

## Article

# Between Utopia and Dystopia: Sectarianization through Revolution and War in Syrian Refugee Narratives

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Received: 12 February 2019; Accepted: 8 March 2019; Published: 12 March 2019



**Abstract:** Whereas much recent research has tried to understand the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, few studies address the issue from a bottom-up viewpoint as seen from people's everyday and lived experiences. This article seeks to access trajectories of sectarian identity formations through Syrian refugee narratives, articulated in stories that evolve around the revolution and the emerging civil war. It questions how the sectarian debate is experienced and reflected upon from refugees' micro-narrative perspectives and the ways in which these experiences correspond to politicized frames operating on a macro-level. By taking the concept of 'sectarianism' as a theoretical vantage point, the study argues for a dynamic identity approach when attempting to understand complex processes of contested and contesting identities. Moreover, it suggests that by replacing the concept of sectarianism with 'sectarianization', we may provide a more nuanced understanding of processes in which religious identities are discursively constructed and mobilized in conflicts such as the Syrian one. The qualitative analysis of this study is based on in-depth narrative interviews with a multi-religious Syrian refugee population residing in Norway. Divided into four narrative clusters, their stories deal with hope, fear, victimization as well as hate and distrust. Through the extremities of revolution and war, each of these clusters reveal particular memories, moments and experiences that in various ways have informed and shaped issues of identity and perceptions of the 'religious other'. Taken together, their stories expose a valuable juncture through which the complexities surrounding religion, identity and conflict can be further studied.

**Keywords:** refugee narratives; Syria; interreligious relations; sectarianization; conflict; religion; identities; revolution; war

## 1. Introduction

*"We had the chance to breathe freedom, and that was a wonderful feeling. I felt we were born again!"*

*"Sectarianism is in the blood of Syria. It's not positive or negative, but it's a reality."*

*"[I]t came to a point where everyone knew that, ok, now it is eternal, it will all go to hell!"<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Citations from conversations with Syrian refugees taking part in this study.

Representations of utopia and dystopia illustrate two metaphorically compelling frames enveloping the stories I have gathered from Syrian refugees in exile. Together they frame a narrative space within which a discursive plurality of refugee voices take place. They oscillate between exuberant hopes of a new and democratic era beginning with the revolution in 2011 and feelings of despair regarding the subsequent descent into violence, war, and forced displacement. Embedded in these stories is the question of ‘sectarianism’—or the ways in which religious identities and differences are constructed, mobilized, and gain momentum—socially, culturally, and politically.

The case of sectarianism in Syria, as seen from the perspective of Syrian refugees, is a particular interesting phenomenon to study. The country’s long-standing history of ethno-religious diversity and peaceful intercultural coexistence is intriguing, albeit not necessarily a shared interpretation of the past to which all Syrians adhere. Behind the events of 2011 and onwards, there is a multi-layered context triggering an overall question into the reasons why Syria could spiral so quickly into violent conflict and fuel divides along sectarian lines. One way to trace the ‘roots and routes,’ so to speak, of these contestations and their religious implications, is to lend ears to the dispersed Syrian refugee population itself. Guided by the following questions, this study attempts to trace processes of sectarianization through Syrian voices in Norway: How is the sectarian debate experienced and reflected upon from refugees’ perspectives and on a micro-narrative level? And how do these experiences correspond to politicized frames operating on a macro-level?

Despite the growing body of literature concerning the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, few studies address the issue from sociocultural or religious studies’ perspectives. Fewer still explore the formation of sectarian identities and discourses from refugees’ firsthand accounts.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there is need for a more nuanced understanding of how religion and identifications are perceived to operate on the ground in complex conflicts such as in Syria. In particular, as pointed out by Anne-Marie Korte and Lucien van Liere, we need to look more closely at how “fluid religious identities are shaped, (re)invented and (re)appropriated within shifting cultural and political frameworks” (Korte and van Liere 2017, p. 3).

Heeding this call, the current study seeks to access trajectories of sectarian identity formations through refugee narratives, articulated in stories that evolve around the revolution and the emerging civil war. More specifically, this article inquires how fragments of refugees’ individual life stories (re)present, mediate, and validate the meta-discursive frame of sectarianism—or reversely; dispute, question, and contradict it. I shall demonstrate that refugees’ experiences are discursively mediated and exist in an intersection of micro- and macro narratives, smaller and larger stories, individual testimonies and socio-political scripts. Taken together, they expose a valuable juncture through which the complexities surrounding religion, identity, and conflict can be further studied.

Following a methodological overview, this study starts with critically examining the concept of ‘sectarianism’ and exemplifies how differing approaches theoretically engage with the term in analyses of the Syrian conflict. It proceeds to give an overview of Syria’s master narrative landscape before devoting the final part to a qualitative analysis where processes of sectarianization are explored from below and narrated through stories told by Syrian refugees. Divided into four narrative clusters, the stories deal with hope, fear, victimization, as well as hate and distrust. Each of these clusters reveal particular moments, events and experiences that in various ways have informed and shaped perceptions on identity issues and the emergent differences that arise when conflict and religion intersect in narrative trajectories of war.

## 2. Methodological Reflections

The current study is part of a larger empirical project in which narrative trajectories of war, forced migratory journeys, and resettlement experiences among Syrian refugees in Norway are discussed

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<sup>2</sup> Interesting exceptions to note are [Salamandra \(2013\)](#); [Stolleis \(2015\)](#); [Schmoller \(2016\)](#); [Gaiser \(2017\)](#); and [Tobin \(2018\)](#).

socioculturally and by employing a religious identity perspective. Altogether, 28 Syrian refugees have taken part in this project, both through extended sessions of narrative interviews as well as in focus groups.<sup>3</sup> Together they represent the colorful tapestry of different ethno-religious communities that for centuries have characterized the Syrian society. The project's aim has been guided by capturing the versatility of experiences that are voiced from Syrians in exiles. This includes looking at how their highly differentiated backgrounds concerning religion, secularism, ethnicity, education, and geographical locations have shaped their discursive practices.

To present a more comprehensive analysis of the issues at hand, this particular study is limited to the stories of a few participants in the project, focusing on material that has emerged through conversations and in-depth interviews during 2017 and 2018. A further limitation has been drawn as regards to the temporal frame of their stories. To more fully grasp the emerging processes of sectarianization and changes concerning identity issues, I have decided to restrict the timespan to experiences and events that occurred during 2011 and 2012. This is a formative period in the Syrian conflict, in which experiences of dramatic changes, crises, and life-turning events took place. At the same time, the period represents a foreboding to the ever-escalating tragedy that continued to befall Syria in the years afterwards, when—in Yassin al-Haj Saleh's words—the crisis was no longer merely a Syrian one, but a “crisis of the world” (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, p. 26). It is important to note, however, that by accessing this particular period through narratives, the study does not pretend to give an accurate historical account of the revolution and emerging civil war. Nor does it seek paying homage to a particular interpretation of this contested period. In concurrence with Marita Eastmond, I view narratives not as “transparent renditions of ‘truth’”, but rather as reflections of “a dynamic interplay between life, experience and story” (Eastmond 2007, p. 248).

In *Contesting Religious Identities* (2017), Korte and van Liere underline the urgency of understanding “how religion intersects and interacts with other social, political, and economic discourses” (Korte and van Liere 2017, p. 3). This is no less relevant when examining sectarianized conflicts. Indeed, in times of conflict, concepts such as religion, ethnicity, nationhood, and language—the four very “*basic sources and forms of social, cultural and political identification*” (Brubaker 2013, p. 3, emphasis in original; see also Enns 2012, p. 151)—have a tendency to become accentuated, encouraged or questioned. As many scholars have pinpointed, studying narratives is a way of grasping these dynamic relations, as stories never exist merely in the personal or public domains respectively, but intersect in ways that construct complex sites of shared and contested identities (Somers 1994; De Fina 2003; Benmayor and Skotnes 2009; Jackson 2013; Ammerman 2014; Andrews 2014; Hammack and Pilecki 2014; Shenshav 2015).

Methodologically, I apply a narrative identity approach and find it a useful avenue to research the different and fluctuating ways in which narratives play into identity and identifying practices, and vice versa. Inspired by, among others, Ricoeur's anthropological hermeneutics on narrative identity (Ricoeur 1991, 1996) and Jackson's “politics of storytelling” (Jackson 2013), this approach investigates the subjective and social constituents of identity through the stories we tell and are being told. Language plays an important role concerning issues of identity in war, not least when identities are seemingly at war with each other. It shapes people's worldviews, beliefs, and norms, as well as provide legitimacy for individual and collective behaviour. Language can express stereotypes, reinforce boundaries, demarcate differences, spur violence and capitalize on fear of the enemy other. Yet, it can also enhance understanding, promote coexistence and bridge the gaps of telling each other

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<sup>3</sup> Trying to reflect on the multi-ethnic and religiously diverse mosaic of Syrian refugees, I have selected a broad sample of voices from people with varying degrees of attachment to their religious and/or ethnic identity backgrounds. Different types of qualitative sampling methodologies were employed in this process. All research subjects have been informed of and given consent to the research project and its ethical standards prior to participation. Due to issues of political and ethno-religious sensitivity, I have chosen to anonymize the participants by applying fictitious names. The research's ethical standards, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality for research participants, have been approved by the Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees prior to the interviews (cf. <https://etikkom.no/en/>).

apart. Through language, narratives, and discourses not only reflect but also shape social realities, and together they provide a complex site for exploring the powerful ways in which individual and social identities become shared or contested (Briggs 1996, pp. 10–14; Zotzmann and O'Regan 2016; Van Liere 2014).

