



The Dark Path of Minority Politics

Why Privileging Minorities Will Only Perpetuate the Syrian Catastrophe

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Since the inception of the Syrian uprisings, the Syrian regime has had an implicit justification for its violence: the protection of minorities. The regime has never been open about this, yet it is there. The justification reveals the dual structure of the Syrian state under the Assads: there is an outer, public discourse of national unity and an inner, publicly unexpressed discourse of minority protection and a minorities' alliance.¹ After eight years of war in Syria that saw savage oppression, genocidal massacres, and the rise of brutal extremist groups, the regime's claim that it must exist to protect minorities proved to be a self-fulfilling prophecy—at least for a while, especially between 2013 and 2016. This reality has emerged not because the “protection of minorities” was necessary to begin with, but because the Syrian regime's strategies, response to the uprisings, and role in the civil war made it all but inevitable.

This report argues that the temptation to give the Syrian regime credit for protecting minorities must be refuted and resisted. The truth is rather the opposite: the regime's top priority is to protect itself, using minorities as a shield. The entire minority-versus-majority narrative in Syria is one that the regime carefully crafted long before the uprisings of 2011 began—indeed, since the 1970s. It fashioned this narrative on a pattern inherited from colonial powers, which had earlier

cast themselves as protectors of minorities throughout the Levant. To understand the possibilities for a better future in Syria, activists and analysts need to unshackle themselves from the false narratives and fears of inevitable minority persecution. This is not an easy task, but the cycles of violence and repression in Syria will continue until its politics can confront a very basic truth: what Syria needs is not a politics of minority protection, but civil and economic rights for all on the basis of citizenship, neither enhanced nor restricted by the divisive identity markers bequeathed from the colonizers and reinvigorated by the Assad regime.

This report provides a constructive critique of the minority-protection narrative. It focuses on the historical basis and permutations of this narrative, before moving on to an evaluation of the possibilities for escaping it, and some warnings about the dangers to come.

This report draws heavily from an essay I first published in Arabic in early 2013, when I was still living underground in Damascus. It was motivated by a March 2012 statement by Sergey Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, warning of “Sunni rule” in Syria.² I wrote the essay believing that my experience as an activist and intellectual contemporary to the Assad family rule during half a century gave me an

This report can be found online at: <https://tcf.org/content/report/dark-path-minority-politics/>

important perspective on the historical and political origins of what I called “minority politics” and its implications. Needless to say, the regime never commented on Lavrov’s flagrant comments. Nor, of course, did it comment on Iran’s pretext for intervention in Syria—protecting Shia holy shrines—which recalled the Crusaders’ justifications for their destructive campaigns almost a thousand years before. What might seem more surprising was how little Lavrov’s comments, and others like his, were questioned from other quarters. Not a comment was heard from any Western government, international analyst, or anti-imperialist leftist. Indeed, in the years since, there has been continued silence on comments like Lavrov’s and the logic underlying them, even from groups and individuals who should have been in a position to give a critique.

This report is thus an attempt to fill a years-old gap in the discourse on minority protection in Syria. Much has changed since 2013 when the essay that inspired this report was written—not least, the Syrian revolution has been defeated on the battlefield, without qualification or any hope for military miracles. But the fight over the rhetoric and analysis surrounding Syria’s uprisings, society, economics, and politics is far from settled. There is still time to understand the truth behind the violence. There always will be. But now especially, the time is ripe for developing a fact-based and truthful explanation of the regime’s resilience—one that reveals the way it has sold out the security and happiness of the Syrian people in order to ensure its survival.

The Minority Protection Racket

Since the inception of the Syrian uprisings, the regime and its Russian backers have clung to a justification for their violence: the protection of minorities. Even as the rest of the world has disavowed any sympathy or support for Bashar al-Assad, it has come to endorse his claim of minority protection. And at least for some outside observers, the war in Syria seems to have borne out Assad’s claims that he and his ruling clique were standing between majoritarian extremists and the annihilation of Syria’s “mosaic” of ethnicities and sects. According to the inner, publicly inexpressible rhetoric of the regime mentioned above, this diversity stands arrayed

against the overwhelming menace of the Arab Sunni masses, descending mostly from rural areas, and their extremist foreign backers.

