modern times, an interpreter who excels in his scholarship receives from his mentors the title of Sign of God (*Āyatu Allāh*). Upon the demonstration of further scholarship, a Sign of God is promoted to the rank of a Grand Sign of God (*Āyatu Allāh al-Uzma*), which is also associated with the hierarchical title of the Authority to Be Imitated (*Marjaᶜ al-Taqlīd*). By virtue of his qualities and his wisdom he is to be considered during his lifetime a model for imitation in all aspects of religious practice and law by every observant Twelver.

### The Ismāīlīyya

In 765, after the death of the sixth imām, Jafar al-Sadiq, his two sons Ismāīl and Mūsā al-Kazim claimed their right to succession. Those who accepted Ismāīl's succession became known as Ismāīlīyya. Mūsā's line ended with the disappearance of the twelfth imām, Muhammad Mahdī (873–874). Some of the Ismāīlīyya maintained that Ismāīl had not died and would reappear as the Mahdī. Others recognized Ismāīl's son Muhammad as their imām.

In the middle of the ninth century, the Ismāīlīyya appeared as a secret revolutionary organization, carrying on missionary efforts in many regions of the Muslim world that preached revolt against the Abbāsid state and the religious order of the Sunna. In the area of al-Kūfa, its mission was spread from about the year 877 to 878 by Hamdān Qarmat, whose followers were named, after him, al-Qarāmita.

The movement experienced a schism in 899, when Ubayd Allāh succeeded to its leadership in North Africa and gave to himself the title of al-Mahdī, the divinely guided imām. In 909, he led a successful uprising and declared himself caliph until his death in 934. The state that was founded by his rule and those of his descendants became known as the Fātimid Caliphate, which later ruled North Africa and the Middle East until 1171.

The first Fātimid caliph, al-Mahdī, established his capital at a city founded in 920 on the east coast of Tunisia and called it by his title, Mahdīyah. In 969, after several campaigns to expand eastward, al-Mahdī's third successor, al-Muizz, who reigned from 953 to 975, invaded Egypt, built Cairo, and made it the center of the Fātimid Caliphate.

The Fātimids' contribution to Egypt's place in the Muslim world can be seen in their building of a large mosque and seminary, called al-Azhar, after Fātima *al-Zahrā* (Arabic: The Resplendent), the Prophet Muhammad's daughter. At its height, the Fātimid Caliphate's provinces included North Africa, Sicily, the Red Sea coast of Africa, Syria, Palestine, Yemen, and the western coast of Arabia, including Mecca and Medina.

The sect split again after the death of the Fātimid caliph al-Mustansir in 1094, who had nominated his elder son, Nizār, to succeed him, and who had been accepted by the Ismāīlī leaders. However, al-Mustansir's powerful general appointed his younger son, Ahmad, as caliph after marrying him to his sister and giving him the name al-Mustalī.

In 1090, the Ismāīlī theologian and military commander Hasan al-Sabbāh captured the fortress of Alamūt from the Seljūq Turks in

western Iran. He and the Ismāīlīs of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran refused to acknowledge al-Mustalī's succession. Instead, they gave their allegiance to al-Mustansir's eldest son, Nizār, as the designated successor and imām, and subsequently to those claiming descent from him. Accordingly, they were called Nizārīyya.

Under the leadership of Hasan al-Sabbāh, the Nizārīs were able to establish a confederation of principalities in Persia and Syria. They gained control of a number of fortresses in Iran and Syria, the chief being Alamūt. Alamūt was the center of a Shīa state between 1090 and 1256, with territories scattered unevenly from Syria to eastern Iran, ruled by the head of the Nizārī Ismāīlīyya sect. Initially, the state grew out of an attempt by the Ismāīlīyya of Iran to break the power of the Sunni Seljūqs on behalf of the Fātimids. However, after the 1094 split with the Fātimids of Egypt, the Ismāīlīs of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Iran considered themselves part of a cohesive state, despite being scattered territorially.

The Fātimid state faced challenges from within and without the territories they controlled. Externally, they found themselves in a direct clash with the Sunni Seljūq Turks, who invaded Syria and eventually weakened Fātimid control over Syria and Iraq. Internally, besides having to control a majority of Sunni populations, who were hostile to their theology, the credibility of the dynasty suffered a serious blow after the eccentric and unpredictable Caliph al-Hākim, who ruled from 996 to 1020, deified himself. Al-Hākim bi Amr Allāh (Arabic: The Governor by the Rule of God) claimed to have experienced a metamorphosis that made him divine, and thus he became al-Hākim bi Amrihi (Arabic: The Governor by His Own Rule). After his disappearance, the military officers and vizirs of his successors, many of whom did not belong to the Ismāīlīyya sect, gradually became the practical rulers of the state, until its end. The last of those was Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, who was also the vizir of the Fātimid state at the time of the death of its last caliph, in 1171. Salah al-Din abolished then the Ismāīlī Fātimid state and proclaimed the return of Sunni Islam as the religion of the state in Egypt.

The history of the Ismāīlī state was dominated by hostility between the Ismāīlī and, mainly, the Sunni population. Suspected Ismāīlīs in towns were often massacred. Ismāīlīs, in turn, carried out assassinations of powerful men who persecuted them. They lived among the people, keeping their unpopular faith secret and kept men at service in hostile courts, who were prepared to murder a judge, governor, prince, or caliph in public view on the grassy courtyard. Accordingly, they earned the nickname *al-Hashishiyya* (from Arabic: "hashish,"

meaning "grass"). The term then transformed into *Hashashin* and became "assasins" in Western languages.[13] The term hashashin literally means "users of grass," which referred to their preferred killing place but was in the West misinterpreted, giving them the false reputation of using drugs prior to an assassination.

Suspicion and war almost never ceased between the Ismāīlī state and the surrounding peoples. Raiding Ismāīlī villages and slaughtering their inhabitants was considered a pious act among the Sunna, while the Ismāīlīyya in their isolated districts maintained a united front against outsiders and have done so until the present time.

The Ismāīlīs remained in political power through the thirteenth century, until they were displaced by the Mongols and later by the Mamlūks. The imāmate of the Nizārīs remained vested in the lords of Alamūt until the surrender of the fortress to the Mongol conqueror Hulāgū in 1256 and the consequent execution of the Imām Rukn al-Dīn Khurshāh. The Mongol Hūlāgū destroyed the Ismāīlī state in Iran, but the Syrian fortresses survived the Mongols. However, they were later taken by the Mamlūk sultan al-Zahir Baybars of Egypt, who left them as an autonomous community.

In its modern phase, Nizārī history has been distinguished by the transference of the imāmate from Persia to British India in the nineteenth century and then to Europe, where the present headquarters of the current imām, Shāh Karīm Aga Khān, is located. Nizārī communities are found today in over 25 countries in Asia and Africa, as well as in Great Britain, Europe, the United States, and Canada, where, based on a common constitution, they have organized strong community institutions. These are complemented by a development network headed by their imām, concerned primarily with the development of the countries and peoples in which they live.

The person of the Ismāīlī caliph combined temporal and religious authority. He is, according to Ismāīlī doctrine, the embodiment of God's infallible guidance to humankind. Such claim made him the enemy of the Sunni Abbāsid order and the refuge of those who wished to overthrow it.

Like the Twelvers Shīa, Nizari Ismāīlīyya distinguish between the external and inner aspects of religion. The external consists in the apparent, generally accepted meaning of the revealed scriptures and in the religious law laid down in them. It changes with each prophet. The inner aspect consists in the truths concealed in the scriptures and laws, which are unchangeable and are made apparent from them by interpretation, which relies on the mystical significance of letters and numbers.

History progresses through seven eras, each inaugurated by an enunciator prophet bringing a message revealed by God. Each of the first six prophets, Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad, was also followed by a silent one, who revealed the inner side of the message, and by seven imāms. The seventh imām in each era rises in rank and becomes the prophet of the following era, abrogating the law of the previous prophets and bringing a new one. In the era of Muhammad, Alī was the silent and Muhammad ibn Ismāīl was the seventh imām. Muhammad ibn Ismāīl on his reappearance will become the seventh enunciator prophet, the Qāim (equivalent to the Mahdī in Twelver Shīa doctrine), and will abrogate the law of Islam. His message will, however, consist in the full revelation of the inner truths. He will rule the world and then end the physical world, sitting in judgment over humanity. During his absence, he is represented by 12 authorities (*hujjas*) residing in the 12 regions of the earth. Before the coming of the Qāim, the inner message must be kept secret. It can be revealed to a select number of individuals upon taking an oath of initiation with a vow of secrecy and on payment of dues. A hierarchy of preachers (*dāīya*), which serves below the hujjas and the imām, is in charge of the initiation process.[14]

### The Alawīyya

The Alawī belief system is grounded upon the classic religious notion that humans were expelled from heaven for their disobedience of God and they seek to return to it through their good deeds. The initiated Alawīyya believe that in the beginning of time, Alawī souls were lights roaming around God and praising him. When they disputed God's divinity and rebelled against Him, He threw them down to earth and locked them into human bodies, condemning their souls to eternal reincarnation.

During their expulsion to earth, God appeared to them seven times, calling for their obedience, but they refused Him. In each of His appearances, God revealed Himself as part of a trinity. In this trinity, God is the Essence or the Meaning (*Manā*), and two subordinate individuals are the Name (*Ism*) or Veil (*Hidjāb*) and the Gate (*Bāb*). The Essence is incarnated successively in Abel, Seth, Joseph, Joshua, Asaf, St. Peter, Alī ibn Abī Tālib, and then in the imāms as far as the eleventh one, al-Hasan al-Askarī. However, the true character of the Essence is hidden by the presence of the Veil in Adam, Noah, Jacob, Moses, Solomon, Jesus, and Muhammad. Each of the Veils, in turn, is accompanied by a Gate, who is the intermediary between the concealed God and the initiated believers. In the formative period

of Islam, Alī is the Essence, Muhammad is the Veil, and the latter's companion, Salmān al-Fārisī, is the Gate.[15]

Men who recognize the identity of the Essence escape from eternal incarnation by having their soul freed from their body and transformed into a star that eventually returns to its ultimate place, whence it was expelled. Women do not undergo this process because they are believed to be born of the sins of devils, and they are therefore also not initiated to participate in the rites of men. As an alternative, women tend to venerate nature.

The Alawīyya sect began in the circles of the mystics among the Shīa of southern Mesopotamia. Four men played a pivotal role in forming the sect. The first was Muhammad ibn Nusayr al-Numayrī (d. 883). Accordingly, the original name of the sect as al-Nusayrīyya or al-Numayrīyya is derived from its founder Ibn Nusayr (Arabic for "son of the little Christian"), who was a follower of the tenth Shīa imām Alī al-Hādī (d. 868). Ibn Nusayr proclaimed the divine nature of the imām and claimed for himself the status of the Gate who mediates between the divine and the believers. According to Alawī tradition, Ibn Nusayr also became the favorite disciple of the eleventh imām al-Hasan al-Askarī (d. 874), who in turn passed on to him a revelation of al-Askari being the Essence, Ibn Nusayr the Veil, and the yet-to-be last of the 12 imāms, Muhammad al-Mahdī, the Gate.[16]

The second important figure in forming the Alawīyya sect was the disciple of Ibn Nusayr's successor, Abū Muhammad al-Jannān (d. 900), whose *The Book of the Lives and Cycles of Light* (*Kitāb al-akwār wa al-adwār al-nūrāniyya*) is the source of numerous lines recited in Alawī festivals. The fact that some of the festivals are of Iranian origin, such as Nawrūz and Mihrgān, has suggested that al-Jannān was of Iranian descent. Besides authoring his celebrated book, al-Jannān extended his influence by taking under his wing the poet Abū Abd Allāh al-Khasībī, who later became the head of the Alawī community in the south of Baghdad. Al-Khasībī was imprisoned after performing the ritual of declaring true Alawī belief in public, but he escaped and moved to Harrān in North Mesopotamia, claiming that Jesus (reincarnated in Muhammad and the 12 imāms) had rescued him.[17] After establishing a community in Harrān, he moved to Aleppo, where he dedicated his *The Book of the Great Guidance* (*Kitāb al-Hidāya al-kubrā*) to the governor of Aleppo, Sayf al-Dawla al-Hamdāni.

Al-Khasībī died in 957 in Aleppo. He was buried to the north of the city in a place known today as the tomb of Shaykh Yabraq.[18] His second successor, Surūr ibn al-Qāsim al-Tabarānī, left Aleppo in 1032, escaping the persistent wars between the Byzantines and the Muslim

Arabs, and settled at Lattakya, which was under Byzantine rule. There he converted the Arab dynasty, the Tanukh, to Alawī beliefs. The Tanukh were a pre-Islamic confederacy of various Arab tribes who inhabited South Mesopotamia and adopted Christianity around the fifth century and then migrated to Aleppo prior to the Muslim Arab conquest. They were forcibly converted to Islam by the third Abbāsid caliph, al-Mahdī (775–785), who beheaded their chief, Layth ibn Mahtta, for refusing to convert and had their churches destroyed.[19]

Other Alawīyya claim discent from the Ghassanids,[20] Christian Arab tribes that inhabited the buffer zone between Syria and the Arabian Peninsula. They were converted to Islam by the order of the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattab, after his army commander Khaled ibn al-Walīd invaded Syria. The Tanukhs' and Ghassanids' forcible conversion to Islam and subsequent adoption of Alawī beliefs explains the existence of Christian elements in their doctrines, rites, and festivals, such as their Mass-like rituals and celebration of Christmas, New Year's, Epiphany, Easter, Pentecost, and Palm Sunday.[21]

Al-Tabarānī also converted the peasants of the mountains between northern Syria's east coast and the cities of Homs and Hama, some of whom may have still been pagan, to Alawī beliefs. Accordingly, those mountains became known as the Alawīyya Mountains. Today, al-Tabarānī's written works form the major part of the written tradition of the Alawīyya. He died in 1035 in Lattakya, where his tomb lies in the mosque of al-Sha'rānī.[22]

The Alawī belief system is rejected by Shīa and Sunna alike for exaggerating the place of Alī in Muslim doctrine and for believing in the reincarnation of souls. However, the Sunni scholars were more severe in their rejection and advocated death for the Alawīyya, on the charge of apostasy. Abū Hāmid al-Ghazalī (1058–1111), was the first prominent Sunni Muslim scholar to declare the Alawīyya apostates because they "apostatize in matters of [handling animal] blood, money, marriage, and [legal] butchering [of livestock], so it is a duty to kill them."[23] Al-Ghazali distinguished between two categories of infidels (*Kuffar*). One is the "original infidels" who were not born Muslim; the other category is apostates (*murtadoun*), who had been Muslims, but then deviated in their beliefs or practices. Accordingly, he classified the Alawīyya among the *Batiniyya* sects, who believe in the hidden meanings of scriptures. His judgment regarding the two categories was: "the imam has four options with the original infidel; he could be released with the latter's acknowledgment of his indebtedness to such favor granted to him [*al-mann*], ransomed, enslaved, or killed.[24] However, he has no options regarding the apostates, as

they cannot be enslaved, nor the infidel tax be accepted from them, nor *al-mann* or ransom; they must be killed to purify the face of the earth from them. This is the judgment against those declared infidels among the *Batiniyya*."[25] Since al-Ghazali's judgment, at least 17 clerics issued similar judgments against the Alawīyya.[26]

The active persecution of the Alawīyya for apostasy started during the reign of the Mamlūk Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (1260–77), who attempted to convert them to Sunni Islam. The religious judgment of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya followed in 1305, which ruled that the Alawīyya "heresy is more severe than the Jews and Christians and even the Brahmans who worship idols . . . There is no doubt that fighting these people and attacking them . . . is one of the greatest obligations. The rightful Umar and the rest of the companions began the holy war against the apostates before the war against the heretics of the People of the Book [Jews and Christians] because fighting them means defending Muslim land."[27] Following that religious judgment, about 20,000 Alawīyya were massacred in 1317. The Sunni Ottoman state solicited a similar judgment in 1516 against the Shīa from al-Shaykh Nuh al-Hanafi al-Dimashqi because "those heretics combine all sorts of heresy and evil and stubbornness and all sorts of irreligion, bawdry and atheism" and therefore should "be killed whether they repent or not . . . their women and children may be enslaved."[28] Although the judgment was against the Shīa, it was nevertheless used against the Alawīyya as well. In the1820s, in a likely response to Alawī insurgency against the Ottomans, the Latakia-based Moroccan cleric al-Shaykh Muhammad Nasir al-Din al-Mugrabi issued a judgment to kill Alawī men, enslave their women and children, and loot their property.[29] Al-Mughrabi's judgment was also used against the Alawīyya by the governor of Egypt during his conquest of Syria between 1832 and 1840, which they fiercely resisted.[30]

During the Sunni Ottoman state occupation of Syria (1561–1916), the persecutions and massacres faced by the Alawīyya forced them to withdraw from the cities of Homs and Hama in central Syria and from most of Latakia to defensible territories in the mountains along the eastern Mediterranean coast, known today as the Alawīyya Mountains.[31] There, they were ruled by local tribal commanders, who were nominal subordinates of Ottoman-appointed regional governors.

From 1839 to 1876, the Ottomans instituted administrative reforms known as *Tanzimāt*. These reforms were intended to transform the state from theocratic rule to a more secular one that would treat its citizens equally before the law. However, Alawī sources claim that the laws as administered by Sunni judges, who discriminated against them,

stripped 1,300 villages from their ownership, along with their lands and cattle, and played a significant role in their impoverishment.[32]

Near the end of Ottoman rule and after many military campaigns into Alawī territories, the Ottoman state established direct administration over these lands in 1877, which allowed it to exact taxes and conscript soldiers from all the Alawī territories.[33] But the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the French and British occupation of the Fertile Crescent allowed the Alawīyya to establish their own state in 1920. That state lasted 16 years and included the region between Mount Lebanon in the south and Alexandretta in the north and from the eastern Mediterranean coast to the west of the cities of Homs and Hama. In 1936, the French dissolved the Alawī state and incorporated it into Syria, ceding the northern part of Alexandretta to Turkey.

After gaining independence from France in 1946, the Alawīyya believed that they could strive for equal citizenship by promoting the secular ideology of the Baath Party. They opposed the union with Egypt, from 1958 to 1961, fearing their already minority status would deteriorate and their chances to achieve the equality they strove for would weaken; their relative size, approximately 11 percent of Syria's population, would be reduced to about 2 percent of a united Syria and Egypt. As a result, senior Alawī officers formed a secret military committee to engineer their dominance in the army, by controlling enrollment in the military academies and encouraging members of their sect to join the Baath Party.[34] In 1966, an intra-Baath coup brought Alawī officers greater control of Syria, with Salah Jadid heading the Baath Party and Hafiz al-Asad heading the military. Again in 1970, an intra-Baath coup ousted the left-leaning Jadid, leaving the more politically pragmatic Hafiz al-Asad in control of the army and the Baath Party.

From 1978 to 1982, the Muslim Brothers staged the first challenge to the secular rule of the Baath Party and the leading Alawī officers. The challenge took the form of a series of assassinations of Alawī and Baathist military and intelligence personnel as well as civilians and pro-government Sunni clerics across Syria, but especially in the cities of Aleppo and Hama. The Muslim Brothers felt that the ethos of their Sunni constituents was not represented in the Syrian government's domestic, regional, and international policies. On the domestic side, they felt that the government's secular and socialist orientation was offensive to Muslims at many levels. Most offensive was the government's ban of women's headscarfs (*hijāb*) and face coverings (*niqāb*) in schools, which was perceived as nonconforming to Muslim Law (*sharīa*). On the regional and international sides, the Muslim Brothers took issue with the Syrian government's opposition to the jihadist

movement in Afghanistan and its opposition to Saddam Hussein's war against Iran. The Muslim Brothers felt that the Iraq–Iran war was a Sunna–Shia and an Arab–Persian war, which the Syrian government wrongfully opposed. The Muslim Brothers also saw the Soviet military intervention on the side of the communist government in Afghanistan as a case of infidels violating Muslim lands, which must be opposed by the Syrian government and fought against.

While the Muslim Brothers' proclaimed causes had widespread sympathy among the Sunna of Syria, not all of the Sunna favored an opposition led by the Muslim Brothers and few of the Sunna favored a violent confrontation. The Muslim Brothers' sustained challenge to the government culminated in the group's violent takeover of the city of Hama in February 1982. The rest of the Syrian cities failed to answer the Muslim Brothers' call to rise up simultaneously. As a result, the rebellion was quelled and much of the older part of the city was destroyed, with casualties estimated to have ranged anywhere from 2,000 to 20,000. Soon after, the cadres that organized the Muslim Brothers in Syria were pursued and dismantled. Its leaders and intellectuals fled the country. A tacit agreement was eventually reached between its remaining cadres and the government intelligence service that the Muslim Brothers would halt all their political and violent activities in return for the state's ceasing to pursue them. Accordingly, the 1978–82 round of violent confrontation ended, a page of Syrian history was turned, and all parties braced for the next round.

The following three decades witnessed the gradual Islamization of public life. Religious schools proliferated and women donned the Muslim headscarf, both in numbers unprecedented in modern Syrian history, reflecting a consistent trend throughout the Middle East. This regressive trend reversed eight decades of post-Ottoman secularization that commenced with the colonial era and continued throughout the postcolonial, military, and Baath rule.

A major consequence of the Islamization of public life, reinforced by the proliferation of satellite- and internet-based free media, was the surfacing of religious and sectarian conflict. Chapter 8 examines the nature of that conflict and the process by which it first polarized Syrian society and then mutated conflicts of secular nature into religious and sectarian conflict.

### The Durūz

The Durūz sect sprang directly from the Ismāīlīyya sect, which established the Fātimid state (909–1171) and ruled North Africa

and Western Syria from Cairo. The Durūz sect's name derives from Muhammad ibn Ismāīl al-Darazi (d. 1020). He was a Turkish Ismāīlī preacher from Bukhara (modern Uzbekistan) who traveled to Egypt around 1017 and gained favor at the court of the sixth Fātimid caliph, al-Hākim bi Amr Allāh (996–1021).

Al-Hākim succeeded his father at age 11 and seized real reigning power by assassinating his chief guardian at age 15. That bloody inauguration set the tone for what was yet to come throughout his reign: numerous assassinations that included the majority of state officials who served him. He is also known for periodic humiliation of Christians and Jews by forcing them to wear distinctive clothes, forced conversions to Islam, and his destruction of many churches, including the Church of the Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Al-Hākim then extended his insults to Sunni Muslims by having the first three caliphs cursed in public, which caused riots.[35] Yet he also periodically reversed his behavior and acted with humility to all those whom he had previously persecuted, causing some to believe that he was mentally unbalanced. Near the end of his reign, al-Hākim favored a group who believed in his divinity and privately encouraged them to announce it in public.

In 1020, al-Darazi, along with a group of likeminded companions, declared al-Hākim's divinity at a mosque. Al-Darazi announced that God's spirit had passed on to al-Hākim through Adam, Alī, and the Imāms. That declaration presumed a process of reincarnation, thus earning al-Darazi and his group the charge of heresy from the Ismāīlī Shīa hierarchy and the Sunni Muslim majority. They rejected the declaration of al-Hākim's divinity, and riots ensued. Al-Darazi disappeared after the riots, leaving much speculation about his fate. Turkish soldiers responsible for the security of the Fātimid state pursued al-Darazi and killed many of his followers.[36] Around the period of al-Darazi's disappearance and presumed death, his competitor Hamza ibn Alī, originally from Sūzan in Iran, took over the leadership of al-Darazi's group and organized it as a religious sect separate from the Ismāīlī community.

In 1021, al-Hākim disappeared during one of his nocturnal walks. His rule passed to his 16-year-old son, placing al-Hākim's sister in charge of the state's affairs. Hamza announced that al-Hākim had gone into a state of occultation (*ghayba*) to test Hamza and his followers' loyalty and would return to place the sword of victory in Hamza's hand. Soon after, Hamza himself disappeared after apparently assigning to one of his followers, Bahā al-Dīn al-Muqtanā, the task of serving as link between him and the faithful.

Hamza's disappearance and the passing on of his authority to al-Muqtanā coincided with the Fātimid state's elimination of the

group in Cairo and its persecution of the missionary organization set up by Hamza throughout the Fātimid state. As a result of those persecutions, the Durūz missionary activities were suspended, and the Durūz community emigrated and settled in the more defensible mountainous region in southern Syria, where it remained closed to outsiders up to the present day, with few exceptions.[37]

Despite Hamza's crucial role in setting up the networks that have managed to survive to date, the group is known today to outsiders in Syria and elsewhere by al-Darazi's name rather than Hamza's.[38] However, the Durūz religious hierarchy prefers now to be addressed as Unitarian or Monotheists (*muwahidoun*), in reference to their belief in the One God of all ages who manifested Himself in al-Hākim and whom they see as the source of the human soul and the final destination of the souls of the faithful. By adopting the term Unitarian, the group also distances itself from the negative light in which rival Muslim sects view the term Durūz, while simultaneously appearing to uphold the principle of One God, to which none of the major belief systems of the people living in the vicinity objects.

In the official Ismāīlī Shīa belief system, al-Hākim was imām. As imām, he was divinely appointed not only to head the Ismāīlī religious hierarchy, but also the Muslim community at large. It was the imām's right to lead, acquired by his lineage. He also came with the special power to know inner truths (*ta'wīl*), unrestrained by scriptures revealed to the Prophet Muhammad or to his predecessors (*tanzīl*). Al-Hākim intended to take his officially regarded position further and become the ultimate One truth accorded only to the divine.

Hamza therefore declared that al-Hākim transcended from imām to God, while Hamza's discovery of al-Hākim's divinity rendered him the human guide, the imām. Since God is ever present even when unrevealed, He had always been incarnated in other individuals, though obscurely in the past. In al-Hākim's time, God, the One, was uniquely and openly present. In that light, Hamza explained al-Hākim's otherwise inexplicable and erratic behavior. Al-Hākim had become God, who is beyond good and evil and accounts to no one for His actions. His series of abhorrent crimes and persecutions contrasted with periodic demonstrations of humility and generosity could only be acts of the Divine, whose reasoning may not be comprehended by humans. This special understanding of al-Hākim's nature was Hamza's privilege, which made him al-Hākim's imām, the cosmic Mind (*al-aql*). It empowered him with a divinely ordained mission to return one day along with al-Hākim from occultation to conquer and establish justice in the world and have their faithful followers rule all humankind.

Hamza built a network of four subordinates that ranked below him and al-Hākim. Like al-Hākim and Hamza, the members of that network had cosmic principles (*hudūd*), each assigned to an individual that served as a current Veil for the eternally living principles. They are the Universal Soul, the Word, the Preceder, and the Follower. Below these were the proselytizers, the authorized preachers, the persuaders, and the last were the common believers, who were the eternally reincarnated souls.

According to Hamza, God also created false principles in opposition to the true ones. In al-Hākim's time, they were the Ismāīlī hierarchy who taught the false doctrine of the old faith. Al-Hākim would eventually use his temporal power to declare Hamza's true principles in public and enforce the abandonment of the false ones, including Islamic Law (*al-Sharīa*) and all other prior religions. That moment, however, never materialized. Noticing signs of public opposition, al-Hākim was cautious and did not dare to follow up with such an announcement himself.

After Hamza's disappearance, his appointed cosmic principle with the rank of Follower, Bahā al-Dīn al-Muqtanā, wrote proselytizing letters to the Durūz communities that spread in Syria and among other Ismāīlīyya throughout the Muslim world. Al-Muqtanā then claimed to have withdrawn to a state of occultation in 1034, but he apparently continued to send letters to his followers for almost a decade. His and other letters, presumably by Hamza and al-Hākim, were canonized as Durūz scripture and were called the Letters of Wisdom (*Rasāil al-Hikma*). They continue to serve as the foundation for the Durūz religious identity and as the reference for the organizing principles of their community.

The Durūz belief system survived in the mountainous region of southern Syria and became a closed community that kept their doctrines secret, excommunicated those who intermarried with members of other sects, and did not permit apostasy to go unpunished. During the long period of autonomous, closed, group life, the religious hierarchy set up by Hamza was replaced by an alternative, simpler system that is believed to have been established by Abd Allāh Tanūkhī (d. 1480). The new hierarchy divided all adults into the initiated wise (*ʿuqqāl*) and the uninitiated ignorant (*juhhāl*). The number of souls in existence is fixed by the number of those who believed in Hamza's time. They are always reincarnated as Durūz. The initiated ones don special clothing and are required to pray, abstain from alcohol, and lead a virtuous life. If they had reached perfection upon their death, their souls would ascend to the stars. The souls of the rest, who fail

to be initiated in their lifetime, are reincarnated in newborn infants, thus renewing their chance for salvation from eternal imprisonment in human bodies.

The more pious and religiously knowledgeable among the wise serve as heads of communities (*shaykhs*). They offer advice to the ignorant, mediate their disputes, and preside over wedding and funeral ceremonies in return for small gifts. Regarding their relationship with political authority external to Durūz Muslims, they have accepted the Hanafī legal system, though with minor modifications.

Hamza and al-Muqtanā prescribed seven commandments that replaced the five pillars of Islam: (1) to be truthful about their theology to the faithful, but not outsiders, to whom lying is permitted to protect the faithful; (2) to defend and help one another; (3) to renounce all former religions; (4) to dissociate themselves from unbelievers; (5) to recognize the unity al-Hākim as the One in all ages; (6) to be content with whatever He does; (7) and to submit to His orders when delivered by the religious hierarchy. Hamza also prescribed special rules of justice and of personal status to replace Islamic Law, which included equality of rights and obligations between husband and wife.[39]

According to the religious judgment of the mufti of Greater Syria (the Levant) Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad al-Imādi (d. 1641), the "infidelity" (*kufr*) of the Durūz, like that of the Ismāīlīyya and the Alawīyya, is "agreed upon by the Muslims and those who question their infidelity are infidels like them. They are more infidels than the Jews and the Christians because, unlike the People of the Book, it is not permissible to marry their women, or to eat their slaughter."[40] Therefore, they

> should be brought down from their fortresses, have their throats slit. Their dead will forever burn in hell. Those who are martyred fighting them will go to heaven. Their belongings will be booty to the Muslims. The caretakers who order their annihilation will be thanked and rewarded. Those to whom God gives the power to eliminate them from their dominion and purify the holy land in their time will receive the greatest joy and the most perfect of rewards for their strengthening of Islam and supporting of our prophet Muhammad, may God's prayer and peace be upon him. End of the fatwa.[41]

## THE SUNNA

In contemporary times, Sunni Muslims represent the dominant orthodoxy in Islam, as opposed to various Shīa groups who represent

heterodoxy. The Sunni identity was formed in reaction to the Shīa endorsement of Muhammad's descendants through his daughter Fātima and his cousin Alī for the leadership of the Islamic community. For the Shīa, that endorsement rendered the Umayyad and later the Abbāsid dynasties' accession to power illegitimate. Therefore, as they were not descended from Muhammad, the Umayyad and the Abbāsid dynasties backed religious authorities who accepted their leadership. Those religious authorities, the ruling elites sponsoring them, and the populace identifying with the former came to be referred to as *Ahl al-Sunna*, meaning the adherents of the generally approved practice introduced by the Quran and the sayings attributed to the Prophet Muhammad (*al-Hadīth*). Near the end of Abbāsid rule, Sunni religious authorities also accepted the leadership of non-Arabs, so long as their rule enforced the practice of Islam according to the Quran, the Hadīth, and the acts of the Prophet Muhammad as described in his biography (*al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya*).

The Sunna recognize six books of the Hadīth as authentic. They also only accept as orthodox one of the four dominant schools of Muslim law (*Hanafiyya*, *Shafiyya*, *Malikiyya*, *Hanbaliyya*), each named after its founder. Today, the Sunna constitute approximately 90 percent of the world's Muslims. They are the majority of Muslims in all countries except Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

In Syria and the Fertile Crescent region in the past four decades, along with official Sunni orthodoxy, various Sūfi and Salafi groups exist. As they perceived official state-sponsored religious institutions, including the formal office that issues religious judgments (*mufti*), as instruments of the state, politically conscious Sunna distanced themselves from official institutions and formed informal or underground networks that clustered around their places of worship. The proponents of each tradition informed their followers that their interpretations of the scriptures are the most proper for the practice of Islam.

It may be argued that none of these Sunni groups are separate religious sects, especially when state-administered religious institutions (*Awqāf*) regulate the affairs of all the Sunna. However, these groups have developed distinct social and self-identities by which people recognize them. They have also developed informal networks that range from cultural, such as the dancing and chanting circles of the Sūfis, to underground social and paramilitary networks, such as those of the Muslim Brothers and Wahhābī-inspired neo-Salafi groups. Because those groups seek the establishment of different political systems, such as the recently declared caliphate in Iraq and Syria, adhere to varying systems of value, and govern themselves within separate hierarchies,

they will be treated below as religious sects. They are the Sūfiyya, Wahhābīyya, neo-Salafiyya, and the Muslim Brothers.

### The Sūfiyya

The Sūfiyya movement may well have played the most significant role in the spread of Islam in diverse cultural contexts. Its doctrine of "all is God" provided the flexibility to incorporate alien beliefs and practices as if they were expressions of Islamic truths. Beginning as an ascetic movement in Islam, it emerged spontaneously in the late seventh century and survived in various forms up to contemporary times. Its adherents strive to experience a deeper level of satisfaction from the practice of Islam than what they would attain by the mere observance of religious duties. The individual practitioner of Sūfiyya is a Sūfi, a term derived from Arabic "Sūf," meaning wool. Thus, the Sūfi is the person who wraps his body with a woolen cloth, presumably to distinguish himself from common folks with an ascetic sign. The tradition of wearing a thick garment was characteristic of Christian ascetic monks and mystics in Syria and Mesopotamia prior to the Muslim Arab conquest, suggesting the possibility that this movement appeared first among Christian converts to Islam or was an imitation of the Christian tradition. An alternative meaning to the term "Sūfi" points to a Babylonian, Hebrew, and Greek origin, all meaning "knowledgeable."

Early Sūfis rejected material pursuits and deprived themselves of carnal pleasures, which they believed distracted them from an exclusive "surrender to God," as they understood true "Islam" to mean. They trained themselves in methods that would eliminate the distracting impulses of the self. Through chanting the name of God (*dhikr*) while using certain breathing techniques, imagining God and thinking of Him, reciting love poetry, listening to music, and dancing, they believed they could travel along a road that would elevate them to ecstasy. They interpreted those ecstasies and the visions that sometimes accompanied them as absorption in God.

Sūfi rituals also included the chanting of the name of the Prophet Muhammad and imagining him. Some practitioners felt that Muhammad was present before them and communicated with them, a vision that was reinforced by the belief that Muhammad lived after his death in an altered form.

The Sūfis' unorthodox rituals were frowned upon by religious authorities and caused them to be classified as outcasts. However, the rich intellectual life that followed the translation movement inaugurated by the Abbāsid caliph al-Mahdī eventually allowed the Sūfis

to strive for religious justification and inclusion through the use of Neoplatonist and Aristotelian philosophy. The Sūfis centered their movement on the notion of the love of God and claimed that they were mentioned as a group in the Quran's verse: "O you who have believed, those of you who revert from your religion—God will bring forth people whom He loves and who love Him, [they will be] humble toward the believers, powerful against the disbelievers; they strive in the cause of God and do not fear the blame of a critic."[42] In the eighth century, the Sūfis used the Quran and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as a guiding principle to inner knowledge (*ʿilm al-bātin*), as opposed to the external knowledge (*ʿilm al-zāhir*) evident in the sayings of the Prophet and the jurisprudence (*fiqh*) emanating from the latter tradition. While they acknowledged that external knowledge is necessary for pious life, they claimed it is not sufficient for inner illumination. Nonetheless, by the ninth century that acknowledgment and their observance of religious duties made the Sūfiyya movement socially acceptable.

The Sūfi science of inner knowledge falls within the various mystic traditions found in Christian Gnosticism and in gnostic aspects of the Muslim sects that sprang from Shīa Islam. It begins with the one God and ends with Him, through the discovery of the unconscious spirit that sleeps in humans until awakened by the Savior. It is a belief that salvation occurs through special knowledge of the spiritual truth that will enable humans to escape from this painful and evil world. Inner illumination occurs when one recovers his true self from ignorance. That recovery takes place by disentangling the true self from the body and from matter with the help of chanting, music, or dance.

There were many Sūfi writers who compiled materials in Arabic about Sūfi doctrine, practices, and groups, starting from near the end of the ninth century, such as Abū Yazīd al-Bistāmī (d. 874–875), al-Hakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 910), Abū Nasr al-Sarrādj (d. 988), Abū Tālib al-Makkī (d. 996), Abū Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d. 1022), and others. However, the writer who eventually made the Sūfiyya movement acceptable to Sunni Islam was Abū Hāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) from Tus, Iran. After spending most of his life attacking philosophy and philosophers, he experienced a personal crisis that led him to convert to mysticism. In his *Revival of Religious Sciences* (*Ihyā' ʿulūm al-dīn*), al-Ghazālī synthesized Muslim theology and mystical internal knowledge (*ʿilm al-bāṭin*) and argued that Islamic doctrine and practice can be made the basis of a devotional life and lead to the higher stages of mysticism. However, with the exception of listening to music, al-Ghazālī rejected Sūfi rituals.

By far the most influential Sūfi writer is the Andalusian Ibn al-Arabī (1165–1240) who traveled to the east and eventually settled in Damascus. In his "Unity of All Beings" (*wahdat al-wudjūd*), he drew up a Neoplatonic–Gnostic system with the central notion that God operates everything and to His will and action humans should submit with no will or self of their own.[43]

Al-Arabī also attempted to reconcile Islamic Law (*Sharīa*) with the universal aspect of Sūfi beliefs. He argued that God established Islamic Law with certain specific aims. For the latter to be achieved, one must abide by the Law. That God established other laws for other human communities does not concern Muslims, for that belongs to the realm of news (*akhbār*) not to the realm of religious judgments (*ahkām*). In that sense, a Sūfi can practice the Sūfiyya and simultaneously live the pious life commanded by the Islamic Law.[44]

From the eleventh century, Sūfi writings appeared in Persian as well, including Alī al-Jullābī al-Hujwīrī's (d. 1080) first Sūfī handbook in Persian, Ansārī of Herat's (d. 1089) *Uncovering the Hidden* (*Kashf al-Mahdjūb*), and above all the Persian poems of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī (d. 1273).[45] Subsequently, Sūfi literature gradually appeared in other languages throughout the Muslim world.

According to Sūfi doctrine, the mystical path leading to higher forms of religious knowledge is open to any Muslim, but it must be achieved under the guidance of an elder practitioner (*shaykh*). That teacher–pupil relationship gradually evolved into written rules, by which members of various emerging Sūfi orders abided. Orders such as al-Naqshbandiyya, al-Qādiriyya, al-Kubrawiyya, al-Khalwatiyya, and al-Shādhiliyya specify their history, rules for initiation, rules of subordination within the order's hierarchy, rules for proper breathing and chanting, and regulations for periods of seclusion.[46] Those orders survived throughout the ages primarily because they accept and practice the five pillars of Islam and unlike other esoteric (*batini*) sects, they avoided provoking the dominant Sunni Orthodoxy. Despite this, their shrines are being systematically destroyed throughout the regions of Syria and Iraq that are controlled by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant.

### The Wahhābīyya

In the eighteenth century, the religious scholar and jurist Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhāb (1703–92) founded a movement to revive what he believed was the pure practice of Islam. His movement is known after his name, as al-Wahhābīyya. However, because of the negative connotation of the term Wahhābīyya, his followers in contemporary

times prefer to be called Unitarians, or Monotheists (*Muwahidoun*).[47] The movement called for a direct return to the Quran and the Hadīth to regulate the lives of Muslims and their relationship to non-Muslims. Legal opinions that were composed in later times could be consulted, as long as they did not contradict the Quran and the Hadīth.