This methodology is certainly not without its flaws and challenges, not least concerning the degrees of distance between what is narrated and the actual events they purport to represent. As such, there will always be a tension regarding the often complex and ambivalent mixture of memories and emotions that inform representations of past events. It is thus important to be aware that “... memory remains a shifting and sometimes unstable foundation of war consciousness and its associated representations” (Baraban et al. 2012, p. 4). However, whereas no individual testimony or hegemonic grand narrative can adequately represent a conflictual past in its entirety, the strengths of a narrative identity approach is its reflection on and openness towards a heterogeneous landscape in which a myriad of voices find their discursive space. As articulately expressed by Matar and Harb (2013), these strengths and limitations can be summarized as follows:

Narration allows us to examine the diverse discursive spaces and forms within which conflict is mediated, communicated, experienced, imagined and lived, while not losing sight of the fact that the term narration itself implies subjectivity and agency, if not a provisional and partial reconstruction of lives and histories. (Matar and Harb 2013, p. 4)

### 3. Sectarianism and Syria—Theoretical Approaches

The role of religion in the Syrian civil war is a highly disputed issue. So is the notion of ‘sectarianism’ and the various analyses concerning contested and contesting identities at play. In recent years, a considerable amount of publications has discussed whether the term ‘sectarianism’ functions as a key prism through which the Syrian conflict can be understood.<sup>4</sup> There are, however, at least three principal problems attached to the debate on sectarianism in academic and public literature. For one, the term itself is rarely defined, leaving it a vague and inconsistent category with multiple taken-for-granted understandings and indiscriminate usages. Secondly, and related to this definitional indistinctness, the concept is swaying ambiguously between descriptions of religion’s pervasiveness in the conflict and instrumentalist explanations downplaying the religious dimension. As for the third problem, the term is seldom discussed from a bottom-up viewpoint as seen from people’s every day and lived experiences or—for our purposes—investigated through refugees’ narrative voices. Rather, it has become a label by which mainly scholars of political science and international relations offer top-down analyses attempting to explain identity politics and larger geopolitical dynamics in Syria and the Middle East as a whole.

Despite contributing with much valuable insights to the sectarian debate, many of these studies have not yet sufficiently considered how ordinary individuals understand, subscribe to or, alternatively, reject the sectarian framing of revolution and war, including the dynamic perceptions of the “religious other”. Certainly, information on a more analytical level is needed to understand narratives and contexts, just as information from bottom-up perspectives offer additional nuances to the whole picture. Thus, there is still need for a critical examination of the concept of sectarianism as a discursive category in the academic literature on Syria as well as its individual and contested appropriation in personal narratives. As we shall see, a narrative identity approach may allow for adding new layers of theoretical understanding to this debate.

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<sup>4</sup> See among others: Berti and Paris 2014; Farouk-Alli 2014; Browne 2015; Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeh 2015; Phillips 2015; Atassi 2015; Stolleis 2015; Leenders 2016; Tomass 2016; Hashemi and Postel 2017; Gaiser 2017; Pinto 2017; Wehrey 2017; Wimmen 2017; Dixon 2017; Haddad 2017; Soage 2017; Makdisi 2017; Balanche 2018.

### 3.1. From Sectarianism to Sectarianization

It has been said that no one studying the Middle East can begin to understand the region without “taking into account the ebb and flow of identity politics” (Telhami and Barnett 2002, p. 2). Indeed, conflicts of identity in the Middle East have often been labeled ‘sectarian’ and mostly alluded to the perceived ancient hatred and the allegedly irreconcilable encounter between the ‘sects’ of Sunni and Shi’a Islam. Although most current scholarship criticizes such an essential reading (cf. Marashi 2014; Soage 2017; Atassi 2015), the term ‘sectarianism’ is still eluding a shared definitional understanding and is rarely concerned with identity affiliations outside that of the Muslim context. Many analysts appear to use the term by predominantly referring to processes of group formations in which religious identities are at stake.<sup>5</sup> The ubiquity in use of the term in academic literature suggests, however, that there exist multiple terminological understandings of sectarianism (Haddad 2017).<sup>6</sup>

Notwithstanding, common to most understandings is to view the phenomenon with negativity and associate it with hatred, stereotypes, prejudice and violent conflict (Haddad 2017, p. 104; Makdisi 2017). Such a perception may come out as too one-dimensional, however, as it views sectarian coexistence to be a contradiction in terms as well as concealing the fact that sectarian identities have managed to positively connect and interact for centuries in the region. In the case of Syria, according to Atassi (2015, p. 19), a long and interwoven history of cross-cultural and inter-religious relations thus tend to become “missing narratives”—or stories erased from communal memory as they fail to fit the negative and mediatized framing of the conflict as sectarian.

Moreover, as noted by Ussama Makdisi (2017, pp. 3–5), the Arabic term for sectarianism—*al-ta’ifiyya*—only became negatively infused during the 20th century when Western colonial interests, as well as domestic Arab nationalist discourses, spurred debates on sectarian affiliations as irrational, tribalistic, and reactionary remnants from a pre-modern past. Many political intellectuals saw sectarianism as an antithesis to the idea of a secular, enlightened, unified and sovereign nation-state (Makdisi 2017, pp. 3–5). Such uneasiness with sectarianism may explain why it is not only associated with something shameful and taboo but also something potentially dangerous that can threaten public peace and national cohesion.

Other disagreements in literature concern whether sectarian identities and relations are something which is felt, imposed, constructed, or inherent in human nature and whether it should be studied as a social, religious, or political issue (Haddad 2017, p. 102). These discrepancies are also mirrored in what Paul Dixon (2017) distinguishes as three basic types of explanatory models regarding sectarianism and conflict. The primordialist model represents a biological answer for humans’ predisposal to violence, whereas the ethno-nationalist model points at the influence of religion and culture in creating sectarian conflict. Both are essentialist, according to Dixon, in that they exclude other conflict-producing factors and dismiss individual agency and cross-cultural differences (Dixon 2017, p. 17). In sharp contrast to the previous two models, the instrumentalist model (or the “evil politicians/dictator-explanation”) opts for a wider lens regarding how different factors and identities interact and intersect over time. However, by overemphasizing the role of political systems and elites in creating sectarian violence (Dixon 2017, p. 25), this model frames it all exclusively within politics and fails to account for discourses from below, as well as for the salience of religion and other cultural identity markers.

All of these models are represented in analyses regarding the particularities of the Syrian conflict. Aligned with the essentialist approach, Mark Tomass asserts in *The Religious Roots of the Syrian Conflict*

<sup>5</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionaries*, for example, offer the following very basic definition of sectarianism: “Excessive attachment to a particular sect or party, especially in religion”. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sectarianism>.

<sup>6</sup> Fanar Haddad has identified five principal ways in which the terminology is used academically: (1) An expansive approach which subsumes sectarian expressions under an all-inclusive umbrella without clarifications or boundaries; (2) A “sect-centricity” approach with an array of different meanings of ‘sect’; (3) A political approach that solely focuses on the institutionalization of sectarian identities in political systems; (4) A multi-faceted and typological approach avoiding singular definitions and (5) An approach which makes sectarianism equivalent to racism. (Haddad 2017, pp. 102–3).



(Tomass 2016), that religious and sectarian identifications are not merely the products of the present war, but rather determining sources of the conflict. In Syria as well as in the Middle East at large, he maintains, religious identity has historically been “the dominant determinant of political allegiances” (Tomass 2016, p. xii). To understand the Syrian war, he argues, it is essential to grasp how groups and individuals continuously “prioritize their religious and sectarian identities” (Tomass 2016, p. 5). Although his work is displaying much valuable insight into the multi-ethnic and multi-religious makeup of the Syrian society, one can argue that it becomes reductionist when suggesting that sectarianism is all about religion, inherent religious worldviews, and the inevitable clash of different sectarian identities.

