



# The Political Science of Syria's War

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POMEPS BRIEFINGS **22**



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**The Project on Middle East Political Science**

The Project on Middle East Political Science (POMEPS) is a collaborative network which aims to increase the impact of political scientists specializing in the study of the Middle East in the public sphere and in the academic community. POMEPS, directed by Marc Lynch, is based at the Institute for Middle East Studies at the George Washington University and is supported by the Carnegie Corporation. It is a co-sponsor of the Middle East Channel (<http://mideastafrica.foreignpolicy.com>). For more information, see <http://www.pomeps.org>.

# The Challenges of Nation-Building in the Syrian Arab Republic

By Harris Mylonas, George Washington University

Syria's ongoing existential conflict is arguably related to its nation-building trajectory starting in the beginning of the twentieth century. What can theories of nation-building and state formation tell us about the origins of conflict as well as future of the Syrian state? In *The Politics of Nation-Building*, I identify the conditions under which the ruling political elites of a state target ethnic groups with assimilationist policies instead of granting them minority rights or excluding them from the state. I develop a theory that focuses on geostrategic considerations arguing that a state's nation-building policies toward non-core groups — any aggregation of individuals perceived as an unassimilated ethnic group by the ruling elite of a state — are influenced by both its foreign policy goals and its relations with the external patrons of these groups. I posit that external involvement, whether clandestine, covert, or overt, drives not only the mobilization and politicization of the non-core group's identity, but also the host state's perception of the non-core group and the state's nation-building policies toward the group.

Through a detailed study of the interwar Balkans, I conclude that the way a nation-state treats a non-core group within its own borders is determined largely by whether the state's foreign policy is revisionist or cleaves to the international status quo, and whether it is allied or in rivalry with that group's external patrons. However, as I admit in the book, my argument does not travel to all states at all times. In particular, it should apply to countries that 1) are driven from a homogenizing imperative, 2) have non-assimilated segments of the population and no caste system in place, 3) have the capacity to directly rule the population, and 4) have a ruling political elite representing a core group with a clear "national type." In what follows, I explore how my work illuminates some of the challenges of nation-building in the Syrian case.

In *The Politics of Nation-Building* I argue that the main reason that leaders adopt the "nation-building option" is

the reality, or anticipation, of other powers manipulating non-core groups in their state to undermine their stability or annex parts of their territory. This process is particularly conspicuous in situations where the ruling elites perceive their borders to be challenged. While this process worked in Tilly's (1975, 1990) account of Europe and fits the pattern I narrate in the interwar Balkans, it does not seem to fit so much the story in Syria. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the territories of contemporary Syria were divided up by decree through a series of treaties. Syria was under the French Mandate since 1920 and after a tumultuous history gained independence in 1946. As it is often the case, colonial powers had to rely on local elites coming from specific groups for political and economic control. Syria was no exception and the role of the Alawites and Christian minorities was vital for the French from the beginning of their Mandate.

As a result of this legacy, as well as the geopolitical situation in the region, this system of choosing a loyal local ethnic group and ruling the rest of the population through it—that has its roots to the French colonial period—was perpetuated. The various military coups following independence until Hafez al-Assad consolidated his rule on the country in 1970 solidified this outcome. The legitimating principle of the Assad regime has not been state-level nationalism. In fact, repression and a carefully constructed network of informants were the basis for legitimacy in Syria for the past four decades — if not longer. To complement this apparatus Lisa Wedeen revealed a cult that the Assad regime — father and son — designed which operated as a disciplinary device.<sup>16</sup> For decades citizens acted *as if* they revered their leader. "The cult works to enforce obedience, induce complicity, isolate Syrians from one another, and set guidelines for public speech and behavior" (Wedeen 1999).