The most influential among Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb's 30 books is the *Book of Unification that Is the Right of God over [His] Servants/Slaves* (*Kitāb al-Tawhīd alladhi huwa Haq Allāh ala al-Abīd*).[48] In it, he quotes the Quran and Hadīth, and occasionally his favorite religious scholar, Ahmad ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), with whom he shared a hostile attitude toward nonconformists, such as Sūfis.[49] From his instructions in this and other books emerged what may be considered today's Wahhābī doctrine.

Wahhābī doctrine is centered on Ibn Taymiyya's understanding of Islam as obedience to a set of rules enforcing the belief in one God, the performance of certain duties, and the prohibition of committing forbidden acts.[50] It denounces beliefs or practices that potentially violate monotheism as heresies. It considers those who practice them as infidels and apostates, and it advocates beheading as its favorite means of punishing them. Because Wahhābī doctrine does not acknowledge religious hierarchy, it became the prerogative of the pious Muslim to attribute unbelief (*takfir*) to potential infidels or apostates and fight them.[51]

Warfare is sanctioned against those who know about monotheism but do not accept it.[52] Moreover, worship and prayer in any form and for any reason should be directed only to God, not to prophets or saints. Any form of prayer directed toward someone other than God is a polytheistic practice. The only exception was made for those who approached the Prophet Muhammad during his lifetime asking him to pray to God on their behalf.[53] To avoid falling into polytheistic practices, it is forbidden to venerate graves, to erect tombs on top of them, to travel to visit them, or to pray near them.[54]

Finally, in line with the Hanbali legal tradition and the teachings of Ahmad ibn Taymiyya, Wahhābī doctrine privileges adherence to the text and to transmitted tradition (*naql*) over reason (*aql*). It forbids innovation (*Bida*), even if it does not contradict the Quran or the Hadīth.[55] Original and independent interpretation (*ijtihad*) of an issue that is not specifically discussed in the Quran and al-Hadīth is permissible as long as it does not contradict them and scholars overwhelmingly agree to it (*ijma*).[56] Moreover, the Muslim is not under the obligation to follow or imitate (*taqlid*) anyone other than the Prophet Muhammad.[57]

Sometime between 1744 and 1746, while preaching his doctrine, Abd al-Wahhāb visited the hometown of the Saudi family at

Diriyya, to the northwest of Riyadh, and accepted the hospitality of its ruler Muhammad ibn Saud (d. 1765).[58] Ibn Saud saw in Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb's teachings a religious mission that he could employ to satisfy his ambition for conquest, for Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb's doctrine preached that those who do not accept his doctrine and join his movement are enemies of Islam, who ought to be fought against and to suffer the looting of their properties. An understanding reached between the two men bequeathed their power to their descendants and gave religious authority and the enforcement of its rule to the house of Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb and temporal authority to the House of Ibn Saud.

In 1746, both men ordered their followers to raid adjoining territories. Wars lasting 27 years ensued, until 1773, when Riyadh fell to Muhammad ibn Saud's son, Abd al-Azīz (d.1793). From then on the Saudi–Wahhābī alliance expanded its control over the region of Najd in central Arabia and looked westward to Mecca and Medina. By that time the family of Ibn Abd al-Wahhāb is said to have been receiving 50,000 gold coins annually from the House of Saud's treasury.[59]

Between 1801 and 1805, an army led by Saud ibn Abd al-Azīz took Mecca and al-Medina and expanded Saudi rule to the north, over southern Iraq and Syria. The Wahhābī doctrine was imposed in all of the conquered territories, which entailed the destruction of many venerated shrines, including those of the Prophet Muhammad's mother, daughter, and grandsons. The conquests added to the House of Saud and Abd al-Wahhāb considerable wealth from booty, almsgiving taxes (*zakāt*), and fines for disobedience of religious rules. By the time of the conquest of Mecca, Saud ibn Abd al-Azīz is said to have acquired 1,400 horses and 500 male and female slaves.[60]

Between 1811 and 1818, Egypt's Ottoman ruler, Muhammad Alī, sent several expeditions that ended Saudi control of the Arabian Peninsula and handed Mecca and Medina over to the control of the Hashimid clan. That rule ended again after Abd al-Azīz ibn Saud conquered al-Riyād in 1902 and later exapanded eastward to expel the Hashimids from Mecca and Medina, in 1920. With British support, he declared in 1927 a Saudi state in its present form.

While the Wahhābī–Saudi alliance is still sound to this day, official Wahhābī legal practice in the Saudi state seems to show signs of departure from the Hanbali school and from Ibn Taymiyya's teachings in three regards: it limits the practice of interpretation to qualified scholars, permits those unqualified to study the scriptures to imitate others, and claims to consider public interest in applying Islamic Law.[61]

In the last quarter of the twentieth century Wahhābī influence expanded beyond the Saudi state to Afghanistan and then Pakistan

through missionary networks and the funding of charities. In recent decades, Arab migrant workers in the Saudi state, who were obliged to send their children to Saudi schools, raised a new generation of non-Saudis who absorbed the Wahhābī doctrine. Upon their return to their respective countries, they spread the Wahhābī doctrine through informal networks and played a crucial role in the rise of al-Qaida in Syria and elsewhere briefly after the Arab Spring uprisings.

### The Salafiyya and the Muslim Brothers

The Salafiyya is a nineteenth-century intellectual movement aimed at reversing the decline of Muslim civilization through a return to the era of the devout ancestors (*al-salaf al-sālih*) of the Muslim community that is presumed to have prevailed in the formative years of Islam. The movement is based on the presumption that the decline of Muslim power was precipitated by forsaking the practice of Islam in its purest form. It was first inspired by Jamal al-Din al-Afghānī (1838–97), a Persian Shīa intellectual who attempted to reconcile Islam and science. He advocated a form of Islamic awakening, supporting a role for reasoning and choice in the action of Muslims and exhorting them to abandon their belief in predetermined destinies. His ultimate aim was to restore Muslim world power by establishing an Islamic caliphate that would unite Shīa and Sunna and challenge Western colonial ambitions in the Muslim world.[62]

During his residence in Egypt, al-Afghānī mentored some of Cairo's youths, including the future grand mufti Muhammad Abduh (1848–1905), who in turn collaborated with two Syrian scholars, Tāhir al-Jazāirī (1852–1920) and Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (1866–1914). The three formed circles of friends in Egypt and Syria that engaged in discussions and produced pamphlets criticizing the tradition of imitation (*taqlīd*) and the rigid adherence to the four schools of law of the Sunna. In consideration for the common good that requires adaptation to new conditions, they demanded that reasoning (*ijtihād*) and consensus (*ijmā*) be given preference over the literal text of revelation.[63] Al-Qāsimī, in particular, opened a discussion on the advantages or dangers of abandoning the four schools of law, which has continued in Syria to modern times.[64]

However, the next generation of Salafis bifurcated along two lines. One trend found more common ground with the literal Hanbali school of Islamic Law, the teachings of Ibn Taymiyya, and the Wahhābīyya movement than with al-Afghānī or Abduh. The other evolved into Arab-Muslim nationalism, but it eventually also endorsed Wahhābī

Islam. While the Wahhābī-Salafis had varied opinions about particular questions, they were, like the Wahhābīs, uniform in their criticism of unorthodox Shīa and Sūfi beliefs and practices.[65] The nationalist trend also saw a positive role for the Umayyad dynasty in the rise of Muslim power. Because it was the most Arab of subsequent Muslim dynasties, that attribution paved the way for the movement to Arabize Islam. Its chief propagator was the Syrian intellectual Muhibb al-Dīn al-Khatīb (1886–1969), a disciple of Tāhir al-Jazāirī. Al-Khatīb and others stressed the particular role of the Arabs in Islamic history and envisioned an Arab nation as a means for restoring Muslim political power.[66] Al-Khatīb eventually declared his support for the House of Saud and became the most visible defender of Saudi-Wahhābī politics and religious practice.[67]

In the 1930s, the ideas of the Salafiyya movement were converted to political action programs by the Muslim Brothers (*al-Ikhwān al-Muslimūn*),[68] an organization that emerged in Egypt and Syria from the fusion of Salafi Islamic societies.[69] It was founded in 1928 in al-Ismāīlīyya, Egypt, as the Association of the Muslim Brothers, by a 22-year-old public school teacher, Hasan al-Bannā (1906–49). Al-Bannā, whose father had provided him a conservative religious education and who is said to have memorized the Quran from his early childhood, was also a talented preacher and organizer.[70] In 1933, when al-Bannā was reassigned to teach in Cairo's public schools, he moved the Association with him and assumed the position of the Supreme Guide. He appointed missionaries who preached in mosques and in public gatherings elsewhere, recruiting new members. In this period, the activities of the Brothers centered on grassroots efforts that established religious schools and charity networks and provided limited medical services.

Al-Bannā brought the Muslim Brothers into the realm of politics after the 1936 clashes between Jewish settlers and Arabs in Palestine. His support of the Palestinian Arab cause gained him prominence in Egypt as well as in Syria. This enabled his organization to recruit Egyptian army officers and spread his network of followers to Syria, where an association was founded in 1937 under the leadership of Mustafā al-Sibāī (1915–65).[71]

Al-Bannā's advocacy of violent resistance to the British presence landed him in prison in 1941. By this time, his organization had formed underground militias with the intention to violently overthrow the monarchy and the parliamentary system established in 1936 by British rule. Those militias' informal participation in the 1948 Arab–Israeli war drew attention to the Brothers as an underground force posing a

threat to the Egyptian government. As a result, briefly after the war, the government of Prime Minister Mahmoud al-Nuqrāshī ordered it to be dissolved, imprisoned many of its members, and confiscated its properties. In response, a member of the Muslim Brothers assassinated the prime minister on December 28, 1948. Soon afterward, al-Bannā himself was assassinated, on February 12, 1949, by unknown assailants. Hasan al-Hudaybī succeeded al-Bannā as the Muslim Brothers' Supreme Guide, and it continued to operate in secret until it was legalized as a civilian association in April 1951.

The military officers' coup of July 23, 1952, which toppled the monarchy, brought the Muslim Brothers to the forefront of Egypt's political life, for many officers were either members of or sympathizers with the organization. However, it faced an obstacle, to the demand of its Supreme Guide that he become the revolution's moral voice and have veto power over its decisions, in the objections of Jamāl Abd al-Nāsir. Moreover, the Brothers' subsequent opposition to the Anglo-Egyptian treaty, signed on October 19, 1954, precipitated their propaganda attack charging that the revolutionary command was insufficiently Islamic and unwilling to fight the British. Eventually, a failed assassination attempt on October 26, 1954, on Abd al-Nāsir's life by one of its members, led to the arrest and execution of many of its leaders, including its Supreme Guide, al-Hudaybī, whose death sentence was commuted to life in prison.

In 1965, in response to the discovery of a plot to overthrow Abd al-Nāsir's regime, another wave of arrests and executions of Muslim Brothers leaders followed, including the execution of its most prominent ideologue, Sayyid Qutb (1906–66). Qutb, who was also a teacher in the public school system, was sent in 1948 on an educational mission to the United States, where he spent two years. Upon his return, he expressed in his writing a profound dislike of the Western lifestyle and became an active member of the Muslim Brothers.[72] He attributed infidelity (*takfīr*) to the Muslim societies of his time[73] and advocated assassinations as legitimate means to ascend to power.[74] He was imprisoned and released twice before his third arrest, trial, and execution.

The doctrine of the Muslim Brothers as developed by al-Bannā, Qutb, and al-Sibāī does not differ in substance from that of the Wahhābī Salafiyya practiced in Saudi Arabia. Both consider Islam to be a divinely revealed order that organizes all aspects of human life. They hold that it is a system of belief, value, and law; a rite for worship; an identity; and an enforcement mechanism for all these. They believe it is an order applicable to all humans at all times. Both groups oppose attempts to reconcile religion with philosophical reasoning

because they believe past attempts at such reconciliation led to sectarian divisions that weakened Muslims in facing the Western physical, cultural, and ideological invasion.

However, the Muslim Brothers are different in form from the Wahhābī Salafiyya. In their appearance, they abandoned their robes for Western suits, replaced their long beards with nominal ones. In their politics, they accepted the modern state instead of the caliphate and accepted elections as the means to gain power. They presented themselves as a democratic alternative to the ruling royal families. Moreover, faced with competing socialist ideas in the 1940s, Qutb and al-Sibāī formulated the notion of Islamic socialism, where the state guarantees private property but also represents the interests of the community by controlling the use of individual fortunes and deducting from them the poor tax (*zakāt*).[75] Yet, like the Wahhābī Salafiyya, they were willing to enforce Muslim law with the power of a police state and to attribute infidelity, apostasy, or heresy to anyone who challenged their self-declared monopoly on the literal interpretation and enforcement of Muslim law.[76] In both doctrines the state is an instrument to eliminate sin as defined in Muslim scriptures rather than to maintain peace.

The challenge for the Muslim Brothers was to deploy the power of the state to re-Islamize many aspects of people's lifestyles in Egypt and Syria that had been influenced by modern Western culture. In addition to the legal, educational, tax, and banking systems, Western influences also included women's clothing; forms of greeting; the use of foreign words in speech, music, art, and ideas; and the use of the Christian calendar. The Brothers were to create an authentically Muslim state with an elected leader that would eventually embrace all the Muslim peoples. The aim of this Islamic State would be to enforce Muslim law within its borders and to send out missionaries to evangelize Islam throughout the world.

While the Wahhābī Salafiyya flourished in Saudi Arabia, the Muslim Brothers faced leftist-nationalist military regimes in Egypt and Syria who fought them by every means. Having been banned in those nations, the group saw many of its members go into exile in Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar. But even in those countries, they posed a threat to the royal families of the Arab kingdoms and emirates that hosted them. Accordingly, their influence was confined to the intellectual realm, while their missionary networks operated underground to spread their doctrine.

The violent activities of the Muslim Brothers seeking to gain power first surfaced in Syria between 1978 and 1982, when they carried out

a series of assassinations of Baathist and Alawī figures and bombings of state-owned enterprises, then followed up with an armed rebellion in 1982 in the Syrian city of Hama, which was quelled with brutal force. The Muslim Brothers of Syria and Egypt came back later to the political scene after the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, supported by two sources. One was the prince of Qatar, Hamad al-Thāni, who used them to transform his emirate into a regional power. The other was the neo-Ottoman government of Turkey, who aspired to restore the Ottoman Empire. The latter, by and large, adopted the ideology of the Muslim Brothers, but under the appellation of the Justice and Development Party.

# 6

# The Islamization of the Fertile Crescent

Early Arab rulers of the newly conquered territories had to depend on the skills of their non-Muslim inhabitants to run the affairs of the state. The Melkites, who had held the administrative and civil servant posts in the major cities in Syria during the time of Byzantine rule, remained in their positions. Few Jacobites also served at the caliph's court, such as the court poet al-Akhtal, who served Caliph Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān. Another Jacobite employed by the caliph was the Edessan nobleman and merchant Athanasius Bar Gumāyē, whom Abd al-Malik appointed as secretary to his brother and governor of Egypt Abd al-Azīz.[1]

However, Arab-Muslim tolerance of the non-Muslim population began to wane. The first signs of change started with the Caliphate of al-Walīd ibn Abd al-Malik (705–715), who made Arabicization and Islamization his primary objectives. With Arabicization, the Melkites' positions were threatened when al-Walīd commanded that "the Christian lawyers" should no longer use the Greek language to document the public accounts but rather should write exclusively in Arabic.[2] The Arabicization of those government records was part of a project to unify the diverse tax systems in the various provinces under Arab rule while also moving towards an Arab-Muslim administration. In response, the Melkites acquiesced to Arabicization at the end of the seventh century and eventually adopted an Arab self-identity for themselves.

Still, the Melkite embrace of Arabicization was not solely to protect their role as administrators, which inevitably declined despite their willingness to adopt the Arab identity. Like the Nestorians, their greatest incentive was physical security. Tyrants among the Arab governors and statesmen defamed the Melkite patriarchs and considered them eyes and spies for Constantinople and enemies of the state.[3] Furthermore,

Melkites point to a history of persecution, especially in Palestine during the Abbāsid and Fātimid rule, because of their affiliation with the Byzantine (East Roman) kings.[4] When the Byzantines won a battle, the Melkites were generally among the first of the Christian sects to suffer retaliation.[5]

Paradoxically, this history of Arab persecution of the Melkites pushed them toward identification with the Arabs and made them more willing to participate in the Arabicization process. Consequently, unlike the Jacobites, Nestorians, and Maronites, who stuck to their Syriac language for a longer time, the Melkites created the Christian Arabic language, through their ecclesiastical literature and liturgy. Yet they maintained their name as *Rūm* (Arabic for Romans). By the tenth century, their vernacular generally had switched from Aramaic or Greek to Arabic, but in a few isolated towns they maintained their Aramaic language and liturgy for much longer.[6] For an example of this, one only has to think of modern-day Maloula (from Aramaic *maʿlā*, "high place") in the northeast of Damascus and in few adjacent villages, where the Melkites' vernacular is still Aramaic.[7]

Arabicization and Islamization generally went hand in hand, as Islam was offered to the conquered peoples for acceptance and internalization as their own religion. Arab Christians of the Persian Gulf and southern Mesopotamia who belonged to the Nestorian Church, such as the Lakhmids with their great metropolis of al-Hira, were the first to convert to Islam a few decades after the conquest.[8] The tribe Taghlib of southern Mesopotamia was also placed under special pressure to convert. When they refused to pay the poll tax imposed on non-Muslims (*al-jizya*), the second caliph, Umar ibn al-Khattāb, agreed to have them pay instead twice the charity tax imposed on Muslims (*al-zakāt*), on the condition that they not christen their children. But, al-Baladhuri states: "[Umar], peace be upon him, used to say: If I had time for Bani Taghlib . . . I [would] fight their warriors and capture their children. By christening their children, they betrayed the oath and are no longer in our protection."[9] When they continued to christen their children, the third caliph, Uthman, reimposed on them the infidel poll tax, which they had to pay in gold and silver, until they were again pressured to convert during the reign of the Umayyad caliph, al-Walīd ibn Abd al-Malik (705–715). According to Bar Hebraeus:

> Walīd was a hater of Christians . . . Walīd said to Shamʿālā, the chief of the Christian Arabs of Taghlib, "Inasmuch as thou art chief of the Arabs, thou disgracest all of them when thou dost worship the cross. Therefore do what I wish and become a Muslim." And he replied,

> "Because I am chief of all the Arabs of Taghlib, I am afraid lest I may become the cause of the destruction of all of them; [for if] I deny Christ they will deny [Him also]." When Walīd heard these words he commanded [his slaves], and they dragged him along face downwards and cast him out. And Walīd sent him a message in which he swore saying, "If he really will not agree [to do what I say], I will make him eat his own flesh." And when Shamʿālā did not give way, even under this threat, Walīd commanded and one cut off a slice from Shamʿālā's thigh and roasted it in the fire, and they thrust it into his mouth. And when Shamʿālā persisted in his refusal even after this, Walīd dismissed him, and he continued to live, the wound being visible in his flesh.[10]

An alternative account of this incident claims that al-Walīd eventually put Shamʿālā to death for his refusal to convert to Islam.[11] Al-Walīd was embarrassed that his fellow Arabs would not identify with Islam, and therefore sought to convert them. The Taghlib tribe gradually converted to Islam. Their descendants are said to have been the Shīa Hamadānids who ruled Mosul and Aleppo in the tenth century.[12]

Bar Hebraeus also mentions a rare incidence of forceful conversion of Christian Arabs in his description of Caliph al-Mahdī's (775–785) passage through Aleppo on his way to conquer Asia Minor. According to Bar Hebraeus, "the Tanūkāyē who lived in tents round about Aleppo went forth to meet him; and they were riding [5,000] Arab horses, and were decked out with ornaments. Then it was said to him [the caliph], 'All these are Christians.' And he boiled with anger and compelled them to become Muslims."[13] After they initially refused to convert, al-Mahdī had their chief, Layth ibn Mahatta, beheaded and their churches destroyed.[14]

This incident is of particular significance because al-Mahdī pioneered a movement to proselytize Islam through dialogue. Nonetheless, the thought of a Christian Arab was repulsive enough to demand the immediate and hostile conversion of his hosts. In the case of non-Arabic-speaking people, however, the Muslim Arabs were more able to tolerate divergent religious beliefs. Yet, this tolerance was conditional upon the Christians' and Jews' willingness to accept an inferior social status in the class-based system of the new Muslim order.

Altogether, the Arab conquest established a social order with four classes. The first class was the Muslim Arab aristocracy, which received salaries from the individual poll tax (*al-jizya*) and the collective land tax (*al-kharāj*) from Christians, Jews, and new converts to Islam. The second class was composed of the new Muslims (*al-Mawāli*), or those who had converted by will or by force and were still obligated to pay the land tax. The third class was the *Ahl al-Dhimmah*, which was made

up of Christians, Jews, and Sabians[15] who paid the poll tax in addition to the land tax. Groups comprising Christian and Jews were allowed to self-govern, except when a Muslim came into conflict with them. The fourth group was composed of those who were enslaved prisoners of war, had been captured in raids, or were bought. While Islamic law forbade Muslims from enslaving fellow Muslims, enslaved non-Arabs and their offspring were to remain slaves even after converting to Islam. The offspring of a free man with a woman slave could be freed if the father acknowledged them, though, and the offspring of a free woman with a male slave were considered to be free as well.[16]

In time, the *Mawāli*, or new Muslims, assimilated into the Muslim aristocracy through intermarriage, and the third class converted and became the *Mawāli* to take advantage of the tax incentive offered to that group. Just decades after the conquest, the Arab tribes of the Persian Gulf, who had belonged to the Nestorian Church, became the first to convert to Islam. Thereafter, conversion to Islam progressed slowly and with significant resistance. With their social infrastructure functioning as resource-sharing groups, Christians and Jews were self-contained and able to resist outside pressures for long periods. Successive Muslim states continued to recognize and deal with Christian sects and Jews as separate communities, allowing them to govern themselves through their own laws as well as assemblies and courts presided over by their own clergy.

While the option to convert to Islam and become exempt from the poll tax should have been available from the initial phase of the conquest, the first caliph to enforce it in practice was the eighth Umayyad caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Azīz, or Umar II (717–720), great grandson of Umar ibn al-Khattāb. Umar II was educated in Medina with the pious jurists *al-muhaddithūn* and became its governor before assuming the caliphate in Damascus. His enforcement of a tax incentive to convert Christians and Jews to Islam was accompanied by policies designed to humiliate those groups. Emboldened by the Quranic verse that he should "fight those who do not believe in God nor the Last Day," and make them "pay the poll tax offered on the back of their hands, in a state of humiliation [Arabic: *Sāghirūn*]," Umar II discriminated against and bullied Christians and Jews with impunity.[17] Since *Sāghirūn*, plural of *Sāghir*, could mean lowly, despised, contemptible, humiliated, meek, submissive, or servile, one could therefore also translate it to mean "in a state of submission." However, in a section entitled "Is the poll tax [*al-jizya*] intended to spare blood or to humiliate and punish," the prominent jurist al-Jawzīyah argues that it is intended to humiliate and punish non-Muslims for being so.[18]

The most striking of Umar ibn Abd al-Azīz's regulations spoke of "excluding Christians from public offices, prohibiting their wearing of turbans, requiring them to cut their forelocks, to don distinctive clothes with griddles of leather, to ride without saddles or only on pack saddles, to erect no places of worship and not to lift their voices in times of prayer."[19] Further, a Christian could not testify against a Muslim in a court of law, and a Muslim who killed a Christian would only be fined for his crime. He extended some of these restrictions to Jews as well.[20] The policy seemed to have had some effect. In response to a warning from his tax officer that the coffers were shrinking, Umar II is said to have responded that the Prophet would have wanted him to spread Islam rather than be a tax collector and that if necessary he would resort to manual labor to make a living.[21] The Abbāsids, in turn, credited Umar II for being the only pious caliph among the Umayyad caliphs, and spared his grave from desecration.

Similar humiliating policies were reinstated several times in Muslim history, suggesting that they were, in practice, difficult to enforce for prolonged periods. They were introduced again during the reigns of the Abbāsid caliphs Hārūn al-Rashīd (786–809)[22] and al-Mutawakkil (847–861)[23] and the Fātimid caliph al-Hākim bi-Amr Allāh (996–1021), and they were also enacted under local governors, such as Muhammad Nur al-Din, ruler of Diyār Bakr (1167–85).[24]

A contemporary of the first two Abbāsid caliphs, Abū al-Abbās al-Saffāh (750–754) and his brother Abū Jafar al-Mansūr (754–775), documents a change in the method of collecting tribute. The previously agreed upon lump-sum payments that had been levied upon a leader of a religious community residing in urban dwellings and on land in the countryside was replaced by an individual poll tax. Concerning this, the author of the Chronicle of the Monastery of Zuqnīn in North Mesopotamia writes:

> AG 1003 [AD 691]: ʿAbd al-Malik made a census {Arabic: *taʿdīl*} among the Syrians, issuing strict orders that everyone should go to his own country and village and to his father's house, and that everyone should be registered by his own name and that of his father, together with his vineyard, olives, cattle, sons and everything that belonged to him. From this time the poll-tax began to be levied on the skulls of adult males. From this all (sorts of) evils began to well up against the Christian nation. Previously rulers had levied the tax on land and not from adult males. From this point onwards the Sons of Hagar began to subject the Sons of Aram to Egyptian slavery. But it is our own fault: because we sinned, slaves have become our masters. This was the first assessment that the Arabs made.[25]

Moreover, during the year 766–767 of the reign of al-Mansur, the caliph ordered the branding of peasants and urban dwellers alike "on the neck, like slaves" and "on the forehead…on both hands, on the chest, and even on the back."[26] Similar branding of Christians and Jews seems to have taken place elsewhere. For example, Theophanes' *Chronographia* reports that when al-Mansūr visited Jerusalem, he ordered the Christians and Jews to tattoo their names on their hands so that they could not escape the poll tax. As a result, many Christians fled to Byzantine territories and their dwellings were taken by Arabs.[27]

Al-Mansūr appointed a Persian officer in the region of North Mesopotamia to bring back fugitives and resettle them in dwellings inhabited by Arabs. He also tormented the Arabs, "confiscated all that they possessed, filled their fields and houses with Syrians [Syriac-speaking Christians], and made them sow their wheat."[28] The Syrians "worked for them [the Arabs] like slaves until they virtually owned them and their children as slaves, in addition to whatever they possessed…Sometimes the Arabs tormented the villagers who resided in their farms, in that they divided (the tax) so that they had to pay it with them, until they destroyed them and took away whatever they possessed; they finally ran away from their own dwellings."[29]

Perhaps the eccentric Fatimid caliph al-Hākim bi-Amr Allāh (996–1021) surpassed the most creative of his predecessors in specifying the way in which his Christian and Jewish subjects ought to be humiliated. During his reign and according to Bar Hebraeus' chronicle:

> The Temple of Resurrection [Sepulchre] which is in Jerusalem was dug up from its roots and all its furniture was looted. And he laid waste also thousands of churches which were in his dominions. And he commanded the heralds to proclaim, "Every Christian who entereth the Faith of the Arabs shall be honoured, and he who entereth not shall be disgraced, and he shall hang on his neck a cross from above [upside down]. And the Jews shall place on their necks the figure of a calf's head, since they made "a calf" in the wilderness and worshipped it. And they shall not wear rings of the fingers of the right hand, neither shall they ride on horses, but on mules and asses, with common saddles and stirrups of wood. And the man who will not accept this humiliation, let him take everything that he hath and go the country of the Rhōmāyē [Syriac for Romans]." […] [al-Hakim also commanded that] "Every Christian who does not hang on his neck a cross of wood weighing four litres, according to the measure of Baghdad, shall be killed. And also the Jew who does not hand on his neck a plaque with the figure of the claw of chicken, which weighs six pounds, shall be killed. And when they go into the baths they shall tie little bells on their necks, so that they may be distinguished from the Arabs.[30]

However, not all caliphs used humiliation to induce the conversion of non-Muslims. While Muslim clerics could find support for extreme measures within Muslim scriptures, other Quranic verses were found to favor amicable means of conversion. "Invite to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching," says one verse, "and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious, for your Lord knows best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance."[31] Another verse also states, "There shall be no compulsion in religion: the right way is now distinct from the wrong way. Anyone who denounces the devil and believes in God has grasped the strongest bond; one that never breaks. God is Hearer, Omniscient."[32] Ultimately, scriptural support could be found for both oppressive and agreeable paths to conversion, and so it was up to the supreme ruler to decide how Christians and Jews were to be guided toward Islam.

At times Christians reminded their Muslim rulers that the scriptures granted them the freedom to practice their own faith. One instance is found in the Chronicle of Michael the Syrian, which includes an exchange between Michael and the commander serving the prince of Mosul Sayf al-Din al-Ghāzī (1170–80) at Nisibin in 1175:

> There are three books which contain precepts: the Law for the Hebrews, the Gospel for the Christians, and the Qur'an for the Muslims. Examine all three, especially yours, and you will see that God does not command kings to direct the affairs of the faith by the sword, since the faith is acquired freely and not by constraint. Likewise since God gave the empire to the Muslims, from Muhammad until today, none of the just kings who have reigned have trampled the law of God, but they have observed it. According to God's permission, they have imposed all sorts of tribute and every kind of corporal servitude on Christians, but they did not claim authority in matters of faith.[33]

It has been argued that, when Muslims still were a minority in Syria and Mesopotamia, rulers avoided forced conversions due to a fear that nonconformists would band together and revolt.[34] Conversion through a combination of tax incentives and humiliation also proved to be slow, as those methods also induced nonconformists to cluster around the networks of their resource-sharing groups. As a result, those who favored the more amicable methods gained influence and began to encourage forums for debate with Christian clerics and various Manichean sects of South Mesopotamia in lieu of discriminatory treatment and incentives.

By the time of the reign of al-Mahdī (775–785), the notion that Islam should be spread through persuasion became a policy of the

Abbāsid state. That policy followed from the imperial ideology fashioned by the second Abbāsid caliph al-Manūsr (754–775) that claimed the Abbāsid state was preordained by the stars and by God to be a new empire that would afford equal rights to its Muslim citizens.[35] Under Umayyad rule, rights and privileges were allocated according to ethnicity and religion, and so proselytizing was not seen as necessary. However, the new Abbāsid ideology made Islam a proselytizing religion that would bring about equality between all citizens by converting the whole of them to its Islamic belief system. The Muslim minority was therefore faced with the task of not only converting non-Muslims, but also with having all previous converts conform to a Muslim orthodoxy as defined by the religious authorities at the Abbāsid court.

However, proselytizing through dialogue required the mutual acceptance of rules of logic that were still alien to Muslim clerics. The Christian clerics only welcomed dialogue when they could counter Muslim proselytizing with their more developed theologies and Greek philosophy, creating a need to translate Greek works on the art of dialogue into Arabic. Aristotle's *Topics* was then presented to al-Mahdī as a model for methods of argumentation and debate, and so al-Mahdī commissioned the Nestorian Patriarch Timotheus I (780–823) to translate *Topics* from Syriac into Arabic.[36]

The same al-Mahdī, who beheaded the chief of the tribal confederacy of Tanoukh, Layth ibn Mahatta for refusing to convert to Islam, read the translation of Aristotle's *Topics* and debated against Timotheus' Christian beliefs, which included notions related to Christology, the Trinity, and the veneration of the cross that were considered blasphemous to Muslims. He also debated with Timotheus over the prophecy of Muhammad as well as moral and ritual differences between Christians, Muslims, and Jews.[37] Those debates had two unintended consequences for Islam and Arab-Islamic civilization: one was the emergence of religious heterodoxy; the other was the emergence of scientific thought and technological development.

Al-Mahdī's use of debate to address religious discord established a paradigm for resolving legal disputes as well: statements were presented or defended by the opponents. In this manner, early Islamic theology encountered non-Muslim literature, such as Hellenistic, Iranian, and Indian religious thought, and Muslim jurists soon joined theologians in disputation. As a result, more translations of works on logic were demanded. Nestorian and Jacobite scholars, who had been translating Greek texts into Syriac and vice versa for centuries, were called on to translate Greek works in logic into Arabic and provide

commentary on them. A second phase of translations and commentaries was produced by the school of Hunayn ibn Ishāq (808–873), a Nestorian scholar and leader of the academy of the House of Wisdom (*Bayt al-Hikma*) in Baghdād.[38]

The subsequent translation movement, which included Arab and non-Arab scholars, resulted in a rational, intellectual environment that was conducive to the study of philosophy and science. Paradoxically, the science of logical methods (*ʿIlm al-kalām*) that Muslim clerics had employed to counter Christian theology also gave rise to religious heterodoxy. The resulting atmosphere of relative tolerance paralleled the European Enlightenment, which facilitated scientific and technological progress.[39] Hundreds of Mesopotamian monasteries, and especially those in Dayr Qunnā, Edessa, Nisibin, Tur Abdin, Qēnneshrīn, and Seleucia-Ctesiphon, became sources of officials, logicians, translators, scientists, and physicians for the Abbāsid court.[40] Some men hailing from monasteries were allowed to hold high positions, such as that of vizier, though appointments were still conditional upon conversion to Islam.[41]

Yet if religious competition between the Muslim minority and the Christian majority created an environment of tolerance and rationality, then the end of the competition would disrupt that intellectual environment and restore intolerance.[42] Until the first Crusades at the close of the eleventh century, the majority of the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent were still Christian; by the end of the Crusades and in the final years of the thirteenth century, Muslims had become the majority. According to the previous hypothesis, a decline in scientific activity should have taken place once Muslims gained superior numbers and were no longer cowed by the threat of revolt. Indeed, a recent empirical test produced by an economic historian suggests that the rise of an intolerant religious orthodoxy is accompanied by stagnation in free thinking and a decline in scientific activity. This study claims that the numerous and relatively well-educated non-Muslim inhabitants of Syria and Mesopotamia prevented the repression of the rational sciences. However, as the non-Muslim population decreased, the Muslim religious elites were less constrained in their intolerance of free thinking.[43] When unconstrained, religious authorities were disinclined to tolerate free thinking because they believed rational thought weakened religious faith. The weakening of religious faith, in turn, would weaken their authority and reduce their well-being in the prevailing social order.

In the Fertile Crescent, Muslims became the majority between the eleventh and twelfth centuries.[44] From that point forward, religious

authorities discouraged the questioning of religious dogmas and reasoning. The prominent Sunni jurist Abū Hāmid al-Ghazāli (1058–1111), for instance, produced relentless attacks on philosophy and the rational sciences. In his three books, entitled *The Incoherence of Philosophers*, *The Savior from Delusion*,[45] and *Restraining the Populace from the Science of Dialogue*, al-Ghazāli pioneered an intellectual effort to contain the proliferation of philosophical reasoning.[46] In those three books, al-Ghazāli attacked philosophers, discouraged the exercise of independent judgment in determining moral actions within a religious belief system, and encouraged the reliance on clerics for religious interpretation and the determination of correct conduct. Subsequently, religious authorities thus established new religious schools that excluded the study of the logically intensive branch of Muslim theology (*ʿIlm al-Kalām*) and rational sciences.[47]

In due course, a religious orthodoxy emerged victorious[48] and produced the next generation of clerics, such as the prominent jurist Ibn Taymiyya (1263–1328)[49] and his protégé Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah (1292–1350).[50] Both issued religious judgments (*fatwas*) against heterodox Muslims, Christians, and Jews, which had profound social implications that persist to modern times. The view that once heresy and apostasy had been removed, there would be no need to study logic was also expressed by the father of modern sociology Ibn Khaldūn (1332–1406).[51] The study of rational sciences indeed declined, which in turn, led to a decline in the mathematical and technical skills necessary for measurement and innovation and a subsequent decline in technological progress.[52] That triumph of religion over philosophy and the rational sciences proved to be enduring, from the centuries following the Crusades until modern times.

# 7

# Social and Psychological Origins of Religious Conflict

The Fertile Crescent's cultural model of prioritizing religious identity over other social identities generated religious cleavages that caused conflict between the sectarian groups in the distant past. Some have persisted, in various forms, to the present time. While the religious conflicts have faded among the Christian sects, they persist between the Muslim sects and between Muslims, Christians, and Jews. Larger groups demanded the conformity of smaller ones to symbolic representations of their identities and associated beliefs and value systems. Those demands were reinforced by prejudicial attitudes and transmitted through intra- and intergroup interaction. Viewing nonconformists as heretics, apostates, or infidels inhibited assimilation, providing fertile ground for conflicts of a secular nature to be seen along sectarian fault lines and thus mutate into recurrent violent sectarian conflict.

## Why Did Intra-Christian Conflicts Fade?

Table 7.1 summarizes the four Christological doctrines discussed in chapter 4 that were for centuries an object of conflict between the Byzantine Church and its Oriental provinces. Contemporary readers may wonder why apparent variations in these descriptions were unsettling to the extent that adherents of one doctrine would declare a rival doctrine heretical. For instance, the Chalcedonian position that the human and divine natures of Christ are "united" does not seem to be substantively different from the Dyophysite position that the two natures are in "perfect and inseparable conjunction." Moreover, the Chalcedonian position that the two natures "remain distinct after the union" also seems to be identical to the Dyophysite one that the "the divinity remains preserved in what belongs to it, and humanity in what belongs to it." It is also not self-evident that the Monophysite position that "Christ is not one person *in* two natures, but is one person

**Table 7.1** Fifth- to seventh-century Christology

| Doctrine | How the Human and Divine Natures of Christ Are Related |
|---|---|
| **Chalcedonian** | |
| Byzantine, Roman, and Melkite: 451–629 and 681–Present<br>Maronite: 1596–Present | The human and divine natures of Christ are *united* in one person, yet remained *distinct* after the union. "He was true God and God's son. His nature was one with the Father, while he showed himself in appearance as a man like us. In two natures did he appear, as God and as man, yet in no way separated. He remains one Christ, no alteration or adulteration touches him, no cleavage or division."[a] |
| **Monophysite** | |
| Jacobite, Copt, Armenian, and Ethiopian: 451–Present | Christ is not one person *in* two natures, but is one person *out of* two natures.[b] |
| **Dyophysite** | |
| Nestorian: 486–Present | "While the divinity remains preserved in what belongs to it, and humanity in what belongs to it, it is to a single Lordship and to a single (object of) worship that we gather together the exemplars of these two natures, because of the perfect and inseparable conjunction that has occurred for the divinity with respect to the humanity."[c] |
| **Monothelite** | |
| Byzantine and Melkite: 629–681<br>Maronite: 629–1596 | The divine and human natures in Christ, while quite *distinct* in his *one* person, had but *one will* and *one operation*.[d] |

[a] Sophronius, "Christmas Sermon," December 634. Quoted in Robert G. Hoyland (1997) *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press), p. 71.

[b] W. Stewart McCullough (1982) *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press), pp. 49–51.

[c] Sebastian Brock (1992) *Studies in Syriac Christianity* (London: Variorum), pp. 133–34.

[d] Cyril Hovorun (2008) *Will, Action and Freedom: Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 93–102.

*out* of two natures" is incompatible with either the Chalcedonian or the Dyophysite position. Why then did the clergy involved in the Christological debates declare each other heretics?

One explanation attributes the fifth-century Christological discord to the "authoritarianism natural to a patriarchal society, which could find justification in the need to defend Christianity against its enemies."[1]

Since belief in Christ was the only common element tying together the ethnically diverse population living under Byzantine rule, criteria were needed to specify the correct set of beliefs that entitled one to identify as Christian. Such criteria were arbitrary because "neither the object of that belief, God, nor the mind of the believer was susceptible of analysis in concrete terms."[2] Therefore, because rival Christological doctrines are not descriptions of observable phenomena, they cannot be subjected to a process of refutation. As such, rival doctrines could not be resolved through dialogue. One is then left with the clergy's motives for differentiating their Christological position.

Clergy may differentiate their Christological doctrines to whatever extent necessary to establish and maintain a separate and distinct group identity associated with their doctrine. They can deem such differentiations as important as they need to be in order to further their own separatist aims. Thus, the Byzantine emperor could have endorsed a doctrine substantially agreeing with Monophysite doctrine and suggested it to his Monophysite subjects, and they would have found fault with it still, so long as they had motive for not conforming.