Various insurgent groups seemed to provide proof for the regime’s position. The Islamic State provided the most famous example, but other militias also ruled over conquered populations, with brutality visited on non-Sunnis and Sunnis alike. Western media has bought into this story, almost completely. Even its insistence on the use of the name “Islamic State” or the “Islamic State in Iraq and Syria” lends an implicit legitimacy to the narrative: the name can be misread as the Islamic state, a misinterpretation that the group is surely happy to have perpetuated. Syrians refer to the group as “Da’esh,” a word with ugly resonance in Arabic, which is hated and punishable by Da’esh thugs. “Da’esh” is thus a name that carries less baggage. While it is simply the Arabic acronym for “the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant,” it does not have the sheen of “the Islamic State”—a name that bolsters the idea that the group is somehow the expression of the Muslim majority’s political ambitions, which of course it is not.³

Further supporting the regime’s position, observers cling to superficial coverage and tend to ignore the dynamics of militarization, sectarianization, and radicalization that the systematic violence of the regime triggered in Syria. This leaves people under the false impression that people in Syria kill each other because they are Sunnis and Shias, an erroneous and essentialist claim echoed time and again by American leaders, most recently by Barack Obama when he said sectarian fighting had been going on for “thousands of years.”⁴

For a while, it was more tempting than ever for some to give the Syrian regime credit for, at the bare minimum, being somewhat accurate in casting itself as the protector of minorities. Hundreds of thousands are dead. More than half of Syria’s prewar population of twenty-two million are now refugees or internally displaced.⁵ There have been countless atrocities in a war that has exhausted everyone connected to it. But the temptation to give the Syrian regime credit must be resisted. This is a genocidal regime,

a quality that is inherent in its sectarian formation and the identity-based politics it has adopted, which dehumanize some people and “overhumanize” others according to their inherited denominations. Some 90 percent of the war’s victims were killed at the hands of the Assad protectorate and its protectors. Government forces monopolized war planes and weapons of mass destruction, organized a killing industry in Sednaya military prison (effectively a torture camp), and may have built a crematorium to dispense with the dead bodies.⁶

Notably, it is not only foreign powers that profess concern for the fate of minorities in Syria. Some Syrian intellectuals, too, adhere to this line of thinking, in one form or another. A common characteristic of such individuals is that they never prioritize the struggle for justice, democracy, and equality over their own elitist fears and privileges. One of the frequent grievances leveled against the Syrian revolution since its inception is that it failed to mobilize broad segments of “minorities,” or hasn’t sufficiently “reassured” them. There is a clear link between the revolution, which these elites perceive as a possible tectonic change in the sociocultural geology, and a growing concern about the situation of minorities in a post-Assad Syria. Every time the regime is not quite secure, its industry of fear produces more of this commodity.

As this report shows, however, such a position can only be held from deep inside the regime’s rhetorical and political labyrinth. This is a sectarian regime that has been ruling Syria for almost half a century, and which did its best to make Syrians fear each other—so that the regime becomes the sole provider of security. Rampant Islamophobia in the world today should not leave people blind to this structure and history.

Since the colonial era and even before it, the narrative of minority protection has successfully obscured the commonalities in the grievances between Syrians regardless of faith and ethnicity. The minority-versus-majority narrative is built on false premises, purporting to favor human rights but in fact providing a deep and enduring justification for authoritarian control. In claiming to protect the “minority” against the “majority,” it created and hardened divisions that

are far from organic. The regime knows that this politics of minority protection is sellable in the West, whose most powerful states have mostly been promoters of tyranny and sectarianism in the Levant.

Threatened Minorities / A Threatening Majority

The premise of “the protection of minorities” or “minority rights” in the context of Syria implies two assumptions, one relating to the relationship between “minorities” and “the majority,” and the other to the revolution.

This essential premise suggests that minorities are threatened by the majority, and that their protection is from this very majority—both minorities and the majority being defined by religion, ethnicity, and the past, and perceived as primordial entities. At the same time, the so-called majority is presented as a monolithic, gargantuan mass. Minorities are also presented as homogenous masses, albeit at a smaller scale.