At the other end of the spectrum, in *Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War* (Balanche 2018), Fabrice Balanche represents an instrumentalist approach in which sectarianism is analyzed as tightly interlaced with power, class and urban/rural policies. Whereas Balanche's work is an impressive socioeconomic and geopolitical survey of the importance regarding sectarian identities in Syria, it fails to provide a more subtle understanding of the religious dimension of sectarianism. Similarly instrumentalistic, but even more opinionated, the Syrian writer and former political prisoner al-Haj Saleh provides in *The Impossible Revolution* (Al-Haj Saleh 2017) an in-depth analysis of the type of power-related sectarianism he sees as systematically permeating the Syrian political system: “[S]ectarianism is a matter of political and social privilege, not a question of identity, culture, or religion” (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, p. 278). It is a system in which a thoroughly sectarian regime, what he calls a “sultanate” with inherited dynastic claims, unjustifiably employs structural differences as a tool for discrimination, subordination and enforced loyalty to secure its monolithic domination. Again, whereas his analysis offers a comprehensive account of the lengths to which the Syrian regime has exploited and utilized identities for political purposes, it too tends to dismiss other important factors and place all moral guilt on the mantle of the political elite (cf. the “evil politicians/dictator”-model).

A less reductionist approach is exemplified by Nader Hashemi (2015), whose understanding of sectarianism takes a middle ground between that of Balanche and Tomass, but who, similar to al-Haj Saleh, sees it firmly within the framework of authoritarianism rather than that of the theology of faith-based differences:

While it is true that religious identities are more salient in the politics of the Middle East than before, it is also true that state actors have politicized these identities in pursuit of political gain. The politics of authoritarian regimes is the key context for understanding this problem (Hashemi 2015, p. 74)

In *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, Hashemi and Postel (2017) offer an interesting replacement of sectarianism as an analytical concept. Rather than viewing it as an -ism, void of any meaningful content and which implies a static and unassailable characteristic of opposing identities, they suggest that ‘sectarianization’ is a better term to use. They define it as a dynamic process “shaped by political actors operating within specific contexts, pursuing political goals that involve popular mobilization around particular (religious) identity markers” (Hashemi and Postel 2017, p. 4). Paulo G. H. Pinto (2017) expands this understanding by describing the sectarianization of the Syrian conflict as a process that has unfolded on multiple levels:

top-down (state-generated); bottom-up (socially generated); outside-in (fueled by regional forces); and inside-out (the spread of Syria's conflict into neighboring states). (Pinto 2017, p. 123)

Indeed, for our purposes, ‘sectarianization’ is far more suitable as a term in that it displays the dynamics at play in processes of contested and contesting identities. Conceptualizing sectarianization, therefore, means to move beyond primordialism and instrumentalist explanations and accommodate approaches that acknowledge the complexities of identities, temporal and spatial contexts as well as the dual dependency of structural constraints and individual agency. A narrative identity approach may well offer a potential opportunity to enhance our theoretical understanding of these issues.

Inspired by Adam Gaiser's narrative identity approach, this study will adopt his understanding of sectarianism as "participatory discourses" where individuals emplot themselves (Gaiser 2017, p. 62). Rather than viewing sect affiliation as something permanent and essential, it is a "dynamic and conscious process of adoption, maintenance, and manipulation of certain types of narrative identities in particular places and at particular times by particular persons or groups of persons" (Gaiser 2017, p. 62). This perspective is more attuned to our investigation of sectarianized outlooks held by Syrian refugees. It allows for exploring individual sectarian claims or rejections by actors in their everyday lives (Tobin 2018, p. 225), at the same time as it looks at larger hegemonic discourses enveloping the "smaller stories" at any given time and place in history.

### 3.2. Syria's Master Narrative Landscape

It will come as no surprise that political identity narratives abound in the midst of an ongoing Syrian civil war. In a multi-religious Syria, where a Sunni majority exists side by side with larger and smaller minorities—such as Alawites, Christians, Druze, Ismailis, Shiites, and Yezidis—views regarding the nature of their sectarian relations are contested.<sup>7</sup> These contestations are also reflected in the discursive field of larger stories we may subsume under concepts such as "master narratives" (Bamberg 2005) or "metanarratives" (Lyotard 1984). Challenged by the dramatic events occurring in the wake of the Arab Spring, many of the prevailing hegemonic discourses in Syria were seriously challenged, according to Frida Nome (2016). Considered a time of crisis, it also triggered crises of identity in which competing "forces [would] try to hegemonize the social arena, each presenting its own framework as the only possible solution to the crisis" (Nome 2016, p. 43).

According to a report on Syria issued through the *Master Narrative Platform* (2012), three sets of highly competitive master narratives have shaped the Syrian political context both before and after the uprising in 2011.<sup>8</sup> The first one is categorized as "consensus narratives"; stories which are widely shared across the different divides of the Syrian society. On the one hand, these narratives concern the proud civilizational history of Greater Syria, including its perceived history of multicultural and inter-religious conviviality and coexistence (cf. Løland 2019; Chatty 2017; Stolleis 2015). On the other hand, they include conspiracies regarding foreign and domestic forces that threaten to disrupt this legacy's survival. The second category concerns the legitimacy of the Alawite dominated Assad-regime and its supporters, and includes narratives which are "carefully crafted and cultivated to justify and buttress autocratic rule" (Master Narrative Platform 2012, p. 8). Standing in conflict with the second category, the third forms a buffer containing an array of disruptive voices whose aims are to confront the regime and change the status quo. Among the disruptive voices mentioned in the report, are revolutionaries, Sunnis, and Kurds (Master Narrative Platform 2012, p. 9)—segments in society advocating for long-desired freedoms, although not necessarily sharing the same means by which to achieve this vision.

However broadly conceived and insufficiently covered, the report on Syrian master narratives provides a valuable backdrop for the following analysis of individual narratives from a Syrian refugee

<sup>7</sup> The ethno-religious composition of Syria's demography is in itself a contested issue and numbers vary in different surveys. One pre-war (2009) estimation places the total Syrian population to approximately 21 million people, out of which 74% were Sunni Muslims, 16% other Muslims (including Alawites, Shiites, Ismailis and Druze) and 10% Christians of various denominations. Cf. <http://www.heritageforpeace.org/syria-country-information/geography/>.

<sup>8</sup> The platform is a collaboration between Open Source Center, Monitor 360 and other partners across the US Government and it gives the following definition of master narratives: "Master narratives are the historically grounded stories that reflect a community's identity and experiences, or explain its hopes, aspirations, and concerns. These narratives help groups understand who they are and where they come from, and how to make sense of unfolding developments around them". Cf. Country Report on Syria (Master Narrative Platform 2012, p. 6) accessible online: <https://info.publicintelligence.net/OSC-SyriaMasterNarratives.pdf>.

context.<sup>9</sup> Authored in 2012, at the very beginning of the civil war, the report neglects, for instance, to include the Islamist and jihadists discourses that began to enter the narrative battlefield during this time. Notwithstanding, already early on, Syria's master narrative landscape points to deep and existential schisms "characterized by conflict across ethnic, sectarian, and political lines" (Master Narrative Platform 2012, p. 8).

In the Syrian national and official discourse and during the two Assad-regimes, the issue of sectarianism has occupied an odd double-status. On the one hand, the sectarian narrative has been connected with the historically loaded Arabic term of *'fitna'* which, aside from its original Qur'anic usage, has come to mean "chaos", "anarchy", "discord", "sedition", "trial", and "civil war" (Nome 2016; Tobin 2018).<sup>10</sup> Issued as a stark warning, this term was invoked several times during president Bashar al-Assad's first speech to the nation after the revolution erupted in 2011.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, and conditioned by the first, are the controlling measures intended to keep a tight lid on "the cauldron of ancient hatreds" (Dixon 2017, p. 21), thereby instilling a sense of fear concerning any expression of sub-national or sectarian identifications. Highly politicized and subject to vilification, therefore, sectarianism in Syria has been subject to an enforced silence in a quid pro quo policy of guaranteeing peaceful coexistence against threatening sectarian forces. The paradox of this narrative, as noted by many, is that it is always reliant upon an external and demonized sectarian "other", while simultaneously masking the very sectarian and power-related measures that have helped sustain the regime's dominant discourse (Dixon 2017; Al-Haj Saleh 2017; Wimmen 2017).

As noted by Christopher Phillips, "[s]ect was officially dismissed and an inclusive, Syrian Arab nationalism encouraged, but politicised sect identities were simultaneously reproduced, either by the regime or by internal and external enemies" (Phillips 2015, p. 366). In the wake of the revolution, however, it is important to note that all parties to the conflict have engaged in sectarian rhetoric and committed sectarian-based violence against an enemy other. Thus, layers of new master stories have been added to the Syrian landscape and shaped the battlefield as different rebel groups, Islamists, domestic and foreign militias, as well as regional and international forces, have sought to hegemonize their version of events. A mutual game of blame has occurred between actors in the conflict, accusing each other of "trying to foment sectarian chaos whilst simultaneously framing themselves as beacons of hope for all Syrians" (Browne 2015, p. 13).