While the Christians living in the Persian-controlled region of Mesopotamia had a clear motive for adopting the alleged Nestorian heresy, namely to distance themselves from their Persian masters' Byzantine enemy and live in peace, the Monophysites were faced with a different challenge. The Persian state religion was Zoroastrianism and therefore had no religious authority over the Christian clergy's order or their church affairs. The Christians of Byzantine-controlled Syria and North Mesopotamia, on the other hand, were faced with masters of the same religion. Therefore, they were inclined to adopt another alleged heresy in order to reject Byzantine authority over their churches.

The Monophysite clergy's motive was to continue to preside over their local communities, free from external control. Christology, being the major debate of the time, provided them with the opportunity to acquire a distinct group identity, enabling them to demarcate themselves from other groups, especially from the religious hierarchy of the Byzantine Empire. In just such a manner, the rival Christological doctrines served as façades for conflicts between clergy over group control. The Monophysite clergy spared no opportunity to express their rejection of the Byzantine Chalcedonian doctrine, as demonstrated dramatically in the bishop of Edessa's refusal to administer the sacrament of communion to Emperor Heraclius unless the latter first renounced the Council of Chalcedon. From the Byzantine emperor's perspective, acceptance of the empire's religious orthodoxy implied the subordination of the local clergy of the Syrian and North Mesopotamian provinces to the

Byzantine religious hierarchy, and therefore a heresy implied insubordination and an expression of defiance of Byzantine rule.

However, in sharp contrast with the fifth-century Christian clergy, modern-day counterparts no longer consider varying Christology as a matter of discord. During the author's thirty years of informal conversations with Syrian and Mesopotamian Christians, the subject of their competing views on the union (or disunion) of the human and divine natures of Christ has never arisen spontaneously. Most modern-day Christians, clergy and laity alike, are unaware of the specific theological differences between the various religious sects to which they belong. Laity did not seem to care about their churches' particular Christology, even when reminded of the differences alleged by early Christian clergy to have been the cause of their churches' splits. When the modern clergy were pressed for their assessments of the supposed Christological differences, some had difficulty articulating them; all believed they were of no substantive significance whatsoever, neither in the past nor in contemporary time.

In a spirit of reconciliation, Pope John Paul II and the patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East (Nestorian) Mar Dankha IV signed on January 11, 1994, a Common Christological Declaration that dismissed their churches' Christological differences as a "misunderstanding" and unworthy of the "anathemas" from which many had suffered in the past.[3] Moreover, the Syrian Orthodox (Monophysite Jacobite) Metropolitan of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim, who for decades had been involved in interfaith dialogue among the Eastern churches, dismissed the Christological differences as linguistic, rather than substantive, in nature. To him, they were mere misinterpretations of the language used to describe the competing Christological doctrines.[4] Like the rest of the Jacobite clergy, the Syrian Orthodox Archbishop of Jerusalem Mar Severius Malki Murad also affirmed that there were no differences between his church and all other Christian churches on matters of Christology. He, as well, attributed past differences to linguistic misunderstandings.[5]

In light of the Monophysites' past insistence upon their differentiated Christology, one may be skeptical of the present claims that the schism was caused by the misuse of language. Leading Syrian and Mesopotamian clergy were well versed in Greek, the language of their Byzantine masters. Many of them were engaged in translations of Greek texts to Syriac and vice versa, including Aristotelian philosophy and other works of logical discourse that were used by the Christian clergy against Muslim proselytizing. Further, Severus, the patriarch of Antioch who articulated the Monophysite Doctrine, was

Greek-speaking. Therefore, one is led to conclude that the reasons for the Christological discord, its persistence for centuries, and its eventual dismissal, involved more than mere miscommunication. The clergy's recent startling discovery of such miscommunication casts even more doubt about it being the genuine reason for the schism. Thus, the question of why Christological discord was considered important in the past but has disappeared in modern times needs further consideration, including of the changing power structures in the region.

After the Muslim-Arab conquest and the consequent Byzantine withdrawal from the Fertile Crescent, the Monophysites were no longer under pressure to accept the Chalcedonian orthodoxy of Constantinople. By that time, proselytizing activities between the three Christian sects had also ended by implicit mutual agreement among the clergy not to encroach into each other's domains. The Christological discord had served its purpose for the clergy, transforming a separatist tendency into concrete, defined groups over which separate religious hierarchies presided. The clergy insured continued group separation by demarcating their boundaries with differentiated rites, rituals, and rules for membership and exclusion. As a result, a different identity emerged for each group as it experienced different events, shared different information and resources, and generated its own historical narrative.[6] As time passed, the sectarian identities were fossilized to the extent that sect members felt as if they were members of different nations, not of different sects built upon minor Christological differentiations between their founding clergy.[7]

When the sectarian boundaries were no longer threatened by rivals, the Christological discord no longer served a useful purpose for the clergy. Yet, those sectarian groups still prevail today in the Fertile Crescent despite the faded Christological conflict. The boundaries between the groups have persevered, and the sects show no inclination toward the reunification of the Christian churches. The clergy substituted the Christological lines of demarcation with new ones. They dug deep into their pre-Christian past and revived their former pagan identities in order to present themselves as competing nations. With few exceptions, the Dyophysite Nestorians claimed the Assyrian identity; the Nestorians who reconciled with Rome earlier in the sixteenth century claimed the Chaldean identity; the Monophysite Jacobites first claimed the Assyrian identity and then shifted to the Aramean identity to demarcate themselves from the Nestorians; the Chalcedonian Melkites claimed the Arab identity; the theologically shifting Maronites claimed a combination of the identities of the Sea People, the Phoenicians, the Maradites, and the Arameans. A few Melkites, along with a few secular Muslims, freeing

themselves from organized religion, merged all pre-Abrahamic identities, such as the Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, Phoenician, Assyrian, Babylonian, Aramean, and Canaanite identities into a Greater Syrian identity. All of these groups intended to assert their right to exist as indigenous peoples who inhabited the Fertile Crescent prior to subsequent foreign conquests by Greeks, Romans, Arabs, and Turks.[8]

The Christological discord also had to be put to rest in official terms because it separated the Christians of the Fertile Crescent from their coreligionists of the Church of Rome and other East European churches. Some of these Fertile Crescent clergy were under the illusion that realignment with the European churches would provide Western physical protection for their communities in the Fertile Crescent and thereby prolong and make more secure their presence in their ancestral land. Their loss of majority status at the end of the thirteenth century and their continued relative decline since then changed their clergy's perspective on what they perceived as threatening their control over their groups. The occasional massacres of Christians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and the subsequent waves of their mass exodus from the Fertile Crescent toward Europe and the Americas, or displacements within it, reinforced their sense of physical insecurity. Faced with serious challenges for their survival, no Christian clergy could make a persuasive argument for demarcating their communities along ambiguous Christological lines.

Today's Christians continue to face pressure to conform, not from rival Christian sects, but primarily from Salafi Jihadi Muslims and their various subsectarian group affiliations. This has been violently demonstrated in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt after the Arab Spring uprisings. Yet conformity pressure has not been exclusive to interreligious groups. The post Arab Spring intra-Muslim sectarian violence in Syria and Iraq has proved to be more severe. While Christians were allowed to flee without any of their possessions, robbed, kidnapped, or killed, heterodox Muslims, especially after the Arab Spring uprisings, face greater violence and are often killed immediately upon identification. While Christians are given the option to convert to Islam, pay the infidel tax (*al-jizya*), or be killed, in most instances heterodox Muslims are not given the first two options; they face capital punishment for the charge of apostasy (*irtidād*).[9]

## The Current Intra-Muslim Conflicts

What is the nature of the intra-Muslim conflicts and under what circumstances would they fade away? Table 7.2 summarizes four

**Table 7.2** Muslim sects

| | Position on | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Abū Bakr<br>Umar<br>Uthmān<br>Abū Sufyān<br>Muāwiyah<br>Aisha | Alī and descendants through Fātima | Interpretation of scriptures | Reincarnation |
| **Sunna** | Positive | These figures do not possess privileged knowledge of the Quran or the right to lead. | This is the privilege of non-hierarchical religious authorities and need not be approved by a widely recognized religious body. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. |
| **Sunna-Sūfiyya** | Positive | These figures do not possess privileged knowledge of the Quran or the right to lead. | This is the privilege of non-hierarchical religious authorities and need not be approved by a widely recognized religious body. Inner Knowledge is open to anyone who practices Sufi rituals. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. Salvation occurs through special knowledge of spiritual truth. |
| **Sunna-Wahhābīyya** | Positive | These figures do not possess privileged knowledge of the Quran or the right to lead. | This is the privilege of non-hierarchical religious authorities and need not be approved by a widely recognized religious body, but must be literal, non-innovative, and applied at all times. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. |

continued

**Table 7.2** Continued

| | Position on | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Abū Bakr<br>Umar<br>Uthmān<br>Abū Sufyān<br>Muāwiyah<br>Aisha | Alī and descendants through Fātima | Interpretation of scriptures | Reincarnation |
| **Sunna-Muslim Brothers** | Positive | These figures do not possess privileged knowledge of the Quran or the right to lead. | This is the privilege of non-hierarchical religious authorities and need not be approved by a widely recognized religious body, but must be literal and non-innovative. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. |
| **Shīa-Twelvers** | Negative | These figures possess privileged knowledge of the Quran and must lead the Muslim world. | The Imam reveals the inner meaning of religion. In his absence, interpretation is the privilege of *mujtahids* (authorities), who must be recognized by established institutions. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Shīa-Ismāīlīyya** | Negative | These figures possess privileged knowledge of the Quran and must lead the Muslim world. | In the absence of the seventh imam, Muhammad ibn Ismāīl, interpretation is the privilege of *hujjas* (authorities) and the serving imām. | Each body is associated with a singular soul that will be judged on the Last Day. |
| **Shīa-Alawīyya** | Negative | Ali and the eleventh imam possess the spirit of God. | This is privileged to a small number of scholars. Scriptures are not to be interpreted literally, because they are signs of inner knowledge and therefore Muslim Law drawn from them is not abiding. | Souls are reincarnated in newborn bodies, but those who recognize God's manifestation on earth are transformed into a star and return to God. |
| **Shīa-Durūz** | Negative | These figures possess privileged knowledge of the Quran and must lead the Muslim world. The last of whom is al-Hakim, the divine imam. The Durūz will rule the world upon al-Hakim's return. | Access to scriptures and interpretation is privileged to a small number of scholars. | Souls are reincarnated in newborn bodies, but if they are initiated and reach perfection, then they are emancipated to return to the stars. |

dimensions of the current religious conflict among Muslim sects. The first is an attitude conflict toward the Prophet Muhammad's companions and his youngest wife Aisha. The second is a power conflict over who has the right to rule the Muslim world. The third is an attitude conflict toward interpretation of scriptures and, thereby, a resulting value conflict about the proper application of Muslim Law regarding personal and social aspects of life. The fourth is a conflict over the relationship between God, the soul, the body, and the Last Day.

The origin of the schism between the Shīa and Sunna was initially political. It began with the death of the Prophet Muhammad and the manner in which a group of his companions passed succession to Abū Bakr at a gathering that came to be known, after its location in Medina, as "the Saqifa affair."[10] Members of the two sects held to divergent accounts of Alī's reaction to Abū Bakr's accession to power. The preeminent Abbāsid court historian al-Balādhurī (d. 892), who was among the first to document Muslim oral history, presented the Sunni view of what had taken place. He narrated about 30 versions of the event based on different chains of oral transmission.[11] All of the versions confirm that Alī was absent from the Saqifa meeting because he was washing Muhammad's body in preparation for burial. Most of the accounts acknowledge that, while Alī was unhappy that he was not consulted about the pledge of allegiance to Abū Bakr, he nevertheless consented to it once he was asked to do so. Some claim that he was surprised by the pledge of allegiance to Abū Bakr, but he also nevertheless consented in order to avoid conflict. Alternatively, a version of al-Bukhari's narration of the same events attributed to Aisha claim that Alī pledged allegiance to Abū Bakr only after Fātima's death six months later.[12]

However, the Shīa maintain the view that Alī never pledged allegiance to Abū Bakr. Abd Allāh ibn al-Abbās (d. 687–688), cousin of Muhammad and Alī, claimed that Muhammad died on Alī's chest and that thus Alī and later members of Alī's extended family, the House of Hāshim, should be the rightful successors to Muhammad.[13] Other Shīa sources narrate a slightly different scenario by adding a violent role for Umar in soliciting Alī's consent. They claim that while Alī's supporters gathered at Fātima's house, Abū Bakr and Umar, fully aware of Alī's claims to succeed Muhammad and fearing a serious threat from his supporters, summoned him to the mosque to swear the oath of allegiance to Abū Bakr. When Alī refused, Abū Bakr and Umar, aided by an armed band, surrounded the house and threatened to set it on fire if Alī and his supporters refused to come out and swear allegiance to Abū Bakr.[14] Based on an alternative narration of this incident that appeared centuries later,[15] a controversial Shīa cleric claims that Umar stormed

the house and assaulted Fātima, causing her miscarriage with a third son, Muhsin,[16] a charge that contemporary Sunni clerics deny.[17] Today Shīa worshipers recite the story of the Saqifa affair in places where they perform Shīa rituals known as *Husayniyyat*, marking it as a starting point of the series of tragic events perpetrated upon the family of the Prophet Muhammad for Muslims to commemorate.[18]

Contemporary Shīa scholars add Abū Bakr's refusal to grant Fātima any of her father's inheritance to their list of grievances against him.[19] This transgression, they claim, was followed by Umar's and then Uthmān's accession to power by twice more bypassing Alī's right to rule. Moreover, the three caliphs also stand accused of contributing to the schism between the Shīa and Sunna by appointing Uthmān's second cousin, Muāwiya, the son of the powerful Meccan noble Abū Sufyān, to be a military commander in Syria and later promoting him to be its governor. It was Muāwiya's refusal to acknowledge Alī's right to the caliphate upon Uthmān's death and his claiming it for himself that ignited the first intra-Muslim civil war, which claimed at least 70,000 lives.

Yet, prior to the first battle of that civil war, the Shīa add three prominent figures to the list of transgressors against Alī. One is the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha, the daughter of Abū Bakr, and the others are two of Muhammad's companions: Talha ibn Ubayd Allāh al-Taymī, a kinsman of Abū Bakr, and al-Zubayr ibn al-ʿAwwām, a cousin of Muhammad. The three waged war against Alī four months after his accession to the caliphate in the Battle of the Camel, which resulted in estimated 6,000–30,000 deaths.[20] Both companions had aspirations to succeed Uthmān, but failed to muster support equivalent to that of Alī. Both were killed in battle, and Aisha was sent back to Medina.[21]

Having those events in mind, the Shīa rebuke the Sunna for revering Abū Bakr, Umar, and Uthmān, the first three caliphs, who stand accused of robbing Alī and his descendants, through Muhammad's daughter Fātima, of the right to lead the Islamic community. The Shīa also add Abū Sufyān, his son Muāwiya, and his descendants who established the Umayyad dynasty to the list of undesirables. They believe that Abū Sufyān and his house's conversion to Islam was not genuine. They accuse them of plotting to eliminate Muhammad's descendants by poisoning his grandson Hasan and slaughtering Husayn and many other family members. Moreover, the Shīa see in Muāwiyah's establishment of the tradition of cursing Alī from the pulpit during Friday's prayer a reinforcement of the schism between the Shīa and Sunna at the symbolic level.

The Sunna, in turn, accuse the Shīa of various transgressions ranging from cursing the first two caliphs and Muhammad's wife Aisha to excessively revering Alī. The Sunna's identification with Aisha is essential

to their tradition because they credit her with the transmission of many sayings of the Prophet Muhammad and therefore view insults to her as blasphemous (*kufr*). They view the elevation of Alī to a level close to prophet status by some of the Shīa as an exaggeration (*ghulu*) and the Alawī notion that Alī would be in possession of God's spirit as outright blasphemy. In general, because of their attributing a special status to Alī and his descendants through Fātima, Salafi Sunni adherents of either the Wahhābīyya or Muslim Brothers consider the Shīa to be apostates (*murtadūn*), thus deserving death.[22] Moreover, because the Alawī and Durūz beliefs in the reincarnation of souls seem to deny the notion that each body is singularly associated with a soul that would face the judgment of the Last Day, they also are rendered apostates to the Sunna.

The startling contrast between the Sunni view of the first two caliphs as pious and faithful companions of the prophet versus the Shīa view of them as political opportunists is rooted in the different sources from which they drew information. The positive images of Abū Bakr and Umar, who posed no threat to Abbāsid rule, were portrayed in the Abbāsid period, when the oral Hadith tradition was collected and written. The same nonthreatening view could not be taken of Uthmān, whose cousins were the Umayyads, from whom the Abbāsids captured power, almost annihilating them. Thus, Uthmān is depicted as wealthy and of questionable judgment, in contrast with the images of the pious, modest, and just Abū Bakr and Umar. Alī, on the other hand, was depicted as honest, courageous, and somewhat lacking in political skills, but nevertheless as one who approved of Abū Bakr's and Umar's succession, thus discrediting his descendants who challenged Abbāsid rule by claiming that Alī never gave up the right to succeed Muhammad.

On the right to lead the Muslim world, the Sunna claim that Muhammad did not name a successor, and therefore prophecy and succession should not be joined in the House of Muhammad (*Ahl al-Bayt*). The Shīa, on the other hand, believe that Muhammad had intended for succession to pass to his cousin and son-in-law Alī and that the Abbāsids who presided over the documentation of Muhammad's sayings (*al-hadīth*) more than 200 years after his death had eliminated those that specified Muhammad's desire to pass on succession to Alī, appointing him to be the first imam of the Muslims. That initial appointment, the Shīa believe, was based on Muhammad's conviction that the House of Muhammad has superior knowledge of the Quran and this is passed down to his descendants and rightful successors, the imams.[23]

After the disappearance of the twelfth imam, al-Mahdi, the Shīa leadership was dispersed. The latest attempt to reconstruct it was under the present office of the Grand Ayatollahs al-Khomeini and then Khamenei.

Both claim descent from the Prophet Muhammad through his daughter Fātima. The mere first name of the former being *Rūh al-Lah*, Arabic for "the spirit of God," is a clear indication of the different attitude the Shīa have toward humans' relationship to God. That appellation is sufficient for the Sunna to levy the charge of blasphemy against the Ayatollah for carrying it, his parents for giving him the name, and his followers for uttering it. Indeed, the Shīa believe that members of the House of Muhammad adhere to superior moral standards and therefore their rule is inclined to be more just and would have saved the Muslim world from calamities that were brought upon it by unjust and corrupt rulers. Today's rise of organizations such as al-Qaida and their affiliates is a perfect example, they argue, of the dangers of allowing the task of interpretation of Muslim scriptures, application of Islamic Law, and leadership to fall into the hands of freelance individuals.

Through drawing information from two different sources, Muslims formed two different identities. Those who were exposed to the Abbāsid tradition of Hadith identified with the symbols that formed the Sunna, while those exposed to the tradition of the House of Muhammad identified with the symbols of the Shīa. By denouncing each other, both Sunna and Shīa feel they are denouncing a grave injustice done to the memory of those with whom they identify.[24] Members of both groups have passed on to their offspring and share with their fellow worshippers strong emotions of love, hate, guilt, or culpability toward the principal actors in the dramatic events surrounding the formative period of Islam. Today, with the proliferation of self-publishing media, such as YouTube and Facebook, it is common to see Sunna and Shīa broadcasting their views on whether those key figures are at present in hell or heaven and whether they harbor emotions of love or hate for them.[25] Members of both groups demand from the other group total conformity to the way they interpret the events surrounding that period. They also believe that those who conform to their group's religious narratives and rituals will ascend to heaven; those who do not will descend to hell.[26] This prompts us to ask why people demand that others conform to their own beliefs, values, or norms.

## Religion and Conformity

The notion that one must act in conformity with a set of beliefs, values, and norms is as old as urban civilization and the complex social systems that are associated with it. In contrast to the migratory lifestyle of earlier nomadic groups, the first urban civilizations that emerged in Mesopotamia in the fourth millennium BC required concentration of

both power and people in cities. That concentration gave rise to different forms of economic and social organization, which were based on large-scale exploitation of human energy, the formation of ruling classes, hierarchical organization, and administrative division of labor.

The individual's conformity to a prescribed role was essential for the functioning and stability of the new economic and social order. Accordingly, at the center of ancient Mesopotamian religions, complex systems governed the relationships between gods and humans, individuals and the state, and living humans and their dead ancestors. Indeed, Mesopotamian religions conceived the universe as a vast network of orderly, harmonious, and systematic relationships within which actors must know their proper places and fulfill their prescribed roles. Such reverence for order and definition of roles is reflected in the Mesopotamian *Epic of Creation*. The epic expresses the pattern of the universe's affirmation through combat between the forces of order and chaos. The universe originally emerged from the triumph of order, which the god Marduk (Ashūr, in the Assyrian version) injected into chaotic gods, humans, nonhumans, and inanimate matter.

The *Epic of Creation* was recited in Babylon and Assur on Nissan (April) 1 during the New Year festival Akītū to restore and revitalize the social order with the spring ritual.[27] It has reached us in Akkadian with Babylonian and Assyrian dialects. It informs us that a male god, Marduk and a female god, Tiamat, raised a family of gods. These gods became so chaotic and uncontrollable that they prompted Marduk to kill them. When Tiamat rebelled and waged war to avenge the killing of her offspring, Marduk slew her, cut her in two parts, and created our orderly universe with each part of her corpse. He then created humankind with the corpse of a god whom he slew for inciting Tiamat to rebel. The epic culminates in the glorification of Marduk and the establishment of his order.

The triumph of Marduk's order was believed to be in harmony with the order of the planets and stars. Thus, the act of salvation from chaos brought humans into harmony with the divine order through the oracles. The oracles were the temple priests who acted as a medium through whom people could seek advice or prophecy from the gods. Oracles predicted future events or discovered hidden knowledge through their interpretation of omens that revealed human destiny. Their views of the role of the deity and human free will in the prevailing order varied. Some denied the deity's power of intervention and believed in the free will of humans; others, like the astrologers of Harrān of North Mesopotamia, regarded the planets as potent deities, whose verdicts could be changed through liturgy.

Representing a transition of Mesopotamian religions to Christianity, Bardaisan of Edessa (154–222) believed that the movements of the stars governed the material world, leaving the human soul free to choose between good and evil. Accroding to him, the goal of humans is to free themselves from an astrologically dominated material world.[28] Bardaisan's transition to Christianity also bridged to the Hellenistic religions, which Mesopotamians had long resisted.[29] Hellenistic religions viewed the law and order of the universe as a confining evil structure from which humans must escape. Notions of conformity to order and prescribed place were replaced by notions of escape, liberation from status, and salvation from a world imprisoned within its own evil. Humans wanted to escape from earthly despotism and ascend to another world of freedom, their true home, from which they were exiled and to which they wanted to return.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam fall somewhere between these two opposite views of conforming to or rising above the worldly social order. Each demands of the individual various degrees of conformity to an order believed to be favored by God, the supreme eternal being. God, in turn, rewards and punishes humans, in this world or in the afterlife, according to the extent of their conformity to moral rules, which "He" had presumably passed down to humans through the prophets.

Religious authorities of modern times in the Fertile Crescent play a role equivalent to the oracles of ancient religions. They present themselves as the custodians of sacred traditions that were passed on to them from God. They tell us they must preserve those sacred traditions and enforce them by all means available. The way in which religious authorities interpret the meaning of sacredness establishes their attitude toward scriptures. For some, sacredness implies the literal reading of scriptures and the enforcement of explicit rules of moral conduct contained in them; for others, scriptures and rules are seen in more complex terms, ranging from their validity relative to their historical context to their metaphorical expression of the special experience of those who produced them. These varying attitudes toward the scriptures of one religion along with the existence of multiple religions and scriptures became an obvious source of conflict between religious authorities. That multiplicity also produced a region inhabited by people with multiple identities and value systems, generating fertile grounds for conflict to emerge at many levels.

## Religion and Social Conflict

Table 7.3 summarizes eight levels of social conflict that occur among the religious groups inhabiting the Fertile Crescent.

**Table 7.3** Levels and substance of religious conflict

| Level of Conflict | Substance of religious conflict |
|---|---|
| **Metaphysics** | Rival conceptions of a Supreme Being and "His" relationship with humans |
| **Social Value** | Rival perceptions of what is moral, just, and beautiful |
| **Social Norm** | Rival rules that define social values, such as proper rituals and manners |
| **Social Structure** | Barriers to entry into the social and business networks of rival groups |
| **Marriage** | Barriers to intermarriage between members of groups |
| **Secular Identity** | Absence of a collective secular identity prioritized over all social identities |
| **Attitude** | Pervasive prejudice between intergroup members |
| **Behavior** | Discrimination between intergroup members based on their religious identity |

People in mixed societies often find themselves in a position where they are expected to conform to religious claims that are incompatible with their own. With respect to metaphysics, excluding rare but genuine atheists, all inhabitants of today's Fertile Crescent believe that God constitutes the origin of all that exists. Yet, believers have not reached a consensus about what God wants to accomplish and how. He is a God of justice, vengeance, love, peace, or a combination of a few or of all human emotions. Most importantly, God is believed to favor a certain order to which people must conform and has commanded people to enforce it. Some sects in the region have even demonstrated belief in a partisan God, who favors some regions over others and some people over others. Moreover, some believe that God relayed His latest commandments to Muhammad and then sealed the channel of communication, favoring people of a certain time over others. Still others believe that God appeared centuries later in human form and that He will appear again to abolish all previous commandments and establish a new order.

The sources of *religious* conflict are the multiple systems of social values that emanate from the rival desired orders, for social values must be enforced by rules that define them. Religious conflict therefore does not remain confined to a relationship between the individual and the metaphysical world. Where the notion of freedom of religion no longer holds, religious conflict appears on the social scene as people pursue their daily affairs. When a politically dominant religious group enforces its social norms, members of rival religious groups are expected to

approve of and participate in acts that they may consider evil or unjust. To illustrate, we will take, for example, the case where the Sunna are the dominant religious group. In that instance, for Shīa Muslims to be integrated into Sunni Muslim communities, they would have to revere the first three caliphs and the Prophet Muhammad's wife Aisha in public—a reverence they consider unjust because of the injustice they believe those figures committed against the family of the Prophet Muhammad. The Alawīyya, to be consistent with the Sunna, would have to renounce their view of the fourth caliph Alī as possessing the spirit of God, perform a pilgrimage to Mecca, pay the poor tax levied on Muslims, and force their own women to wear the veil, or at least the headscarf. While secular Sunni Muslims would also face similar restrictions, non-Muslims would lose their equal status in the society unless they adopted the dominant social values and norms, a process commonly referred to as converting from one religion or sect to another.

Interplay of motives underlies instances of conversion. A person or a group converting to another faith may have one set of motives, while the person or group pressuring others to convert may have another. At the core of religious conversion is a power struggle between two individuals or two groups, where one side demands from the other to conform to their group's beliefs, values, and social norms, including diet and rituals. Converting may also involve adopting another group's hostile or reverential attitudes toward certain individuals or groups.

One recent example of forced conversion took place in early February 2015 in the northwestern region of Syria, where the Organization of al-Qaida-al-Nusra Front occupied the Summaq Mountain and asked its approximately 20,000 Durūz Muslim inhabitants, who are distributed over 18 villages, to "declare their Islam." Their declaration of Islam, according to the organization's regional commander the Tunisian Abu Abd al-Rahman, necessitated their adoption of Muslim Law according to a religious judgment he issued that included "the destruction of the shrines of their religious leaders, their performance of regular prayer in mosques, segregation of boys and girls in schools, segregation of men and women, the imposition of the black *niqāb* on women instead of the white headscarf they commonly wear, and finally commitments to teaching the Quran."[30]

Groups with rival religious beliefs, social values, and social norms generate distinct social identities and draw lines of demarcation between them. They perpetuate themselves by erecting barriers to entry into each other's social and familial structures. Once rival groups are formed, mechanisms related to intergroup prejudicial attitudes and discrimination take on a life of their own, maintaining and

cementing the lines of demarcation for centuries. Today, inter-religious and inter-sectarian lines are by no means weaker than they were a millennium ago. Quite to the contrary, the proliferation of Internet-based media have made religious sects more cohesive and more aware of their rivals, and all have become stronger, killing any chances for assimilation for generations to come. Moreover, the scriptures' commandments to exclude infidels or apostates or to commit violence against them in the struggle to impose total conformity or to justify conquest are available at the believers' fingertips.

In the context of today's religious and intra-Muslim religious conflict in the Fertile Crescent, the sample below of 12 verses from the Holy Quran needs a massive interdisciplinary intellectual effort from within the Muslim community for genuine practicing believers to change their attitudes toward them.

1. Believers may not befriend infidels instead of believers. And whoever does so has nothing with God, except when taking precaution against them. And God Himself warns you, and to God is the destination (Quran 3:28).
2. You are the best nation given for humankind. You order people to do what is right and forbid what is wrong and believe in God. If only the People of the Scripture [Christians and Jews] had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them are believers, but most of them are defiantly disobedient (Quran 3:110).
3. So let those who fight in the cause of God exchange this world for the Hereafter. And he who fights in the cause of God and is killed or achieves victory, We will bestow upon him a great reward (Quran 4:74).
4. O believers do not take the Jews and the Christians as friends. They are friends of one another. And whoever among you is their friend, he is of them. God does not guide the unjust (Quran 5:51).
5. When your Lord revealed to the angels that I am with you, so believers brace yourselves, as I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieved, so strike [them] upon the necks and strike from them every fingertip. That is because they opposed God and His Messenger. And whoever opposes God and His Messenger, God is severe in penalizing them (Quran 8:12–13).
6. When the sacred months have passed away, then slay the polytheists wherever you find them, and take them captives and besiege them and lie in wait for them in every ambush, then if they repent and keep up prayer and pay the poor-tax, leave their way free to them; surely God is Forgiving, Merciful (Quran 9:5).

7. And if they break their belief after the oath they take [apostize] and they denigrate your religion, then fight the leaders of the infidels, for they do not believe, so they might cease to exist (Quran 9:12).
8. Fight them [the apostates]; God will punish them by your hands and will disgrace them and give you victory over them, and heal the breasts of believers (Quran 9:14).
9. O believers, fight those adjacent to you of the infidels and let them find in you harshness. And know that God is with the righteous (Quran 9:123).
10. Fight those who do not believe in God or in the Last Day and who do not forbid what God and His Messenger have forbidden and who do not adopt the religion of truth from those who were given the Scripture [Christians and Jews] until they pay the tax on the back of their hand willingly while subdued (humiliated) (Quran 9:29).
11. And He brought down those who supported them among the People of the Scripture [Jews of Bani Qurayza] from their fortresses and cast terror into their hearts; made you kill some [600 males] and take others [the women and children] captives. And He made you inherit their land and their homes and their properties and a land which you have not trodden. God is capable of everything (Quran 33:26–27).
12. Muhammad is the messenger of God; those with him are hard against the infidels and merciful among themselves (Quran 48:29).

The Holy Quran is by no means the only scripture that inspires social division and violence. The Holy Bible contains material of equal quality. However, the focus is on Muslim Scripture because the question at hand is political reform in the Middle East, where Islam is the dominant religion and where an intra-Muslim civil war is raging.

## Reactions to Conformity Pressures

Conforming to prevailing beliefs, social values, and social norms means that a person must act in harmony with roles prescribed for him or her by others. For group members, pressure to conform to the social identities of a rival group is a threat to the security and comfort they derive from their own social identities. Pressure imposed upon them to conform to rival social identities creates the stress of having either to defend themselves against such pressure or to change the way they view themselves and others. They can respond to this pressure in various ways: (1) by genuinely conforming, such as the people

who convert from one religion or sect to another; (2) by disguising their self-identities, such as practicing the *taqiyyah*, where heterodox Muslims pretend that they accept what Sunni Orthodoxy demands from them; or (3) by resisting the pressure to conform. As shown in the postscript to this chapter, responses to conformity pressure create a matrix of social and economic consequences. Members of all the heterodox Muslim sects resisted conformity to the dominant religious orthodoxy by disguising their true identity by keeping their beliefs secret and also joined secular political parties that advocated the separation of religion and state, while Christians resisted by joining secular political parties or emigrating, and Jews emigrated.

## NONCONFORMITY AND PREJUDICE

Identity, nonconformity, and prejudice relate to each other in many ways, primarily because these phenomena are characteristics of group formations. As individuals identify *with* groups and form identifications *of* others as members of rival groups, they form prejudices toward those others. They also become the objects of prejudice, because others associate them with rival groups.

Prejudice is a stereotyped, often negative, and emotionally charged belief that members of rival groups hold about each other. It is a belief they hold without sufficient evidence and that cannot be easily modified with contrary evidence.[31] This belief induces an emotional orientation among group insiders toward members of rival groups in the form of a prejudicial attitude, which they express in unconscious behavior and purposeful actions in different ways, depending on the individual's susceptibility to conformity pressure. Expressions of prejudicial attitudes range from antipathy, avoidance, condescending discourse, and selective and perverse interpretations of motives and facts concerning members of rival groups to discriminatory exclusion, false incrimination, verbal abuse, physical attack, and extermination.[32] All are exercised against members of rival groups while a positive and honorable self-image is maintained.

At many junctures in the last two centuries, the Fertile Crescent witnessed manifestations of all of those prejudicial attitudes among members of the religious groups inhabiting it that culminated in widespread massacres. Because we are witnessing today another climax of those attitudes, closer attention to them may explain a few patterns of behavior that could otherwise appear simply chaotic.

Table 7.4 summarizes complementary processes that induce prejudice through interaction, across different religious groups as well as

**Table 7.4** Identification, conformity, and prejudice

| | Level of Process | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | Psychological | Group Dynamics | Individual |
| **Process at Work** | The human potentials for social identification and stereotyping create externalization targets as a defense mechanism, in order to maintain a positive self-identity. | Circumstances and dynamics of intra-group (peer pressure) and inter-group interaction yield pressures to conform to the normative patterns of the group. | Differences in individual susceptibility to intragroup conformity pressures lead to behaviors expressing prejudicial attitudes in varying degrees of intensity. |

within them.[33] The processes may be divided into three levels: psychological processes, group dynamics, and individual processes.

### Stereotyping as a Cognitive Mechanism

Human psychological potentials provide fertile ground for prejudicial attitudes to develop. At the psychological level, the formation of religious groups induces individuals to identify themselves as group-insiders or group-outsiders. When insiders identify themselves as *we* and identify outsiders as *they*, they form the basis for cognitive social categorization, the process underlying stereotyping.[34]

To comprehend their social environment, individuals reduce its complexity by classifying the people they observe into groups with distinct social characteristics, a process that we commonly refer to as stereotyping. This is a cognitive process whereby individuals organize information about social categories through a structure we refer to as a stereotype. In common discourse, whenever there is an identity-sharing group, there is stereotyping.

One significant outcome of stereotyping is the accentuation effect, whereby insiders exaggerate their similarity to other insiders and amplify their dissimilarities to outsiders. Insiders also tend to view outsiders as relatively less complex, less variable, and less differentiated.[35] Another outcome of stereotyping is the attribution of perceived group differences to stable group traits or dispositions rather than to social influences.[36] Thus, people tend to commonly attribute behavior associated with ethnic or national groups to their disposition. For instance, in a debate on *al-Jazeera* on May 5, 2015, the Syrian Alawīyya were described as being "a unique condition in the human

race that combines blood thirst, murder, criminality, monstrosity, hate, low morals, greed, shrewdness, hypocrisy, and degeneration. Frankly, they are the scum of humanity and the worst of God's creation."[37]

### Stereotypes as Targets for Externalization

The positive view of one's own self-identity is a significant source for self-confidence and comfort, and an individual will deploy various defense mechanisms to maintain it. Symbolism takes center stage. As people become aware of the world around them, the inanimate and animate objects with which they identify serve for them as symbols of goodness. For example, they identify with religious symbols, such as his places of worship, their clerics, and their religious rites. They identify with cultural symbols of their own ethnicity or nationality, such as language, dialect, music, or diet. They also identify with cities in which they grew up, their sports teams, educational institutions they attended, and other objects. In social settings where members of rival identity-sharing groups interact under stressful political conditions, such symbols play a significant role in emphasizing the existence of each individual's support system and in unleashing his or her defense mechanisms.

When individuals feel themselves in danger because of their perceived social identity, they bridge the distance between themselves and their group by transforming symbols of their self-identity into targets shared with the group for social identification, thus creating a sense of safety. For example, the crucifix that normally relieves a Christian's private fear of mortality or eternal damnation became a symbol of solidarity among Lebanese Christians involved in a multi-sectarian conflict, during the initial phase of the civil war of 1975–90. As perverted as it sounds, Maronite Christian militia members wore oversized crucifixes while fighting street battles against Muslim, Arab nationalist, and leftist militias. What is commonly viewed by Christians as a symbol of nonviolence became a symbol with the power to uplift morale in a violent conflict.

In a manner paralleling individuals' perceiving of their own group's symbols as embodying goodness, insiders of rival groups transform the same symbols into shared enemy targets. Such targets then embody for these insiders negative perceptions with which they identify members of rival groups. Thus, for Muslims, the same crucifix that elevated morale for the Lebanese Christian militias and generally symbolizes comfort and nonviolence for Christians in general has become an enemy symbol, embodying all kinds of resentments stored up against Christians during the two groups' interactions throughout their histories. The crucifix is for Muslims a symbol of the European

Crusaders and the atrocities they committed during their conquest of the Near East. In this light, as the media widely reported in eyewitness accounts, it is not surprising that Albanian Muslims and Serb Christians were carving mosques and crosses on each other's flesh and corpses during their civil conflict of the 1990s.

Another example of symbols of self-identity transforming into shared targets for social identification is the way in which the Muslim Brothers' armed uprising in Syria in 1976–82, and its subsequent repression by the secular government, led to a significant increase in religious activities and the display of Islamic symbols. More people attended mosques, more mosques were built, more women put on the headscarf, more people went on pilgrimage, more people fasted in Ramadan, and more Muslims avoided befriending non-Muslims. Similarly, but to a lesser degree, Muslims in Europe and North America, feeling stressed amid the public reaction to the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, gathered around their mosques and attended Friday prayers in larger and unprecedented numbers.

### Externalization as a Defense Mechanism

The process of social identification and the subsequent transformation of objects into symbols of insiders versus outsiders create convenient targets for the projection of negative images onto rival identity-sharing groups. To defend and maintain a positive self-identity, members of rival groups externalize negative images onto others. They attempt to allocate inner phenomena to the external world. To externalize is to *split*, *generalize*, *project*, and *idealize* one's instinctive wishes, conflicts, moods, and way of thinking onto the outer world. Clinical studies have demonstrated that individuals employ these processes of splitting, generalization, projection, and idealization as defense mechanisms.[38] These mechanisms are also observable among groups, as I elaborate for each of them below.

Splitting allows members of an identity-sharing group to feel justified in their own actions while deflecting wrongdoing by seeing it as a characteristic of one member or minority members of the same group. A split could also be mutual, whereby members of the minority also perceive the other side as being in the wrong. The process is defensive for both sides, since the other is always wrong. Adopting such extreme views allows members of both sides to feel justified in their own positions, thus shifting the responsibility for the bad things that had to happen to the other side. We see today such splitting taking place on a daily basis in the Syrian conflict, where opposing Sunni Muslim rebel groups cast each

other as apostates for the actions they commit, while all simultaneously claim to be applying Muslim Law verbatim, the way the four "Rightly-Minded Caliphs" carried it out in the formative years of Islam.[39]

Generalization is a form of rationalization that enables individuals to feel they apprehend the unknown about something or someone. For example, an individual who wishes to harm another assumes that the other has the same intention toward him or her. The aggressor therefore substitutes a reasonable explanation for the true, but disturbing, motivation for his or her own behavior. This mechanism is just as present at the group level. Consider the second Bush administration's rationalizing hostile action against the regime of Saddam Hussein by assuming that Hussein had similarly hostile intentions toward the United States. It is indeed redundant to quote numerous examples in modern international conflicts, where each side justifies hostile action by assuming that the other side has the same intention.