Another set of conditions for my argument to be applicable is that part of the population has not yet been successfully

assimilated and there is no “caste structure” in place since in caste systems assimilation is by definition impossible.<sup>17</sup> Syria is definitely a heterogeneous society, but the heterogeneity is more pronounced depending on which cleavage dimension is salient at each historical moment. In terms of ethnicity, about 90 percent of the population was Arab before the civil war — including about 500,000 Palestinians and up to 1.3 million Iraqi refugees — while there were about 9 percent Kurds and smaller groups of Armenians, Circassians, and Turkomans. In terms of religion, based on 2005 estimates 74 percent of the population were Sunni Muslims, Alawites were about 12 percent, Druze 3 percent, while there are also some small numbers of other Muslim sects, Christians 10 percent, about 200 Jews, and Yazidis.<sup>18</sup> Finally, in terms of mother tongue we find the vast majority speaking Arabic, and then Kurdish, Armenian, Aramaic, and Circassian being used by the respective non-core groups. Moreover, although this was not a caste system the mode of rule was definitely blocking social mobility and especially political clout for non-Alawites and their close allies and informants. The rule of the Alawi controlled Baath party coupled with the state of emergency that had been in force since 1963 had decisively alienated the Arab Sunni majority. But following the Arab Spring and coupled with past violence, inequalities, and repression that many reportedly felt in Syria, resistance against the regime grew and by now it has turned into a multiparty civil war. The opposition is fragmented but defections from the Assad side have also been plentiful. The lack of any national cohesion is apparent.

Nation-building cannot be pursued by a failed state that cannot directly rule its population. Assad’s regime clearly did not suffer from this problem. Syria was far from a failed state. In fact, it is a state with high literacy rates — 88 percent for males and 74 percent for females. But even if Syrian ruling elites faced the pressures I described above and had the capacity to do so, they would have had a hard time to nation-build. For nation-building to occur, the ruling political elites of the state must represent a core group that is well defined and has a clear criterion of inclusion — a “national type” in what Eric Hobsbawm

called the age of nationalism. In Syria, the closest thing we can find to a constitutive story in Assad’s Syria has to do with a Pan-Arab identity. Particularly, a version of Baathist ideology that combines a supranational form of nationalism that calls for the unity of Arabs with anti-imperialism, anti-Zionism and secular socialism.<sup>19</sup> Arab nationalism was vital in the struggle for independence — a by-product of British machinations against the Ottoman Empire — as well as the decolonization movement against the French. Thus, the state-level type of nationalism that dominated Europe, did not manage to emerge in much of the Arab Middle East, since such unification was opposed by multiple great and regional powers. The short experiment of the United Arab Republic that brought Egypt and Syria together in a union between 1958 and 1961 was stillborn but characteristic of the supranational character of the constitutive story that motivated Syrian leadership. Given this configuration, it is really hard to identify a Syrian constitutive story and this is reflected in the school curriculum that primarily emphasizes anti-Zionist ideas, Pan-Arab ideas, and ironically, Sunni Islam (Landis 1999). Thus, while linguistically and ethnically there could be an overwhelming majority constructed — that of Arabs and Arabic — if one had to decide what constitutes the core group in Assad’s Syria, they would most likely suggest that it is the Alawites — together with other minorities — in the exclusion of the Sunni Arab majority.

Despite the well-known arguments that territory is becoming increasingly less important in our globalized world, myriad of territorial disputes, dozens of border changes and the long list of “nations without a state,” or “stateless nations,” point to a more sobering picture. For the past couple of years, several external state and non-state actors are aligning themselves with internal factions or non-core groups in Syria. However, the most powerful regional states Turkey, Iran, and Israel — all non-Arab — are unable to dominate Syria through these local alliances. The USA can be an arbiter of the conflict by intervening with Sunni, which would please Turkey and the Gulf states along with Sunni populations in Syria, Jordan, Palestine, and Egypt — each for different reasons. Alternatively, if

Iran prevails, Alawites in Syria, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Shiite minorities in the Gulf States, and the Shiite majority of Iraq would rejoice. But a more cynical point of view, one perhaps best summarized by Ed Luttwak,<sup>20</sup> suggests that the United States — and even Israel — should allow this war to go on since it is in their strategic benefit for the factions to fight each other thus preventing the emergence of a strong and unified Arab state, or a victorious Iran. A note of caution flows from my work in the Balkans. Shifting alliances in the context of the current multiparty civil war with ample external backing, coupled with the rapid changes in control over territory already have lead

and will continue to lead to repeated instances of violent exclusionary policies, since non-core groups that are perceived as enemy-backed, or collaborating with the enemy, are going to be targeted by the respective sides of the conflict.