In our forthcoming narrative inquiry, we shall view these master stories, not as canonical templates confined within impermeable boundaries. Rather, as will become evident, refugee voices operating on the micro-level in exile, relate to these narrative frames sometimes by subscribing to them and other times by rejecting them, revealing for the most part experiences that come in-between or cut across and move beyond publically sanctioned discourses.

#### 4. Tracing Sectarianization: Syrian Refugee Narratives on the Revolution and Emerging War

The Arab Spring that swept over the Middle East during late 2010 and the early parts of 2011 was met with bewilderment, disbelief, and cautious anticipation among Syrians. Whereas few dared to envision that protests could help dethrone the authoritarian and long-standing regime in Syria—such as witnessed in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt—others were dreading such a scenario to unfold in their midst. For some, the revolutionary winds that eventually reached Syria carried promises of a nascent utopia; an exuberant turning point breathing life and activism into a nation of oppressed. For others, however, it was considered a dystopic nightmare seriously destabilizing life as they knew it. By tracing

<sup>9</sup> There are more recent reports of interest, such as *Sectarianism in Syria (The Day After (TDA) 2016)*, a survey study conducted by the organization The Day After. Another is the compilation *Playing the Sectarian Card*, edited by Stolleis (2015), in which space is given to identities and affiliations from different minority perspectives.

<sup>10</sup> In its Islamic usage, the term *'fitna'* refers to the trials and uprisings that occurred within the early Muslim community during the seventh century, the result of which were multiple civil wars and the final religious schism between Sunnites and Shi'ites.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?298760-1/syria-president-bashar-al-assadhe>.



the processes of sectarianization through the extremities of revolution and an emerging war, the following trajectories are divided into four narrative clusters we can subsume under the headings of hope, fear, victimization, as well as hate and distrust. Voiced by Syrian refugees in exile, their stories and the ensuing narrative analysis reveal a spectrum of experiences together representing a highly fragmented and contested mirror image of what took place in 2011 and onwards.

#### 4.1. *Calling for Freedom: Narratives of Hope*

In 2011, Rania was a young and ambitious under-graduate student from Damascus with a Sunni-Muslim background. She had many discussions with her friends regarding the Arab Spring. “We were all divided”, she says, depending on “subjective opinions and where each one of us was standing in that historic moment”. She recalls watching the news when the Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak stepped down in February 2011, and some of her friends exclaimed: “We hope that this doesn’t happen here! We don’t want our country to fall into chaos!”. They were not necessarily happy about the Syrian regime, according to Rania, but they preferred the status quo rather than not knowing who would fill the gap should the Assad-regime be removed. Rania herself, however, said she and many others were “extremely hopeful”. They actually started to believe that if Mubarak could fall, so could Assad. If protests at the Tahrir square could bring about such pivotal changes, so could people in Syria. For Rania, it was a moment inaugurating what she terms as a “tsunami of hope”. Although it was among her friends from minority groups that skepticism prevailed the strongest, many of them also collectively shared her hopes for reforms in Syria. In Rania’s opinion, the call for democratic changes was secular in nature as it transcended sub-identity affiliations and carved out a “new space” which brought “communal solidarity” to the forefront of the opposition.

Nasser, a middle-aged Sunni-Muslim merchant from the suburbs of Damascus, reiterates this democratic demand: “We wanted freedom, equality, and social justice. It was as simple as that”, he says. He recalls that when Bashar al-Assad came to power after the death of his father in 2000, many were optimistic that things would change. “We had carried a burden for 30 years, and we said that maybe that young man [Bashar] would take the intelligence [apparatus] away”. When this ceased to happen, it was as if something needed to burst out. Pointing at a glass on the table, Nasser provides an image of what he means: “Look at this glass of water. You keep pouring and pouring and pouring and then, what do you think happens? It overflows!”.

In the northeast of the county, similar sentiments were surfacing, according to Abdel. He had just finished his university degree in Islamic studies when the revolution started and had settled down with his wife and four children to help minister at a local mosque. People in that area had for long been poor and marginalized, according to him, and the revolution was welcomed as a way of breaking with the strains of the past and hoping for a better future.

My feeling, or the feeling of the majority of the ordinary people, was a sense of something called freedom. We had the chance to breathe freedom, and that was a wonderful feeling. I felt we were born again!

A member of the small minority sect of Ismailis—an offshoot of Shia Islam—Hassan explains that when the revolution started, “people were happy that this was happening”. In the city of Salamiyah, considered the “Ismaili capital” in Syria, people “had so many reasons to go out [and demonstrate]”, he says.

What is evident from the voices of Hassan, Abdel, Nasser, and Rania is that the revolution for many brought about a general spirit of hope amid long-suppressed feelings of oppression, economic deprivation, and lack of freedom and democratic rights. For Nasser, as for many others, the last drop that made the cup run over was triggered by events occurring in the southwestern city of Daraa in March 2011. After at least 15 children were arrested and allegedly tortured for writing anti-Assad slogans on the wall of their school (Wimmen 2017; Lister 2015), people took to the streets, calling for a release of the children and asking for reforms. These initial protests in Daraa—later named the

“cradle of the revolution”—subsequently sparked the revolutionary fire that spread across the country. Echoing Nasser’s claim, the human rights activist Rafif Jouejati has summarized what she identifies as the main objective for the protest movement, namely “the right for all Syrians to live in peace and dignity; to freely practice their religious and political beliefs; to be equal citizens before the law”.<sup>12</sup> As corroborated in other empirical studies (Pearlman 2017; Hindy and Ghaddar 2017; Sørvig 2017), those who were positively inclined towards the revolution perceived the uprising as a process of liberation and a grand new era, filled with euphoric hopes for a new beginning.

At the outset, as Rania confirms, sectarianism was not a major driver that propelled the revolution. According to Heiko Wimmen, “the Syrian protesters who rose up against the regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in 2011 adopted a non-sectarian approach” (Wimmen 2017, p. 61). It was a non-violent and primarily civic uprising that cut across religion, sect, and ethnicity. Echoed in slogans such as “One, one, one, the Syrian people are one” (“*Wahid, Wahid, Wahid, al-Sha’b al-Suri Wahid*”), many of the revolutionaries purported to advocate an explicit inclusiveness.<sup>13</sup> Thus, in the beginning, anti-regime and pro-revolutionary protests stressed that all Syrians were one and united, “rather than members of religious groups like the Alawis, Druzes, Isma’ilis, Sunnis or Kurds” (Van Dam 2017, p. 5).

Certainly, before the war, there existed a widely held national narrative of Syria as a harmonious state in which diversity coexisted, and cross-sectarian interaction was embraced as a natural part of the Syrian identity fabric (Løland 2019). This is not to say, however, that religious references were not mobilized from the beginning of the uprising or that sectarian tensions were absent in the Syrian society. There existed already political practices in which rights and privileges were unevenly and discriminately distributed among the population (Pinto 2017, p. 124), creating much frustration and underlying tensions in society.

It is against this policy, as well as the general features of authoritarianism and the extensive power mechanisms exerted by the two Assad regimes that our interlocutor’s call for freedom must be understood. Indeed, as Nasser alludes to, this power was nowhere more visible than in institutions such as the army, police, and the notorious intelligence services (*mukhabarat*), whose eyes and ears were perceived to be omnipresent (Wimmen 2017, p. 69; Lister 2015, p. 29). Taken together, they did much to effectively cement the totalitarian and threatening nature of the Syrian state.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4.2. Breaking the Silence: Narratives of Fear

In her seminal narrative research, Wendy Pearlman has categorized different types of fear engulfing the Syrian civil war. One she names “silencing fear”, alluding to how authoritarianism produces climates of insecurity and compliance through surveillance, intimidation, and detentions (Pearlman 2016, p. 24). Another is called “surmounted fear”—a type of fear which accompanied the uprising and which, rather than silencing, encouraged and empowered the “fight for political voice” (Pearlman 2016, p. 26). Both of these types of fear are tangled up with issues of identities as evident in the following stories of Hassan, Said, and Nasser.

The impression that all minorities were unequivocally siding with the regime is inaccurate, according to Hassan. It clouds the fact that many were hiding their dissatisfaction behind an apparent and fear-driven showcase of support for the authorities. After Daraa, however, and judging by the

<sup>12</sup> Jouejati (2015).

<sup>13</sup> Kahf (2011). See also Salamandra (2013, p. 303) and Pinto (2017, p. 128).

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Global Security report: “A range of techniques are used by the security services to co-opt or intimidate Syrians. These techniques, at the most accommodating end of the spectrum, include offers of remunerative, prestigious positions and other rewards. At the opposite end they routinely involve coercive measures such as travel bans, surveillance and harassment of both individuals and family members, the threat of detention (without charge), interrogation, and imprisonment after lengthy trials. It is often in the middle range, between enticements and threats, that the Syrian security services are at their most effective, curbing dissent, obliging people to report on their friends and colleagues, and convincing them sometimes to present regime arguments justifying policies or decisions.” <https://www.globalsecurity.org/intell/world/syria/intro.htm>. See also (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, pp. 236–37).

huge amount of protesters in the street, Hassan took it as a clear sign that something significant was happening in the country and that “a wall of fear had been broken”.