While generalization rationalizes and justifies hostile action, projection remedies its negative impact on the actor's psyche. Projection is a psychologically defensive mechanism whereby an individual subconsciously denies his or her own attributes, thoughts, and emotions and instead ascribes them to other people, thus protecting the individual's own conscious mind from the pain of accepting a devalued aspect of the self as well as the resulting guilt or shame. The individual projects the unwanted feelings onto another person and so causes the other to appear to the projector as a threat from the external world. Through projection, individuals transform their self-image into an enemy image. They defend against their awareness of their own aggressive impulses toward another by attributing its cause or responsibility to the external world. As is the case with generalization, projection is quite active at the intergroup level.

Idealization is the process through which individuals suspend their capacity to be in touch with reality. The individual denies the existence of painful facts and of terrifying events taking place, thus becoming immune to evidence of reality. A few days after the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, a BBC journalist entered Saddam's hometown of Takrīt with the US army and had a casual conversation with a Sunni Muslim passerby in the street. During the conversation, that person insisted that the next president of Iraq should be a Sunni Muslim. When asked why, he gave two reasons: first that the president of Iraq had always been a Sunni Arab from Takrīt, and second, a Sunni had never done anything bad to anyone else, meaning to the Shīa and the Kurds. Denying Saddam's and his clan's crimes against the Kurds and the Shīa is a form of idealization. Idealization may also involve denying

latent feelings of hostility. Through idealization, an individual escapes intolerable thoughts, feelings, or events by projecting everything negative onto the world outside, which is then perceived as hostile in proportion to the violence and distress emerging within his or her own.

Redirection is an additional psychological potential that underlie the process of committing violence. For instance, during the Lebanese civil conflict, when Kamal Jumblatt, the political leader of the Durūz sect in Lebanon was allegedly assassinated by Syrian intelligence agents on March 16, 1977, members of his militia subsequently attacked a neighboring Maronite Christian village of Deir Dourit and murdered all of over two hundred of its inhabitants. There were no survivors left to tell their story.[40] While there was neither evidence nor a suspicion that any of the inhabitants were implicated in the assassination, the massacre seemed to the perpetrators as a natural reaction in the context of the civil war, for the Syrian army at the time was too strong of a target to attack. A similar massacre took place in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila on a much larger scale two days after the assassination of the Lebanese president-elect Bachīr al-Gmayel on September 14, 1982, where right-wing Maronite street thugs were rounded up from the Christian quarters and brought to the camps that were besieged by the Israeli army and murdered hundreds of unarmed civilians.[41] Here again, while in the context of current events, Palestinians were not suspected by the Maronite community to have carried out the assassination, the massacres seemed to the perpetrators a natural course of action.[42] Those two events are an example of redirection, which one may observe in animal behavior, where an animal, if prevented from performing a certain act, redirects itself to an alternative object. If an animal is prompted to attack another but is prevented by fear of the opponent or by a reluctance to leave its territory, it might attack what it can, including a harmless companion, the ground, or vegetation.[43]

### From Psychological Potentials to Prejudicial Attitudes

For group members to gain each other's acceptance and generate the shared experiences that strengthen their bonding, they tend to conform to established group attitudes regarding outsiders. The benefits of securing continuity, reciprocity, and cooperation within a group are ample incentive for insiders to strengthen their bonds by conforming to normative patterns of that which is good or bad as well as that which insiders ought to think of outsiders. The least costly way for insiders to strengthen their bonds is for them to draw and deepen lines of demarcation between their values and those of outsiders. To protect

and enhance group cohesion and self-esteem, insiders stress the superiority of their shared values and engage in self-indulgent, fault-finding comparisons of rival groups. Moreover, they perceive their *own kind* vis-à-vis *the other kind* as different and therefore fear them and feel the need for protection from them. Even under relatively peaceful conditions, group insiders tend to perceive rival groups as enemies.

The mechanism by which mutual dislike develops into prejudicial attitudes depends on the individual's susceptibility to prejudice. How an individual reflects his or her identity-sharing group's attitudes toward outsiders depends on the individual's motives and on the state of his or her ego identity. For instance, a political entrepreneur may attempt to exploit differences in social values in order to articulate a certain group's fear of outsiders and elevate it to a sense of imminent danger. The entrepreneur thus makes him- or herself a needed resource, offering political action strategies that promise protection from unwanted outsiders. On the other hand, the degree to which individuals with no political motive participate in the process of demarcating insiders from outsiders depends on how they feel about themselves. The less independent, secure, and happy with their life accomplishments they are, the better they feel when they initiate or participate in condescending discourse toward members of a rival group. If they do engage in such discourse, it is an expression of a prejudicial attitude, which for them is also a "therapeutic" process that helps them to believe they are better than they usually think they are.

It is commonly accepted that ignorance and prejudice feed upon each other. However, it is an individual's susceptibility to prejudice that matters most for explaining his or her expression of a prejudicial attitude through behavior and action. Although individuals may be well informed about an object of prejudice, adopting a prejudicial attitude toward it may make them feel more comfortable with themselves. Individuals with an aggressive impulse toward the object of prejudice feel better if they make themselves believe that they are the victim of the latter, thus deserving of sympathy, which puts them in a morally defensible position to justify a violent act they commit against a rival group.

For instance, when Muslim pundits interpreted George W. Bush's description of the "war on terror" as a "crusade," in the medieval meaning of the term as a religious war against Islam and Muslims instead of interpreting it in its contemporary context to "pusue with zeal," it gave Islamists a pretext to call for a holy war (*jihād*) in Iraq to liberate a "Muslim land" from the crusaders. The outcome was that Iraq provided opportunity for Jihadists to kill "infidels" and their Iraqi "accomplices," thereby attaining an honor they are unable to attain

easily within other infidel territories. The Jihadists' insurgency had possible outcomes that were most favorable to them and to their Islamist supporters. The first is the prolongation of the occupation, thus continuing to supply a source where "honor" could be collected; the second was a hasty US withdrawal and the degeneration of Iraq into chaos and civil war. The first outcome served the interest of Jihadists' cause to attain the honor of fighting infidels; the second outcome served their cause of fighting for the establishment of an Islamic state.

In the late 1990s, Archbishop of Aleppo Mar Gregorios Yohanna Ibrahim made a series of presentations in Syria on a theme that aimed to distance Near Eastern Christians from the Crusaders, who occupied parts of the Fertile Crescent from 1095 to 1295. The move was surprising because it ought to be common knowledge as to who the Crusaders were and why they invaded the region. However, with the recent rise of political Islam, Islamists have been identifying the indigenous Christians of the Fertile Crescent with the Crusaders, despite the former having also been the victims of the Crusaders' campaigns. As far as it is a belief unsupported by facts, it is an example of a prejudicial attitude. A local mayor rode this prejudicial attitude to action, confiscating the ruins of a sixth-century monastery owned by the Archdiocese of Aleppo and blocking a project to rebuild it on the charge that "the Crusaders are returning to the region."[44]

## Religious Identity and the Competitive Drive

Middle Easterners inherited the identities of the groups in which they were born, including their religious identity. Because the beliefs constituting their religious identity are learned from childhood, they tend to defend them when challenged. They defend them not because of the substance of the ideas themselves, but because they are associated with *their* group's history and constitute *their* group's identity. Informal conversations with Middle Eastern laity of different religious sects pointed to their pride in the uniqueness and superiority of what was *theirs*, be it their beliefs, moral criteria, rites, rituals, or liturgy. There are of course exceptions, such as dissidents, rebels, and nonconformists, not to mention psychotics, all of whom stand out of the group. Yet, diversity of opinions within one religious group in the Middle East is significantly lower than within similar groups in West.

Once groups emerge, people's competitive drive sharpens the lines of demarcation among them. Social identification and self-identification propel individuals to compete with each other as members of groups, just as much as they personally compete with each other as individuals.

For example, those who identify with a sports team will share in the elation and humiliation of the team as it wins or loses its matches. Through identification, the team's triumphs become the individual's personal triumphs, and the team's failures are as devastating as a personal failure. Additionally, fans of rival sports teams transfer the physical competition between the teams into personal competition among individual fans. This competitive process is associated with various forms of self-identification, including national identification, religious identification, and sectarian identification.

Competition for physical survival, self-esteem, or vanity induces individuals to attribute negative characteristics to members of rival groups, thereby justifying actions committed against those rivals. In the last century, the Nazis and their ideological predecessors justified their military campaigns to enslave their Slavic neighbors by persuading themselves that Slavs were an inferior race. In such a spirit, a year before World War I, Kaiser Wilhelm II was quoted as having said, "Slavs were not born to rule but to serve, this they must be taught."[45] Similarly, religious traditions often describe their own adherents as the favorite of an almighty creator who, in his wisdom, has given his followers the duty to seize territories for the benefit of all humankind, thereby recasting an act of conquest as part of a mission of benevolence.

Group members also perceive the "other kind" vis-à-vis their "own kind" as different and harbor various emotions toward them.[46] They may fear them and feel the need for protection from them, or may attribute negative characteristics to them. As throughout the Arabian Peninsula's history, Arab tribes have denounced each other in order to justify raids on each other's territories and looting of each other's property. Looting can be morally justified if the victim is deemed to be inferior to the perpetrator, allowing the looter to claim a higher level of entitlement to the victims' possessions. The Prophet Muhammad was the first one known to attempt to channel that Arabian intertribal competition outward, through his formation of the Muslim Community (*al-Umma*). By forming the Muslim Community, he redefined the borders between group insiders and outsiders to unify the competing tribes. For that reason, the world was subsequently divided, from the perspective of the Muslim Community, into the Land of Islam (*Dār al-Islām*) and the Land of War (*Dār al-Harb*). The former lay within Muslim political dominion, while the latter lay outside it, thus preparing the ideological stage for perpetual conquest of lands inhabited by non-Muslims, a conquest demanded and rewarded by an almighty creator of the universe.[47]

## Postscript

Considering myself the individual under investigation, table 7.5 presents four possibilities of my assessment of and subsequent responses to pressures regarding social roles expected of me.[48]

In Case 1, my self-identities are compatible with my social identities, no matter who perceives them. That which people believe I am and the roles they expect me to perform are compatible with what I believe I am. However, such compatibility takes place in an ideal social setting where various identity-sharing groups have no value conflicts. In such an ideal setting, one's lack of conflict with others may be due to two processes. First, I may have internalized prevailing social identities and codes of conduct and conformed to them without external rewards or punishments because I came to believe that they are moral and therefore have value in themselves, even if my violations of them would not be detected.[49] Second, prevailing social identities may have been forced upon me by positive or negative sanctions from without. Unable to live with the consequences of social conflict, I may, as a self-defense mechanism, alter my self-identity to be more compatible with prevailing social identities. By doing so, I transform my self-identity to be more compatible with my perceived social identity, yet I retain a sense of self that is still acceptable to me.

In Case 2, my self-identities are compatible with my social identities, at least as members of my identity-sharing groups perceive them. However, they conflict with the way *rival* identity-sharing groups perceive them. As a result, people with whom I do not identify may put pressure on me to conform to their social identities. I may respond to such pressure in two ways, depending on the particular social identities to which I am expected to conform. I may disguise my self-identities by acting as if I accept what rival identity-sharing groups

**Table 7.5** Identity and conformity

| | My Social Identities According to *Rival* Groups | My Social Identities According to *My* Group | My Response to Conformity Pressure |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Case 1** | Compatible | Compatible | Conform |
| **Case 2** | Conflicting | Compatible | Disguise my social identity or Resist |
| **Case 3** | Compatible | Conflicting | Disguise my social identity or Resist |
| **Case 4** | Conflicting | Conflicting | Resist |

expect from me, despite their contradiction with my self-identities and preferences. Thus, I act as if I am a different person: one who would not dissent publicly from the rival group's social identities. However, when conforming to the ways of others demands a significant and uncomfortable lifestyle change, I may resist. I am more likely to resist the pressures to conform if disguising my preferences fails to spare me the insults and humiliating discrimination of rival identity-sharing groups. My resistance to conforming may take several forms. I may defect, by immigrating to a social setting where people either demand less conformity or where prevailing social identities are more compatible with my own. Alternatively, I may endeavor to change the social order, either by advocating separatism, through the creation of institutions more tolerant of differences, or by advocating radical change, through the overthrow of the prevailing social order. Both options for advocating change transform social conflicts into political ones.

In Case 3, my self-identities are compatible with my social identities as members of rival identity-sharing groups perceive them. However, my self-identities do conflict with the perceptions of *my own* identity-sharing groups, particularly closed groups structured on race, religion of birth, or family. I may respond to pressure to conform by disguising my self-identities when interacting with my fellow group members, acting as if I accept their social identities. Alternatively, I may resist pressure to conform within my group by attempting to assimilate into rival groups with whom my self-identities are compatible.

Finally, in Case 4, my self-identities are incompatible with my social identities, regardless of the group perceiving them. I am in conflict with all the identity-sharing groups that dominate the social scene and therefore face pressure to conform from all of them. I am a social outcast. My resistance to pressure to conform to the prescriptions and expectations of others engenders three possible outcomes: First, I may immigrate to a place where my social identities are perceived as more compatible with my self-identities. Second, I may join outcast groups from whom I seek psychological support for my resistance to conformity. Third, I may attempt to change the way others view me and limit their expectations of my conformity by joining radical groups whose goal is to overthrow the prevailing social order.

# 8

# The New Media and the Islamic Awakening

The end of the twentieth century crystallized a paradoxical relationship between economic and socio-psychological intercourse. The global political movement to free commodity production and distribution from barriers to trade was met with a countermovement through which people affirmed their local identities. Global dismantling of barriers restricting exchange of human energy accompanied local resurgence of social and psychological ones. Throughout the world, people sought protection, reassurance, and continuity in the face of globalization's erosive forces of change.

This countermovement took various forms in different parts of the world, yet common among the populations was the desire to assert familiar and stable elements in their lives. In the fast-changing world of mass communication, individuals were exposed to questions that challenged their inherited social values.[1] In the Middle East, where religion is the most important source of identity, that countermovement took the form of an "Islamic Awakening" (*al-Sahwa al-Islāmiyya*), whose leaders were either propelled to power by the Arab Spring uprisings or were placed in internationally supported opposition to prevailing secular regimes, as in Syria. In the past three decades, the ideological proponents of the Islamic Awakening had reacted to change by advocating self-protection from the challenges brought about by exposure to rival values. They employed self-defense mechanisms that ranged from self-censorship and boycotts to establishing their own schools, social and economic networks, and even economic institutions, such as Islamic banking.

In the Arabic-speaking Middle East, the paradoxical relationship between globalization and its countermovement coincided with the appearance in 1996 of *al-Jazeera*, the Arabic satellite-based television station. Unlike *al-Jazeera* English, which was established a decade

later, *al-Jazeera* Arabic was staffed by native Middle Easterners and North Africans with various political affiliations. It was devoted almost exclusively to Arab and Islamic affairs and regularly featured leading local figures who reflected the mood of their streets. At its launch, program hosts tended to advance their own personal political agendas, which ranged from secular Arab nationalism to Western liberalism, to feminism, to Islamic fundamentalism.

The rise of *al-Jazeera* Arabic was novel and unique in comparison with the histories of other forms of mass media in the Middle East and North Africa. For the first time, viewers could hear independent and uncensored opinions on current and past events on live broadcasts of news and various talk shows. Having no sponsors besides the prince of Qatar, *al-Jazeera*'s editorial policy was to reflect the public sentiments of the Arab streets.[2] Prior to becoming the leading voice of the Muslim Brothers, *al-Jazeera* provided an outlet for the voices of the impoverished masses, their oppressors, secular and religious authorities, international political figures, Israeli government personnel, and underground terrorist organizations, including al-Qaida.[3]

Because it became everyone's voice, audiences eager for uncensored news elevated the popularity of *al-Jazeera* programs to a level above that of the most-watched soap operas. On the heels of *al-Jazeera*'s success, other satellite-based channels sprang up around the Middle East, replicating its model across the religious-political spectrum. Governments sponsored some of these channels, such as the Saudi-owned al-Arabiya, while others were supported by various oligarchs and religious organizations. *Al-Jazeera*'s regular hosting of religious authorities revealed a pro-Sunna bias, but rival channels, too, showed sectarian favoritism. *Al-Jazeera* maintained a special place among these outlets because it reached a wide and diverse audience and enjoyed a level of unparalleled credibility among Middle Eastern television watchers by offering a little something to make everyone to feel at home. But the explosion of social media that followed—most importantly, YouTube, Facebook, and Internet publishing—gave individuals and groups unprecedented and unfettered access and allowed them to voice their uncensored views in public.[4]

The movement intensifying the Islamic Awakening began with freelance religious authorities' access to widely viewed television channels, which gave recognition to sectarian identifications that were previously unacknowledged publicly. As a result, public acknowledgment of private beliefs and attitudes toward symbols of rival sects facilitated a transition from the formal secular discourse of state-controlled media to an informal sectarian discourse of a new,

relatively freer media. Sectarian identification, which had been shameful to acknowledge in public discourse, became acceptable, a fact that contributed to legitimating religious ideology at the expense of the secular nationalist ideologies that had dominated the politics of the Fertile Crescent nation-states since World War II. By making public antagonistic religious beliefs that were formerly held in private circles, the new satellite-based media and, subsequently, open-access social media were inadvertent contributors to the decline of state-sponsored secular Arab nationalist ideology and to the rise of religious ideology. The latter's proponents, in turn, co-opted the secular aspects of the initial Arab Spring uprisings to seize power.

## The Nation-States of the Fertile Crescent

By the end of World War II, the boundaries drawn by France and Britain within the Fertile Crescent to create the five nation-states of Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine/Israel, and Syria, were maintained by power structures dominated by ruling families, their sect members, and outsiders who were willing to be subservient to them. The governments of those nation-states patrolled its borders long enough for people to recognize the new identities of the nation-states as national identities, such as being "Syrians, Iraqis, Lebanese, Jordanians, Palestinians." Yet, that identification was superficial. The region's inhabitants identified with and felt beholden to the institutions of their own sectarian groups rather than those of any state. Neither a nationalist ideology nor the political conditions necessary to propagate such an ideology was present at the grassroots level.

Jews in the Fertile Crescent nation-states emigrated to Israel or to the West. Christians remained gathered within the informal social organizations of their sects, as they had for centuries. The smaller Muslim sects lived in regions dominated by their members, such as the Alawīyya, Durūz and Ismāīlīyya in Syria and Lebanon, while most urban Shīa lived in semi-segregated enclaves, such as Sadr City in Baghdad and various regions in southern and eastern Lebanon, or in the almost exclusive Shīa towns in Syria, such as Nubul, al-Zahra, al-Fouah, and Kafraya.[5] Dominant Sunni Muslims, with large numbers in urban centers, drew fictitious boundaries around their city enclaves (*hāra*). Identifying themselves by enclaves, the Sunna gathered in informal assemblies at local mosques. That sectarian mosaic persisted to the modern day in the Fertile Crescent, despite deliberate attempts in the second half of the twentieth century to supplant it with nationalist ideology.

Under the leadership of the Arab Baath Party, the governments of Syria and Iraq attempted to neutralize religion and sectarianism by persuading their inhabitants that they shared common elements that cut across the disparate religious groups. They propagated Arab nationalist ideology, intending to forge a new identity that would subsume the sectarian ones. Their official rhetoric claimed to resurrect (*Baath*) an identity, and a civilization associated with it, which had presumably existed since the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent but had allegedly weakened and almost disappeared due to 400 years of foreign Ottoman domination. In truth, however, no such common Arab identity ever existed among the inhabitants, and, privately, everyone knew it.

Five decades of Arab nationalist education, designed to graduate a homogenized, secular generation that prioritized an Arab national identity over sectarian ones, failed to produce its intended outcome. Graduates instead filled the ranks of Islamic fundamentalist groups, whose ambitions to rule supreme were kept in check only by force. Disillusioned by the dismal prospects of national identification, smaller sects, from which the leading nationalists initially emerged, returned to clustering around their sectarian groupings, which served them as resource-sharing networks.

Fourteen centuries after the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, sectarian identity remains the primary basis of social identity and religion remains the dominant force that shapes social and political allegiance. At present, sectarian rivalries prevail among five Muslim sects (Sunna, Shīa, Durūz, Alawīyya, and Ismāīlīyya), in a manner similar to those that prevailed among the three Aramaic-speaking Christian sects (Jacobite, Melkite, and Nestorian) on the eve of the Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent.

Currently, sectarian membership determines the individual's attitudes toward his or her fellow citizens in this region. The issues these attitudes affect range from sympathy with certain causes to access to resources, to political appointments, and, amid the outbreak of social unrest, to life or death. The appalling sectarian mass murders committed in Lebanon, and that continue to be committed today in Iraq and Syria, should have been sobering for all those who still claim that sectarianism was politicized only by the US invasion of Iraq.[6] Sectarian massacres remain easy to provoke because, as has been shown in previous chapters, sectarian identification in the Fertile Crescent has deep historical roots. It is the basic building block for human grouping in the region, which the post–World War II nation-states have failed to break.

## The New Media and Religious Entrepreneurship

One prevailing norm in the Fertile Crescent was the reluctance to discuss incompatible views in casual conversation. People tended to want to know their acquaintance's sectarian affiliation so that they could be careful about statements they might utter. They also engaged in flattering discourse (*mujamalāt*) with individuals whose social identity they privately viewed in a negative light. It was common to denounce a rival sectarian identity in intragroup discourse while simultaneously pretending in intergroup discourse that the negative attitude did not exist. The reason for this duplicity was to avoid the high cost associated with face-to-face insults: they often resulted in a violent reaction and triggered an intergroup clash.

The secular state media that emerged after World War II, in turn, reflected those norms and made avoidance of public discourse on incompatible religious views a matter of public policy. The sectarian divisions of the Fertile Crescent, and the negative images groups had of one another, made public references to sectarian identification taboo. Thus, the views espoused by state media were the ones widely regarded as the proper, politically correct positions to support in public. Except for Lebanon, which gives official political recognition to sectarian groups, state media did not acknowledge privately held beliefs and attitudes. In Syria and Iraq, official media under *Baath* rule did not recognize extra-Arab identities. Although people related to their sectarian or ethnic identities in their daily affairs, these were entirely absent from the formal discourse of state media. Because of their politically correct nature, state media reports about current events were viewed by the public as ludicrous propaganda, and thus their effectiveness was weakened. Viewers grew cynical and came to receive all of the state's messages with skepticism, including its assessments of prevailing conditions, which, in retrospect, may have otherwise been accepted as reasonable.

Governments' monopolies on broadcasting systems had allowed them to censor all political statements within their territory. In Syria, public references to sectarian identities were nonexistent, and any references to religion were only in a positive light. The religiously diverse inhabitants of Syria were always depicted in the media as having lived together in perfect harmony in the past and as continuing to do so in the present. The official line was that foreign invaders, such as the Crusaders or more recent colonialists, such as the French, British, Zionists, or even Americans, had attempted to ignite insidious discord among the inhabitants and were continuing at present to do so. Many,

especially academics, internalized the notion that Middle Easterners should interact with each other anonymously with regard to their sectarian affiliations. Until recently, academics, journalists, and political figures considered public acknowledgment of sectarian affiliation to be shameful. Some still do.

With the advantage of a distant state media, *al-Jazeera* was the first TV channel to emerge on the scene to give priority to sectarian identification, shocking the public with that which was privately believed but which was publicly unspoken. On-air references to sectarian identities encouraged public acceptance of the existence of sectarian groups. For the first time in recent memory, newscasts, documentaries, and talk shows acknowledged viewer's genuine reference groups, symbols, and social identities. In the warmth of their prioritized sectarian group, viewers felt at home. Al-Jazeera captured their attention and became their new window to the world.

The free flow of communication from private circles to the public sphere suggested to some that the viewer was getting a fuller range of facts and analyses, and therefore forming a more balanced interpretation of events. Ideally, we may like to believe that people utilize the free flow of information to improve outcomes for themselves by improving their understanding of the contentious issues in the Fertile Crescent, and that this allows them to take balanced political positions that could affect change in everyone's favor.[7] However, such a positive prognosis fails to assess how people process the flood of information they encounter. Moreover, the notions that the impact of Arabic satellite channels "toward forging a collective sense of 'Arabism' is immense" and that the "intensive outpouring of news and live debate creates a shared feeling of belonging and certainly enhances a pan-Arab identity"[8] may have merit from the perspective of Arab diasporas looking at the Middle East from without. Yet, they have had an entirely different impact within the Fertile Crescent.

Given the religious lens through which Middle Easterners view one another, it is naïve to think that these perspectives would converge to produce a more socially harmonious Middle East. People cope with excessive information and conflicting interpretations of events by filtering out views that unsettle them, while maintaining those that comfort them. Regarding topics that people feel passionate about, such as politics or religion, people employ defensive means to maintain their mental comfort in the face of the diverse and conflicting views that unsettle and confuse them. Below are three examples.

First, through the mechanism of discriminating interest, viewers tune in to programs not because they want to learn something new

or reconsider their views, but because they seek psychological reassurance about their existing beliefs and prejudices. Therefore, they pay the most attention to shows featuring leaders and role models with whose views they already agree. Furthermore, viewers rarely, if at all, take the trouble to become well informed. Viewers have no incentive to invest time and energy in actively searching for alternative sources of information in order to form a balanced view about a matter of their concern. This fact is not exclusive to the unempowered masses around the globe, whose leaders feed them information to sway their opinions in one direction or the other. It cuts across all levels of social and political hierarchies, including the media itself, which often uncritically transmits such information to the public.

An example from the United States clarifies this point. On January 28, 2008, "60 Minutes" aired an interview with George Piro, the FBI agent who debriefed Saddam Hussein over an extended period. Piro reported that Saddam believed "Ben Laden was a threat to him and to his regime [and] Saddam's story was verified in interrogations with other former high-ranking members of his government. One striking theme that emerged was just how little we knew about Saddam and how little he knew about us."[9] In the interview, Piro refers to the fact that Saddam despised al-Qaida and its fundamentalist ideology, a fact that was not only corroborated by Osama bin Laden, who called Saddam the "the great atheist," but that is also unanimously believed in the Fertile Crescent. Indeed, the secular ideology of the *Baath* emerged in Syria and Iraq as a countermovement and an alternative to Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Yet this fact had not registered in the memory of the US public, nor did it influence public policy with regard to the Iraqi regime's alleged ties with al-Qaida.

Second, through discriminating interpretation, viewers fail to recognize messages they find threatening to their already-held views. Consider the way in which Islamist pundits who appeared on *al-Jazeera*, and elsewhere in the uncensored Arab media, interpreted George W. Bush's televised comment describing "the war on terror" as a "crusade." Webster's dictionary gives two meanings for the term "crusade": "1: any of the military expeditions undertaken by Christian powers in the 11th, 12th, and 13th centuries to win the Holy Land from the Muslims. 2: a remedial enterprise undertaken with zeal and enthusiasm."[10] Islamists, including those who resided in English-speaking countries and who were thoroughly familiar with the English language, took it for granted that Bush intended to convey the first meaning of the term. Bush's subsequent damage-control visit to a US mosque did not change their perception. Despite such

misinterpretation, which pundits repeated for many years on popular talk shows on Arabic media, no one challenged it.

Third, through discriminating recollection, or selective amnesia, people repress in their memory signs that have caught their attention but provided contrary evidence to what they already believed.[11] People feel comfortable with what they know and protect themselves from challenges to it. Beliefs, especially ones that were acquired during childhood, such as religious beliefs, value systems, views of rival religions and sects, or images of the self and of the other constitute one's identity. They cannot be easily changed with new information. That is why interpolitical or interfaith dialogue does not lead to a convergence of rival political or religious beliefs. Dialogues of that sort often take the form of competition between the conversing parties to reinforce each one's own beliefs and prove the other's wrong. Accordingly, a creationist does not become an atheist after being exposed to certain relevant facts, nor vice versa, because the changing of an individual's belief system invites clashes with a host of elements in the individual's life, elements that have become comfortable.

Individuals employ the aforementioned defensive mechanisms to select the facts that will eventually register in their consciousness and to maintain their comfortable, preconceived perception of the world. When these mechanisms stand between the individual and the world, the free flow of information tends to amplify what people consider themselves and each other to be and reinforce their preconceived views of themselves and of others. Middle Eastern viewers, who prioritize a sectarian self-identity, felt more powerful as they observed reports on members of their own sects from across a geographical area to which they previously had almost no access. Sect members celebrated their shared views not only when they met their fellow members at prayer time, but also on previously nonexistent visual media. Viewers observed symbols of their identities displayed on popular television channels for everyone to see.

Sect leaders appeared regularly as guests, and their statements were reported promptly. They appealed directly to their followers through the new widely viewed media outlets. Like all people, sect leaders and religious authorities have personal goals. Accordingly, from the angle of personal motive, one may consider religious authorities, or those who presume to speak on behalf of their sect members, to be religious entrepreneurs, who preside over formal or informal religious hierarchies to attain personal goals, such as power, prestige, fame, employment, or wealth.

For the first time in the history of Middle Eastern television, religious entrepreneurs were able to bypass the censored state media and

access an audience directly. While some appeared on their own sectarian-sponsored channels, exposure on widely viewed channels such as *al-Jazeera* made them look more legitimate. Free of state censorship, media personnel competed to excel in their performance: through direct questioning or uncensored viewer participation, they sought to uncover their guests' true opinions. Pointed questions gleaned from viewers pressured guests to reveal religious views offensive to rival groups and which were previously unexpressed on state media. For example, below are two examples of recurring instances that became commonplace.

In 1998, *al-Jazeera* hosted a debate between a cleric known for his secular views on the separation of religion and state, Ahmad Hassoun, and Moroccan cleric Muhammad al-Fazazi, the founder of the fundamentalist group *al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya*, who would later be convicted of inciting the Casablanca bombing of May 16, 2003. During the debate, the fundamentalist pressed the Sufi to admit that Christians are, according to Islamic scriptures, infidels.[12] This debate and another are posted by al-Fazazi supporters along with statements he made elsewhere after gaining recognition on *al-Jazeera*, such as a lecture on August 12, 2000, in Rome in which he attempted to explain the significance of the term "mercy" in the Quran and argued that "fighting the infidel with iron and fire is being merciful to Muslims."[13]

Similar debates between clerics encountered similar results, where honest yet offensive and hate-filled statements were made on *al-Jazeera*. On August 15, 1999, a program entitled "al-Sharia and Life" hosted relatively moderate Sunni cleric Faysal Mawlawi, the general secretary of *al-Jamaa al-Islamiyya* of Lebanon, who affirmed, "Christians are infidels," but added, "so are Muslims in Christian view."[14]

Because of the state's suppression of free expression, such views, though widely held in private and informal circles, had thus far been unexpressed in public. The subsequent proliferation of satellite television stations with exclusive religious content, coupled with Internet publishing, brought to public discourse a stream of interreligious and intra-Muslim inflammatory rhetoric that was first treated in a moderate manner by *al-Jazeera*.

With emotionally charged religious sermons no longer confined to the state-monitored places of worship, the new media outlets provided opportunities for ambitious individuals to treat religious rhetoric as a commodity to be sold to a public for whom religious identity trumps all others.[15] Competing for the attention of potential followers, individuals posing as religious authorities invoked common symbols, stressed traditional values, warned against traditional enemies.

With the public's perception of official religious authorities, such as State Muftis, as being mere apologists for the state, freelance claimants of religious knowledge competed to fill the emerging demand for independent interpreters of scripture. The consumers of this commodity, on the other hand, have been told for many centuries that interpretation of scripture is within the exclusive purview of religious authorities. Since no universally accepted standards as to who qualifies to attain such status exist, individuals with no formal training gained the title of *sheikh*; Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawāhiri are but two examples among the hundreds who broadcast themselves first on *al-Jazeera* and then over the Internet.[16]

The new breed of self-appointed religious authorities stressed elements that constituted a common denominator for as many viewers as possible, by repeating preconceived negative notions of a threatening enemy from within or from without. They reinforced their audiences' prejudices and reassured them with ideas with which they were familiar and where little was novel enough to threaten them psychologically. They ruled out addressing more intelligent and sophisticated viewers, whose particular views and preferences would make them difficult to sway.[17]

The more good sense, pleasure, and righteousness a message provided for the receiver, the more potentially effective it was.[18] Religious rhetoric satisfied these criteria. Religious speech is perceived as sensible, it produces a feeling of strength that gives people pleasure, and it offers a righteousness that makes people feel morally superior. Therefore, in the religiously charged environment of the Middle East, religious entrepreneurship has a good chance for success, once it finds a media outlet.

Unlike secular leaders, religious authorities in the Arabic-speaking Middle East have an advantage in the craft of oration. Formal Arabic is the exclusive language of religious sermons, formal speeches, and news broadcasts. It bestows upon religious authorities and media personnel a special, revered status, setting their speech apart from the spoken Arabic used in daily affairs. The combination of a powerful, formal Arabic religious and emotional content, and access to the public placed religious authorities in a position to swing public perception.

Further, religious authorities are perceived by the faithful either as consultants on how to acquire the blessings of an eternal afterlife in the heavens or as mediators between them and their transition into that afterlife. Thus, conflating an imputed righteousness to certain desired thoughts and acts with the religious beliefs of their followers allowed religious authorities to elevate the desired thoughts and acts to a matter of religious duty.

Perhaps no sect leader in modern Middle Eastern history has achieved success to parallel that of Hasan Nasrallah. His persistent and efficient use of religious narrative to advance a contemporary plan of action has persuaded audiences beyond his Lebanese Shīa followers. His effectiveness in blending religious narrative with ongoing political affairs dwarfs that of the most skillful nationalist ideologues, earning him to a level of credibility even with secular audiences. While his popularity fell steeply after he sided with the Syrian regime from the first signs of unrest in Syria, there is no doubt that he is still able to muster overwhelming support from the Lebanese Shīa community alone to confront the imminent onslaught from the two branches of al-Qaida (ISIL and al-Nusra) and their various Salafīyya Jihadīyya affiliates.

The human proclivity for competition redirected the flow of information from intragroup discourse to an open, intergroup discourse. Competition transformed what sect members quietly discussed within their internal ranks and moved it outward. Competition among media personnel seeking recognition for excellence, along with competition among rival religious authorities for fame and power, eventually caused the latter to reveal in public their privately held, but often negative, views toward rival groups. One of the major effects of this making private beliefs public is the surfacing of Sunna–Shīa rivalries, such as public references to a "Shīa Crescent," implying the existence of a Shīa conspiracy to dominate the region spanning from the eastern side of the Mediterranean to Iran. While Shīa and Sunna equally revere the Quran as the words that God dictated to the Prophet Muhammad, they had thus far kept their negative views of each other's religious symbols to their private religious circles.

In modern times, governments of the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent kept mass production of books and radio and television broadcasts under control and censorship. However, the proliferation of Internet access in the past ten years was pivotal in making private views public. While official, statesmen-like clerics have kept their views of rival sects private, lower-profile clerics have inundated the Internet with text, voice, and videotaped sermons demonizing members of rival sects for their identification with individuals and practices of which they do not approve.

The unintended effect of enabling public expressions of privately held beliefs concerning members of rival religious groups contributed to the decline of secular ideology and ushered in a new and unstable phase of Middle Eastern political history. In the Fertile Crescent, the inadvertent outcome of the new form of spontaneous interaction of rival sect members in a free media legitimated sectarian identification,

at the expense of the Arab nationalist identification that was officially propagated in the second half of the twentieth century. That decline paved the way for the Islamic Awakening and for the Arab Spring uprisings to take on a religious tone.

## The Decline of Secular Ideology

The secular ideology that emerged in the Fertile Crescent during and after World War II and was expressed in the form of Syrian nationalism and a rival Arab nationalism was the product of intellectuals, belonging mainly to Christian and outcast Muslim sects. They attempted to create a secular national identity to subsume religious and sectarian ones and thereby, after centuries of marginalization, carve leading roles for themselves in public life and power circles. Through controlled state media, the Arab nationalists who gained power fed to the masses the notion that claiming an Arab national identity is sufficient to warrant equal respect from all, regardless of individual sectarian identity. From that time until the emergence of the new media, inflammatory religious rhetoric never surfaced in public discourse.

However, after the US and British invasion of Iraq, the emerging power structure succumbed to open sectarian politics. The invasion and occupation of Iraq triggered the process and then added fuel to the fire by recognizing sect leaders as the official representatives of the masses. We subsequently witnessed the unfolding of a new era in Iraq that mirrored what Lebanon had been experiencing with its free media and democratic institutions since its inception as a nation-state. The informal resource-sharing networks of the sectarian groups became legitimate and assumed the functions of the former state. While Iraq's disintegration into sectarian groups was caused by the vacuum that was left after the United States deliberately dissolved its state institutions, the country would have nevertheless spontaneously disintegrated after the power structure that had maintained it was removed. Had an internal coup ended Saddam Hussein's regime, and the leaders of that coup then held free and fair elections soon after, the process would have been less painful, but the outcome no different. Given the sectarian loyalties that dictate how individuals view and value the world around them, free and fair elections would have rendered the formal rules of state institutions obsolete and replaced them with those of sectarian networks. Secular Arab nationalists who appeared on *al-Jazeera* after the US invasion of Iraq often expressed their dismay at "the sectarian mosaic" they perceived, speaking as if it were not real, concocted instead by foreign invaders. Many still do.

In Syria, the secular state media attempted to contain the religious sectarian tide by fostering an official version of popular Islam at symbolic, as well as substantive, levels, while censoring references to sectarian symbols. It attempted to reverse five decades of policies designed to forge an Arab identity, by replacing what it considered "Arab" symbols with "Islamic" ones. Under previous policy, women's headscarves were branded as a "reactionary" symbol and outlawed from schools. While in a public speech in 1980 President Hafiz al-Asad famously branded the woman's headscarf as "a remnant of rotten traditions," in 2006 Syria celebrated what appeared to be close to headscarf-pride marches. With a marathon of public events, the Syrian government declared Aleppo the "Capital of Islamic Culture."[19] The state also appeared to be curbing Islamist fervor by opening hundreds of religious schools across the country. The state's implicit message to the public was clear: "We are for Islamic values too, but we will not tolerate sectarian rhetoric." The propagators of this message knew that legitimizing sectarian rhetoric would pressure the state's dominant military power structure to explain its own sectarian affiliation.

However inefficiently, secular nationalists attempted to submerge religious rhetoric through nationalist propaganda in the state-sponsored media, keeping mum on religious groups' negative views of one another. The secular regime's failure to create genuine state institutions has much to do with Middle Easterners' prioritization of their religious and sectarian identities and their disloyalty to formal state institutions. The emergence of the new, uncensored Arab media has reinforced that failure. By recognizing sectarian religious figures, by making sectarian references in public discourse, and by portraying things the way they truly are, the new media has been a nail in the coffin of secular ideology. With the lack of a popular base for secular ideology, the rising tide of the Islamic Awakening, and the legitimization of sectarian rhetoric, the stage was set for an uprising of any kind to quickly mutate into a sectarian one.

# 9

# From the Arab Spring to the Revolt of the Sunna

## The Struggle for Secular Syria

The breaking up of the Ottoman Empire after World War I and the apportioning of its former territory in the Fertile Crescent between France and Britain bequeathed to those two countries the task of carving viable nation-states out of that land for its religiously diverse inhabitants. The two colonial powers agreed that France would administer the central and northwestern part (comprising contemporary Syria, Lebanon, and part of southeastern Turkey) while Britain would administer the southern and eastern parts (comprising contemporary Iraq, Palestine, Jordan, and Sinai).