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## Why Regime Change is a Bad Idea in Syria

*By Alexander B. Downes, George Washington University*

Shortly after the onset of the Syrian uprising, U.S. President Barack Obama called for the ouster of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In language highly reminiscent of his statements a few months earlier about Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi, Obama said on August 18, 2011, that the "future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way... . For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside."<sup>21</sup> Obama went on to note that, "[T]he United States cannot and will not impose this transition upon Syria," a pledge that he has largely kept: the United States has for the most part resisted calls to intervene directly in the conflict with military force. The near exception to this policy — the administration's threat to launch missile strikes in response to the Syrian government's chemical weapons attack two months ago — was not carried out, and in any event was not intended to be a decisive intervention in the war. The only U.S. intervention in the Syrian conflict to this point has been indirect: a CIA-run program to train fighters associated

with the Free Syrian Army (FSA) as well as the recent provision of non-lethal aid and light weapons to the FSA.<sup>22</sup>

Setting aside the oddity of making demands without any intention of following through on them — or giving others the means to follow through on them — what are the effects of demanding regime change as a condition for ending a civil war like the one in Syria? I argue that there are three effects, all of them bad. Demanding regime change effectively shuts down negotiations and prolongs the war, both by encouraging the rebels and asking the regime to commit suicide. It also puts Assad in an untenable situation: if he agrees to negotiate his way into exile, given the universal jurisdiction inherent in international criminal law, there is no guarantee that he won't be prosecuted later for crimes he committed during the war. Finally, rhetorical policies of regime change have a tendency to escalate to actual policies of regime change. Increased direct or indirect U.S. involvement in the current Syrian civil war, however, could lead to new atrocities and

- 14 David Schiller, "A Battlegroup Divided: The Palestinian Fedayeen," in *Inside Terrorist Organizations*, ed. David C. Rapoport (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 92.
- 15 Hassan Abbas, "The Dynamics of the Uprising in Syria," *Arab Reform Brief* 5 (October 2011).
- 16 Whitman, Elizabeth. "Stalemate in Syria," *The Nation*, April 23, 2012.
- 17 They involve an "ideology of inferiority for the subordinate groups" and thus an almost fixed ethnic structure that is perceived as natural. For more on hierarchical systems, see Horowitz 1985, pp. 21–32.
- 18 <http://www.state.gov/outofdate/bgn/syria/85051.htm>
- 19 It is characteristic that both in 1982 when the regime violently crushed the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion in Hama and in mid-March 2011 following the brutal response of the regime to the protests in Daraa, the conflict was attributed to Zionists and Americans intervening in Syrian internal affairs using fifth columns as agents of Western imperialism. See Wedeen 1999 and Seale, Patrick. "The Syrian Time Bomb Forget Libya," *Foreign Policy*, March 28, 2011.
- 20 Luttwak, Edward. "In Syria, America Loses if Either Side Wins," *The New York Times*, August 24, 2013.
- 21 "President Obama: "The future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way," <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad>. For an example of Obama's earlier statements about Qaddafi, see Barack Obama, David Cameron, and Nicolas Sarkozy, "Libya's Pathway to Peace," *New York Times*, April 14, 2011.
- 22 Paul Richter, "Senator Criticizes CIA Training of Syrian Rebels as 'Incredibly Slow,'" *Los Angeles Times*, October 31, 2013; and Ernesto Londono and Greg Miller, "U.S. Weapons Reaching Syrian Rebels," *Washington Post*, September 11, 2013.
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- 25 Communique of the London 11, October 22, 2013, <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2013/10/215729.htm>.
- 26 "Assad Sees No Date for Syria Talks, Mulls Re-election," *Reuters*, October 21, 2013.
- 27 Daniel Krčmaric, "The Justice Dilemma: International Criminal Law, Mass Atrocities, and the Dynamics of Civil War," Ph.D. dissertation in progress, Department of Political Science, Duke University. This paragraph is based on Krčmaric's work.
- 28 Mark Landler, "Obama Tells Qaddafi to Quit and Authorizes Refugee Airlifts," *New York Times*, March 3, 2011.

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