Such a break, however, did not come without personal costs and dire expenses for many. In the outskirts of Damascus, Said watched the unfolding events occurring in the country with a mixture of joy and uneasiness. Coming from a family with a traditional Sunni Muslim background, he sympathized with the protesters for reasons that cut across both socio-economic and religious concerns, believing that the majority Sunni population was for long underprivileged and had suffered discrimination at the hands of the Alawite-dominated elite in society. He believed that the revolution might bring about some positive changes, that “perhaps now, someone will listen to us”. Living in a small village surrounded by military bases, however, Said felt he had to keep this hope well hidden. “Inside I was very happy about what was happening, but I couldn’t show it. I couldn’t participate in any of the demonstrations because I had responsibilities towards my family”. He describes how Assad’s security forces penetrated these early and non-violent demonstrations, observed who took part in them and later hunted them down. “In my neighborhood, eleven young men were arrested in the middle of the night, and three of them never returned alive”. One of the men who came back told Said about the torture and humiliating treatments they had suffered while incarcerated in the prison of Saydnaya. “He was not a man anymore,” Said recalls, “he was just a sick and broken shadow of himself”.<sup>15</sup> This man gave him an imperative warning that stuck with Said up until he left Syria for good and which solidified his fear of breaking the silence: “Whatever you do, never ever say anything against Assad!”

Nasser, on the other hand, was one who fervently embraced the revolutionary call and actively took part in the early demonstrations. Nevertheless, he recalls how he needed to balance the fear of speaking up with the fear of his own and his family’s safety when taking to the streets. He claims to have seen how intelligence officers brutally cracked down on the demonstrators, and how the regime brought “drug dealers and other criminals” to infiltrate in their midst in order “to make it look like the demonstrations were not peaceful, that we are terrorists”. This was a game the regime played, according to Nasser, with the intent of distorting the image of the revolution from the very beginning. It provoked him since, in his words, “we didn’t carry anything, I swear, no weapons, no sticks, only our voice”.

Representative of these stories is the impression that the Syrian regime for decades had created a nation in fear and a “kingdom of silence” (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016). Both Said and Nasser show how institutions of enforcement and punishment placed a heavy burden upon anyone attempting to raise their voice and take part in the demonstrations. Ever since the Arab Socialist Ba’ath Party came to power in 1963 and consolidated the Syrian Emergency Law, any public gatherings or signs of political dissent have been outlawed and coercively repressed by the two Assad-regimes (Al-Haj Saleh 2017). The Syrian regime also went to great lengths of controlling and managing its power symbolically, as alluded to by Hassan when he talks about displaying a showcase of support. What Lisa Wedeen (2015) has named the “cult of Assad” is a compelling example of this. This cult became the axis around which the authoritarian control circulated and took a strangling hold of the society, according to her (Wedeen 2015, p. 30). It consisted of spectacles of support and the vocabulary of veneration for—if not worship of—the Ba’ath party and its leader, as well as other forms of carefully crafted rhetorical strategies designed to enforce obedience, induce complicity and ensure loyalty. These measures were both powerful and effective as they deeply penetrated “people’s experiences of everyday political life” (Wedeen 2015, p. 30) and “succeeded in conditioning the behavior of most Syrians” (Perthes 1995, p. 148).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Cf. “About Saydnaya”, Amnesty International: <https://saydnaya.amnesty.org/en/saydnaya.html>.

<sup>16</sup> An emerging body of testimonial writings and literary memoirs published by Syrians in exile (Halasa et al. 2014; Yazbek 2016; Malek 2017; Al-Haj Saleh 2017; Eid 2018; Abouzeid 2018), themselves a result of breaking with the imposed and self-censored regulations for public speech, attest to this collectively internalized fear of speaking up and voicing anything that could infringe upon the officially sanctioned discourse.

A significant aspect of these symbolic power mechanisms was the enforced silence concerning all talk on sectarianism and sub-national identities. “The topic of sectarianism is one of the worst political taboos in Assad’s Syria. Not only is it a source of intellectual and political paralysis, but also a mask that hides the regime’s sectarian practices and its manipulation of Syrian society” (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, p. 292).<sup>17</sup> While this policy aimed to strengthen a secular narrative of a unified Syrian Arab national identity, it did not succeed in banning sectarianism from society. Rather, by designating ethno-religious identities as a forbidden and hypersensitive topic, it helped foster ignorance of and prejudice towards the religious other, as witnessed particularly in the Syrian education system (Bali 2015). For Said, such silencing and negating of differences seem to have infringed upon him a sense of being different or alienated. Although a member of the majority population, as a Sunni Muslim he felt that he was not listened to and became marginalized economically as well as religiously.<sup>18</sup> In part, Said’s frustration and hope may be understood politically as a demand for greater inclusion, respect, and representation against the refusal of a ruling elite to share power.

Nasser, on the other hand, expresses his distress of being mis-identified as a ‘terrorist’ when partaking in peaceful demonstrations. Indeed, as noted by many scholars, one of the factors that brought about a sectarian twist from the outset of the revolution, even before the uprising turned violent, was the regime’s quick intent of portraying the demonstrations as a “foreign conspiracy” consisting of “Salafi terrorists” and “armed gangs” (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016, p. 40; see also Stolleis 2015). It was a carefully drafted master narrative that purported to present Syria as a victim against forces determined to “sow sectarian strife” (Wimmen 2017, p. 63) and incite violence that would pose a security threat to the nation. Integral to the shaping of this narrative was to strengthen the legitimacy behind the military’s responses and to scare people, particularly the minorities, into siding with the regime.

According to Balanche, this narrative comes across as “an astounding bit of hypocrisy from a regime that relies on the loyalty of an Alawite minority and does all it can to divide its Sunni citizens” (Balanche 2018, p. 130). Such a divide and rule policy became particularly evident when a presidential amnesty was issued for the release of hundreds of Islamist prisoners in late March 2011. This move was, according to Charles L. Lister, “yet another devious attempt by the Assad regime to manipulate its adversary, this time by unleashing those it could safely label ‘jihadist’ or ‘extremist’ amongst its ranks” (Lister 2015, p. 53). Indeed, as noted by Wimmen, the discriminatory measures that the authorities undertook to allegedly safeguard the peace, in fact hastened “the outbreak of the very sectarian conflict the regime was purportedly warning against” (Wimmen 2017, p. 63).

In the Syrian national discourse, labeling political adversaries as terrorists is a sectarian practice with historical antecedents, the most recent of which is pointing back to the sectarian conflict that raged between the ruling regime of Hafez al-Assad and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and 80s.

#### 4.3. *The Haunting of Hama: Narratives of Victimization*

Looming on the horizon of fear for most Syrians is the domestic turbulence that culminated with the Hama massacre in 1982. These events have deeply affected generations of Syrians irrespective of their religious or sectarian background. The conflict involves the long-standing and mutual enmity between the Ba’ath party and the Muslim Brotherhood over the place of religion and religious authority

<sup>17</sup> See also Stolleis (2015, p. 8); Worren (2007); Salamandra (2013); Haddad (2017); Hindy and Ghaddar (2017). According to one activist interviewed by Hindy and Ghaddar (2017), now a refugee in Lebanon, “the dictatorship forbade us from expressing our primary identities”. Throughout the whole of Syria’s modern history, he asserts, “the regime and the Ba’ath party had held a monopoly over discussions of identity”, quelling the very diversity upon which the Syrian society historically rested.

<sup>18</sup> See Balanche (2018) for reports regarding socio-economic and political discrimination against the Sunni population prior to and during the uprising.

in the Syrian society.<sup>19</sup> Shadows of this past seem to have resurfaced under the Syrian revolution, and a majority of my interlocutors mentions it in one way or another, as reflected here in the stories of Dany, Maryam, and Hassan.

Dany is a manager with a Christian Orthodox background who worked in the region of Latakia when the uprising started. He presents a counter-narrative to many of the more euphorically tinted stories of the revolution that we have encountered so far. “Suddenly there were angry people in the streets throwing stones and chanting”, he says. “We were scared, and we didn’t know what was happening”. Eventually, after having seen what took place across Syria, Dany concluded that this was not a revolution. “It wasn’t about freedom or the Arabic spring. No, no, the start was really only in Sunni areas where people wanted to make problems”. His suspicion was strengthened by the fact that most demonstrations occurred after the Friday services in the mosques.<sup>20</sup> “Since the beginning, we knew that there is a conspiracy,” Bassem explained, “and that those boys [the demonstrators] were not innocent. They were manipulated and paid to make trouble and start the war in Syria”. He and many with him believed that the instigators came from the Muslim Brotherhood, “because we know from history that this group had problems with the government”.