At the time of the French takeover of its share of the Fertile Crescent, the northern part was emerging from a period of genocidal mass murders of Armenian and Assyrian Christians (1895–1915);[1] the Maronite Christians had been granted their semiautonomous region in Mount Lebanon following the 1860 massacres they had suffered there;[2] the Christians of Damascus were massacred in 1860 and their quarter burnt;[3] following a similar event at a smaller scale in Aleppo a decade earlier;[4] and the heterodox Muslims, especially the Alawīyya, Shīa, and Ismāīlīyya, had survived four centuries of intermittent massacres, dispossession, displacement, and seclusion throughout Ottoman rule.[5] Accordingly, in 1919, on the eve of his arrival to Beirut, General Henri Gouraud, commander of the French Army of the Levant, exploited the prevailing distrustful sentiments of the inhabitants toward the adherents of dominant Sunni religious orthodoxy that was bequeathed to the region by the Ottomans and their Seljūq and Mamlūk predecessors. In 1920, under the mantle of protecting smaller religious communities, France created five states: one for the western Armenians in Cilicia;[6] one in the coastal region for the Alawīyya; one for the Durūz in the Durūz Mountain in the

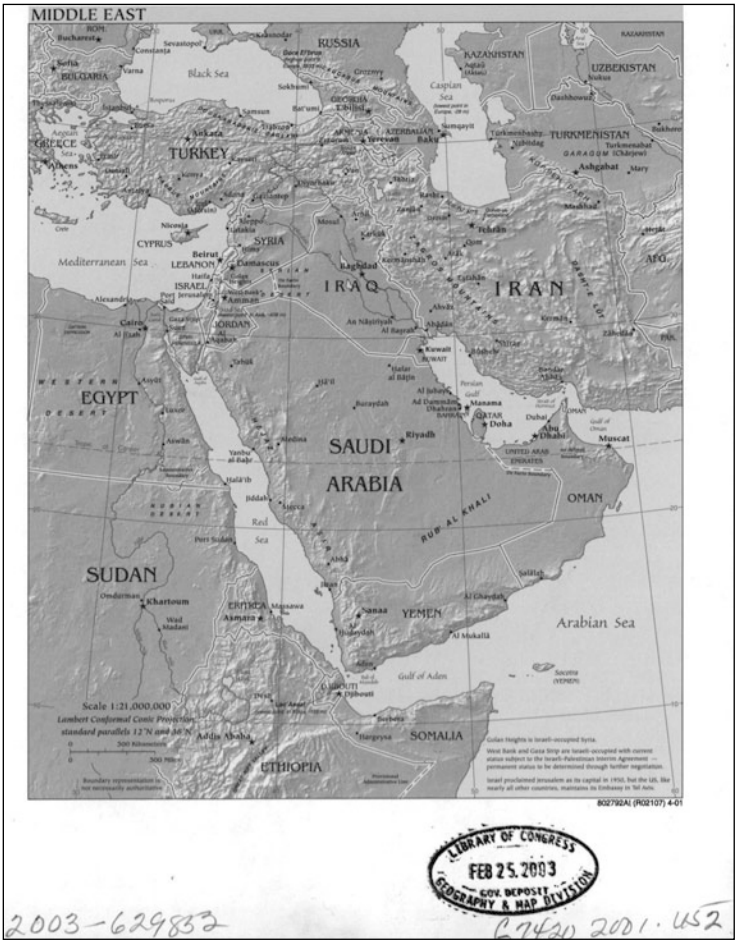


**Figure 9.1** Map of the Middle East.

*Source*: US Central Intelligence Agency (2001), *Middle East* [Map; 802792AI (R02107) 4–01] (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency) from Library of Congress, *Map Collections* [Catalog Number 2003629852], Geography and Map Division, http://www.loc.gov/resource/g7420.ct002245/, accessed July 1, 2015.

south; one for the Maronite Christians in Mount Lebanon, to which several regions were added in order to create a viable economy; and the rest was intended to be a state for the Sunna.[7] In this arrangement, the Shīa, Ismāīlīyya, and the non-Maronite Christians remained without spheres of influence.

The western Armenian state did not live to see the light of day, however, as France ceded it to Turkey along with the entire strip of northern Syria in the Treaty of Ankara, signed on October 20, 1921, which ended the Franco-Turkish war.[8] Reports on events preceding the treaty described at length the sufferings that the Armenian population had undergone through the systematic endeavors of the Kemalists to annihilate the Armenians who survived the 1915 genocide. They requisitioned their houses, schools, churches, cattle, merchandise, and provisions for the needs of the Kemalist Army, while Topal Osman, commander of Mustafa Kemal's special Bodyguard Regiment, "had terrorized and massacred the Christian population in that district and destroyed their houses by fire."[9] In 1936, the French also ceded the northwestern region of Alexandretta to Turkey, and much of its non–Turkish-speaking population was either expelled or fled.

In 1928, Arab and Syrian nationalists sought to eliminate the sectarian divisions of Syria by adopting a secular constitution that (1) affirmed equal rights for heterodox Muslims and Christians, (2) made no reference to Islam as the religion of the state nor dictated that the office of its president should be held by a Muslim, and (3) emphasized the geographical unity of Syria. In 1930, after prolonged negotiations, the French occupation authority approved the secular constitution with two modifications: the first acknowledged the authority of the French Mandate; the second recognized only Lebanon as a mini-state. As a result, the Alawīyya and Durūz mini-states were officially dissolved into Syria in 1936, yet they remained practically self-governing until the 1943 declaration of independence from France.

The feudal elite that dominated the state's organs after the French troops' departure, in 1946, dismantled the local administrative structures in the Alawīyya and Durūz mountains, neglected their infrastructure, marginalized their political leaders, and executed the most prominent ones on charges of apostasy. These last were Suleiman al-Murshid in 1946 and his son Mujīb in 1952; Mujīb was the founder of the Murshidīyya, a subsect of the Alawīyya.[10] On the grassroots level, contemporary heterodox Muslims claim the feudal elite applied neither the letter nor the spirit of the adopted constitution. They tell stories of discrimination, persecution, public humiliation, and confiscation of their lands by their fellow Sunni citizens and the authorities.[11]

Moreover, in 1950, the founder of the Syrian branch of the Muslim Brothers, Mustafā al-Sibāī, who was also a member of the committee to modify the constitution, succeeded in making two changes that effectively annulled that document's secular status. The first was to add the words "the religion of the president of the republic is Islam"; the

second was the new statement "Islamic jurisprudence is the chief source of legislation."[12] Sensing the threat to secular ideology and the intent to marginalize with it heterodox Muslims and non-Muslims, the newly formed Baath Party plotted for a takeover of power and when it succeeded in 1963, it made uprooting the Muslim Brothers a priority, as they posed a threat to the Baathist secular ideology. The Muslim Brothers resisted by founding the Secret Apparatus, which clashed with the Baath regime during the 1964 insurrection in Hama.[13] The insurrection was quelled, and its leader, the cleric Marwān Hadīd, was arrested and sentenced to death. Following that incident the Muslim Brothers were outlawed. However, Hadīd's sentence was not carried out, and he was pardoned and released soon after.

In 1970, Hafiz al-Asad orchestrated an internal Baath Party coup. When it succeeded, he attempted reconciliation with the Muslim Brothers, but they objected to his presidency in the strongest terms on the basis of his Alawī identity. They viewed him as non-Muslim, and therefore saw his presidency as a violation of the constitution. Marwān Hadīd then formed an underground paramilitary wing of the Muslim Brothers, called the Islamic Fighting Vanguard, and set out to topple the new Baath regime and its "apostate" president, while the Muslim Brothers publicly claimed that it was a separate and independent organization from Hadīd's Fighting Vanguard.[14] Hadīd's followers infiltrated the Syrian army; he was planning a major showdown with the regime.

In 1973, Hafiz al-Asad attempted to reverse the Muslim Brothers' changes to the constitution and specifically to change Article 3, which stated that "the religion of the president of the republic shall be Islam" to "the president of the republic shall be a Syrian Arab" and to add the statement "Syria is a secular state." As violent clashes took place in Hama over opposition to the revision, Asad retreated and restored the Muslim Brothers' condition for the presidency. Instead, Asad obtained religious judgments from the two prominent Shīa clerics Ayatollah Hasan al-Shirazi and al-Sayyed Mousa al-Sadr who declared the Alawīyya as Muslims.[15] Hadīd nevertheless continued his violent campaign to topple the regime. He was arrested on June 30, 1975, and died a year later in prison, allegedly under torture for refusing to give up the struggle for an Islamic state.[16] His followers continued his fight and formed many underground paramilitary networks, such as the Youth of Muhammad, the Soldiers of God, the Faithful Youth, and the Islamic Fighting Vanguard, who carried out an assassination campaign designed to topple the regime and ultimately abolish secular law and establish an Islamic state.

## The Political Context of the Arab Spring Uprising

Five major political events, beginning around the time of the 1970 Baathist internal coup, preceded the Islamic Awakening and culminated in the Syrian version of the Arab Spring uprising. These are the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), the Muslim Brothers' uprising in Syria (1976–82), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan (1979), the Islamic Revolution in Iran (1979), and the Iran–Iraq War (1980–88).

First, events triggering the 1975–90 civil war in Lebanon began in 1970, after the Palestine Liberation Organization, or the PLO, was dislodged from Jordan and relocated its headquarters in Beirut, Lebanon. The reorganization of the PLO in southern Lebanon and its attacks on northern Israel prompted massive Israeli retaliation against Palestinian refugee camps, some of which were located in densely populated urban areas, including Beirut. In response to the pressure of repeated Israeli air strikes, the Lebanese government attempted in 1973 to restrict the activities of the PLO, whose armed presence also threatened the supremacy of the Lebanese army. However, this initiative was complicated by the fact that government and defense hierarchies in Lebanon were dominated by Maronite Christians, while most Palestinians were Muslims. As a result, the conflict was transformed from one between an armed organization and the state to a conflict along religious lines.

The Lebanese army's failure to disarm or restrict the activities of the PLO prompted the Phalanges militias of the Maronites to take on this task of the state. Their clashes with the PLO on July 29 through 30, 1974 were followed by fighting on September 22 with the Durūz's "Socialist Progressive Party." On April 13, 1975, the civil war began with a Phalanges ambush of a bus transporting Palestinians, which killed most of the passengers. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine—General Command retaliated by bombarding the Christian quarters of Beirut. Subsequently, sectarian-based militias grouped into two opposing fronts: one included four Christian militias aided by the Lebanese army; the other included 25 Muslim militias aided by the PLO. Israel also participated by continuing its air raids on Palestinian camps. Thousands of civilian casualties and massive sectarian cleansing were the outcome of this first, 1975–76, phase of the civil war, including massacres of Maronites in 1976.

Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad initially aided the Muslim and Palestinian militias. However, as the latter gained significant ground against the Maronite Christians and refused to stop their advance

into Christian territories, Asad switched sides. He called for the Arab League to convene the Riyadh Summit of October 17, 1976, which was attended by heads of state from Egypt, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. The summit authorized an Arab Deterrent Force, composed of 25,000 Syrian soldiers and 5,000 Arab soldiers, to enter Lebanon and stop the fighting. While the forces were formally under the command of the Maronite Christian Lebanese president, in practice they were commanded by the Syrian officers in the field.

Many Syrian and Lebanese Sunni Muslims viewed this direct intervention by the Syrian military for the purpose of preserving the political power of the Maronite Christians as treacherous and directly attributable to Asad's Alawī sectarian identity. Expressing these popular sentiments, graffiti appeared in Beirut, reading "O Asad, O Christian, when did you become a Maronite" (*ya Asad ya nasrani emat srt maroni*).[17] The Muslim Brothers used those anti-Alawīyya sentiments to boost their own political agenda and the action program they had embarked on since the Baathist coup of 1963.

Second, following the 1976 Syrian intervention in Lebanon, the Muslim Brothers expanded their assassination list to include prominent Alawī and Baathist officers, civil servants, medical doctors, university professors, and schoolteachers.[18] While most of those targeted were Alawīyya, the Muslim Brothers' hit list included Sunni Muslims and even Sunni clerics accused of collaborating with the government.

The following personal anecdote demonstrates the uneasy atmosphere that the Islamic Fighting Vanguard of the Muslim Brothers created for Sunni Muslims, who were willing to share power with the Alawi-dominated regime. As the assassinations campaign went into its third year, a school friend of mine and Baath Party member, Abdo,[19] informed me of his concern: he had heard that the name of his maternal aunt's husband, the prominent Sunni cleric al-Sheikh Muhammad al-Shāmi, was on that hit list. Expressing an all too familiar conflict between his personal allegiance to his uncle and his sectarian allegiance, he said to me: "there would be a severe retaliation if the [Muslim] Brothers assassinated him." Then he added, after a prolonged pause, "but if people take to the streets and chant God is Greatest (*Allahu Akbar*) against the government, I would not be able to resist joining them." On February 2, 1980, two months after that conversation, the Muslim Brothers shot and then slaughtered the cleric in the courtyard of his mosque.[20]

It wasn't until June 16, 1979, when the Muslim Brothers carried out the Aleppo Artillery School massacre, that the sectarian nature of the revolt showed itself in undeniable terms. On that evening, the

commanding officer on duty, Ibrahim al-Youssef, who was secretly a member of the Muslim Brothers' military wing the Islamic Fighting Vanguard, entered the cadets' canteen while they were dining, pulled out a list of names and announced that those who hear their names read should leave the canteen. The remaining cadets whose names were not read were Alawīyya. The commander then left and shut the door. Immediately after, armed men led by Adnan Uqla, the leader of the Fighting Vanguard, appeared at the windows and gunned down the Alawī cadets.[21] That massacre marked the beginning of the escalation of violence on both sides. As special units of the Army conducted regular patrols of the city, they were often ambushed. They, in turn, retaliated, sometimes with indiscriminate violence and humiliation of civilians. A failed assassination attempt on the life of Hafiz al-Asad on June 26, 1980 was followed the next day by the execution of approximately 800 Islamists in the notorious Palmyra prison.[22]

Fourth, the 1979 Islamic Revolution of Iran, which replaced its secular government with a Shīa theocracy, encouraged the Muslim Brothers in Syria to believe that they could accomplish a similar objective, replacing their country's secular government with a theocratic one rooted in the tradition of the Sunna. However, this admiration of Iran soon gave way to hostility toward it as the Shīa identity was politicized and entangled in the Iran–Iraq war. In 1980, as Syrian President Hafiz al-Asad opposed the Iraqi invasion of Iran on the grounds that it squandered Iraq's wealth on an unworthy fight over a strip of land, again sectarian allegiance came to the fore. Syria's siding with Iran against Saddam Hussein's invasion was the fourth factor that caused the Syrian Sunna to feel their sectarian ethos was not represented by their government. Although a secular Baathist, Saddam Hussein was still seen in Syria as a Sunni Muslim who had invaded Shīa Iran; he was not seen as a tyrant pursuing his own glorious place in history. On the other hand, in backing Iran in the war, Syria's ruling elite were seen by their Sunni constituents as supporting Shīa Iran and acting from a sectarian perspective rather than from a strategic Arab perspective to strengthen Syria's negotiating power for the return of the Golan Heights, as Hafiz al-Asad envisioned his government's stance. The fact that the Alawīyya, Asad's sect, had only a few symbolic elements in common with the Shīa, and especially with the ethos of the Islamic Revolution of Iran, did not matter; Asad's government was seen as acting out of sectarian allegiance because the Alawī system of beliefs, though heretic in the eyes of most Shīa, had originally emerged from the Shīa tradition. Since then, the Shīa identity has remained politicized, and the Sunni inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent have looked

upon the Shīa and particularly Iran with suspicion. This antipathy was fueled by a dramatic increase in the publication of anti-Shīa literature by Gulf powers who felt insecure about the rise of an Islamic Iran. The House of Saud felt particularly threatened, and worried about losing its dominion over Mecca and Medina, the two holy cities that any Muslim dynasty, caliphate, or theocracy would have to eventually claim in order to legitimize its ambition to lead the Muslim world. Today, Syrian rebel media outlets often refer to Iran's Shīa with archaic appellations, such as Magians (the pre-Islamic Zoroastrian priestly cast) or Safavids (the dynasty that ruled Iran in 1502–1736), in order to cast Iran in the minds of Muslims as an ambitious power that seeks an empire and to discredit Iran's claim to Islam.

Fifth, a few months later, in December 1979, the Soviet army invaded Afghanistan to aid its beleaguered communist government against Islamist insurgents. US policy makers, immersed in their own Cold War against the Soviets, saw in the invasion an opportunity to embarrass the Soviet Union and drain its resources by plotting with Saudi Arabia to engineer a Soviet failure. With US supervision, the Saudis deployed their vast media empire to attract, recruit, train, and arm Jihadists to fight the Soviets. While the Arab and Western world imposed sanctions on the Soviet Union and funded the Jihadi effort, the Syrian government did the opposite. Hafiz al-Asad maintained Syria's high-profile diplomatic, economic, and military ties with the Soviets, while the Syrian media denounced the Jihadi insurgency as a reactionary movement in the face of social progress in Afghanistan. This stance further alienated Asad, and by implication, his sect and the Baath Party, in the eyes of the majority of Syria's Sunni Muslims.

As a result, the Alawīyya at large faced the wrath of the Sunni Islamists, who held them singularly responsible for maintaining the unwanted, to them, secularization of Syria and the alienation of its Sunni inhabitants from their domestic and international Islamic causes. The rest of the heterodox Muslims and non-Muslims were politically weak and unarmed, so the Alawīyya appeared to the Sunni Islamists to be the main obstacle to the imposition of Muslim Law (*Sharia*) in all aspects of life and on all of the inhabitants of Syria, including heterodox Muslims and non-Muslims.

The Muslim Brothers' revolt ultimately ended, after the Hama Massacre of 1982, where the army put down the Muslim Brothers' takeover of the city and in the process demolished entire parts of its old quarters, with estimates of casualties ranging from 2,000, according to a CIA report,[23] to 20,000 rumored deaths.[24] A violent page in

Syrian history was turned, while all parties braced for the next round. The opportunity for that next round presented itself during the Arab Spring uprising. While the West saw it as another youth revolt against dictatorship, it was, for the vast majority of Syrians, a continuation of an unfinished episode that had begun three decades earlier.

In the interim, the transition in Syria's leadership that had taken place from father to son had serious consequences for the regime's struggle with the Islamists. Having grown up in the countryside, Hafiz al-Asad was in a better position to communicate with the peasantry and have them rally around the Baath Party to "defend their revolution." The peasants indeed did, or at least their ambivalence toward the Muslim Brothers confined the latter's activities to few major cities. Moreover, Hafiz enlisted peasants in the Baath Party to secure their future loyalty to Baath rule. In general, the peasantry of that period formed the backbone of the counter movement to the Muslim Brothers. In the cities, Hafiz established religious schools headed by clerics who ultimately answered to his security networks, a fact that partially explains the urban inhabitants' reluctance to rebel against the regime during the 2011 uprising. The son, Bashār, on the other hand, was a city dweller and grew up in a privileged urban environment distant from the countryside. That physical distance inadvertently translated into a neglect of the needs of the demographically exploding countryside, which made the peasantry susceptible to manipulation and recruitment by the domestic and foreign Islamists.

In addition, by the time of the Arab Spring uprisings, a few external developments popularized the Muslim Brothers' ideology and strengthened their organization, while others challenged it for power. First, the Islamic Awakening brought to the arena more Islamists and more violent ones, such as the Wahhabiyya subsect of Sunni Islam, who branded themselves as various al-Qaida franchises throughout the Muslim world. The 2003 US and British invasion of Iraq attracted these former recruits in the fight against the Soviets, referred to as the Jihadi Base; in Arabic they were Qaidat al-Jihad or, in short, al-Qaida. After defeating the Soviet army, those fighters formed an international network and called it the al-Qaida Organization, which was headed by Osama bin Laden with the aim of fighting infidels who occupy Muslim territories. After the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, al-Qaida established the al-Qaida Organization in Iraq under the leadership of Abū Musab al-Zarqāwi, who pledged allegiance to bin Laden. In 2006, that same organization entered into a coalition with other Islamist groups, and they called the new formation the Islamic State of Iraq. In April 2013,

its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, announced that he had merged al-Nusra Front, another organization he had established as the Syrian al-Qaida, with the Islamic State of Iraq to form a new organization: the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (geographical Syria). In June 2014, al-Baghdadi declared himself the caliph of the Islamic State with the aim of restoring the Muslim Empire and ruling it according to the principles of the Wahhabiyya. While al-Baghdadi's organization, ISIL, recruited mostly foreign Jihadists, al-Nusra attracted many of the Syrians who had returned to Syria after the 2008 economic slowdown in the Gulf region. Those unemployed, especially the Wahhabi-educated ones, found themselves at home with the al-Qaida affiliated groups.

Under those circumstances, al-Qaida established itself in the Fertile Crescent as a competing Sunni force, against which the West could claim the "moderateness" of the Muslim Brothers. Indeed, while no one established criteria that define a "moderate" rebel, policy makers and politicians referred to all non-al-Qaida affiliated groups as moderates, despite their Salafi Jihadi ideology. Al-Qaida, the most militant brand of the al-Salafiyya al-Jihadiyya movement, presented itself to the Syrian rebels as an alternative to the Muslim Brothers and indeed proved itself to be a more efficient fighting force that was able to impose Muslim Law where the Muslim Brothers had failed.

The second circumstance to strengthen the Muslim Brothers was their coming to power in Turkey and branding themselves as the Justice and Development Party. They brought with them a comprehensive program to reverse the secularization of Turkey and the ambition to restore the Ottoman Empire, the last Muslim Caliphate, which had disintegrated after World War I.[25] During the Arab Spring uprisings, Turkey hosted the Syrian National Council, dominated by the Muslim Brothers, and volunteered to lobby for them with the Syrian regime. As the latter rejected Turkish pressure to share power with the Brothers, Turkey called for the removal of the Syrian regime and actively facilitated the intensification of protests into a full-scale militarization of the conflict.

Third in the sequence of events that advanced the Muslim Brothers was the rise of the Emirate of Qatar, which hosted many members of the Brothers who had fled from Egypt and Syria. The discovery of huge reserves of natural gas in Qatar enabled it to use its easily earned revenues for buying influence in the Muslim world. Indeed, briefly after deposing his father, Qatar's ambitious prince Hamad ibn Kahlifa Āl Thāni decided to use Qatar's newly found wealth to carve a political role for himself and his heirs in the Muslim world. He made

Qatar into the media center for the Muslim Brothers, bolstered by *al-Jazeera* TV network and the media empire of many newspapers and websites. The prince hosted the contemporary spiritual spokesman for the Muslim Brothers, the cleric Yousef al-Qaradawi, who heads the International Union of Muslim Scholars, and made him a de facto grand mufti of the Arab Spring uprisings. In May 2013, continuing in the tradition of the Hanbali legal school of Ibn Taymiyya, al-Qaradawi denounced the Alawīyya as "more infidel than Christians and Jews" and called on Muslims "everywhere" and on "everyone who has the ability and has training to kill" to go to Syria because "we cannot ask our brothers to be killed while we watch."[26]

Fourthly, after the assassination of Yasser Arafat,[27] the Palestinian network of the Muslim Brothers, branded as Hamas, rose to power in Palestine through elections, but later a coup restricted its political domain to the Gaza Strip. After the Arab Spring uprising in Syria, Hamas's Sunni Muslim identity trumped its Palestinian one as it declared its support for the Sunni revolt in Syria and moved its headquarters from Damascus to Doha, the capital of Qatar, the prime refuge for the Muslim Brothers' leadership and clerics. Hamas subsequently aided the Syrian rebels with its tunnel-digging expertise, which it had honed over the many years of siege in the Gaza Strip. Hundreds of similar tunnels were dug across Syria for the purpose of blowing up Syrian government buildings, checkpoints, and monumental buildings, such as those surrounding the Citadel of Aleppo that housed the Syrian army.[28]

The last but not the least of the factors that created the present conditions in favor of the Muslim Brothers was US foreign policy. The administration of President Barack Obama was persuaded that the rising tide of the Islamic Awakening was unstoppable and that the Muslim Brothers were a moderate Sunni Islamic movement that could be an ally of the West; if they rose to power in Syria, they would check Shīa Iran's projection of its power in the Middle East. Moreover, in the years preceding the Arab Spring uprisings, a general opinion prevailed in Western academic and political circles that Turkey presented itself as a model for a moderate Islamic state: the Muslim Brothers rule while still maintaining Turkey's alliance with NATO. That climate of opinion explains why the United States backed the rebellion of the Sunna from day one of the uprising and branded it to the American public as a pro-democracy movement.[29]

The Muslim Brothers, on the other hand, had also taken political steps to appear as open to parties whom successive Syrian governments had rejected. In 2005 and later they made overtures to the

Kurds of the region bordering Turkey, pointing out their tolerance of Kurds as opposed to the regime's Arab "racism." The Brothers also appointed two Kurds to leading positions: one was Abdel basset Sida as head of the Syrian National Council in June 2012;[30] the other was Ghassan Hitto as prime minister of an interim government for the Syrian National Coalition of Revolutionary Forces in March 2013.[31] This openness toward the Kurds countered the common suspicion among Arab Sunni Muslims that their Sunni Kurd brethren do not take their religion seriously, and therefore, in their view, are "morally unreliable." Another startling move was the appointment as president of the Muslim Brothers–dominated Syrian National Council of the communist George Sabra. Leaving aside the questionable motive of the latter in serving as a front man for an organization dominated by religious fundamentalists, the Muslim Brother's willingness to appoint a communist who is also of Christian extraction is evidence of how far the group is willing to go to present itself to the West as an open-minded and acceptable alternative to the embattled Syrian regime.

Taking full advantage of the Arab Spring uprising in North Africa, the Obama administration sent Ambassador Robert Ford to Syria while he was still unconfirmed by the Senate.[32] Robert Ford arrived in Damascus during the Egyptian uprising in January 2011 and has since played a key role in coordinating with antigovernment forces for the uprising and later in its militarization.[33] On July 8, he travelled to the religiously conservative city of Hama to cheerlead the protestors calling for the downfall of the Asad regime.[34] After the militarization of the uprising, Ford spearheaded the diplomatic efforts to advocate a more active role for the United States in arming the rebels. On May 11, 2013, Ford was seen with Abd al-Jabbar al-Ukaidi, the commander of Aleppo's Revolutionary Military Council of the Free Syrian Army, in which the Muslim Brothers-affiliated al-Tawhīd Brigade is a major force.[35] On August 6, 2013, al-Ukaidi appeared with several rebel group leaders, including those of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, praising God and thanking them for their participation in their takeover of one of Aleppo's military airports.[36] On a different occasion al-Ukaidi, like many members of the opposition in the Muslim Brothers–dominated Syrian National Council, praised the Syrian al-Qaida franchise, al-Nusra Front, but underplayed their relative size within the Free Syrian Army.[37] By this late stage of the rebellion, the religious dimension of the conflict must have been clear to any observer, let alone to the US ambassador.[38]

In practice, the political organization and leadership of the Muslim Brothers were stationed in Turkey and Qatar and thereby had little control of the fighting groups in Syria. They acted as representatives of the Syrian "revolution" with Western, regional, and Arab sponsors. However, the fighting groups, though ideologically sympathetic with the Muslim Brothers, were organizationally fragmented across the Syrian landscape and did not necessarily follow orders from the exiled leadership.[39] Indeed, today, the political organization of the Muslim Brothers only represents the ethos of the rebellion and by no means commands any significant force on the ground. That fragmentation and remoteness from the single command and control center caused the fighting groups to compete for resources and, as a result, often engage in combat against each other. More frustrating to their Western backers was their willingness to join the better funded and more disciplined ranks of al-Qaida affiliated groups, who were more eager to die for the cause of toppling the regime and in the process kill as many infidels and apostates as they could.[40]

## The Political Economy of the Uprising

The ideology of the Baath Party, which came to power in Syria in 1963, was inspired mainly by the works of its founder Michèl Aflaq[41] and drew on Arab nationalist and Socialist components. The Arab nationalist component was designed to legitimize the ascendance of non-Sunni Muslims and non-Muslims to positions of power in Syrian government hierarchies; the Socialist one sought to redistribute agricultural land from feudal landlords to peasants[42] and, presumably, to improve the lot of a small industrial working class. A subsequent left-leaning intra-Baath power struggle between the supporters of Aflaq and mainly Alawī officers led to the ousting of the former in 1966. The victors favored implementing Soviet-style five-year plans to establish large-scale state-owned industrial and commercial enterprises that would employ a large segment of the population and thereby create a strong working class. The rationale for such an undertaking was the belief that the Baath Party could not maintain itself in power for long without a working class that would be willing to guard the Baath revolution.

In 1970, the events of Black September in Jordan had major consequences regarding economic policy in Syria. The battle for power that unfolded there between the PLO and the Hashemite monarchy over which of them should rule the country, precipitated a disagreement over the appropriate Syrian response between the two top

Syrian military officers, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Asad. Asad refused to carry out Jadid's orders to provide air support for the Palestinian divisions that Jadid sent from Syria to Jordan to support the PLO's rebellion.[43] Jadid subsequently discharged Asad for insubordination. Asad responded by staging a bloodless coup and prevailed. Asad's capture of power had economic consequences, as he was more pragmatic regarding the role of the private sector in industrialization. He believed that the private sector should be allowed to participate more freely in industrial development so that it would compete with the public sector and thereby, presumably, force both sectors to be more efficient.

As time passed, the private sector cannibalized the public sector. Power and wealth concentrated in the hands of extended families affiliated with the highest-ranking military officers, including families belonging to the Sunni majority who supported the prevailing power structure. The failure of the public sector was generally due to the lack of organizational behavior expertise among industrial policy makers and managers of state-owned enterprises. Workers and managers had no incentive to control quality, but more crucially, upper level managers plundered their own enterprises by selling the assets to private entities, and the political elite left such abuse of public trust unpunished. Instead of being sacked, corrupt managers were sometimes transferred to alternate positions. As a result, state-owned enterprises were not able to compete without monopoly power and barely broke even when they were granted that power.

As state-owned enterprises were failing, new large-scale private enterprises were emerging from a new fusion of private capital, owned by the historically dominant Sunni merchant and industrial classes, and the influence of high-ranking military officers or other regime affiliates, some but not all of whom were Alawīyya.[44] The latter cleared bureaucratic and legal hurdles erected by the Baathist governments and provided protection from informally sanctioned transgressions by rival power brokers in exchange for a share of the ownership and profit. Those informal networks neither abided by, nor enforced, the legal codes, and they insulated themselves from the rule of law through informal mechanisms. However, while such cooperation was common among individuals within the various sects, suspicion remained at the inter-sectarian level, highlighting the paradoxical relationship between personal and sectarian identities.[45] For example, Alawī and Sunni individuals would trust each other on personal levels, while still remaining suspicious of each other as members of their separate sectarian groups.

The new large enterprises significantly weakened traditional small-scale businesses that had hitherto formed the backbone of Syria's economy, and this led to a general decline in per capita income.[46] While some small-scale urban businesses and proprietors experienced a trickle-down effect from some of the concentrated wealth, the urban working class and especially the multiplying inhabitants of the countryside lived on a subsistence level. Within half a century, because of a culturally based high level of fertility averaging 3 percent and improved health services that led to a declining rate of infant mortality and prolonged life expectancy, the Syrian population quadrupled.[47] The emerging economy, however, was not able to absorb this population increase and provide the rising living standard that was compatible with people's expectations. To the contrary, the growth rate declined from 7.21 percent in 1994 to 1.7 percent in 2004.[48] Within three decades, the official unemployment rate doubled from 6.9 percent in 1994 to 12.3 percent in 2004.[49] Several years of successive droughts further disproportionately deteriorated the living standards in the countryside and raised food prices. The regime affiliates across the Syrian sectarian landscape who had left the nonurban areas and who had originally intended their Baath revolution to lift their fellow peasants up from poverty, prospered and their offspring came to preside over vast amounts of real wealth. Yet the peasantry from across all sects, including the Alawīyya not affiliated with the families of the military elite, was left behind.[50]

One major factor that for a long time kept the peasantry and working class from falling into poverty was the government subsidies for food and local transportation, free education, and limited free healthcare provided to all citizens. However, the gradual removal of the food subsidies, which continued up until the eve of the Arab Spring uprisings, placed further pressure on the low income masses and caused widespread resentment. Indeed, on the eve of the Syrian uprising, there were simply too many grievances that had not been addressed by the incumbent power structure: vast income inequalities, state officials' corruption and abuse of power at all levels of government, the economy's inability to absorb a new quarter of a million of job seekers every year,[51] and the removal of all trade barriers with Turkey, which caused hardships in many competing sectors. Moreover, the Syrian Army's withdrawal from Lebanon, following the assassination of the Lebanese oligarch, former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri, left Syrian workers there without protection from random attacks and murders by Lebanese street thugs. Many of those workers returned to Syria, creating more unemployment. Many were from

Houran and its capital city Daraa, the southern region of Syria, where the rebellion started. The withdrawal also exposed the Syrian border to Jihadist infiltration and supply of weapons through the Lebanese port of Tripoli, which used to be under Syrian control.

In short, there were numerous economic grievances that exacerbated the standard political grievances faced by authoritarian governments. Yet, political corruption was the hallmark of the last two decades, which Bashār al-Asad was unable to address. Massive high-level corruption commenced in the 1990s, when President Hafiz al-Asad inexplicably went into seclusion. Except for rare appearances with foreign dignitaries, he isolated himself from his surroundings, including his ministers, and therefore lost a sense of the magnitude of abuse of power and theft of public assets that was being carried out by his Baath Party subordinates. Like many political systems with one-party rule, those who joined the Baath Party and stayed in it after it securely established itself were by and large opportunists. Baath Party circles in schools, universities, and state enterprises functioned more like networks of informants, which convened in "political evaluation" sessions, whereby some members denounced their non-Baathist colleagues to advance themselves or please their superiors.

The following four anecdotes may illustrate why many Baath Party members acquired their reputation as informants or corrupt officials.[52] While in my early stages of high school at Aleppo College, my classmate Abdo, who was a Baath Party member and officer of the affiliate youth organization, escorted me to the office of a high ranking administrator. The latter appeared as a cultivated intellectual. My classmate introduced me to him saying: "As you requested, here is a student with a superior academic record." The administrator was a government official appointed as an external enforcer of the government's curriculum in a private school that was established by American Protestants in the 1930s. The administrator then made a case that I should attend the Baath Party circle meetings in the capacity of a "Friend Member." I was flattered by the invitation, as I was under the impression that it would allow me to participate in extracurricular school activities, bond me with my Muslim classmates whom I had already befriended a year earlier, and contribute to managing student affairs at a school that I was grateful to be attending. I was right in my expectations until briefly before graduation, when I frequently heard about "the upcoming political evaluation" process. By that time, the administrator who had recruited me and presided over the party's weekly meetings was replaced by a lieutenant, the

military commander of the school's paramilitary youth organization. At one meeting, the lieutenant handed me a class list and asked me to politically evaluate my classmates. No further instructions were given as to what "politically evaluate" meant or who the enemy we were supposed to be on the lookout for was. I also did not inquire further, as I had no intention of participating in the process. Half of my graduating class was Christian and half of those were Armenian; the other half was Muslim. As I was fluent in Armenian, I overheard the Armenians' conversations and knew that they had no interest in politics whatsoever. The rest of the Christians were Arabic-speaking and were all mostly interested in sports and often had superficial conversations. The remaining classmates were Sunni Muslim and were my friends. The next week, the lieutenant asked me for the form. He looked at it, and then at me and said: "Where is your evaluation?" I responded, "No one is interested in politics." He angrily said: "Are we going to send the form back empty?" I responded, "Why not? They are all friends; isn't that a good thing?" He then pointed to one name in what seemed like a random pick and said: "What about this one?" I responded, "He is especially good." The person he picked was an Armenian, who later attended graduate school in the United States and became a renowned engineer and inventor with over a hundred patents. Presumably, the lieutenant's expectation of a good job on my part was for me to denounce a few colleagues to show his superiors that his subordinates were doing their due diligence in identifying potential threats. That encounter was my first and last disturbing experience with the Baath Party. Since I did not see myself in the position of informant, I never returned. I later discovered that such evaluations were common occurrences at party meetings at the university level, as I became the subject of an evaluation when I applied for graduate school. One friend leaked to me the minutes of a session in which I was subjected to three conflicting assessments of my political views. One member described me as a "bourgeois reactionary" as evidenced by my "affluent" status for having been seen "driving a car to the university, while the rest take public transportation"; the second offered: "he is a communist," evidenced by "a paper he presented in the political economy class arguing that religious thought should not be taught in schools, for it promotes dogmatic thinking and hinders progress"; the third commented: "he is an idealist" and gave a lengthy justification based on his personal interactions with me. The third assessment must have carried more weight, as I was given security clearance and admitted to graduate school.

The upshot of the above two anecdotes is that those who persevered in the Baath Party could be divided into two groups. One was marginalized for refusing to go along with immoral conduct; the others went along with the flow, were promoted, and assumed leading positions in state organs. Of the latter group, I knew a high-ranking Baath Party member who was appointed as the general manager of one of Aleppo's largest state-owned enterprises in Syria. Immediately upon his appointment in 1981, I witnessed a conversation between him and an acquaintance of his, a former entrepreneur in the manufacturing industry, who happened to be my late father. The manager offered him in a casual manner a business venture whereby the former would provide the latter a regular supply of materials below market price and split with him the profits accrued from their resale at market price. My late father politely declined, justifying his negative response with a chronic health-related reason. There is no doubt that the manager eventually found a cooperative counterpart from the private sector who was willing to take part in that plunder. Such violation of public trust was rampant and reached alarming levels prior to the Arab Spring uprising in a manner that had a forced trickle-down effect on even minor officials, as in the fourth anecdote, which I will narrate below. In deference to the anecdote's main subject's request for anonymity, I will not reveal specific locations.

Four months prior to the Arab Spring uprising, a major general, the chief of police of one southern Syrian city, was transferred to another larger city in the Syrian region of Mesopotamia. One month after the new appointment, the chief received a telephone call informing him that "the brother of the interior minister will be visiting you in few weeks for a collection." The chief responded: "He is welcome to visit, but I have no funds for him." About two weeks after that brief conversation, the chief was discharged to an early retirement. Had the chief gone with the flow and agreed to deliver a sum of money to the minister's brother, as another important figure suggested to me after I informed him of the major general's fate, he would have had to acquire the funds through improper means by pressuring his subordinates to engage in bullying and extortions (*salbatta*) of all kinds. Ultimately, the extortion would trickle down to the weakest link in the food chain, which is the hapless citizen.[53] In that manner, corruption crept into many state functions, creating widespread resentment and more importantly, when it spread to state security organs, leading to the quick collapse of the security apparatus controlling the country's border with Turkey and thereby allowing the subsequent unlimited flow of foreign Jihadists into Syria.

## The Political Liberalization Fantasy

Bashār al-Asad's accession to the presidency in the year 2000 made many believe that he would end the Baath Party's monopoly over power and usher in political change in the direction of a Western-style democratic government. This hope arose in response to the record of the three successive regimes of the Baath Party, which had monopolized political life and gradually turned the party into a mere instrument of power and control, void of substantive processes to address the vital political and economic challenges facing Syria. The Baath Party had also blocked all attempts to develop an open and pluralistic political system.

However, as can be understood from the analyses presented in chapter 8, the Baathists, in order to make progress toward the kind of political reform that would lead to democratic change, would have had to hand power to the Islamist political forces with whom an increasing number of Syrians were identifying. The rising tide of political Islam combined with open and free elections would have replaced the incumbent authoritarian regime with a totalitarian one. As the Western notion of a constitutional democracy, which grants individual freedoms regardless of the political group or party in power, had no place in the prevailing Islamic religious thought, the idea of democracy is reduced to the principle of majority rule. The concepts of freedom and democracy in the vernacular of the Arabic-speaking Middle East signify nothing more than freedom from slavery, or tyrannical rule, and a vaguely defined notion of justice. Accordingly, a representative democratic political system could elect a coalition of Islamist parties who, in turn, would impose Muslim Law on all the country's inhabitants without regard to individual beliefs.

From the Syrian regime's perspective, the political reforms promised by Bashār al-Asad upon his accession to power had to be postponed indefinitely, because the prevailing conditions were not favorable for the regime to gain legitimacy via free and open elections. Four major factors played a role in the regime's resistance to allowing political reforms prior to the Arab Spring uprisings. First, the regime was aware of the Islamic Awakening as an influential social force that had manifested itself in the Middle East in all aspects of life. It therefore feared that free and open elections would bring Islamists of various kinds to power to eventually impose Muslim Law on the country's inhabitants at large, a result that at least half of today's Syrians opposed. Second, even if the regime had barred Islamist political organizations or individuals from running for political office, conducting reasonably

free elections would still have led to the Baath Party's loss of power, because of the negative perceptions its members had cultivated for themselves over the past 40 years. The regime was not willing to lose power, especially when no alternative political organizations had been established to represent key regime personnel. Third, economic conditions had been deteriorating for various aforementioned reasons, in addition to the prolonged economic embargos imposed by the West. Such economic decline by itself would have been enough reason for people to vote symbols of the regime out of power. Accordingly, the regime had to tackle these three issues first before facing the general public in an open election. To maintain their party in power, top regime personnel needed to undertake administrative reforms, eliminating corruption within its ranks, and then undertake economic reforms to improve material conditions for the masses prior to allowing meaningful political reforms to take place.

In addition to the above three factors, external threats to Syria's security provided the fourth and decisive factor that killed any chance

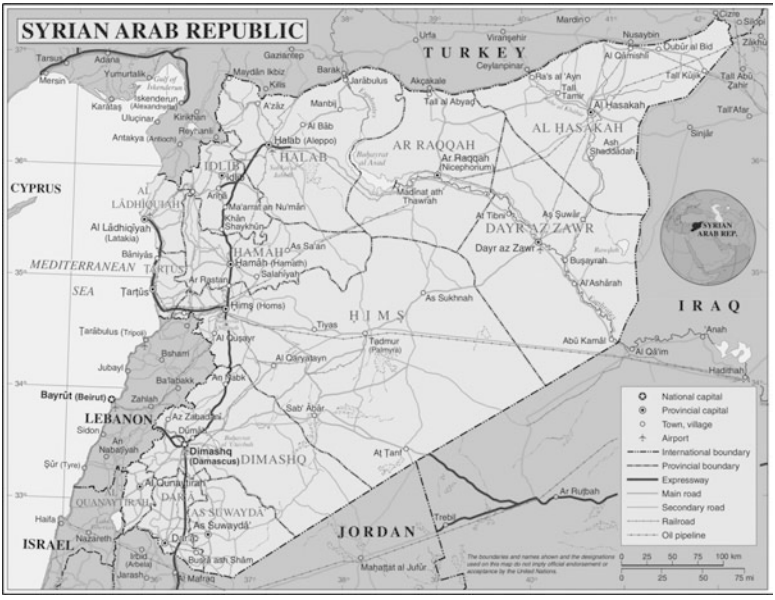


**Figure 9.2** Map of Syria.

*Source*: US Central Intelligence Agency (2001), *Syria* [Map; Base 80086AI (G00046) 5–07] (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency) from Library of Congress, *Map Collections* [Catalog Number 2007631377], Geography and Map Division, http://www.loc.gov/resource/g7460.ct002138/, accessed July 1, 2015.

for political liberalization. The regional security concerns stemming from the frantic reaction of the United States to the September 11 terrorist attacks, notably the invasion of Iraq, placed Syria in a defensive position. With US officials announcing that the invasion of Syria would follow the invasion of Iraq,[54] regime personnel prioritized security concerns over political reform. The subsequent assassination of Lebanon's most prominent oligarch, former prime minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005; the attempts to implicate the regime's leadership in the assassination; the Syrian army's resulting hasty withdrawal from Lebanon, exposing the western frontier to a possible Israeli attack; and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon that followed a year later, all intensified the regime's insecurity.

## The Uprising

As street protests swiftly overthrew the presidents of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, albeit in Libya with the military help of NATO, Syrian antigovernment activists began to believe they could overthrow the Syrian regime in the same manner. Among those activists were many disillusioned secular oppositionists, from various sectarian and professional backgrounds, who had lost hope that the ruling regime would ever transfer power to a freely elected civilian government. Those various opposition forces had two illusions. One was that street protests could peacefully topple the regime; the other was that the power vacuum would be filled by a self-appointed transitional government that would soon call for elections whereby Syrians would elect open-minded, liberal individuals in the self-image of the secular oppositionists themselves. As the first option for replacing the regime proved to be an illusion, the secular opposition believed that a violent overthrow of the regime would still bring them to power. Since they had no armed groups representing them on the ground, they served with the blessings of their foreign and Arab sponsors as the spokesmen for the Islamist fighters, including al-Qaida.[55]

Protests were sparked in the religiously conservative southern city of Daraa by the arrest of a group of 18 teenagers, 11 of whom belonged to the family of Aba Zayd. On March 6, 2011, the teenagers were caught writing on the city's walls the slogan of the Arab Spring, "The people want to overthrow the regime." After their arrest, the first staged civil action was recorded in the center of Damascus, where a handful of people marched in a protest on March 15, calling for a free Syria.[56] While the Daraa teenagers were still in custody and allegedly tortured, hundreds of protesters gathered on March 18 for

Friday's prayers at al-Omari Mosque and called for freedom and the downfall of the regime. Security forces were reported to have opened fire on the protesters, killing three of them.[57] On March 20, protesters attacked the courthouse, the Baath Party headquarters, and the wireless network Syriatel building, which belonged to President Asad's cousin, and set them all on fire; seven policemen and four protesters were killed during the attack.[58]

Calls for countrywide protests on Friday, March 25, were broadcast on social networks in solidarity with the uprising in Daraa. That day also saw an attack with sectarian undertones on a military base in al-Sanamayn, near Daraa; the soldiers responded by opening fire and killing an unknown number of the attackers.[59] Since that day, regular demonstrations have been staged after every Friday's prayer in many cities, especially in Homs, Hama, Banyās, and in the towns of the Damascus countryside. On March 26, the next day, widespread protests and confrontations took place again in Daraa, while shots were fired by unidentified snipers, killing and injuring an unspecified number of people.[60] That same day, mobs set on fire the Syriatel building in Latakia and later burned a public transportation bus, claiming it was in response to a shooting by the military police.[61] Two days later, a guard at the military officers' club in Homs was stoned to death by unidentified assailants.[62]

The tribal social structure in Daraa and al-Sanamayn dictated retaliation for the violent deaths, in order to restore the honor of the afflicted families. As a result, violent confrontations escalated between protestors and all government security organs. On April 8, protestors, who appeared to have acquired arms from unknown sources, clashed in Daraa with the security forces. Twenty-seven protestors and 19 security officers were reported to have been killed.[63] In the meantime, Western media and *al-Jazeera* were reporting the uprising as a "pro-democracy movement."[64]

On April 10, an army bus travelling between Latakia and Tartous was ambushed in Banyās by unidentified gunmen killing nine and injuring scores of soldiers and officers.[65] On the same day in Banyās, the first incident of a torturing and beheading occurred; an Alawī farmer was attacked by a mob on the charge of supporting the regime, and his killing was shown on video;[66] two of the assailants who appeared in that video were later arrested and narrated the details of the incident.[67] On April 17, in Homs, a retired Alawī general was killed, along with his two children and his nephew,[68] and two young Alawī civilians, one of whom was a child prodigy inventor, were killed in a separate assassination.[69]

In response to the continued protests and violence in Daraa, the Fourth Armored Division, an elite combat unit of the Syrian Army, entered the city on April 25 and kept it under siege for ten days. Many were reported killed, including the 13-year old Hamza al-Khateeb, whose case sparked widespread international attention and where the opposition and government told different stories about the circumstances of his death.[70] A mutiny and defections of soldiers were also reported. Because the Fourth Armored Division was led by Maher al-Asad, the president's brother, the confrontation took on, in the minds of the protestors and their sympathizers, a clear sectarian character. The regime's power structure was headed by Alawī officers, and this, from the perspective of the protestors, framed the uprising as a revolt of the powerless Sunna against the powerful Alawīyya.

Aware of the prospects of countrywide protests degenerating into sectarian hostilities, some demonstrators chanted the anti-sectarian slogan "the Syrian people are one."[71] Despite similar slogans, events nevertheless took a sectarian turn: (1) the protests occurred in predominantly Sunni strongholds;[72] (2) they were carried out by males;[73] (3) females who marched in protests wore the veil;[74] (4) protestors' calls for freedom were mixed with religious and sectarian slogans;[75] and (5) as was claimed by Riād al-Asaad, the founder of the Free Syrian Army, those who voluntarily joined the Syrian Army were Alawīyya, while those who joined his army, including Syrian Army defectors, were Sunni Muslims.[76]

The Syrian military and intelligence elite saw the initial emergence of protests from mosques and the attacks on government facilities and security offices as attempts to settle the unfinished battles of 1979–82 between the Muslim Brothers and the Alawi-led regime. From the perspective of the regime's elite, giving up power raised fears of foreseeable reprisals against them for the quelling of the Muslim Brothers' rebellion. For the lower ranks of Alawī officers and civilians, the prospect of their elites giving up control of the army stirred fears and resurrected memories of their being marginalized and subjected to the many calamities that came with their centuries-long seclusion in the mountains under the rule of the Turkish Mamlūks and Ottomans. While the rest of the heterodox Muslims were not in a position to influence the course of events, these groups nevertheless held even greater fears because, unlike the Alawīyya, they had fewer resources in the current situation. The Ismāīlī Shīa Muslims were completely defenseless, and the Durūz could only hide in their mountain. Wave after wave of about 700,000 of Syria's urban Christians fled, into diaspora around the world.[77] Those remaining feared the same fate as

their coreligionists in Iraq, while the Assyrians and Armenians faced the specter of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century genocide.

Thus, the Syrian conflict polarized quickly after the protests began, and most of those who stood on the sidelines eventually joined one of the two sides. One was the Sunni majority; the other comprised the heterodox Muslims, a large segment of secular Sunni Muslims, Christians, feminists, leftists, and Syrian nationalists. Fear of the extreme uncertainty and violence that could result from the militants of the Sunni majority's overthrowing the regime caused the latter groups to back the incumbent regime at any cost. The Sunni majority, on the other hand, viewed the regime's power base as complicit in the transgressions of the elite and responsible for the regime's survival. Indeed, the past 50 years have offered ample evidence of transgressions carried out by regime affiliates, ranging from being granted monopoly rights to outright theft of public goods to violent criminal conduct.

## From Protests to Civil War

According to Hassan Aboud, the self-styled cleric and founder of the Salafi Jihadi organization, the Islamic Ahrār al-Shām militias, underground cells that had participated in organizing the initial antigovernment demonstrations engaged in combat as early as May 2011, prior to the July 2011 establishment of the Free Syrian Army by army defectors.[78] In all likelihood, similar underground cells of rival groups participated in demonstrations and in subsequent combat across the Syrian landscape. As many protests were repressed,[79] the gruesome reprisal attacks against the army, police, and security forces that followed set the stage for the full militarization of the conflict on both sides. On April 29, 2011, the Syrian army was ambushed by armed rebels on al-Rastan Bridge and many soldiers were killed;[80] on June 6, 2011, rebels attacked the government security office in Jisr al-Shughur and massacred 120 security officers;[81] and on August 1, 2011, 17 officers were slaughtered in Hama, and their bodies were thrown in the Orontes River.[82] Lacking sufficient infantry for house-to-house combat, the Syrian army responded with air force bombardment against the rebels and their communities with inexpensive makeshift bombs, known as barrel bombs, causing significant civilian casualties for a prolonged period.[83]

By mid-2012, much of the countryside of Damascus[84] and Aleppo was taken by the Islamist rebels, those the West has either referred to as a "secular opposition" or as "moderate Islamists." Stretched thin

across the Syrian landscape, the Syrian army was unable to enter the towns of the countryside. Instead, it responded with artillery or air bombardments, causing civilians to flee either to areas under government control or out of the country to neighboring Jordan, Lebanon, or Turkey.[85]

Because the rebels were based in Sunni strongholds, the army's operations were perceived as "Alawīyya killing Sunna." As a result, neighboring and regional countries took sides in the conflict based on their sectarian affiliations. All such foreign support was coordinated by the Obama administration, as Vice President Joe Biden publicly declared, although he later blamed these same Middle Eastern allies for the rise of al-Qaida in Syria and Iraq.[86]

Russia and Iran, on the other hand, stood by the Syrian regime. Russia replenished the Syrian army's supply of weapons, and Iran supplied the foreign reserves needed by the Syrian government to maintain the functioning of its civilian infrastructure and state institutions. Shīa militias from Iraq and from Hezbollah initially came in to protect Shīa shrines and Shīa-dominated towns but later participated on a larger scale against the rebels in various parts of the country, especially along the western mountainous region on the border of Lebanon, the region bordering the Golan Heights, and in the two Shīa towns of Nubbul and al-Zahara in the northern Province of Aleppo that have been under siege by the rebels since the beginning of the uprising.

As regional and international parties actively participated in supporting both sides of the conflict, it ceased to be a civil war. It became an international conflict fought on Syrian soil between the United States and its Sunni Muslim allies versus Russia, Iran, and local heterodox Muslims. Today and for the past four years, the open support of the United States, Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar for the Islamist rebels who aim to destroy Syria's secular regime has produced the Syrian government's loss of control over its southern, northern, and eastern territories. Except for small Kurdish-dominated regions along the Turkish border, those territories are primarily controlled today by ideologically cohesive, but organizationally fragmented, al-Qaida groups or their sociopolitical affiliates. In the meantime, native Syrians are bitterly divided and polarized between those who see their salvation with the Islamist rebel victory over the Syrian army and those who see their salvation in the Syrian army's victory. Such polarization is clearly reflected on social media pages, such as Facebook. The sample shows that polarization (see table 9.1), where participants cluster among like-minded people.

**Table 9.1** A sample of popular Facebook pages

| Name of Arabic Language Facebook Pages | Number of Followers as of June 23, 2015 | Political Orientation since the Syrian Conflict |
|---|---|---|
| Aljazeera-Arabic TV Channel[87] | 11 million | Anti-Syrian regime, the voice of the Muslim Brothers – Qatar |
| AlArabiya TV Channel[88] | 11 million | Anti-Syrian regime, the voice of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia |
| Faysal Al-Kasim[89] | 7.5 million | Syrian, Anti-Syrian, regime Aljazeera program host |
| Almayadeen TV Channel[90] | 3.6 million | Lebanese, pro-Syrian regime, pro Hezbollah |
| Azmi Bishara[91] | 1.3 million | Anti-Syrian Regime, former Palestinian member of the Israeli Parliament, al-Jazeera's Arab Spring analyst |
| Halab Today[92] | 981 thousand | Aleppo's anti-Syrian regime, pro-Islamist rebel groups news |
| Sham Times[93] | 189 thousand | Pro-Syrian regime news |
| Aleppo News Network[94] | 155 thousand | Pro-Syrian army news |
| Nasser Kandil[95] | 154 thousand | Lebanese, pro-Syrian regime Commentator |
| The Muslim Brothers of Syria[96] | 131 thousand | Anti-Syrian regime, pro-Islamist rebel groups news |
| Naram Sargon[97] | 71 thousand | The voice of the Syrian presidential palace |
| Souriyatna (Our Syria)[98] | 55 thousand | Anti-corruption, pro-Syrian army discussion group |
| Nabil Fayad[99] | 30 thousand | Anti-Islamist intellectual, anti-rebellion, former dissident |
| Nizar Nayouf[100] | 4 thousand | Leftist investigative journalist, anti-Syrian regime, anti-Islamic, anti-corruption. Source of classified information and documents. |
| Adonis Nahhas[101] | ? | Syrian National Social Party, tactically pro-Syrian regime, anti-Islamist rebellion |
| Jinnar Jibrine[102] | ? | Syrian National Social Party, tactically pro-Syrian regime, anti-Islamist rebellion |

## A Sunni Zone to Break the Shīa Crescent

The ongoing violent conflict in Syria and Iraq, though preceded by an array of socioeconomic grievances, culminated in the revolt of the Sunna against the secular Syrian regime and against the rising power of the Shīa in Iraq and Lebanon. The revolt of the Sunna was seen by the Sunni-dominated Arab nation-states and Turkey as an attempt to break the alleged Shīa Crescent. The idea of the Shīa Crescent was used by the Hashemite King Abd Allah of Jordan in 2004, as a warning against Iran's growing influence in Iraq after the US removal of Saddam Hussein from power. While Hussein was secular, he nevertheless bore the Sunni Muslim identity. Up to the time of the US invasion, he had kept Iran's influence over his predominantly Shīa population at bay with iron and fire. In addition, he engaged in an eight-year war with Iran, partly on behalf of the United States, to contain the Islamic Revolution of Iran. Because Middle Easterners prioritize their sectarian identities, removing the Sunni Saddam Hussein from power and subsequently holding open and free elections meant that the dominant political actors in Iraq would be Shīa, who would see their neighbor, Shīa Iran, as an ally rather than an enemy. Furthermore, the same process of sectarian identification caused Iraq's southern Sunni Arab ruling families to feel threatened by its new Shīa power structure, which is susceptible to Iran's influence.

Yet for the concept of the Shīa Crescent to be materialized on the ground, Shīa influence would have to be extended throughout Syria and Lebanon. However, western Iraq and central and Eastern Syria are predominantly inhabited by Sunni Muslims. While the Shīa have had more freedom to perform their rituals, no efforts have been taken to forcibly convert the Sunna to Shīa Islam, deport them, or subjugate them in a manner that would leave them with no religious rights or political representation whatsoever. In addition, Syria's secular Muslims, including heterodox Muslims (Alawīyya, Durūz, and Ismāīlīyya), and Syria's and Lebanon's Christians would, if given the option, oppose the formation of the Shīa Crescent; none of those groups would be voluntarily willing to live under the rule of a Twelver Shīa theocracy. At the present time, however, their options are limited. They are obliged to rely on Shīa Iran and Hezbollah for their survival. Given the fact that Christians, who in principle are "protected" under Muslim Law, are currently relying on Shīa Hezbollah for physical and psychological support, one can only conclude that the Alawīyya, Ismāīlīyya, and Durūz have even fewer options. Moreover, the view from Iran itself does not support the notion that it is seeking

to establish a Shīa Crescent. It rather sees the promotion of such a concept as a result of an intra-Arab competition for power.[103]

The notion that Syria prior to Sunni rebellion was part of a Shīa Crescent, and therefore warranted a war to break the crescent by breaking Syria along sectarian lines, does not correspond to reality unless one relies on a perverted interpretation of the facts on the ground. About 75 percent of Syria's inhabitants are Sunni Muslims. Prior to the Arab Spring uprising, its Sunni inhabitants had no fewer religious rights than in any other Arab or non-Arab state with a Sunni majority. Syria has a Sunni Ministry of Islamic Infrastructure (*Awqāf*) and a Sunni Faculty of Muslim Law in Damascus and Aleppo that only teaches Sunni jurisprudence; the school system's Sunni religious curriculum is taught by Sunni teachers to all Muslims including heterodox Muslims; the percentage of Sunni mosques in major cities is about 98 percent; the religious programs on television are only Sunni; all the Muftis are Sunni; the beginning of the holy month of Ramadan is determined according to Sunni jurisprudence; the religious holidays recognized by the state are only those that Sunni jurisprudence recognizes; and the president prays in Sunni mosques during religious holidays, led by Sunni clerics. By all measures, Syria is a Sunni state. Its Sunni-dominated cities are more prosperous than those dominated by heterodox Muslims. Its defense minister, the majority of its officers and soldiers, ministers, and diplomats are Sunni Muslims. Its president is Alawī born, but there is no evidence that he adheres to the Alawī belief system we discussed in chapter 5. He is married to a Sunni woman. However, by virtue of his kinship, local, and sectarian ties, most of his trusted intelligence officers, personal guards, and key military commanders are Alawīyya. Moreover, as we discussed in chapter 5, regarding the relation of the Shīa to the Alawī, the Shīa consider Alawī believers sinners for their exaggeration of Alī's religious significance. Finally, Alawī communities in Syria are conspicuously different from the Shīa ones in Lebanon or in Iran, as the Alawīyya are thoroughly secular and Alawī women do not cover their hair or faces.

The combined effect of the Syrian leadership's tactical political engagement with Iran and Hezbollah in order to bolster its negotiating power with Israel for the return of the Golan Heights, the fall of Saddam Hussein, and the sectarian lens with which Middle Easterners view the world around them has created the hoax that Syria forms a bridge between Iran and Lebanon to make up a Shīa Crescent. This mistaken idea and particularly the sectarian lens for viewing the world seems to have become contagious. Western, and particularly United States, French, British, and Israeli, reaction to the notion of a rise of a

Shīa Crescent has been to support the revolt of the Sunna in Syria, so that the latter would establish a Sunni sphere of influence, comprising western Iraq and eastern Syria, and break Iran's projection of power into Syria and Lebanon. That is why the Middle East's Sunni states as well as foreign policy makers in the United States saw the initial Syrian uprising and subsequent armed rebellion as an opportunity to break the Iran–Syria–Hezbollah alliance through a transfer of power to a Sunni-dominated regime. Such a regime, however, would project Sunni Turkey's power into the Syrian hinterland and create a *Sunni Zone* from the Black Sea in the north to the Red Sea in the south. For that reason, the governments of Turkey and Qatar sponsored the Muslim Brothers and the foreign Turkic fighters. The House of Saud, on the other hand, wary of a future challenge from the Muslim Brothers to its rule, sponsored instead the Salafi groups like the Army of Islam and al-Qaida affiliates, such as al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. When the latter declared war on the House of Saud for joining the Western coalition air strikes against its forces, the Saudis coordinated with their rivals Turkey and Qatar and merged the various jihadist factions into "the Army of Conquest" (*Jaish al-Fath*) in which the Organization of al-Qaida in the Levant–al-Nusra Front is the dominant force. The new formation is currently directed to check ISIL's advance in Syria as well as fight Syrian government forces and its Shīa ally Hezbollah.

Today, the sectarian character of the Syrian conflict pits various Salafi Jihadi groups that are ideologically consistent with al-Qaida's, including the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, against Hezbollah and its ally, the Syrian regime, driving the conflict increasingly toward a full-scale intra-Muslim Sunna–Shīa civil war, into which Israel may eventually be drawn. By virtue of US commitment to Israel's security, Americans will not be immune to involvement in such a mad epic of human sacrifice. In the minds of the Muslim faithful, this emerging war may usher in a new epic-making era. For, in Muslim eschatology, the first sign of the Armageddon is an intra-Muslim Sunna–Shīa civil war (*fitna*), which will pull "the Jews" into a fight against Muslims. In that imagined apocalyptic drama, major figures and places of Syria play a decisive role. The tone for that intra-Muslim grand confrontation was set by the key religious figures that are expected to lead the fight in the Levant.

Thus far, Israel has not fully engaged in the Syrian conflict. It restricted its actions to selective air strikes of Syrian army facilities,[104] provided extensive medical assistance to hundreds of Islamist rebel fighters, including al-Qaida,[105] and assassinated key Hezbollah

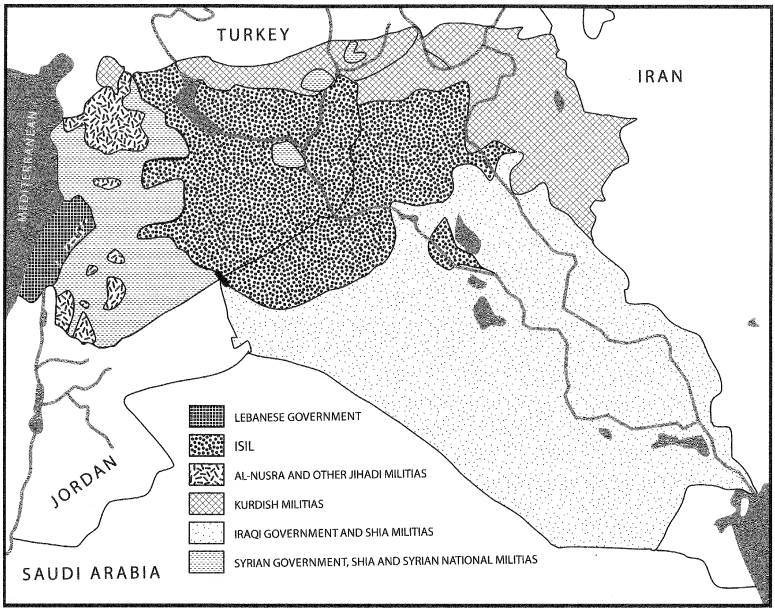


**Figure 9.3** Map of the Fertile Crescent with territories in Syria, Lebanon, and Iraq controlled by rival forces.

*Source*: Zakeus Emanuel Tomass, Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon as of June 20, 2015, accessed July 1, 2015.

fighters in Syria.[106] As Israeli policy makers see Israel's interest lies in the continuation of the war, which would presumably drain, degrade, and weaken all the parties involved on the other side of its border, its prize remains to see Hezbollah's forces dispersed across the Syrian hinterland and eventually fully consumed by the sectarian fire in Syria. However, such a windfall to Israel remains in the realm of wishful thinking. As both sides of the Syrian conflict gain experience on the ground, they will, in the long run, pose a greater threat to Israel than the conventional Syrian army, which once was or any Arab army ever had. Fueling the Syrian conflict will prove to be a strategic miscalculation.

Moreover, the Israeli army's medical support for the Syrian rebels had angered the Durūz inhabitants of the occupied Golan Heights following al-Nusra's massacre of 30 Durūz civilians in the northwest Syrian village of Qalb Lozeh in the Summaq Mountain.[107] On June 22, 2015, armed Durūz men in the Golan Heights ambushed an ambulance that they alleged was carrying two wounded al-Nusra fighters and killed them.[108] The majority of the Durūz who, by and

large, have remained on the sidelines of the armed conflict, are finding themselves gradually been surrounded by al-Qaida factions in their Durūz Mountain stronghold, the fact that explains their violent reaction against the Israeli army's tactical provision of assistance to the Islamist rebels. The Durūz factor adds one more layer of complexity that the Israelis are facing in the Syrian conflict.

In the meanwhile the Sunna–Shia war continues. On November 13, 2014, in his second speech after his declaration of the caliphate, al-Baghdadi asked his followers in the Arabian Peninsula to draw their swords and first cut the Shīa to pieces wherever they see them and then take on the House of Saud, their soldiers, the polytheists [Christians], and the Crusaders [Americans] and their bases.[109]

For Sunni Muslims, the Syrian conflict is a means to restore Sunni military dominance in the Syrian armies, while Shīa and Alawī Muslims, view it as an existential war. This perception was expressed by Hezbollah's General Secretary Hasan Nasrallah on May 20, 2015 in a privately televised address to wounded fighters; parts of it were later reiterated publicly in his televised speech on May 24, 2015.[110] The following is my summary of the gist of his two addresses:

> The Israelis want your land; they do not mind that you stay and work for them, but those who declare you an infidel (*takfīris*) do not want you to stay alive. They do not want your house, your wealth, or land; their project is to annihilate you, and their motto is slaughter. They slaughter males whether they are children or elderly, and they take women captives, exactly like the pharaoh. If we had described them as *takfīris* in 2011, people would have accused us of defending Bashār al-Asad and that we are aborting the revolution. However, now in 2015, there are no demonstrations, no revolution, and no demands for reform. In Syria, there are three sides: ISIL, al-Nusra, and the regime. If we did not fight on the regime's side in Aleppo, Homs, and Damascus, we would have had to fight in Baalbek, al-Hermel, al-Ghaziya, and elsewhere in Lebanon. We are facing grave danger and we have three options to it. The first option is to fight alongside the Syrian regime more than we have fought the last four years. The second option is to surrender our necks for slaughter in a manner similar to what the 1,700 young men did at Speicher Base [Tikrit Military Academy, Iraq], where they surrendered themselves, hoping for mercy although they would have been able to confront their enemy, but ISIL slaughtered all of them. We saw the same pattern in al-Ramādi; on the first day of their occupation of the city, ISIL slaughtered 500 people. The third option open to us is to ask our friends to provide us with ships and sail away with humiliation and search for those who would receive us. We would leave behind the land of our fathers and grandfathers and the 1400 years of history and

> be scattered around the world. Our best option is the first one. If we stay and fight and even if half of us were martyred in this battle, while the other half stayed to live with dignity, pride, and honor; it would still be our best option even if three quarters of us were martyred and one quarter survived to live with their honor and dignity preserved. If God is willing, not so many will be martyred, but this battle will need great sacrifices; it is not about counting martyrs, because it is an existential battle, a battle for dignity, continuity, land, and honor. Until now we have not entered the Syrian conflict in full force, but gradually. However, today, the Saudis, Qataris, and Turks came together and put their differences aside to be all against us in a battle to change the region. Therefore, the challenge is serious and requires from us all a different and serious response. We need to understand the danger correctly, understand the time and understand the diagnosis. We cannot afford to make a historical mistake with existential consequences. It would not help us to regret or repent it afterward. If we err, we will perish. We may, in the coming stage, declare full mobilization. We may have to fight everywhere. From today on, we will not be acquiescing to anyone. And if anyone questions us, we will look into his eyes and say you are a traitor, regardless of who he is, and especially if he is of the Shīa who ally themselves to the West. We will not be quiet from now on and will not accommodate anyone in this existential battle.[111]

In the above speech, which is intended to prepare the Lebanese Shīa for full mobilization, Nasrallah publicly acknowledges the difference in his perception of the chronic Arab–Israeli conflict as opposed to the raging intra-Muslim civil war. The former is seen as one over land, property, and human rights, while the latter is seen as one over the very physical survival of his Shīa community. However, in contrast to Nasrallah's relatively small community of over one million Lebanese Shīa, the two al-Qaida factions led by ISIL's Caliph Abū Bakr al-Baghdadi and al-Nusra's Emir Abū Muhammad al-Golāni draw their jihadist fighters from the entire Muslim world.

On May 25, 2015, a day after Nasrallah's public address, al-Qaida's leader Abū Muhammad al-Golāni was interviewed by al-Jazeera's famous journalist and propagator of Muslim Brothers' causes Ahmad Mansour. The latter claimed to have been embedded with al-Nusra since the beginning of the siege of Jisr al-Shughur after the capture of Idlib on March 28, 2015 by the Army of Conquest (*Jaysh al-Fath*), the recent rebranding of various rebel groups in which the Organization of al-Qaida in the Levant–al-Nursa Front is the leading force. In the interview, which seems to have taken place in the former office of the mayor of Idlib and designed to promote al-Qaida as a reasonable alternative to the Syrian regime as opposed to ISIL, al-Golāni revealed

"a great desire for revenge" against the Alawīyya.[112] Yet, showing an unusual inclination for mercy and an aberration from the norm, he gave the Alawīyya the opportunity to surrender and conform to Muslim Law by accepting a process of conversion. He said "we will not carry out a war of vengeance, despite the fact that we consider the Alawīyya apostates. Al-Nusra Front only fights who fights it. We will let go of anyone who abandons his weapon, surrenders, and disassociates himself from the regime before we capture him, even if he had killed a thousand of us." Regarding the Alawīyya places of worship and shrines, al-Golāni said "we will deal with them according to Muslim Law" by sending "preachers to them to correct their beliefs." Regarding Christians, "the majority of them stand with the regime. We only fight who fights us. At the moment we do not intend to engage in war with them and we do not consider them responsible for what the United States or the Christians of the world, such as the Copts of Egypt, are doing." Regarding the besieged Shīa towns of Nubbul and al-Zahra, "they are at war with us." Regarding al-Nusra's finances, al-Golāni claimed to be "financially independent; we get our funding from our looting [of government resources] or donations from individual Muslims, because Muslims like al-Nusra, they like al-Qaida." Reassuring the world that al-Nusra has no intentions to be a source of danger to it, he announced: "We have gotten guidance from [al-Qaida's leader] Dr. Ayman [al-Zawāhiri], may God save him, confirming that our mission in the Levant is to topple the regime and its allies, such as Hezbollah and others, and then come to an understanding with partners to erect a righteous Islamic rule." According to al-Golīni, Ben Laden's heir has reportedly given al-Golāni "instructions not to use the Levant as a base to attack America and Europe" so that al-Nusra does not get distracted from the battle at hand.

In Part 2 of his interview a week later, al-Golāni asserted that Iran's project in the region is to "revive the Persian Empire through spreading Shīa Islam."[113] However, he denied the claim that "Iran controls the regime of Bashār al-Asad" and also denied rumors of the presence of Iranian troops fighting beside the Syrian Army beyond advisors and freelance non-Syrian "Rafidah Shīa." He asserted that, unlike the Lebanese and Iraqi Shīa, "the Asads made their kingdom on their own," but Iran sought to ally itself with the Asads in order to control Syria and Palestine because "whoever controls the Levant holds the reins of a lot of things in the world." Moreover, al-Golāni asserted that US interest lies in having al-Qaida clash with Iran to weaken both, but so far Iran has refrained from engaging their own troops to play that role. The "ongoing battle is complicated on the surface,

but underneath that surface it is directed against the Sunna." We do not desire to drag Iran into the Levant, but it will suffice for us to amputate Iran's limbs in the region." In the event that that would not be sufficient, "we would move the battle to its territories, for Iran sits on a volcano that is about to explode. It has 8 million marginalized Kurds, marginalized Arabs of the Ahwaz, the tribes of Baluchistan, and 4 million Turks. Most of those are Sunna." In total "there are more than 20 million Sunna," and if there were support to foment unrest, Iran would have to downgrade its involvement in the Levant.

Emphasizing the importance of the struggle for Syria, al-Golāni asserted that what takes place in Damascus will also take place in all the capitals in the region. "A victory of *Ahl al-Sunna* in Damascus will be a victory for all the Sunna in the region. It is not imperative that our armies enter those capitals." There will be a demonstration effect, "where people will realize the right way to achieve their real freedom is by emancipating themselves from slavery to their oppressors and by destroying them . . . [and returning] to the practice of proper Islam so that they deal with the superpowers as equals. They will not achieve all of these merits without following the manner in which the Levantines will liberate Damascus."

On the Arab Spring uprisings, the al-Qaida emir said that "our instructions from Dr. Ayman al-Zawāhiri were *to support and guide those revolutions*" to eventually "eliminate the armies of the region," which were formed by the West in the past hundred years to "suppress people." We do not believe in "political solutions" because they involve compromises and subservience to the West, such as the role that "the Muslim Brothers of Egypt agreed to play in fighting the Mujahedeen in Sinai, accepting the Camp David Agreement, refusing to impose God's Law, and accepting participation in elections and membership in the parliament . . . The Muslim Brothers should return to the right ways." In response to the interviewer's "observations about al-Qaida's ideology" and his "conclusion that al-Qaida is not different in terms of its jihadi principles from the ideology of Hasan al-Bannā and Sayyid Qutb, the founders of the Muslim Brothers," and also his question of why "al-Qaida did not declare itself as Muslim Brothers" to avoid the world's animosity toward it, al-Golāni replied: "We are different from the Muslim Brothers; our ideology is based on the Quran, the biography of the prophet, and the Salafi scholars . . . and yes, we are teaching the works of Sayyid Qutb in our schools . . . However, [in reference to Egypt's Muslim Brothers' engagement in the political process] we do not acknowledge a constitution that was made by humans." Finally, on the conflict with ISIL, al-Golāni claimed that ISIL considers

al-Qaida as a legitimate target because al-Nusra Front kept its allegiance with al-Zawāhiri, while ISIL's al-Baghdadi disobeyed him and killed Muslims who do not pledge allegiance to his own caliphate, which al-Nusra Front also rejects and is willing to fight it unless ISIL changes course.

Based on the declarations above from the two dominant opposition forces on the ground in Syria and Iraq, the stage is set today for a full-blown intra-Muslim war between the Sunna and Shīa in the Fertile Crescent at large, along with intermittent and parallel intra-Sunna battles among the different jihadist factions, led by ambitious political entrepreneurs competing to lead the restoration of lost Sunni power in Syria and Iraq.

# 10

# The Remaking of the Fertile Crescent

Following the decline of the colonial system in the second half of the twentieth century, the notion that state power could induce economic development had become widely accepted. In postcolonial regions with weak states, state-building was a prerequisite for economic development, and had developed into a separate field of specialization within economics. Yet, after 70 years of state-building, economic development in the Fertile Crescent has been hobbled by persistent internal conflicts that modern theories of political economy and economic development did not anticipate. The nation-states of the Fertile Crescent today not only perform below their economic potential, but also suffer from physical destruction on an unprecedented scale.

Economic theory dismissed the cultural and religious diversities of regions such as the Fertile Crescent as premodern phenomena that would wither away in the process of state-building and development, thus largely ignoring the implications of cultural and religious conflict upon economic performance. It implicitly predicted the atrophying of ethnic and religious identities once countries modernize their political systems to pursue an appropriate course of economic development. Yet, political modernization was not forthcoming. Instead, authoritarian rule persisted and is under threatened to be replaced by a religious totalitarian one.

## The Resilience of Authoritarian Rule

Two hundred years after the the seventh century's Muslim Arab conquest of the Fertile Crescent, internal forces began to weaken the governing structure of the Muslim Arab Empire. During the third Islamic caliphate, the Abbāsid era (750–1258), the ruling dynasty was unable to rely on clan and tribal loyalty to protect its interests and to

tighten the chain of command within the military apparatus that presided over a large geographical area and ensured the flow of tax revenue to its center in Baghdad. As a result, the eighth Abbasid caliph, al-Mutasim (833–842), son of the famous Hārūn al-Rashīd, began to rely on Turkish slaves as the preferred recruits for his armies to consolidate his power. That practice became an essential feature of the governing structure of all the caliphs who followed. Young men from the Caucasus, and more specifically from the Qipchaq steppe, who were kidnapped or captured in wars, sold by their parents because of their destitute conditions, or sold in lieu of taxes to the ruler, were then traded in the slave markets of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt.[1] They ultimately found themselves in the military quarters of the caliph, being trained by his eunuchs to be soldiers. They were owned by the caliph and called accordingly in Arabic, *mamālīk*, the plural of *mamlūk*, meaning "owned." They were consequently referred to in Western literature as Mamlūks (also Mamelukes). Their loyalty was due to the caliphs or sultans who owned them. The Mamlūks became the core force of the army and the personal guards of the caliph. This practice continued with the caliphates that followed the Abbāsid. It also proliferated throughout the empire when wealthy landlords or military leaders associated with the caliph, otherwise known as princes, had their own Mamlūks. The Mamlūks were then referred to according to the person who owned them, as the Mamlūks of this prince or that sultan.