In a similar vein, Maryam—a Christian employee from Damascus—describes that what occurred on the streets, was not an expression of oppression or a call for freedom. “The ones who came out in the demonstrations, all Syrians disliked them. They were uneducated and ill-mannered.” For her too, “it was all like a conspiracy. They wanted to destroy Syria, to erase the history and civilization ( . . . ). This is what was planned”. The real reason for Sunni Muslims to resent the president, according to Maryam, was “merely because he is an Alawite”, alluding to the historically sanctioned critical discourse directed against Alawites from both orthodox Sunni and Shia communities.<sup>21</sup>

Hassan, on the other hand, although himself belonging to the Ismaili minority group, saw in the regime’s brutal handling of the revolution a repetition of the slaughtering that occurred in Hama. Many of the victims of Hama sought refuge in his town of Salamiya, he explains, “and we welcomed them as brothers”. This gesture did not go unnoticed by the regime, according to Hassan, who believes that the revolution gave the government an opportunity for revenge against the citizen’s disloyalty three decades earlier.

The sectarian script that the Syrian regime’s narrative upheld from the beginning found a particularly receptive audience by the minorities. However, the role of the minorities during the outbreak of the revolution is highly debatable and should be scrutinized for its often biased representation in much literature (Khoury 2015). It is a myth, according to Mohja Kahf, that minorities did not participate in the Syrian uprising.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that for many, support for Assad rested as much on fear of an Islamist insurgence as it did on a sense of protection under the wings of a secular state. For others, remaining silent or neutral was triggered by a host of different factors, for example by fear of losing one’s job and financial goodwill or being excommunicated from one’s family and religious community.

<sup>19</sup> Disputes regarding the weight of religion in the Syrian society goes back to 1973 when Islamists, represented by the Muslim Brotherhood, demanded that the Syrian constitution included a stricter Islamic jurisprudence: “Assad’s attempt to enact a constitution that did not stipulate sharia as the source of law sparked riots. He was forced to reinstate the charter’s sharia roots, including an article mandating that the head of the state has to be Muslim” (Balanche 2018, p. 117).

<sup>20</sup> Pinto explains that as mosques traditionally have been the only spaces allowed for public gatherings, they were also appropriated by the protesters as natural “spaces they could gather and organize out of sight of the security forces” (Pinto 2017, p. 126).

<sup>21</sup> This history goes back to the medieval times where the minority Nusayri-sect (named after its founder Ibn Nusayr in the 9th century) was subject to numerous religious fatwas (judgements) and were persecuted on basis of apostasy (Tomass 2016, p. 78). According to Shi’a scholar Heinz Halm (2004), modern criticism of the Assad regime “use anti-Nusayri religious slogans in order to bring the head of the state into disrepute as a non-Muslim and a heretic, while al-Asad tried to counter this by public participation at prayers in the mosque. In order to dispel talk of heresy the Nusayris have from the beginning of the present century called themselves ‘Alawis’ (*‘Alawiyyun*), i.e., ‘Ali supporters of Shi’ites, and thus have attempted to get themselves recognized ( . . . ) within the Islamic community” (Halm 2004, p. 157).

<sup>22</sup> Kahf (2013).



Both Dany and Maryam are reiterating many of the specific religious minority experiences and Christian fears regarding the uprising which, colored by skepticism and conspiracy theories, appear to conform with the regime's master narrative of victimization (Bandak 2015; Schmoller 2016). A common denominator for both is the historical reference to the Muslim Brotherhood and the threat of militant Islamism towards other religious groups. The Muslim Brotherhood's attacks on Alawite targets during the late 1970s and early '80s exacerbated fear in most Syrian minority communities, prompting many to believe that should Assad fall, their existence would perish in sectarian bloodshed. For many Alawites, hence, these attacks evoked memories of past persecution and massacres they had historically suffered at the hands of Sunnis at the same time as it strengthened their sectarian ties of loyalty to Assad (Balanche 2018, pp. 117–18; Worren 2007). We find a similar deep-seated skepticism towards the Sunnis among many Christians, and their existential fear of extinction have provoked minority solidarity and pro-regime sentiments. In Maryam's story, we may see such skepticism reflected in her categorization of the demonstrators as "all disliked" and "ill-mannered"—a stereotyped enemy other subject to a "language of dehumanization" (Van Lieere 2014, p. 37).

According to Torstein Schiøtz Worren, the historical traumas, along with the more recent sectarian offences perpetrated by the Muslim Brotherhood, have shaped the Alawis' identity narrative as one of victimization (Worren 2007, p. 102). This narrative does not merely concern a felt theological inferiority in which a perceived hegemonic Sunni discourse views Alawism with suspicion and as a heretical expression of Islam. It is also reflected politically in the fear of Alawites being judged as a group and collectively held accountable for their sect-based ties to the ruling regime (Worren 2007, p. 103).<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the mixture of religious and political resentments against the Alawis were reformulated by the influential spiritual spokesperson for the Muslim Brotherhood, Yousef al-Qaradawi, in 2013. Continuing in the medieval tradition of Ibn Taymiyya, he denounced the Alawis as "more infidel than Christians and Jews" and called for Muslims everywhere to go to Syria and fight them (Tomass 2016, pp. 78, 161).

For most Sunni Muslims, however, what is remembered from the sectarian battle against the Muslim Brotherhood is its culmination in the Hama massacre in which somewhere between 10,000 to 40,000 people were killed (Lister 2015, p. 26). With this campaign, the regime inflicted a brutal defeat not only upon the Muslim Brotherhood but inaugurated an era "during which Sunni Islam and religion in general were kept tightly controlled by the state apparatus" (Lister 2015, p. 26). In al-Haj Saleh's opinion, the Hama massacre in 1982 was "the end-point, not to the conflict with Islamists, but to any political rights for all Syrians" (Al-Haj Saleh 2017, p. 236). As seen from the story of Hassan, this resulted in waves of civilian displacement from Hama, where both refugees and the hosts that gave them refuge were, in his interpretation, victimized and unjustifiably targeted as traitors to the regime.

According to Pearlman, the events of Hama "cannot be overstated" (Pearlman 2016, p. 24). They are subsumed under the long-buried narratives of fear and have collectively affected entire generations. Similarly, Rapahël Lefèvre shows in the *Ashes of Hama* (Lefèvre 2013) how the public memory of those events are deeply reinscribed into the current conflict in Syria. Thus, although for different and contested reasons, these historical incidents have made a lasting imprint on the memories of Sunni Muslims and minorities alike. The haunting of Hama appears to be a collective inheritance having caused transgenerational traumatic group inflections. This brings to mind Vamik Volkan's term 'chosen trauma' which he explains as "a large group's mental representation of a historic event that resulted in collective feelings of helplessness, victimization, shame, and humiliation at the hands of 'others,' and typically involves drastic losses of people, land, prestige, and dignity"

<sup>23</sup> These links to the regime have been subject to grave generalizations and misunderstandings, as shown in the study by Worren: "In the political conflicts of Syria, Alawis feel they are hated by 'The Other' because of the mistakes of the regime. It is a myth, they say, that we gain in any way from a shared religious background. Instead, the nepotism so visible is about personal relations with powerful families, both Sunni, Christian and Alawi, and not sect. Some, therefore, present their shared background as a curse rather than a blessing" (Worren 2007, p. 98).

(Volkan 2006, p. 173). When internalized, these injuries tend to be transmitted to the next generation, causing wounds to remain unhealed, while at the same time instilling a sense of “we-ness” which solidifies group identity (Volkan 2006, p. 173).<sup>24</sup> As shown, the trans- and intergenerational trauma of Hama is situated at the interface of competing narratives of victimization. Together they function as one of many interpretative keys to an enhanced understanding of the conflicting outlooks regarding the uprising and revolution.

#### 4.4. Encountering the Religious Other: Narratives of Hate and Mistrust

In my study, most of the interlocutors negate harboring any negative sectarian sentiments against ‘the religious other’. Rather, what many underpins with both pride and vigor is the multi-ethnic and plural religious character of the Syrian society before the war, where friendship and relations cut across sectarian or religious divides. Subsumed under stories of “paradise lost” (Løland 2019), this grand narrative of conviviality simultaneously hides certain undercurrents of tensions that gained momentum and became intensified during the revolution and emerging war. Through the following stories of Mahmoud, Maryam, Dany, Said, Abdel, Nasser, and Rania, reflections of palpable changes in attitudes concerning people’s ethnic, religious, and political affiliations take shape. Whether real or imagined, differences emerged as potential threatening issues, derailing the relations between family members, friends, neighbors, and colleagues (Stolleis 2015).

Mahmoud, a Sunni-Arab industrial worker, explains how he experienced this shift of mentality in his multi-religious workplace:

After a while, we couldn’t accept each other ( . . . ). The Alawis were sitting together, they would not speak to anyone else, and the Sunnis the same, the Christians the same. We were trying to avoid each other. We actually became afraid of each other. ( . . . ) The situation in Syria was such that you couldn’t trust your brother, so it was very difficult, and we were all separated in very small groups. It was much better to stay alone than expressing your feelings to anyone because no one could be trusted.