Though Islamized, the Mamlūks were nevertheless brought from foreign Turkish and Circassian cultures. Since they lived among a separate caste of people, they had no attachment to or sympathy with the population whom they were trained to repress. After being dehumanized and raised away from their families in abnormal environments, the Mamlūks formed an estranged warrior class that had no respect for the most basic civil values.[2] With the passage of time, they became conscious of their strength and felt independent of the caliphs, whose powers increasingly diminished. Thus, the Mamlūk generals frequently deposed or murdered caliphs and installed new ones to rule under their command. They ultimately established a Mamlūk dynasty that ended the Ayyubid sultanate in Egypt and Syria and ruled there from 1250 to 1517.[3]

Apart from their debasing of the currency and thereby causing inflation and economic crises,[4] the most notorious aspect of Mamlūk rule was the selling of public offices to contractors.[5] For the contractors to make good on their bids for those offices, they pursued the productive forces in the economy in order to extract the funds needed. At times, their increase of the land tax manifolds was so harsh

as to cause farmers to abandon the countryside, leading to a sharp decline in crops and sometimes to famine.[6]

Mamlūk direct rule ended after the Ottoman occupation of the Fertile Crescent (1517–1916), but they maintained their privileged political status in Egypt and Syria under its new Ottoman-appointed foreign rulers.[7] The Ottoman sultans' relationships with their military officers, which constituted the dominant group at all levels of administration, were not qualitatively different from those of previous sultans.[8] Thus, the authoritarian model continued for at least 12 centuries of combined Mamlūk and Ottoman rule, a period long enough to establish a cultural pattern that reproduced the dominance of the military class within social hierarchies through the absolute power of its commander in chief, the sultan. That servile relationship between the sultans and their military guaranteed the execution of the sultans' arbitrary and often despotic rulings, especially regarding the acquisition of land, its redistribution, and taxation. In contrast, elsewhere in Europe the military classes were supplied by landowning feudal lords with independent power that could limit the authority of the kings. The lack of such independent powers in the Fertile Crescent perpetuated despotic rule and bequeathed to those lands a democratic deficit, of which today's inhabitants still suffer the consequences.[9]

The dominance of the military class has persisted into the modern era. In Syria, the civilian government to which the French troops handed power upon their departure in 1946 was soon overthrown by the military, which continues to rule to date. As a result, the mere structure of the authoritarian model, regardless of the sectarian identity of the military elites, was able to prevent the emergence of a visible civil society that could operate outside the confines of kinship and sectarian networks. Civil society, defined as the formal or informal organizations that exist outside of state control, is in the Fertile Crescent almost exclusively composed of the kinship and sectarian networks discussed in chapter 1.[10]

That military dominance, which is the cause of the authoritarian style of governance that disregards the needs of the impacted population, has been largely misunderstood by the intellectual elites and the masses of the Fertile Crescent. Despotic rule is almost always attributed to the personal traits of the person at the helm of power. It is not regarded as a cultural pattern that permeates the entire structures of government and law enforcement, as well as the repressive patriarchal family. We find a similar assessment in the dominant Western narrative that has described the Syrian conflict as that of a "tyrant killing his people." This image suffers from a fatal misunderstanding of the

structure of Syrian society. It presumes that deposing the "tyrant" will be the starting point of the movement toward Western-style democratic government. Instead, the secular military authoritarianism, which prevailed in Syria's post-independence period, threatens now to be replaced by militarism reinforced with religious zeal. A new Islamic authoritarianism is in the making, and paradoxically, with Western blessing and help.

## AUTHORITARIANISM WITH RELIGIOUS ZEAL

The second legacy bequeathed to the Fertile Crescent by Mamlūk and Ottoman rule, as well as earlier Umayyad, Abbāsid, and Seljūq rule, is the dominance of Sunni Muslim religious authorities in the prescribing of social values. While the religious authorities also derived their legitimacy in part from the God-given authority of the caliph as a successor to the Prophet Muhammad, the populace nevertheless accepted their authority mostly because they reinforced their religious identities and religious values. By late Ottoman times, Syria's religious authorities came from a network of socially integrated, absentee landowner families who also supplied the administrators of the cities and towns they inhabited. Beside their shared Sunni Muslim identity, these networks of families also shared the Arabic language as their native tongue, despite the fact that many had Turkish and Kurdish origins. These elites provided the Sunni Muslim population with an intelligentsia who personified and expressed its beliefs and enforced its moral codes.[11]

However, the revolt of the military class in the uprising of the nationalist Young Turks in 1908 eliminated the power of the Ottoman sultan and jeopardized the social and economic privileges of the Ottoman clients in Syria, as their administrative positions were lost to a new inflow of fresh Turkish nationalist appointees sympathetic to the Turkification of Ottoman dominion. Arab nationalism consequently became a convenient alternative to the Arabic-speaking, Sunni Muslim, landowning, administrative, and religious elite.[12] That elite formed an opposition movement that sought to liberate the Fertile Crescent from the Ottoman yoke and effectively maintain their privileges based only on a shared Arab identity.[13] That startling transformation in the attitude of the urban elite, many of whom were originally of Turkish stock,[14] in favor of Arab nationalism, gave a boost to a movement that had thus far been promoted mostly by native Syrian Christians, who were also of non-Arab stock.[15]

An Arab nationalism championed by mostly non-Arabs on a land geographically distant and culturally distinct from Arabia was bound

to be superficial and face serious challenges ahead. Indeed, as the Turkish nationalist movement in 1908 faced an Arab nationalist countermovement, a century later, we witnessed the reverse; the simultaneous decline of Arab nationalist ideology was accompanied by the rise of the neo-Ottomans. The latter marketed themselves to the Arabs as Muslims who prioritized their Sunni Muslim identity over their Turkish one and the majority of the Sunni masses in Syria believed it.[16]

By the year 2000, when the transition of ruling power from father to son had just taken place in Syria, and where neo-Ottoman influence achieved some of its highest visibility outside Turkey, the Islamic Awakening had clearly evidenced social manifestations in Syrian public life. This was seen in intense and widespread attendance of Friday's prayers coupled with a dramatic rise of women wearing headscarves—these covered the heads of the vast majority of Sunni Muslim women. The Baath policy that had thus far been to keep religion out of public life succumbed to this trend, but attempted to contain it lest it culminate in a political action program to overthrow the secular government altogether.

The year 2006 saw the most striking of President Bashār al-Asad's policies of containment, the establishment of hundreds of religious schools around the country, in addition to the new al-Sharia faculty at the University of Aleppo. That move was no doubt based on intelligence revealing the existence of privately funded underground religious schools; I also discovered a sign of it during a visit to a friend of mine in a religiously conservative neighborhood of Aleppo shortly after Bashār's accession to power.

I had kept in touch with a friend named Zakkour,[17] who had dropped out of middle school and joined his father's workshop for manufacturing scales and whom I occasionally visited to remain in contact with a social environment that otherwise was outside of my regular reach. Zakkour was the eldest son among the 12 children of al-Hajj Aboud, my father's business partner in the early 1970s. The father's family relocated to Aleppo from the region of Azāz in the northern countryside near the Turkish border, where most people are religiously conservative. Beside his al-Hajj title, which Muslims acquire by their pilgrimage to Mecca, Aboud showed his religiosity through regular prayer and through covering his wife and daughters in public with the black *niqāb*. Yet, he decided to send his son Zakkour with me to a middle school administered by a Protestant order. That however did not imply Christian education, since Muslim and Christian students attended separate religion classes, both designed by the ministry of education. It was not uncommon that Muslims would have

their children attend such schools; as I indicated earlier, half of my school's students were Muslims. However, the Muslim students commonly came from Aleppo's landowning or merchant class, not from its countryside. During one of my visits to the family's workshop in the old souk, just below Aleppo's magnificent citadel, two individuals walked in and were seated, one of whom had the appearance of an unofficial cleric. After a standard polite exchange of sentences, the cleric spoke about a school he was administering that needed further funding. I concluded that the cleric was from my host's rural hometown. However, to my knowledge, no schools were allowed to function beyond government supervision. Surprised, I directed a series of questions at the two visitors, inquiring about the nature of the school, the curriculum, and the teachers. All of the cleric's answers were evasive. Al-Hajj Aboud noticed my unusual barrage of questions and the cleric's discomfort with them; he interjected to point out to him that I was a university teacher and therefore the subject interests me. The cleric responded, "I noticed that his questions are specific," yet he was not about to provide any details. Briefly after, al-Hajj Aboud handed over to the cleric a large bundle of cash. The cleric asked, "Do you want a receipt?" Al-Hajj said no. That was the end of the encounter, as the two left briefly after. In retrospect, that donation was at best for an underground religious school.

In 2011, the region of Azāz was among the first to join the armed rebellion. Six months into the fighting, while the city of Aleppo still showed no sign of joining in, I visited Zakkour again. His father had by then passed away and Zakkour had taken on a full religious posture in terms of his appearance. In the conversation I had with him, he alluded to the disappearance of the middle class in reference to the economic cause of the rebellion, but eventually reverted to the standard Sunni complaint about the Alawīyya that they "have no religion" and later asked me for my prognosis for the future. It was not clear to me what he was looking for in a better future, apart from improving his business and toppling the reign "apostates." Knowing that the regime would not hand over power to the Islamist rebels or to their political representatives abroad, I asserted, "Change is due, but to avoid destruction and chaos, it should be through incremental reforms, not through revolution." He did not respond, then said that whatever may happen in the future, things will not get back to the way they were. The atmosphere was tense, but I did not sense personal hostility toward me in the tone of his voice. Possibly to change the subject and soften the atmosphere, he added, "I know you like me, otherwise you wouldn't be here." He followed up by saying, "You,

the *Suryān* are the closest to us." While presumably by "us" he meant Sunni Muslims, it was not clear to me what his precise perception of the "*Suryān*" was, apart from being Christian and possibly independent of the Western churches, but the reference to our collective religious identities with "us" and "you" was clear. Taking advantage of the change in the subject toward "us" and "you," I asked him my favorite question, "Where are you originally from?" The question did not go down well, for he thought I was competing with him about who can claim legitimacy as a native. That made him throw the question back at me. I quickly relieved my friend from the stress of competition by saying that "we are from North Mesopotamia, from which we were deported in 1924 by the Turkish state and we settled in Aleppo since then." He then explained that they descend from al-Hasan and al-Husayn, the two grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad. I heard his casual claim of descent from the Prophet's family for the first time, signifying another sign of transformation in his life. His brother then came into the office. After another casual exchange, he revealed with clear discomfort that his son was conscripted and was serving in the Fourth Armored Division, commanded by the president's brother, Māher, which was known to be active in repressing the rebellion in the southern city of Daraa. He added: "We don't know what they are teaching him." My visit ended as I bid my friend farewell on his way to evening prayer in the adjacent mosque.

A week later, Zakkour paid me a surprise return visit to my home, possibly to offer his condolences for my father's death. He came in with his wife and three children, whom I met for the first time. After noticing the change in his appearance the week earlier, I was not surprised by his wife's black *niqāb*. Looking at them sitting next to each other, I felt that his young wife's cheerful demeanor might allow me to get away with a friendly guerrilla-style attack on his new image as a pious, observing Muslim. I said, "I have known your husband since elementary and middle school. Don't let his beard make you think that he always looked like this. He used to have long hair and wear impeccably fashionable clothes from head to toe, while almost everyone else looked modest next to him." His wife gave me the impression that she felt more at ease than he did with my comment. Indeed, I had encountered so many cases of this kind of transformation among my former Muslim schoolmates, yet no one was willing to volunteer the story of why they had changed. I knew that when I had seen Zakkour ten years earlier, he was engaged to a student in her last year of medical school. She was charming, thoroughly secular, and must have been extremely hard working and independent to be able to make it to

medical school. Knowing Zakkour well, I was certain then that he wanted to free himself from his family's religiously conservative environment. After a long search, he had finally found the right person to help him with that personal mission. But circumstances were not on his side; the engagement was dissolved over the financial terms of the marriage. It must have been heartbreaking to him, as he still had her photo in his pocket when he told me that he had broken off with her. In 2011, he was back in the environment he grew up, and his children were replicating his childhood experience. Since this last encounter, I have not heard from Zakkour again, and I don't know whether he is alive. Today, four years later, the entire area of the ancient souks, including his office and workshop, are in total ruin.

Zakkour's religious transformation was not an isolated case. By 2008, there were 976 Islamic schools and more than 9,000 mosques in Syria, while secular cultural institutes approached only 100 and annual secular cultural performances were also below 100.[18] The religious schools, which were presumably under state supervision, promoted an Islamic revivalism focused on individual virtues, such as fairness, forgiveness, dialogue, and wisdom rather than focusing on the macro politics of assuming state power and exercising direct control of the social sphere in a manner similar to the Wahabiyya in Saudi Arabia.[19] Four prominent Sunni clerics were among the leading figures who promoted this form of controlled revivalism: the two Grand Muftis of Syria, Ahmad Kuftaro (1964–2004), the head of the Sufi Naqshbandiyya order,[20] and Ahmad Hassoun (2005–present);[21] the prominent religious scholar Muhammad al-Bouti;[22] and the lesser known scholar of the younger generation, Muhammad Habash.[23] However, the informal networks that emerged around those schools proved to be more effective in recruiting new members; they worked through an array of charity services that catered to the students and their families' needs, physical and, not least, psychological ones such as friendship, entertainment, a sense of belonging, and a source of identity. Satisfying those basic needs made the networks function as resource-sharing groups par excellence. It rendered them indispensable to managing their members' daily affairs in the same manner that similar networks had been providing for members of the Christian sects for hundreds of years.

The state's policy of containment did not confine itself to promoting religious groups and movements that professed acceptance of the principles of secular ideology, such as the Naqshbandiyya, Tajdeed, Zayd, and the Quabaysiyyat women's group,[24] but it also sanctioned the activity of Abd al-Hadi al-Bani, a cleric who led a group in a

cult-like manner and sought the establishment of an Islamic state. The subsequent outlawing of this group in 2010 demonstrates the state's suspicion that not all its approved groups were serving the aims for which they were intended.[25] Indeed, as early as 2008, noticing the proliferation of Islamic organizations growing beyond its control, the state undertook a campaign to shut down various Islamic institutes, calling on its leading loyal clerics to propagate anew declining secular values and sponsor conferences to effect change in that direction. However, it was already too late; outlawing religious groups did not vanquish them. Anti-secular groups proliferated underground, especially in the countryside; this fact explains today's absence of secular groups among the rebels and explains why the rebels felt at home joining the ranks of al-Nusra Front, the Syrian franchise of al-Qaida or even the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. Those groups provided clear and simple answers to questions of identity, morality, and political and military action; all answers were to be readily found in the scriptures, in sources that people have been told since their childhoods are the most credible inspiration of correct moral conduct, to which the faithful must conform and to which they must force others likewise to conform. Non-conformity is deemed equal to defection to the enemy; it is grand treason in times of war.

The secular public's awareness of the rising tide of religiosity made it fear the practical consequences of having to live in a state of absolute conformity to Muslim Law. Anticipation of the uncertainty that would result from a weakening of the regime's hold on power caused them either to be suspicious of joining the initial protests demanding regime change, or to withdraw from the streets soon after the regime responded with violence and the counter violence took on a sectarian character. Those who persevered with the protests and the subsequent armed rebellion fought for a larger prize than a transparent and accountable government. They sought the restoration of Muslim Law with force and as a result provoked an all-out religious conflict, which continues today to inflame the entire region of the Fertile Crescent.

## Informal Institutions versus the Law

Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria have adopted the legal codes of their former European colonizers. Yet the power of the state is often used in a manner that reflects the preferences of the individuals enforcing the law, which, in turn, is predominantly shaped by their religious indoctrination. Syria, for instance, adopted the French legal system after its independence. On the formal level, one should expect the

individuals executing the law to apply it evenly, but ethnographic accounts and the experience of the author demonstrate that officers of the law are often not able to separate their beliefs from the power vested in them by the state. Sectarian bias manifests itself in all areas of life in the Fertile Crescent, including discriminatory taxation and civil and criminal cases where individuals personally experienced selective application of the law based on their religious identity. These examples were not of corrupt behavior, of which there were also many instances, because they were incidents where officers of the law did not personally benefit from their selective legal application but rather applied rules they had inherited or abided by what they believed to be God's law. Examples include: not accepting the legal testimony of a woman, levying different amounts of land tax on two identical lots of land according to the religious identity of the owner, and a tax officer rejecting the accounting books of a reputable firm based on the religious identity of the firm's owner and levying instead an arbitrary lump-sum amount.[26] Such practices were justified by informal institutions, not by the law.

Informal institutions are those informal rules and patterns of behavior within a group that are accepted as normal and to which an individual is expected to conform.[27] They may pertain to appearance, performance of rituals, or expectations of reciprocity that is reliant upon predictable behavior. They strengthen group members' solidarity and dependence upon each other. Group members are likely to abide by informal rules because they are not only potentially more rewarding to the individual member, but they also stem from group culture. Groups also use means to achieve goals that may conflict with formal means or goals. To advance the interests of the group, members may privilege their informal rules over the law. When that is the case, principles of cooperation and mutual dependence help members escape the consequences of breaking the law, as the entire resource-sharing group is charged with protecting individual members from retaliation by the formal sphere.

Conversely, when the laws of nation-states overlook the informal rules and the divergent values of the groups implementing them, the country's laws are ignored and the governing bodies are rendered ineffective. This occurs when the laws regard the population as an abstraction, inherently driven toward compliance and devoid of identity or competing goals. This means failing to account for groups who engage their own members directly, not anonymously. The intimacy of that relationship, especially compared to the detachment of the nation-state from its populace, encourages prioritization of informal rules and

circumvention of the laws. As a result, the goals of the group become paramount while the goals of the nation-state fall to the wayside.

Because kinship ties and sectarian identity in the Fertile Crescent are the building blocks of resource-sharing groups, they also form the basis for the prioritization of informal rules over the law. For that reason, the most visible of resource-sharing groups, such as the ruling elites, also function according to informal mechanisms, rendering the state ineffective even at the highest level in performing its formal functions. State building is a formal enterprise that takes place on the abstract, formal level, and yet the obedience it requires from a population can only come from a genuine, personal commitment to a nation-state. While a government may try to develop a strong sense of national identity in its population, the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent are clearly predisposed to group identities oriented around kinship, sect, and religion. The process of religious identification entailed the formation of religious identity-sharing groups, whose members are impelled to heed informal rules. Such rules both constrain group members and enable group behavior that is incompatible with the formal rules of the nation-state. In this manner, economic policies predicated upon abstract formal rules are thwarted by unseen informal rules that are simultaneously in effect. Accordingly, with the modern nation-states in the Fertile Crescent, religious and cultural diversity became a source of weakness, not strength. The challenge is to turn such weakness into strength.

In Iraq, Lebanon, and Syria, two models describe how kinship-based and sectarian resource-sharing groups undermined the formal institutions of the state. In the first model, state organs were penetrated and transformed into a means of accomplishing informal goals. This model applies to Iraq, where Sunni elite dominated the state until the Anglo-American invasion in 2003. Similarly, in Syria, members of the long-persecuted Alawi sect penetrated and dominated the formal institutions of the state. The military elite that emerged from the sect repurposed those institutions to consolidate their power. In both nation-states, the power structure was eventually concentrated in the family of the head of state, affirming the individual's order of allegiance to kinship, sect, and religion.

In the second model, leaders of rival sects arrive at a common agreement to maintain the state as a ceremonial façade that conceals their own informal resource-sharing networks. This is the case of Lebanon, where leaders of the three major sects (Maronite Christians, Sunna, and Shīa) held on to real power and crippled state institutions every time they disagreed on a power-sharing formula. For instance,

today, Lebanon's Shīa have entered into coalition governments with rival sectarian groups for a collective rule of Lebanon. However, that pragmatic willingness to cooperate is counterbalanced by an empowering sense of individuality. Lebanon's Shīa are emboldened by the perceived blood ties between Hasan Nasrallah, Hezbollah's general secretary, and the Prophet Muhammad, and they are inspired by the courage Muhammad's grandson Husayn displayed against tyranny. As such, their shared religious identity is not simply the basis of their group, but also the source of that group's strength. Last, the value they place on that identity and its accompanying heritage requires them to cooperate with those who share their rituals, beliefs, and values, as sharing resources with them preserves its continuity. Israel's July-August 2006 bombing campaign and subsequent invasion aimed at destroying Hezbollah's infrastructure demonstrated the extent to which Hezbollah's informal institutions overshadow the formal institutions of the Lebanese state, especially in a time of crisis against an overwhelming force. During the 33-day war, Hezbollah's informal resource network confirmed its efficacy to the Lebanese Shīa by withstanding the Israeli invasion, a task the institutions of the formal nation-state of Lebanon could have not accomplished.

In a similar manner, each of the rival groups draws confidence from identities rooted in a real or mythical history, thereby gaining the strength to resist forces that threaten to erode those identities and their cherished beliefs and values. Today, 70 years after the formation of Lebanon as a nation-state, its leaders keep their formal institutions weak enough so as not to obstruct the informal institutions that they believe better serve their needs. They believe that these informal institutions spring from within them, whereas formal institutions are still seen as structures that are imposed upon a population from without. Today's relentless struggle in Lebanon between the Maronites, Sunna, and Shīa over the control of the state often paralyzes its formal institutions. For, all of the various parties have articulated incompatible visions of how that nation-state should function, which values it should uphold, and with whom it should ally. Yet, from time to time, sect leaders are able to break out of a zero-sum game perception of a compromise government, to conceive of a situation where one's gain does not necessarily equal another's loss. As a cultural anthropologist put it, "Lebanon has continued to be the most effective in containing its deep primordial cleavages . . . but to date Lebanon continues to be a proof that although extreme primordial diversity may make political equilibrium permanently precarious, it does not necessarily, in and of itself, make it impossible."[28]

Post-invasion Iraq has dismantled itself into three zones based on the identities of their three dominant ethno-religious groups: Shīa, Sunni Arab, and Sunni Kurd. Like in the Lebanese model, Iraq still maintains the institutions of the nation-state as a façade with little power over the management of resources. Because cabinet members prioritize their ethno-sectarian identity groups, which nominated them to their posts, their loyalty to the nation-state remains weak, rendering the government ineffective, while real power is vested in the hands of the local ethno-sectarian groups.[29]

In such a social environment, the nation-state is unable to enforce abstract formal institutions in the same manner that it has been enforcing them in the developed capitalist economies of the Western world.[30] On the formal domestic level, in international circles, and from official news outlets, people are identified as Iraqis, Lebanese, and Syrians. On the informal domestic level, however, such terms are vague labels that—at best—entitle one to a travel document with that label. Instead, it is membership in a closed sectarian identity-sharing group that determines an individual's relationship with his fellow citizens and his attitudes regarding domestic and international political events. These attitudes range from sympathy to certain causes, to access to resources, and at crucial moments, to the right to life, as we have repeatedly seen in contemporary Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. Indeed, the last few centuries are plagued with occasions where people have been massacred because their own religious identities placed them at odds with other groups, who believed that having different religious beliefs could nullify an individual's right to live. The ongoing daily massacres in Iraq and Syria, and similar ones in Lebanon just a few decades ago, are only reminders of a recurring pattern of killing centered on religious identity. Today's Syria, "the Throbbing Heart of Arabism," as its nationalist state propaganda often claimed it to be over the past five decades, is in an all-out violent conflict in response to what initially seemed to outsiders as secular demands for democratic change. If distrust among the various religious groups in Syria is at a level that induces them toward mortal conflict, then we would not expect members of these groups to abide by the rule of law with regard to relatively benign matters, such as distribution of resources and opportunities. In general, people do not have an abiding respect for abstract laws whenever they are protected by the informal sphere.

At present informal leaderships, which are predominantly sectarian, although some are ethnic (Kurds) or tribal (in the periphery of the cities), dominate the real power structures within the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent. These leaderships use the power of the state to

further the interests of the informal sectarian groups over which they preside. As outlined above, distrust between members of rival sects that deem each other heretical is not a recent phenomenon. It has been passed on from one generation to another through shared beliefs and value systems that were propagated and maintained by religious authorities, who at times were supported by the ruling power structure and at other times, were oppressed by them.

How could the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent be brought to recognize the authority of modern law-enacting and enforcing institutions of the nation-state when they have been traditionally accustomed to abide by rules of local religious or tribal authorities and their local standards of morality?[31] This question, which has been referred to as the "transition of trust," remains an open one for the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent.[32]

These nation-states have attempted to enforce formal rule of law over divergent value systems by using a top-down approach, relying upon brute force rather than a grassroots approach to reach consensus. As a result, people's view of the state as an alien structure, overseen by predators, has been reinforced. When conflicts between the two sets of rules and goals have occurred, loyalty to family and sectarian groups overcame any allegiance to the nation-state and thereby hobbled the ability of formal institutions to carry out their civil functions. Informal rules filled in the socioeconomic and legal gaps.

The absence of a generalized morality, which manifests itself in sectarian or tribal loyalties, renders the abstract, impersonal nature of the legal systems in the Fertile Crescent nation-states ineffective in regulating social and economic relationships, because neither the power structures capable of enforcing them nor the population are willing to abide by them. The absence of a generalized morality compatible with modern democracies and Western-style institutions is the factor that prevents government in the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent from playing the positive role it has in the Western world in promoting peace and economic development.

A generalized morality may evolve if local informal institutions and networks are legally recognized by the state and are allowed to interact spontaneously to solve conflicts Informal intragroup networks may branch out into intergroup ones that would gradually mitigate common fears and prejudices among sectarian groups. Intergroup relations may eventually make individuals less dependent on their traditional sectarian ties. Awareness of the benefits of an extended sphere of interactions would then gradually build up from concrete experiences, and civil society would gradually emerge. Civil society

would create a civic conscience, independent of kinship and sectarian networks. Such movement from the bottom up that is based on consensus rather than force would imply that the state would eventually formalize and enforce institutions that have already been adopted on the grassroots level and therefore would function according to the aims for which they were intended.

For millennia, because of the distrust of successive foreign rule, the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent have relied on their local informal institutions to manage their daily affairs and to produce wealth. These informal institutions emerged and evolved to cater to the needs of rival religious groups who viewed each other with hostility. At present, they may live in peace in their enclaves, where they are able to reduce friction with rival groups and yet still engage outsiders in voluntary trade and cooperative efforts. In the short term, it is in the best interest of the ruling elites, regardless of their religious identities, to recognize and support the informal, localized institutions and mitigate the conditions that engender the predatory behavior of government affiliates, thereby reducing the possibility of public anger and rebellion against inefficient state institutions and the retaliatory mass murders that result in reaction to them.

Therefore, the key for short-term peace and spontaneous economic development in this region is for rival groups to be content to administer their local enclaves without having the ambition to extend their influence beyond their mutually recognized territories. For this solution to be workable, it necessarily implies the physical and ideological elimination of groups who aspire to extend their cultural patterns by force beyond their localities. In Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, these groups would be the various factions of al-Qaida affiliates, such as the Islamic State, al-Nusra Front, and the Muslim Brothers, as well as others who adopt the notion of Holy War to impose their own group's cultural patterns upon others.

However, in the long term, for democratic institutions to develop, individuals would have to be able to coexist, with their own independent wills, outside the confines of kinship and sectarian networks. That independence is the necessary condition for the establishment of abstract relationships that abide by the rule of law to set limits on private interactions as well as political regimes and to establish an independent judiciary that could curb the power of the state. Only then could one begin to speak of a potential for democracy and a modern nation-state that would be to a certain degree parallel to the Western model.[33] Therefore, in light of the historical circumstances that produced the prevailing cultural model in the Fertile Crescent, where

the individual is confined by kinship and sectarian ties, policy recommendations regarding democratic state-building and the promotion of human rights or individual freedoms must first begin with building the free individual, a task that, if ever undertaken, will require many generations to realize.

## CAN INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM BE REALIZED IN A RELIGIOUS WORLD?

People have relied on two means by which to understand the universe and manage their social and material conditions. One is reason; the other is religion. Reason is detected in the ordered regularity of nature, a predictable natural order that if understood can be used to serve human wellbeing. However, as reason is unable to provide definite answers concerning the nature of being and unable to give comfort regarding the temporary nature of human existence, people relied on the imagination of their ancestors, who passed on to them vivid tales about the origin of the universe, the source of evil, and the fate of humankind, attributing divine origins to the old stories. Those tales came to constitute their religious traditions, which promised them deliverance from suffering, evil, finitude, and death. Because religious traditions claim that reality is not restricted exclusively to what is yielded by sense experience, this approach generated a methodological conflict with rational thinking.

At times, people employed reason to influence religious tradition in a manner they believed would improve human conditions. Some attempted to reconcile the two methodologies, while others believed them to be irreconcilable. The latter idea propelled the European Enlightenment project, which attacked the intellectual and the political order of the church and subjected its authority to the probing of reason and experimental science. It eventually produced the modern-day individual, who in turn produced the democratic system of representative government.

Representative governments, however, were constrained with constitutional boundaries that guaranteed minimum individual freedoms to protect the minority from the tyranny of the majority. Their constitutions also aimed at separating religion from the power of the state. That separation was based on the belief that people ought to act solely on considerations of their own pleasure and pain, not by moral codes sanctioned by the religious scriptures of their ancestors. In this framework of rights, people were seen as interested primarily in their survival and the maximization of their own pleasure as individuals.

This hedonic conception of the individual no longer viewed the state as an earthly approximation of a God-given eternal order to which the individual must conform. Instead, the state is seen as an implicit social contract between people aimed at protecting individual self-interest. The very notion of viewing the relationship between individuals as a social contract, where the arbitrary exercise of state power has no place, clashes with the idea of the authoritarian state. The individual in such a political democracy is viewed to be best served by being granted the freedom to pursue his or her desires and to choose the means to accomplish them as long as it does not conflict with the freedom of others to do the same. Since society in this doctrine is viewed as a collection of individuals, the best outcome for individuals is seen to be the best for society. When conflict arises between individual desires, means, and goals, the state adjudicates between them according to a collectively approved legal code. The free individual, therefore, is the first building block of a democratic system of government and for the establishment of the rule of law.

However, that free individual just described has no place in the Fertile Crescent, or for that matter, in the Middle East at large, where an intellectual movement similar to the European Enlightenment that produced the Western individual was stifled in its infancy about eight centuries ago. As asserted in chapter 6, a similar struggle between reason and religion in Muslim dominions led to the triumph of religion and the suppression of reason, which in turn led to the decline of the mathematical and experimental sciences. The emerging religious orthodoxy silenced challenges to literal interpretations of scriptures. Its judgments enforced that censorship by the threat of capital punishment justified by the charge of apostasy. The charge of apostasy extended in contemporary time even to the act of compiling the works of earlier scholars who had challenged religious orthodoxy throughout Muslim intellectual history.[34] The irony is that those judges and executioners are none other than the so-called civil societies whom Western governments believe could topple secular authoritarian regimes and bring about what Western pundits seem to perceive as superior alternatives.

As it did in the Western world, genuine political reform in the Middle East would have to begin with challenging the hegemony of religious institutions over all aspects of life. Without such a challenge and a victory of reason over dogmatic religious ideology, the world must live with a Middle East ruled either by secular authoritarian governments or by religious totalitarian ones. Authoritarian governments are, by definition, not constrained by the rule of law and therefore are

bound to abuse their power and distribute resources along kinship, sectarian, or other informal but exclusive mutually beneficial ties. Under such rule, what the West deems nepotism or corruption is considered by the authoritarian ruling power structures predictable and morally acceptable behavior, as we have seen in post-independence Syria and Iraq. The religious totalitarian alternative, in addition to duplicating all of the ailments of authoritarian rule, subordinates all aspects of the individual's life to the authority of the religious police, as is commonly done today in the rebel- and al-Qaida-controlled regions of Syria and Iraq, and in Saudi Arabia. While authoritarian rule plants the seeds for instability and rebellion, religious totalitarian rule extinguishes the beauty of life on a day-to-day basis, at the same time that it poses a constant threat to the world outside its dominion. It permits large-scale organized violence and justifies it by its overriding commitment to the state's religious ideology and pursuit of its religious goals. It labels dissent as evil even on minor organizational matters, as we have seen in the recent development of the relationship between the two al-Qaida organizations, al-Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. While the two have the same ideological base, they are nevertheless willing to declare each other apostates and slaughter each other over their leadership or tactical disputes.[35]

In light of today's dominance of religious ideology, challenging the hegemony of religious institutions in the Middle East is a difficult, multifaceted task that would require a persistent effort to reeducate many future generations. After all, Middle Eastern culture produced all of the three divinity-based religions and their prophets. The process must begin by recognizing that religious institutions in the Middle East are deeply rooted in dogmatic thinking, deference to traditional authority, and power relationships conducive to reproducing despotic hierarchies. The vast majority of Middle Easterner's common understanding of religion as a set of dogmas and commandments inherited from their ancestors will not change without the activation of rational thinking. For rational thinking to be revived, people need to acquire logical skills and apply them to the study of their intellectual past in a relatively secure environment. Baath ideology made a fatal error in providing security but not confronting religious ideology head-on. Instead, it promoted the notion that science, social progress, and religion do not conflict. That non-antagonistic coexistence may have occurred in the West, where the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment had already dismantled the Church's grip over intellectual life and relegated it to being merely one of many institutions that influenced the fabric of the Western social order. In the Fertile

Crescent, however, the Baath Party, whether under Saddam Hussein, the Asads, or their predecessors, opted for a policy of containment rather than confrontation. While taking a neutral position toward the dominant Sunni orthodoxy, fearing a public backlash, they censored and outlawed treatises critical of dogmatic religious thinking patterns instead of promoting them. Books by Syrian authors that challenged dogmatic religious thought, such as Sādeq Jalāl al-Azm's *Critique of Religious Ideology*[36] and Adūnīs's *The Immutable and the Transformative*,[37] as well as many other works, should have been taught in high schools and universities instead of being outlawed.

The Baathist military regimes ruled with iron and fire, but did not take advantage of their power to promote an intellectual advance critical of the prevailing dogmatic patterns of thought. Instead they regularly produced propagandistic literature that no one, including the Baathists themselves, viewed earnestly. They excluded, intimidated, and imprisoned leftists and Syrian nationalists, who were among the few groups of activists that produced a genuinely secular discourse. The resulting intellectual vacuum was easily filled by the Islamic Awakening's revival of the religious traditions of imagined "pious" ancestors. As the sources of those traditions were scripture, combining them with a literal interpretation of them, with or without the context in which "God revealed" them to "His prophet," produced a model for people to emulate.

Who can lead a reform movement to initiate the process of building the free individual and to change people's attitudes toward socially divisive scripture, and by what means? The Sunni cleric and Syria's Grand Mufti Ahmad Hassoun suggested that religion should no longer be taught in schools.[38] However, he is an unlikely candidate to lead a reform movement, as most Sunni Muslims discredit him for being "the Asad regime's mufti." The Iraqi Shīa cleric Ahmad al-Qabanji is spearheading a campaign to open an intra-Muslim dialogue about the nature of the scriptures, the biography of the Prophet Muhammad, and their proper interpretations.[39] However, as of today, he has limited access to the public beyond YouTube and Facebook and is already being accused of atheism and deviltry by Shīa scholars, let alone Sunni ones.[40] The questions of who would lead a reform movement in Islam and by what means they would lead it are open, but the process of providing answers would certainly have to start from within the Muslim community in the Middle East and with the state's protection of the clerics or individuals who lead such process. There are new secular voices that are engaged in a critical examination of Muslim scriptures, such as the Egyptian Hamed Abd al-Samad who

broadcasts from Germany[41] and the Syrian Nabil Fayad, a former dissident, who currently enjoys the protection of the Syrian state.[42] Yet, the challenge that they pose is a radical one; they question the veracity of Muslim scriptures and therefore are unlikely to gain momentum among the faithful.

A more realistic process of reform to change people's attitude toward religious scripture and the biographies of Islam's founders would have to begin with an effort to make people comprehend the concept of freedom as an abstract principle. For a free individual to be born in the Middle East, the Muslim community would have to arrive at a consensus that the following rights are minimum requirements that individuals must grant each other and grant the state the right to enforce them:

1. The rights to read, write, and speak freely about the origin of the universe and examine the veracity of all claims made about human cultural and natural history.
2. The right to live free of violence, religious discrimination, or humiliation.
3. The rights of the state to criminalize the use of religious scripture to incite violence, discriminate, or humiliate.
4. The right of women and men to be free of compulsory segregation, a dress code, or imitation of behavior of personal nature.

Only after individuals are willing to grant each other those rights, the rest of the world would be able to speak about a potential for constitutional democratic change in the Middle East. Under the present circumstances, only education not revolution has the potential to make people comprehend the meaning of freedom in the sense Westerners comprehend it. Without comprehending the meaning of freedom, misinformed Western support for violent rebellion to bring about democratic change is futile, and moreover, such support, even as means to counter state violence, brought only chaos and the rise of religious totalitarianism that threatens to destabilize entire continents, the fact that also makes it immoral.

## AMERICAN FOREIGN POLICY

The White House declaration of the "illegitimacy" of the Syrian regime and its subsequent effort to topple it through violent means was bound to yield catastrophic outcomes for the region and for the United States. If we assume that the Western support for Islamist rebels was not the

result of a deadly combination of ignorance and arrogance, but a calculated effort intended to eventually carve out a pure Sunni state in the Syrian hinterland that would drive a wedge between Shīa Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, thus weakening both, then the mission seems to have so far been on a road to success. Indeed, the present multisectarian, secular Syria, though largely led by secular Alawī military officers, had maintained the secular nature of Syria's government and stood in the path of such a formation of clear Sunni–Shīa spheres.

US policy makers claimed to have no doubts that supporting an armed rebellion would yield positive outcomes for the United States and for Syria. In May 2013, I contacted the two US senators for Florida, seeking their help in inquiring from the US allies, the Turkish and Arab sponsors of the Islamic fighters, about a longtime friend in Syria. The Archbishop of Aleppo Yohanna Ibrahim had been kidnapped, among other clergy, by these fighters. Because the archbishop is a US citizen and retains an address in Florida, I naïvely believed that the senators would take an interest in his case and seek the intervention of the kidnappers' possible sponsors, with whom US officials were, as Vice President Joe Biden declared, working "hand in hand" to topple the Syrian regime. I feared that the archbishop would soon be beheaded, like many "infidel" clergy and "apostate" clerics who had been publicly condemned to this fate. Instead, the two senators reiterated the White House's clear vision of the US role in Syria without feeling the need to respond to my more specific inquiry. The Republican senator Marco Rubio said that Asad's violent response to the Syrian people's legitimate demand for freedom had made him lose his legitimacy to govern. Moreover, he stressed that it is in America's vital national interests to see an end to the Asad regime, for the toppling of the latter would constitute a significant strategic loss to the Iranian regime. To seek the establishment of a democratic future in Syria and foster peaceful relationships with Syria's neighbors, Senator Rubio advocated that the United States work with its allies, presumably Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, and Israel to arm key rebel groups and provide them with military guidance, and share intelligence, but ensure nonlethal assistance goes to strengthen the *moderate* groups rather than extremists.[43] However, the facts were that the United States was, and till to this day,[44] providing military assistance, such as Tow and Concourse anti-tank missiles in addition to transferring Libya's arsenal to the Syrian rebels.[45]

The Democratic Senator Bill Nelson echoed Marco Rubio's response reflecting a political consensus on what the US response to the Syrian conflict should be. Senator Nelson expressed his understanding that

the Syrian people are seeking a representative government and that President Asad lost all legitimacy and should step down to allow for a peaceful and *orderly transition to democracy.* He also asserted his support for nonlethal aid for *vetted elements of the armed opposition* and to impose additional sanctions on the Syrian Central Bank, and *work with US allies* to bolster the Syrian opposition and to minimize the influence of al-Qaeda.[46]

While politicians, like Rubio, Nelson, and the White House in mid-2013 were still speaking about supporting the rebellion to secure a democratic future, recently declassified portions of a 2012 Defense Intelligence Agency document show that the Pentagon was fully aware that the rebellion was not about democracy, but a sectarian Sunni-Shīa strife. The document specifically states that "EVENTS ARE TAKING A CLEAR SECTARIAN DIRECTION" and that "THE SALAFIST, THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, AND AQI [al-Qaida of Iraq (later ISIL and al-Nusra)] ARE THE MAJOR FORCES DRIVING INSURGENCY IN SYRIA."[47] Moreover, "IF THE SITUATION UNRAVELS THERE IS THE POSSIBILITY OF ESTABLISHING A DECLARED OR UNDECLARED SALAFIST PRINCIPALITY IN EASTERN SYRIA (HASAKA AND DER ZOR), AND THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT THE SUPPORTING POWERS TO THE OPPOSITION WANT, IN ORDER TO ISOLATE THE SYRIAN REGIME, WHICH IS CONSIDERED THE STRATEGIC DEPTH OF THE SHIA EXPANSION IRAQ AND IRAN).[48] The document then concludes that the continuation of the current trend will strengthen the opposition forces as they will use the Iraqi territories as safe haven taking advantage of common sectarian affiliation of the inhabitants of the border areas between Syria and Iraq. As a result, "THIS CREATES THE IDEAL ATMOSPHERE FOR AQI TO RETURN TO ITS OLD POCKETS IN MOSUL AND RAMADI, AND WILL PROVIDE A RENEWED MOMENTUM UNDER THE PRESUMPTION OF UNIFYING THE JIHAD AMONG SUNNI IRAQ AND SYRIA, AND THE REST OF THE SUNNIS IN THE ARAB WORLD AGAINST WHAT IT CONSIDERS ONE ENEMY, THE DISSENTERS."[49]

As many rebels groups switched to the ranks of al-Qaida and took over major Syrian and Iraqi cities and its daggers publicly slit American throats, open US support of Islamist rebels became difficult to sustain and defend. In response, advisors to the Obama administration persuaded it to undertake a new 500 million dollars plan to recruit, train, and arm 5,000 Syrian rebels every year and for several years to come.[50] Presumably, those new recruits were to be carefully selected and tested

for their secular loyalties prior to thrusting them into battle to fight both al-Qaida and Syrian government forces. In light of the past four years of rebels filling the ranks of al-Qaida, it is not clear from which population pools such secular fighters will be recruited. Apparently, Washington has no shortage of alchemists who are able to turn religious fundamentalists into Jeffersonian freedom fighters.[51] One year later, General Lloyd Austin, the commander of US Central Command leading the war on ISIS, testified before Congress that only "four or five" of the first 54 US trained "moderate" Syrian fighters remain in the fight against ISIS, as the rest deserted, and most likely joined the al-Qaida in the Levant–al-Nusra Front to fight the Syrian army.[52] The project was declared a failure and was suspended and was replaced by different tactics, which presumably "have proven to be effective in the past": dropping weapons to the rebel groups by air.[53]

The US-led war on the Syrian state by proxy is based on the presumption that when the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent are consumed by religious conflict they will be less likely to pose a danger to Israel is at best naïve. Moreover, those who presume that remaking the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent along sectarian lines will provide Israel with more security are gravely mistaken. The Syrian conflict will not abate after the country is divided into sectarian spheres. Breaking Syria up will draw both sects, Sunna and Shīa, into a competition to lead the Muslim world. To prove their worthiness for that leadership, they will outbid each other in challenging the existence of the Jewish state, plunging the region into even more prolonged wars, from which Israel will not, in the long run, emerge as the winner.[54]

While writing the last words in this book, Russia's launching of air strikes on September 30, 2015, on behalf of the Syrian army to reverse Salafi Jihadi rebel advances in central and northern Syria,[55] including al-Qaida, was countered with an increase in US military support for those groups, whose policy advocates and propaganda outlets still insist on referring to them as "moderate rebels."[56] While Israel seems to have reached an understanding with Russia regarding its security concerns, the Arab and Turkish sponsors of those groups have threatened direct military campaigns in Syria against the Syrian army and the Shīa elements aiding it; a declaration if taken at face value would spark an all out Sunna–Shīa war, not limited to Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon.[57]

## Summary and Conclusion

A significant part of this book was devoted to the circumstances that led to the formation of the Christian and Muslim sects that prevail

today in the Fertile Crescent. The purpose was to show that sectarian identity has deep roots among the inhabitants, where it is tantamount to national identity in the modern European nation-states. The historical narrative was also to show that sectarian groups were formed as a result of entrepreneurial activities of individuals who also claimed religious authority.