In the beginning, Mahmoud could never have fathomed that the surfacing conflict would grow into a civil war where fellow Syrians pointed their guns at each other. However, “when the army started with the tanks and the bombs and their heavy weapons, it came to a point where everyone knew that, ok, now it is eternal, it will all go to hell!” After having experienced dire losses of lives in his close family, hatred became inevitable for Mahmoud. Although much of it was due to an increased feeling of general insecurity as well as violent atrocities perpetrated by the regime, he gave it a discernable sectarian face:

There were many Sunnis who were fighting with the regime and who were killing us. But I can say that more than 90% were Alawites and Shiites, so I feel until now that I hate them. I can’t forgive them.

Despite harboring anti-Alawite hate and resentment, Mahmoud refused to take an active part in support for any of the groups warring each other. “I wasn’t ready to get involved in this conflict, to kill or be killed”, he says. “Both of them [the regime and the opposition parties] were bad for us. The Syrian army bombed us, and the opposition fighters stole from us. No one was looking for Syria; no one was caring for the country. Everyone had its own project”.

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<sup>24</sup> Activist Kassem Eid in his autobiography *My Country. A Syrian Memoir* (Eid 2018, p. 128) describes an example of such a transgenerational trauma and links it to the current Syrian civil war: “Perhaps it was out of frustration that we, the youth of Syria, had dared to hope and dream of a better future. Our parents had betrayed us by sleepwalking through their whole lives. They should have known after the Hama massacre of 1982 that the Assad family was too brutal to be allowed to hold power for another generation. They should have screamed their lungs out, fought tooth and nail, and struggled with all of their force after seeing that brutality the Assad regime was capable of. Instead, they kept silent as Hafez al-Assad set in motion a murderous plan to annihilate his future opponent. We, the youth of Syria, turned out to be those future opponents—and because our parents’ generation kept silent, we paid a price in blood.”

In his job as a religious cleric, Abdel was another first-hand witness to the gradual changes that took place in the community where he ministered:

Before the war, and especially in the place where I was living, there were strong tribal relationships. But after the war, the youth, in particular, joined different groups, causing a difference in opinions and confrontations. Once they were friends and shared strong relations, before splitting up and going with one group or another.

Being a figure of religious authority in his village, Abdel says that he was pressured by both moderate rebels as well as different emerging Salafist groups expecting him to give his allegiance and public support for their cause. For years, until ISIL (the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) entered his village in 2014, he says it was a tight balance not to be caught in the web of anyone's particular political agenda:

We didn't want to be judged as one of them. So we tried to avoid that or be neutral so that we didn't get in conflict with any of them. That was until the time of ISIL. They wouldn't even give you a choice to remain neutral.

From a Christian minority point of view, Maryam reiterates the shock and disbelief regarding the dramatic changes that gradually took a hold in people's attitudes towards each other. She recalls that, before the war,

we did not think that we are Christians and they are Muslims. We were together, celebrating everything together, sharing life, supporting each other. Most of the Muslims were very good to us. It was a nice and peaceful life.

After a while, however, she felt there was an increased sense of threat directed towards her and other religious minorities:

At the beginning of the war, do you know what they called out in the mosques? 'Christians to Beirut and Alawites to the tomb!' While walking around, strict Muslims would tell you things like 'Huh, still here? Why are you not in Beirut?'. And to the Alawites: 'Ah, you're still alive, why are you not dead?'. So what kind of emotions will you get when you hear things like this? In your own country!

This kind of sectarian language in addition to other factors, such as stories of kidnappings of Christians as well as everyday shooting and bombings in the vicinity of her house, prompted Maryam to leave Syria behind. It is not without bitterness and remorse she looks back at this decision, pointing her finger at an undefined culprit called "They" whilst yielding that, for the Christians, there were no victories to be gained in this war:

We heard that we are not welcome in this place anymore and that we are few people and need to get out. You'll feel that this is not hating, but it is something that breaks your soul. And this soul is my place; it's my country and the place where my parents grew up. ( . . . ) They planned this for my country, now I am not important, I have to go, and we did leave in the end. They wanted most of the Christians to go, and we went, but why? Because it is not our war, it is not our game; we would have lost. Because in the end, who will win?

Dany, for his part, explains that when the regime started to lose control of certain areas to opposition groups, these places became dangerous for Christians:

The government protects us in Syria. In many places that are not under the government, they don't respect Christians. If they know I'm Christian they can kill me. I'm not talking about Sunni terrorists like Daesh [ISIL] or al-Qaida, no, we talk about normal people. If they see my ID, they'd see my name is Christian. Maybe they need money and take my papers, or maybe they kill me.

Based on this perception, Dany concludes that “[s]ectarianism is in the blood of Syria. It’s not positive or negative, but it’s a reality”. For him, the only remedy against threats to his sectarian affiliation is a strong regime and a stable presidency, since, in his words, “without Bashar al-Assad, no one can protect us”.

From a Sunni-Muslim point of view, Said recalls that as the conflict turned increasingly violent and militarized, derogatory sectarian language became everyday experiences of humiliation and insults. “Every day I had to pass numerous checkpoints and every day I prayed that I would return safely back home”. The people operating the checkpoints were always suspicious about him, constantly probing his loyalty to Assad and harassing him for being Sunni and a potential terrorist. For Said, however, the most distressing about these encounters was the way they bad-mouthed Muslim women and threatened to abuse them sexually. “They cursed our women, and this is very shameful for us.”

Nasser also accounts for experiences of anti-Sunni talk. In fact, he claims to have witnessed how such talk turned lethal during Ramadan in 2011, as one of his friends got killed allegedly based on his Sunni identity.

When we got out from the Mosque one evening, some Alawites came up to us and said ‘We will kill you, we will fuck your sisters and mothers, you Sunni dogs!’ And then they killed him, and I watched him die.

This pivotal experience instilled such a profound sense of fear in Nasser that he decided to step back from engaging in any political activity thereafter. In retrospect, he says that the revolution and everything it symbolized, came to an abrupt halt at that moment. Instead of dreaming of a new Syrian future, he resorted to the background and found strength in his Muslim faith:

They hated the Sunni-Muslims ( . . . ) but we leave all matters to Allah. If I weren’t a believer during the war, I would have gone crazy. But I have a strong belief, and Allah is the one that made me patient.

Rania, on the other hand, claiming herself to be a secular Muslim, did not find any comfort in religion, nor did she lose faith in the revolution. When Islamists entered the revolutionary scene, the call for freedom and dignity was “hijacked”, according to her, and distorted by people who “developed more and more severe and extreme sectarian views”. Nevertheless, she maintains, “it is very crucial that we don’t fall into the trap of reducing everything to a sectarian conflict” as “there are so many other factors that play into the fragmentation of the Syrian people”. The contrast between the peaceful movements she initially took part in and had such great hopes for and the destructive violence overthrowing it is almost too daunting for her to talk about: “If you think about the mere scale of the [Syrian] tragedy, you’ll get paralyzed!” However, for Rania, it has been important not to let the war swallow what remains of the original and non-violent revolutionary message:

Our main goal is to preserve this narrative. The fragmentation [of the Syrian people] is a reality now, but we are maintaining the narrative because it can so easily be forgotten, by the general public, even by Syrians themselves, or by the politicians or the historians.

For Syrian activists in exile, she concludes, keeping the spark of the revolutionary narrative alive “is our existential task; it’s a question of who we are”.

In this narrative section, we have seen that quite parallel to the non-sectarian and democratically oriented protest movement that strived for unity and coexistence in opposition, currents of counter-narratives developed into derogatory discourses in which identity labels and sectarianized language gradually fueled fear and hatred against the ‘religious other’. Changes in attitudes and processes of sectarianization are visible in all our interlocutors’ personal stories, and whereas they are experienced in differentiated ways and through various times and places in Syria, they all point towards an increased dichotomized demarcation between ‘us’ and ‘them’.

As mentioned, the revolution was early on met by ever escalating violent responses by the Syrian state and security forces, prompting organizations like Human Rights Watch to qualify the atrocities

perpetrated against the civilian population as “crimes against humanity”.<sup>25</sup> By mid-2011 and onwards, a host of new domestic and foreign political and military groups emerged to counter the attacks by the regime. At the same time, Islamists of different leanings attempted to exert their influence on the direction of the revolution (Kahf 2013). In this increasingly complex landscape of competing forces and battles, it is important to note, according to Darwich and Fakhoury (2016), that all parties to the conflict mobilized sectarian discourses and stimulated a repertoire of grand narratives in which the ‘sectarian other’ was constructed and framed. Thus, casting the external other as an existential threat became a powerful tool to mobilize around religious identities and gain legitimacy for the use of violence. These developments had a huge impact on the civilian population. As narrated by my interlocutors, inflammatory and sectarian vocabulary was both experienced by, as well as directed against people in their everyday lives, whether Sunni-Muslims, Shiites, Alawites, or Christians alike.

According to Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), the regime’s master narrative appeared to legitimize the targeting of Sunni Muslim communities in particular and crack down unevenly on demonstrators according to their religious affiliation. In Syrian prisons and detention centers, for example, reports have surfaced about a systematic pattern of “sectarian torture tactics” aimed at violating religious boundaries and demean spiritual identities of Sunni detainees (Shalabi 2017).<sup>26</sup> These methods could include forced verbal and physical blasphemy, such as cursing Allah and prostrate to images of Bashar al-Assad or provide false testimonies during inhumane treatments. Also, attacks on Sunni sacred shrines and other vocal insults that struck to the core of Muslim religiosity did much to substantiate Sunni resentment and anti-Alawite discourse (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016, p. 49). As seen from the stories of Said and Dawud, sexual derogatory language against Muslim women, daily harassment at checkpoints as well as actual deadly encounters on the street, were perceived as expressions and practices of severe sectarian hatred.<sup>27</sup> For Mustafa, experiences of killings and the loss of close family members generated feelings of hatred and mistrust in return, instilling a sense of unforgiving animosity against the Alawites.

Correspondingly, from a minority point of view, experiences of sectarianization became visible early on in the conflict. Alawites in particular, but also Christians—as shown in the stories of Salma and Bassem—were victims of increasingly sectarian and Islamist propaganda in which slogans such as “Alawites into the coffin, Christians to Beirut (*al-’alawi a-tabout wa-l-masihi ila Beirut*)” (Stolleis 2015, p. 8) created fear and islamophobic sentiments.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, as shown by Pinto, the revolution became tinted with religious references pointing towards the importance of Islam as a moral framework for many of the revolutionaries with a Muslim background. Political slogans referring to freedom and dignity were mixed with the use of religious idioms such as the *takbir* (the chanting of “Allahu Akbar”) as well as the appropriation of religious symbols and spaces associated with Islam (Pinto 2017, p. 124). While this Sunni-inflected turn inevitably created a sense of empowerment among many Sunni protesters (Wimmen 2017, p. 81), it both scared and repulsed others. For Rania, this turn manifested a sectarian violation, or “hijacking” of the original revolutionary message which she saw as inherently inclusive and non-religious. For Bassem, however, these developments only served to strengthen his mistrust towards Muslims in general and to place his political hopes and dependence upon the regime. For Salma, the language of sectarianism contributed to her feelings of alienation and inferiority as a minority Christian. The experience of sudden hostility and unwontedness by people she once happily

<sup>25</sup> (Human Rights Watch 2011).

<sup>26</sup> See also an example from a video of a young blindfolded boy forced to violate the Muslim testimony of faith (*Shahada*) by pledging faith to Bashar al-Assad as his God: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SN1O5nhi7-g>.

<sup>27</sup> This story of Said is corroborated by many other sources, the latest of which is a UN report about how Syrian government forces and allied militias have used rape and sexual assaults as a weapon of war. Cf. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-warcrimes-sexual/thousands-of-women-men-children-raped-in-syrias-war-u-n-report-idUSKCN1GR1PZ>.

<sup>28</sup> According to some sources, however, anti-minority slogans such as this were allegedly part of the Syrian state’s propaganda and spread in order to scare the minorities into siding with the regime (Stolleis 2015; Bandak 2015).



shared the country with also seems to have heightened Salma's sense of sadness and defeat in what she calls a game, not of her making.

We may read all these stories as narratives of victimhood operating on many different levels. Whereas there are numerous ways of understanding trauma, suffering, and victimhood, processes of sectarianization, as witnessed in these stories, account for both intensely individual experiences as well as the politicization of discursive practices. None of my interlocutors were, in their words, prone to overt sectarianism. Yet their stories reveal how sectarian entrenchment nevertheless became inscribed into their life experiences, were (re)constructed through these experiences and made an impact on how they (re)presented themselves and the 'religious other'.

On the one hand, sectarianism as narratives of victimhood "seems to galvanize a sense of collective identity and belonging, as common suffering tends to strengthen solidarity between victims" (Matar and Harb 2013, p. 171; Enns 2012). On the other hand, victimhood may as much be associated with a sense of powerlessness against forces that overwhelm or challenge the individual's capacity of agency in times of conflict. In fact, similar to Abdel's account, many of the interlocutors in my study portray their position as caught in an impossible situation of in-between competing parties. As shown by van Liere, in times of conflict, patterns of "identification and disidentification" often tend to generate rudimentary identity categories in which violence and cycles of revenge are folded into narratives of victimization (Van Liere 2009, pp. 475–78). These processes include elements of "dehumanization", according to van Liere, in which belonging to an in-group identity "depends primarily on the exclusion of an/the other group" (Van Liere 2014, p. 39), thus creating an "incapability to see the other as morally comparable with the self" (Van Liere 2014, p. 35).

In our Syrian context, such processes of classifications represent "crude simplifications of a complex matter" (Stolleis 2015, p. 6), blurring stories and experiences of ambivalence that fall outside of these parameters. This is why, as testified also by Rania, an essentialist reading of sectarianism is counterproductive for an enhanced understanding of the Syrian conflict. Processes of sectarianization, however, is a better way of describing the narrative realities we have encountered through the stories of a diverse and fragmented Syrian refugee population. Following Makdisi (2017), these stories serve to show that

[r]ather than assume sectarianism to be a fixed, stable reality that floats above history, it is far more important to locate and identify—to historicize—each so-called 'sectarian' event, moment, structure, identification, and discourse in its particular context (Makdisi 2017, pp. 9–10)

## 5. Conclusions

This article has attempted to trace processes of sectarianization through narratives voiced by a fragmented Syrian refugee population residing in Norway. Whereas a lot of research has tried to understand the role of sectarianism in the Syrian conflict, few studies have explored the formation of sectarian identities and discourses from below and through refugees' firsthand experiences. Thus, this study has employed a narrative identity approach in order to demonstrate how individual experiences and micro-narrative testimonies intersect with a larger master-narrative landscape in which the concept of sectarianism occupies an important, albeit a confusing and ambiguous central place. I argue that essentialist and instrumentalist readings of this concept fail to capture the dynamic and contextually constructed nature of sectarianism. Instead, I opt for the term 'sectarianization' as a mode of conceptualization that more accurately describes processes in which contested and contesting identities are at play.

By taking sectarianization as a theoretical vantage point, this study's discussion has evolved around the particularities surrounding the Syrian revolution and emerging civil war as well as the ways in which religion, identity, and conflict intersect in the narrative realm of micro- and macro stories. Obviously, having restricted the time-frame of these narrative trajectories to events and experiences occurring during the first two years of the Syrian conflict, many important aspects of the Syrian civil

war have been omitted. For one, all the interlocutors taking part in this study have more stories to tell regarding the developments that took place after 2012, when the war not only became increasingly internationalized but also more explicitly sectarian as, among others, violent Islamist groups with an overt sectarian ideology entered the scene. These developments, together with the general agony of war and the unfathomable levels of insecurity, devastation, and personal losses, contributed to the complex field of reasons that forced them to leave Syria behind and enter the new and unwarranted status as refugees (Løland, forthcoming). Secondly, by focusing on sectarianism as an expression of how religious identities and differences are constructed and gain momentum in the Syrian conflict, this article has devoted less attention to other equally important factors, such as issues concerning socio-economy, gender, and regional politics.

As such, this article acknowledges that processes of sectarianization are but one of many facets regarding the complexities surrounding the Syrian uprising and ensuing civil war. Although not explanatory exhaustive, the four narrative clusters that have informed our interlocutors' trajectories of revolution and war, provide us with an enhanced understanding of how religion and religious identity constructions intersect with a complex discursive field of individual and public expressions. Embedded within the metaphorical frames of utopia and dystopia, these trajectories reveal a highly fragmented and contested space in which hope, fear, victimization as well as hate and distrust are reflections of ever-changing and (re-)emerging narrative identity patterns. Such patterns, as has been demonstrated, do not happen in a vacuum, but are deeply contingent upon memories of the past as well as the shifting cultural and political frameworks of a present. In our Syrian refugee context, we have seen that memories of a pre-war Syria throw lights on a past that many view as politically troubled and traumatizing. Others are inclined to maintain an idealized image of a pasttime Syria as opposed to the acute sense of a present chaos.

For the Syrian refugees in my study, experiences of war as well as of the forced migratory journeys they have undertaken, have created new layers of past and present traumas, many of which cast towering shadows on their lives in exile. This study has focused on processes of sectarianization in their narratives concerning the early phases of the Syrian conflict. However, more reflection is needed as regards to the evolving discourse of sectarianization in the Syrian conflict in general. In particular, and in the case of a post-war Syria, new research needs to focus on how the Syrian refugee population discursively engage with bridging a sectarian past with prospects of future coexistence.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

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