Prior to the creation of their own nation-states, the inhabitants of the Fertile Crescent experienced political authority through a procession of foreign empires. The monotheistic among them, Christian and Muslim alike, associated security with religious orthodoxy, and so to sustain their empires, they demanded that their subjects conform to that orthodoxy. Humans' inclination to resist conformity prompted nonconformists to establish their own sects and develop informal networks for the sharing of resources, thus enabling the survival of multiple religious groups until modern times.

The religious authorities of the sectarian groups played an important role in promoting and maintaining rituals and rules constraining the behavior of group members, and they defined these against the rituals and rules of rival groups. To patrol the boundaries of the group, clerics often issued religious judgments reminding their followers who the outsiders were and why they should treat them with suspicion if not with outright hostility. In the Fertile Crescent, the vast majority of its inhabitants privately identify primarily with those informal institutions, not the nation-state, and this is reflected in the overwhelming regard for informal rules above formal authority.

As a result, the Fertile Crescent's inhabitants primarily reserve loyalty and trust for members of their extended family. When kinship is not a factor, shared religious affiliations take precedence, as they indicate common experience and shared values. Thus, when these individuals have come into power, they have been unable to exercise their authority anonymously and objectively. Instead, power has been apportioned with kinship and sectarianism in mind, such that the laws of the state become secondary to the blood ties and religious identities of the power brokers. To insure the viability of their dominance, the power brokers have formed alliances with a wide spectrum of people of various religious backgrounds who were willing to pledge their allegiance in exchange for access to government and other administrative positions that would allow them to acquire material privileges or prestige.

At present, clan leaderships dominate the real power structures of the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent. These leaderships use their sect members to consolidate their power, which in turn reinforces

distrust between members of rival sects, who see each other as competing groups caught in a perpetual struggle to dominate each other. The mutual perceptions of heresy and prejudicial attitudes propagated and maintained by clerical authorities have added a religious dimension to the competition for power, thus making it perpetual and enduring. Religious authorities also stifled progress by discouraging critical thinking and endangering the lives of thinkers by declaring them apostates. Yet the most devastating consequence of the supremacy of religious identification has been a failure to resolve nonreligious, secular disputes without provoking violent religious conflict and sectarian massacres as we have repeatedly seen in Lebanon, Iraq, and recently in Syria. Because of the supremacy of sectarian identification, violent revolutions, even when reacting against state-violence, are destined to take a sectarian course, as people resort to their trusted informal sectarian networks for protection. Accordingly, this chapter argued that Western demands for democratization cannot be realized without an intellectual revolution to first build the necessary infrastructure for a secular and democratic system that begins with a yet to be born individual who aspires for such a system.

Syria and Iraq suffer today from the worst humanitarian catastrophes in the world. If the conflict here is not contained, it may escalate to apocalyptic proportions. A process that was triggered by an American project to presumably democratize the Middle East opened the millennia-old Pandora's Box that the author has attempted to reveal to the Western reader. Because of misinformed American policy advocates, the Fertile Crescent today and the Middle East at large are less secure for their inhabitants and pose a great danger to world peace. Yet, as of today, all signs show that the conflict is heading toward further escalation and is attracting more regional and international participation.

# 11

# Aleppo War Photographs, 2012–14

A rooftop overview of the old quarters of Aleppo, including the citadel at the top. This and the photographs that follow were taken in the old quarters between late 2012 and early 2014, by the Aleppo-born and resident photographer Hagop Vanesian. Vanesian had a story to tell for each of hundreds of images he captured during the 18 months he spent among the residents in the government-controlled part of the Old City, bordering what he termed the "militant"-controlled territories. The photographs were taken prior to the subsequent complete destruction of the buildings of the Old City surrounding the citadel of Aleppo (see figure 11.1). Fearing for his safety, Vanesian was dismayed at not being able to cross over to the eastern side of the old city to capture people's suffering there, as a few of his relatives had crossed over to inspect their properties in the industrial quarter, but never returned. To protect the privacy of the subjects, the author was unable to show the many faces that appeared in similar photos.


**Figure 11.1** The Old City and the Citadel of Aleppo, ca. 2013.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, The Old City of Aleppo, 2013.

A legend on a storefront gate in the Jdeydeh quarter reads: "Aleppo: The Capital of Islamic Culture." This slogan was adopted by the Syrian government in 2006 as part of the effort to contain the Islamic Awakening.

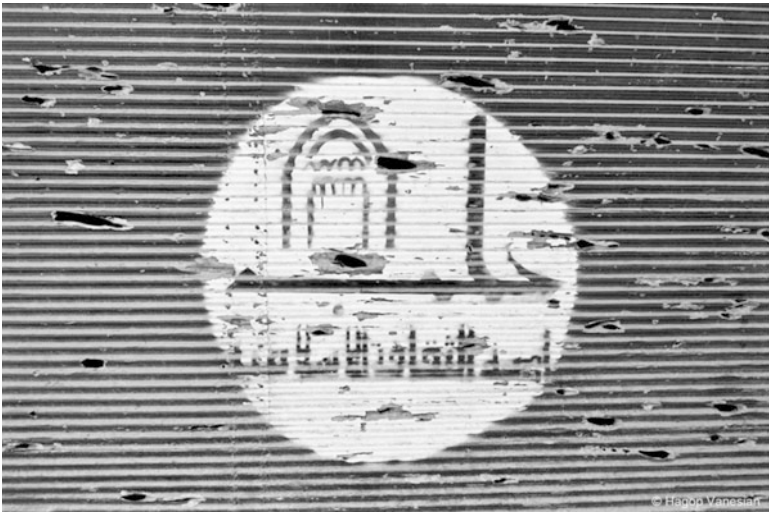

**Figure 11.2** An outdated slogan.

*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Aleppo the Capital of Islamic Culture, 2013.

A father carries his son's headstone into the park in the al-Hamīdiya quarter of Aleppo, where most urban parks have been transformed into cemeteries.


**Figure 11.3** A father marks his son's grave.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Graveyard Park 1, 2013.

The grave of a two-month-old infant in the park in the al-Hamīdiya quarter.


**Figure 11.4** A child's grave in a repurposed park.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Graveyard Park 2, 2013.

Two children gaze at the ruins of their home in the Suleiman al-Halabi quarter.


**Figure 11.5** Where they lived.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Where They Lived, 2013.

This was a residential building in the Sayyed Ali quarter.


**Figure 11.6** Remains of homes in the Old City.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Destroyed Apartment Buidling, 2013.

A boy studies an unexploded propane gas mortar shell in the al-Telal quarter.


**Figure 11.7** Boy and mortar shell.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Unexploded Mortar Shell 1, 2013.

An unexploded propane gas mortar shell stands in the middle of a street in the al-Jdeydeh quarter.


**Figure 11.8** Mortar shell in the street.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Unexploded Mortar Shell 2, 2013.

A soldier leads two children to their home near al-Hatab Square in the Jdeydeh quarter.

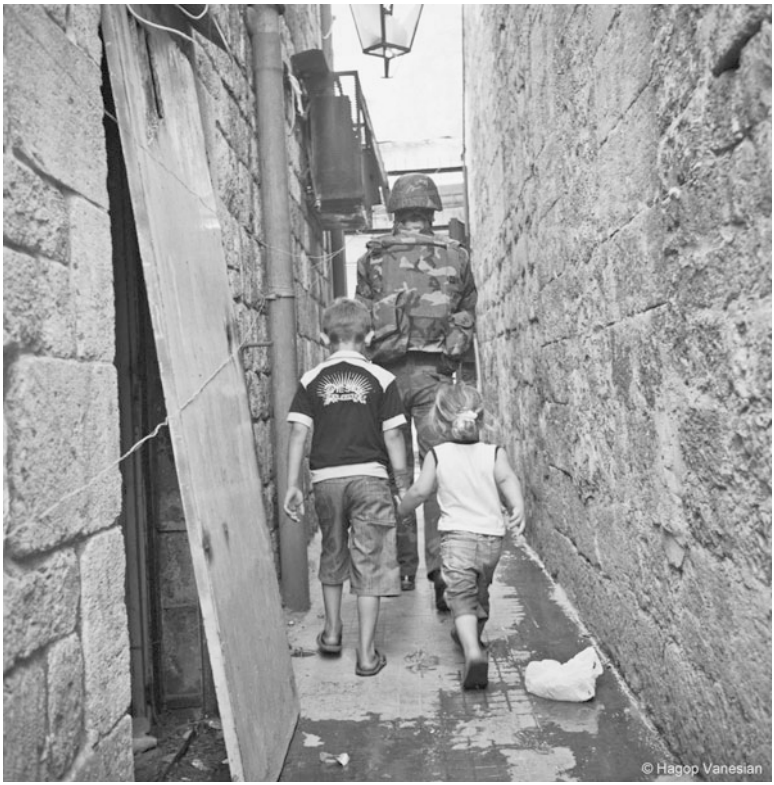


**Figure 11.9** A soldier leads them home.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, A Soldier Leads Them Home, 2013.

A soldier looks toward a street of the "militant"-controlled territory in the al-Jdeydeh quarter.

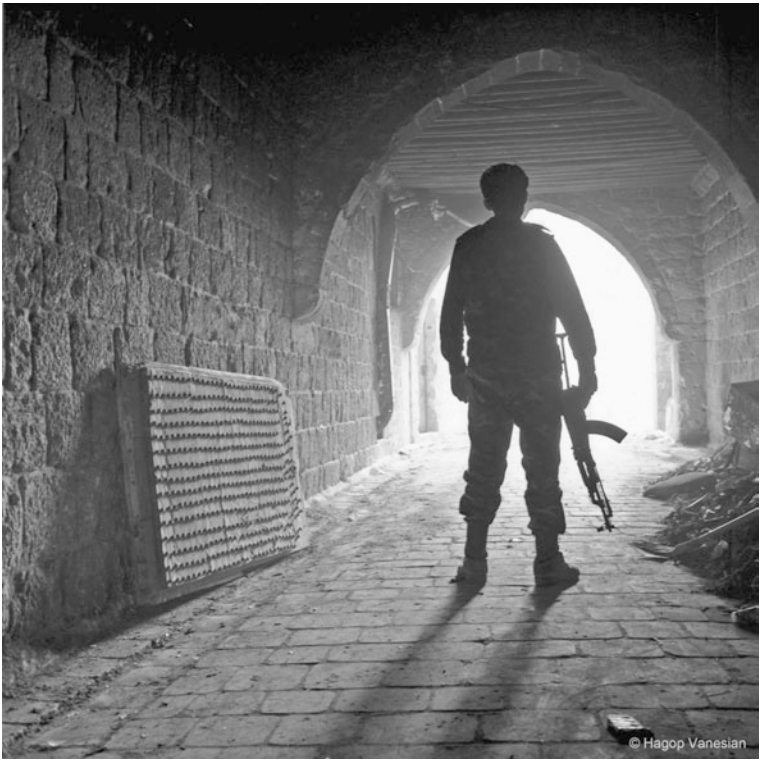


**Figure 11.10** Soldier watching the street.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Soldier Watching the Street, 2013.

Aleppo's name in Arabic Halab is derived from the Aramaic word "Halba," meaning white. It is known for its white and golden stone buildings. The citadel and surrounding monumental buildings were under government control and were therefore systematically targeted by rebels with explosives through underground tunnels. Almost all of the buildings apart from the citadel are completely destroyed.

**Figure 11.11** The Citadel of Aleppo: The view from what was the Carlton Hotel as of September 2011.

*Source*: Mark Tomass, Citadel of Aleppo, 2011.

A soldier performs noon-time prayer at a courtyard in the Jdeydeh quarter.


**Figure 11.12** Prayer in a courtyard.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Soldier Praying, 2013.

Al-Sharaf Mosque at al-Hatab square in the Jdeydeh quarter. A Quranic verse on a banner hanging on the wall reads: "We sent you as mercy for humanity."


**Figure 11.13** A desecrated mosque.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Al-Sharaf Mosque, 2013.

The burnt Armenian church of Saint George (Sourp Kevork) in the Sulayman al-Halabi quarter.


**Figure 11.14** An Armenian church in ashes.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, St. George Armenian Church, 2013.

The Arab Presbyterian Evangelical Church and elementary school at Awjet al-Kayyali, al-Jdeydeh quarter, in ruins.


**Figure 11.15** A Christian church and school destroyed.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, Church and School Destroyed, 2013.

The formerly magnificent house of Zamaria Martini, which was converted to a hotel and restaurant in al-Jdeydeh quarter.


**Figure 11.16** A landmark leveled.
*Source*: Hagop Vanesian, House of Zamaria, 2013.

# Notes

## Preface

1. Mark Tomass (1997) "Game Theory Models with Instrumentally Irrational Players: A Case Study of Civil War and Sectarian Cleansing," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 31, pp. 623–32.
2. Mark Tomass (2007) "Al Jazeera and the Counter Movement to Globalization," Santa Barbara: University of California: 9th Annual Conference of the Center for Middle Eastern Studies, accessed June 28, 2015, http://www.cmes.ucsb.edu/9th_annual_conference.html
3. Mark Tomass (2012) "Religious Identity, Informal Institutions, and the Nation-States of the Near East," *Journal of Economic Issues*, 46, pp. 705–26.
4. See the syllabus of the course at: http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k77270.

## Introduction

1. Daniel Pipes (1990) *Greater Syria: The History of an Ambition* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 7.
2. Bernard Lewis (1998) *The Multiple Identities of the Middle East* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson), p. 13.
3. Samuel P. Huntington (1993) "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs*, 72, pp. 22–49.
4. Fouad Adjami (2012) *The Syrian Rebellion* (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press).
5. David Lesch (2012) *Syria: The Fall of the House of Assad* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press).
6. Thomas Pierret (2013) *Religion and State in Syria: The Sunni Ulama from Coup to Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
7. Fanar Hddad (2011) *Sectarianism in Iraq: Antagonistic Visions of Unity* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press).

## 1 The Significance of Religious Identity

1. Table 1.1 is a modified version of a classification by Arnold Dashefsky and Howard Shapiro (1974) *Identification among American Jews:*

*Socialization and Social Structure* (Lexington, MA: Lexington Books), pp. 4–7. For alternative definitions, empirical evidence, and a detailed survey of literature on social and personal identities, see Marilynn Brewer and Wendy Gardner (1996) "Who Is This We: Levels of Collective Identity and Self-Representations," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71, pp. 83–93. For alternative definitions of Ego and Social Identities, see Dominic Abrams and Michael Hogg (1998) "Comments on the Motivational Status of Self-Esteem in Social Identification and Inter-group Discrimination," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 18, pp. 317–34. See also Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry (2000) "Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts," *Academy of Management Review*, 25, pp. 121–40.

2. Personal communication; this name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.
3. Amatzia Baram (1997) "Re-Inventing Nationalism in Ba'thi Iraq 1968–1994: Supra-Territorial and Territorial Identities and What Lies Below," in William Harris (ed.) *Challenges to Democracy in the Middle* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishers), p. 39.
4. As of today (June 1, 2009), Aflaq's tomb is located in Baghdad's Green Zone, where US soldiers are using it as a recreational facility. Photos of its exterior and interior can be seen on: Housediggity, "Foosball and Baathism," *House in Iraq* (blog), May 23, 2006, http://hdiggity.blogspot.com/2006/05/foosball-and-baathism.html.
5. Michel Aflaq (1975) *Fi Sabil al-Ba'th* (Beirut: Dar al-Taliʿa), p. 165. Author's translation.
6. Ahmad Abū Sāleh, interviewed by Ahmad Mansour, "Shahed ala al-asr – ahmad abu saleh g.1 [A Witness of the Epoch: A Ahmad Abū Sāleh, Part 1]," YouTube video, 50:11, posted by "Al-Jazeera Arabic," September 28, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uj0deIWXuK8. Author's translation. All subsequent quotes are based on this video clip.
7. Personal communication, meeting of Revolutionary General Command (1963).
8. Tāreq Azzīz, interviewed by Ali al-Dabbagh, "*Muqablat Ali al-Dabbagh ma Tariq Aziz (2)* [Ali Dabbagh's meeting with Tareq Aziz]," YouTube video, 1:32:32, posted by "Amman lilʿalam," April 20, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jp-YFVxPiuA.
9. See Henri Tajfel and John Turner (1986) "The Social Identity Theory of Intergroup Behavior" in Stephen Worchel and William Austin (eds.) *Psychology of Intergroup Relation* (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall), p. 16.
10. See Beverly C. Butler (2009) "Intentional Blindness for Ignored Words: Comparison of Explicit and Implicit Memory Tasks," *Consciousness and Cognition*, 18, pp. 811–19.
11. Joseph A. Varacalli (1992) "Whose Justice and Justice for What Purpose?: A Catholic Neo-Orthodox Critique," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 6, pp. 309–21.

12. Based on the author's recollection of a television program devoted to the biography of John Wayne.
13. Personal communications (1978); this name has been changed to protect the individual's privacy.
14. See Erik Erikson (1963) *Childhood and Society* (New York: W.W. Norton), pp. 261–62. For a detailed examination of ego identity, see Anna Freud ([1936]1966) *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense. The Writings of Anna Freud*, Vol. 2 (New York: International Universities Press).
15. See Erik H. Erikson (1964) *Insight and Responsibility* (New York: W.W. Norton).
16. For a comprehensive study of religious fundamentalism, see Martin Marty and Scott Appleby (1995) *Fundamentalism Comprehended* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
17. See Michele Dillon and Paul Wink (2007) *In the Course of a Lifetime: Tracing Religious Belief, Practice, and Change* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press); and Joanna Blogowska and Vassilis Saroglou (2011) "Religious Fundamentalism and Limited Prosociality as a Function of the Target," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 50, pp. 44–60.
18. See experimental evidence of people's willingness to share resources with those with whom they identify in John F. McCauley (2011) "Distinguishing Religious and Ethnic Politics: Evidence from a Field Experiment in West Africa" (paper presented at ISP/Initiative on Religion and International Affairs, Belfer Center, Harvard Kennedy School, Cambridge, MA, March 25, 2011).
19. See Prithviraj Chattopadhay, Malgorzata Tluchowska, and Elizabeth George (2004) "Identifying the Ingroup: A Closer Look at the Influence of Demographic Dissimilarity on Employee Social Identity," *Academy of Management Review*, 29, pp. 190–202.

## 2 THE FERTILE CRESCENT MEETS THE MUSLIM ARABS

1. This chronology is approximate, as there was no clear end of one empire and beginning of another that completely dominated the entire Fertile Crescent in this order.
2. Simo Parpola (2004) "National and Ethnic Identity in the Neo-Assyrian Empire and Assyrian Identity in Post-Empire Times," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, 18, No. 2, pp. 5–22.
3. Throughout this book, I refer to the East Roman Empire as Byzantine in order to be consistent with modern Western literature. However, none of the East Roman contemporaries used the term Byzantine in reference to them. East Romans referred to themselves as Romans despite the fact that Constantinople was their capital city, the Syriac Chronicles referred to them as Romans (Syriac: *Rhomāyē*), and the Arabs referred to them as Romans (Arabic: *Rūm*) and still do.

4. For evidence on how Syrians used historical accounts to stress sectarian identities and group solidarity from the fifth to the eighth century, see Michael G. Morony (2005) "History and Identity in the Syrian Churches" in J. J. Van Ginkel, H. L. Murre-Van Den Berg, and T. M. Van Lint (eds.) *Redefining Christian Identity: Cultural Interaction in the Middle East since the Rise of Islam* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers & Department of Oriental Studies), pp. 1–33.
5. For details on the seventh-century communal organizations in Mesopotamia, see Michael G. Morony (1974) "Religious Communities in Late Sasanian and Early Muslim Iraq," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 17, pp. 113–35.
6. The Greek-speaking Christians referred to the Arabs as Saracens, from the Greek *Sarakenoi*, a term they applied to an Arab tribe living in western Arabia that they extended to include all Arab tribes.
7. Quoted in Robert G. Hoyland (1997) *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press), p. 70.
8. Ibid., pp. 72–73.
9. Ibid., pp. 77–78.
10. Arianism, from Arius (250–336) of Alexandria, is a conception of Christ's nature that was condemned as a heresy by the Council of Nicaea in 325 for denying Christ's divinity. It suggested that God alone is divine, self-existent, unique, and immutable, but Christ, the Son, is a created being and therefore is not self-existent and cannot be divine. The uniqueness of God implies that His immutability cannot be shared with the mutability of Christ, who was presented in the Gospels as being subject to growth and change. Furthermore, since Christ was created out of nothing, he cannot have direct knowledge of the Father.
11. Quoted in Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 486.
12. Jacob of Edessa, Letter 6, to John the Stylite. Quoted in Robert Hoyland (2008) "Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa" in Bas ter Haar Romeny (ed.) *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill), p. 19.
13. Michael G. Morony (1984) *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), p. 346.
14. Translated in Sebastian Brock (1987) "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē Rīš Mellē," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 57, pp. 60–61. Reprinted in Sebastian Brock (1992) *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology* (London: Variorum Reprints), II.
15. Andrew Palmer (1993) *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (trans.) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), p. 56.
16. Tel-Mahrē's chronicle was lost, but significant parts of it are quoted in the Chronicle of Michael I, the Syrian, Patriarch of Antioch (1166–99). It is kept in St. George's Church in the Assyrian Quarter (Arabic: *Hay*

*as-Suryān*) of Aleppo, Syria, where the Edessans settled. See Michael I, the Syrian, in George A. Kiraz (ed.) (2009) *Texts and Translations of the Chronicle of Michael the Great* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press).
17. Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, pp. 155–57.
18. Ibid., pp. 129–30.
19. Ibid., p. 163.
20. Ibid., p. 166.
21. Ibid., pp. 174–78.
22. See Bar Hebraeus ([d. 1286] 1877) *Chronicon ecclesiasticum*, J. B. Abbeloos and Th.-J. Lamy (eds. and trans.) Vol. iii (Louvain), pp. 123–25.
23. See Bar Hebraeus ([d. 1286] 1932) in *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l Faraj*, Ernest A. Wallis Budge (trans.) Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press), p. 95.
24. According to Robert Hoyland, Tel-Mahrē's use of this particular phrase must have been "conditioned by more than a millennium of prejudice" that Byzantines held toward "culturally inferior" non-urban Saracen tribes. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p. 24. See also E. M. Jeffreys (1986) "The Image of the Arabs in Byzantine Literature" in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress, Major Papers* (New Rochelle, NY: Aristide D. Caratzas), pp. 305–21.
25. Andrew Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 141.
26. Ibid., p. 251.
27. See Muhammad Ibn Qayyim al-Jawzīyah ([1292–1350] 1995) *Ahkām ahl al-dhimmah* (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah). In this volume the author, a Muslim Jurist and the head of the Jawzīyah religious school of Damascus, lays down rules to govern how Muslims should interact with Christians and Jews in every aspect of life.

## 3 Formation of the Jewish Identity

1. Harrān is 38 km to the southeast of Edessa (Syriac: Ur hoy; modern Urfa, Turkey). A popular legend in Urfa claims that Ur from which Abraham fled is Urfa, where an alleged birthplace of Abraham is a popular tourist site.
2. Bar Hebraeus ([d. 1286] 1932) in Ernest A. Wallis Budge (trans.) *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l Faraj*, Vol. 1 (London: Oxford University Press), p. 10.
3. Peter Ross Bedford (2001) *Temple Restoration in Early Achaemenid Judah* (Leiden: Brill), p. 44.
4. Michael Menachem Laskier (2003) "Syria and Lebanon," in Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (eds.) *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times* (New York: Columbia University Press,), pp. 319, 316–34.

5. Michael Menachem Laskier (2003) "Introduction," in Simon et al., *The Jews of the Middle East*, p. viii.
6. Andrew Palmer (1993) *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (trans.) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), p. 161. Bar Hebraeus also confirms this stipulation, but the date entered is 636; see Bar Hebraeus, *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l Faraj*, p. 96.
7. See an extract of this fragment in Robert G. Hoyland (1997) *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press), pp. 449–50.
8. Luke 23:21; Mathew 27:25.
9. Jane S. Gerber (2003) "History of the Jews in the Middle East and North Africa from the Rise of Islam Until 1700," in Simon et al., *The Jews of the Middle East*, p. 6.
10. Ibid.
11. Michael Menachem Laskier, Sara Reguer, and Haim Saadoun (2003) "Community Leadership and Structure," in Simon et al., *The Jews of the Middle East*, p. 49.
12. Gerber, "History of the Jews," pp. 12–13.
13. See interviews with Sami Michael and other Jewish writers of Iraqi origin in the second installment of the documentary series "Israel: A View from the Inside," http://doc.aljazeera.net/ourproduction/, accessed February 23, 2011.
14. For detailed statistics, see Reeva Spector Simon (2003) "Iraq," in Simon et al., *The Jews of the Middle East*, pp. 347–48, 364–66.
15. See the memoirs of the two Jewish Iraqi poets Mīr Baṣrī and Anwar Shā'ul in Mīr Baṣrī (1991) *Riḥlat al-'umr: min ḍifāf Dijlah ilá wādī al-Tīms: dhikrāyāt wa-khawāṭir* (al-Quds: Rābiṭat al-Jāmi'īyīn al-Yahūd al-Nāziḥīn min al-'Irāq fī Isrā'īl); Anwar Shā'ul (1980) *Qiṣṣat ḥayātī fī Wādī al-Rāfidayn* (al-Quds: Rābiṭat al-Jāmi'īyīn al-Yahūd al-Nāziḥīn min al-'Irāq).
16. For detailed statistics, see Laskier, "Syria and Lebanon," pp. 325–34.

## 4 Formation of Christian Sectarian Identities

1. For Syriac sources, such references may be found especially in Book III of the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus and his Lives of Eastern Saints.
2. Sebastian Brock, email message to the author (January 7, 2015).
3. See J. M. Fiey (1965) *Assyrie Chrétienne*, Vol. I (Beyrouth: Librairie Orientale), pp. 14–15.
4. See the chapter "Greek into Syriac and Syriac into Greek" in Sebastian Brock (1984) *Syriac Perspectives on Late Antiquities*, Vol. II (London: Variorum Reprints), pp. 1–17.

5. Quoted in Robert G. Hoyland (1997) *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, NJ: The Darwin Press), p. 21.
6. Ibid., p. 21
7. Sebastian Brock (1987) "North Mesopotamia in the Late Seventh Century Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē Rīš Mellē," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 9, p. 58. Reprinted in Sebastian Brock (1992) *Studies in Syriac Christianity: History, Literature, and Theology*, Vol. II (London: Variorum Reprints).
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., p. 59.
10. W. Stuwart Mcullouch (1982) *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, CA: Scholar Press), pp. 127–31.
11. W. A. Wigram ([1910]2004) *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press), 31–39.
12. Ibid., pp. 10–11, 56–76.
13. Ibid., pp. 113–19.
14. Ibid., pp. 138–41.
15. Ibid., p. 153.
16. Some believe that Bar Hebraeus may have exaggerated the figure, presumably because he was a Monophysite who revealed his partiality by referring to Bar Soma (Syriac: "Son of Fast") as Bar Sola ("Son of Shoe") for committing such acts. See Mcullouch, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, p. 131; and Wigram, *An Introduction to the History of the Assyrian Church*, p. 154.
17. Brock, *Studies in Syriac Christianity*, pp. 133–34.
18. George V. Yana (Bebla) (2000) "Myth vs. Reality," *Journal of Assyrian Academic Studies*, 14, p. 80.
19. Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler (2002) *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon), pp. 148–49.
20. Robert Rollinger (2006) "The Terms 'Assyria' and 'Syria' Again," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 65, pp. 283–87; Richard N. Frye (1992) "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 51, pp. 281–85; Sargon George Donabed and Shamiran Mako (2009) "Ethno-Cultural and Religious Identity of Syrian Orthodox Christians," *Chronos*, 19, pp. 71–113.
21. Khaldun S. Husry (1974) "The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (I)," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 5, No. 2, pp. 161–76; and Khaldun S. Husry (1974) "The Assyrian Affair of 1933 (II)," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 5, No. 3, pp. 344–60.
22. Pro Oriente Foundation, Vienna (1994) *Syriac Dialogue: First Non-Official Consultation on Dialogue within the Syriac Tradition* (Aleppo, Syria: Mardin Publishing House), p. 428.
23. Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar Winkler (2002) *The Church of the East: A Concise History* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon),

pp. 154–57. All of the figures presented on the Christian sects are rough estimates, for there are no official and reliable statistics on the size of sect members in the Middle East. Only local priests can know figures relevant to their parishes, as they visit them twice a year to collect donations, which constitute their only source of income, in addition to fees they charge for administering rites of passage. Moreover, the attacks of the Islamic State and other al-Qaida affiliates on the dwellings of Christians in Syria and Iraq led to a massive exodus, thus making the figures more in the realm of the unknown.

24. "Attacks on Assyrians in Syria by ISIS and Other Muslim Groups," AINA News, February 27, 2015, http://www.aina.org/releases/20150226225711.htm.
25. "ISIS Execute Three Assyrians in Syria," AINA News, October 8, 2015, http://www.aina.org/news/20151008022445.htm.
26. Note that Monophysitism was not the exclusive position of Syrian and Mesopotamian clergy. The Christians of Egypt, Ethiopia, and Armenia also were Monophysite. Nor were all Syrian clergy exclusively Monophysite; there were the Melkites who maintained allegiance with the Byzantines in asserting the dual nature of Christ.
27. Amir Harrak (1999) *The Chronicle of Zuqnīn: Parts III and IV/AD. 488–775* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies), pp. 53, 61–67.
28. For the Ghassānid's role in Baradaeus's activities, see the references in Volker L. Menze (2008) *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (New York: Oxford University Press), pp. 222–23.
29. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church*, p. 270.
30. See Hendrik Gerrit Kleyn (1882) *Jacobus Baradaeüs: de stichter der Syrische Monophysietische* (Leiden: E. J. Brill); Mcullouch, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity*, p. 83; Andrew Palmer (1993) *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Andrew Palmer and Sebastian Brock (trans.) (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press), pp. xiii–xiv.
31. See Bas Ter Haar Romeny et al. (2010) "The Formation of Communal Identity among West Syrian Christians: Results and Conclusions of the Leiden Project," in Bas Ter Haar Romeny (ed.) *Religious Origins of Nations? The Christian Communities of the Middle East* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 1–52.
32. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 140.
33. In 614, the Persians conquered Syria and Palestine and took from Jerusalem what people believed to be the Cross on which Christ was crucified. In 627, Heraclius invaded Persia and met the Persians near the ruins of Nineveh and achieved a decisive victory. A month later, after Heraclius entered Dastagird, the king of Persia, Khosrow, was overthrown by his son Shahrvaraz, with whom Heraclius made peace, demanding only the return of the Cross, the captives, and the conquered Byzantine territory.

34. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, pp. 142, 142n–43n.
35. Robert Hoyland (2008) "Jacob and Early Islamic Edessa," in Bas ter Haar Romeny (ed.) *Jacob of Edessa and the Syriac Culture of His Day* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 11–24.
36. Frye, "Assyria and Syria: Synonyms," pp. 281–85; Rollinger, "The Terms 'Assyria' and 'Syria' Again," pp. 283–87.
37. For the author's explanation of the changes in their English language appellation, see Mark Tomass (2012) "Multiple Resource-Sharing Groups as Bases for Identity Conflict," in Önver Cetrez, Sargon Donabed, and Aryo Makko (eds.) *The Assyrian Heritage: Threads of Continuity and Influence* (Uppasala, Sweden: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis), pp. 243–77.
38. "ISIS Forcing Christians of al-Qaryatayn to Pay Jizya," *The Syrian Times*, October 4, 2015, http://thesyriantimes.com/2015/10/04/isis-forcing-christians-of-al-qaryatayn-to-pay-jizya/.
39. Quran 47:4.
40. Quran 9:29.
41. The closest term to *Moronōyē* in Syriac is *Morio* for "Lord" and *Moran* or *Maran*, depending on the dialect, for "Our Lord Christ."
42. Matti Moosa (2005) *The Maronites in History* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press), p. 1.
43. Kamal Salibi (1979) *Munṭalaq tārīkh Lubnān*, *634–1516* (Niyū Yūrk: Manshūrāt Kārāfān; Bayrūt: tawzī' Maktabat Ra's Bayrūt), p. 40. Author's translation.
44. Ibid., pp. 30–34.
45. Ibid., p. 37. Author's translation.
46. The Franks are Germanic-speaking tribes to whom France owes its name. They have appeared in written history since the third century AD on the eastern bank of the Lower Rhine River. In the fifth century AD, they invaded present-day northern France, Belgium, and western Germany. They were subsequently Byzantinized and restored the Western Byzantine Empire under the reign of Charlemagne (768–814).
47. Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, pp. 119–21.
48. See the section on the Maronites' faith, where the author argues that they were Chalcedonians who accepted the Monothelite Doctrine, in Cyril Hovorun (2008) *Will, Action and Freedom: Christological Controversies in the Seventh Century* (Leiden: Brill), pp. 93–102.
49. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles,* p. 29.
50. See the quote from Dionysius I of Tel-Mahrē in Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, p. 114, where he makes this claim.
51. Sayf al-Dawlah's son Saad is said to have initially paid the Byzantines a tribute not to enter it. See Philip Hitti (1970) *History of the Arabs*, 3rd edn. (London: The Macmillan Press), p. 460. See also Kamal Salibi (2010) "Maruniyya, Mawarina [Syriac Marunaye, presumed derivative from the personal name Marun, diminutive of mar 'lord'],"

*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., Brill Online, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_SIM-8819, accessed March 12, 2010.

52. Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, p. 229.
53. This poem of al-Qilāī is quoted in Isṭifān al-Duwayhī (1973) *Aṣl al-Mawārinah:ḥaqqaqahuwa-qaddamala-huAnṭūnḌawal-Anṭṭūnī*,Vol.1 (Ih'dan: Mu'assasat al-Turāth al-Ih'dinī), p. 128. Author's translation.
54. See Butrus Daww (1977) *Tārīkh al-Mawārinah al-dīnī wa-al-siyāsī wa-al-ḥaḍārī*, 2nd edn (Bayrūt, Lubnān: Dār al-Nahār lil-Nashr), pp. 342–45, 349. However, Daww inexplicably states on page 361 that Yuhanna Marōn became patriarch in 687.
55. Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, pp. 130–47.
56. Kamal Salibi, "Maruniyya, Mawarina," date accessed March 2, 2010.
57. Istifān al-Duwayhī (1973) *Aṣl al-Mawārinah* (Ihden, Lebanon: Manshourat Muassaset al-Turath al-Ihdeni), p. 111, pp. 114–16, 135; Istifān al-Duwayhī (1890) *Tārīkh al-ṭā'ifah al-Mārūnīyah* (Bayrūt: al-Maṭba'ah al-Kāthūlīkīyah), pp. 53, 66.
58. Al-Duwayhī, *Tārīkh al-ṭā'ifah al-Mārūnīyah*, pp. 127–28. The estimated date of Maron's appointment as patriarch predates the pontificate of Sergius by one to two years. Al-Duwayhi had made this claim in an attempt to correct a counterclaim that Pope Honorius (625–638) appointed Maron as patriarch. See al-Duwayhī, *Tārīkh al-ṭā'ifah al-Mārūnīyah*, p. 127. In addition, Honorius had accommodated Heraclius in sanctioning the Monothelite Doctrine; thus he could not have approved of Maron's Chalcedonianism. For, in 680, the third Council of Constantinople decreed that Christ had two wills and condemned Honorius for his Monothelite heresy. Later, in 682, Pope St. Leo II confirmed the condemnation, and so did his successors, thus straining relations between Rome and Constantinople.
59. Al-Duwayhī, *Tārīkh al-ṭā'ifah al-Mārūnīyah*, p. 128. See also this work, pp. 129–35.
60. See Moosa, *The Maronites in History*, pp. 7, 183.
61. Ibid., p. 17.
62. Ibid., pp. 9, 13.
63. Salibi claims they were originally tribes from central Anatolia or from further East, whom the Byzantines stationed in the Amanus Mountains to fight the Persians, then the Muslims. See Salibi, *Munṭalaq tārīkh Lubnān*, p. 41.
64. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 195.
65. Ibid., p. 200.
66. Daww, *Tārīkh al-Mawārinah al-dīnī wa-al-siyāsī wa-al-ḥaḍārī*, p. 389. For the entire thesis on the Maronite "Nation," see this work, pp. 390–405.
67. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 25.
68. Most references indicate that the Jacobites used the term "Melkites" immediately after the Council of Chalcedon of 451. However, translators of Syriac manuscripts indicate "Melkites" was used after the Council

of Constantinople. See Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 25.
69. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 25.
70. Kenn Parry and David Melling (eds.) (1999) *The Blackwell Dictionary of Eastern Christianity* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), p. 312.

## 5 FORMATION OF MUSLIM SECTARIAN IDENTITIES

1. L. Veccia Vaglieri (1954–2005) "Fāṭima," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edn., Brill Online, accessed May 21, 2011, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0217.
2. L. Veccia Vaglieri "ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib," in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, accessed May 3, 2011, http://www.brillonline.nl/subscriber/entry?entry=islam_COM-0046.
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## 6 THE ISLAMIZATION OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT

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## 7 SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ORIGINS OF RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

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## 10 THE REMAKING OF THE FERTILE CRESCENT

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