The premise itself deems the Syrian revolution to be essentially majoritarian and anti-minority, without a clear explanation for why that is the case, and without showing sensitivity to time and historical changes in the course of the last eight years and for decades before. The roots of Western “neutrality” toward the Syrian revolution are based in this premise. Most Westerners are repelled by the Syrian regime, but they are equally or even more repelled by the Islamic core of our societies. Many sectors of Western society have never reconciled themselves with Islam as a religion, especially those who identify the West with the Judeo-Christian tradition (a relatively modern concept that only gained wide currency after World War II and the Holocaust). The emphasis placed on “the protection of minorities” is a vocal implication of this amoral neutrality, which is essentially apathy.

In fact, there isn’t one single majority in Syria. Nor are there static minorities, whose political and social positions are identical and whose defining characteristic is their being minorities in the face of a similarly static majority. There are

different majorities and minorities, which vary depending on the criteria we adopt to distinguish between them. If the criterion is ethnic, the majority is Arab and the minorities are Kurdish, Armenian, Assyrian, and Syriac. If the criterion is religious, then the majority is Muslim, and the minorities are Christian and Yazidi. If the criterion is sectarian or doctrinal, the majority is Sunni and the minorities are Alawite, Christian (and their many churches), Druze, Ismaili, and Shia.

But these are all static categories that Syria has inherited from its past, not dynamic categories of the kind that are supposed to distinguish modern, national, or democratic political sociologies. The subtext of foreign commentary on Syria is that these groups are the country's innate political majorities and minorities, and that this reality reflects deep-rooted sociological features. This misguided premise is, in some ways, self-fulfilling—contributing to the formation of static minorities and majorities.

However, these static differentiations don't have equal political value. The Sunni–Alawite contrast seemed far more menacing during the Syrian-versus-Syrian struggle in the first two years of the uprisings than the Muslim–Christian one—which Western powers and Russia engaged in during the nineteenth century. It also seemed more dangerous than the Arab–Kurdish contrast—which has been ranking second in the list of the most politically grave dichotomies. The reasons for this are political, historical, and ever-changing, and are related to contemporary polarizations, transformations, and conflicts.

One might assume from this logic that minorities are at greater risk when there is an identification between ethnic, religious, and sectarian majorities, constituting an overwhelming majority—which is the case with Sunni Muslim Arabs in Syria, who make up more than two-thirds of the population. But this abstract inference is disproved by reality. Syria's Arab Sunnis are far from being homogenous or majoritarian, and there has never been an active identification that brings them together in a way that might threaten any minorities.⁷ What's more, they weren't regarded as homogenous in the brief modern history of the Syrian entity (1918–63) before the Ba'athists seized power. The regional, cultural, and class

differentiations within this Arab–Muslim–Sunni component make the notion of an “Arab Sunni majority” of little to no political significance. Even within the broader organized religious Sunni spectrum, there are significant political differentiations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and Salafi jihadists. I tend to call these groupings Sunni sects; taken together, they are minorities among the Arab Sunnis, and even more so among Syrians at large.

The years of war in Syria, during which most victims, casualties, and displaced people were Arab Sunnis, underline the lack of merit in the assumption that there exists a unified Sunni majority, or even one that has convergent stances on public affairs. It has also been clear that a section of Syrian Sunnis has been supportive of the regime—maybe not in an active way, but still preferring stability and the status quo.

The idea that there is a majority threatening vulnerable minorities is a political fiction, made prominent in Syria under Hafez al-Assad (president 1971–2000), who actually adapted it from an older narrative. The current anxiety about minority rights is a permutation of this idea.

What is meant here by “minority politics” is a politics that is explicitly or implicitly directed toward manipulating inherited sociocultural differentiations. This politics works to consolidate and perpetuate the differentiation between “the majority” and “the minorities.” It considers the relationship between the two as inevitably adversarial, ultimately calling for an alliance of minorities, or the protection of minorities from the majority.⁸

In minority politics, minority rights are not intended to mean the granting of rights to minorities that are equal to the supposed majority's—in other words, establishing the principle of citizenship and equality. Rather, minority rights are about granting special statuses to identified minorities, as political blocs or communal groups. Equal rights cannot be sought through the concept of the protection of minorities, and they are not on the agenda of minority politics.

The prominent feature of the discourse of minority politics is, ironically, its utter negligence of the political context (as

discussed above), and its attribution of the risks and threats to the essential characters of cultural or social majorities and minorities. It is as if, in all cases, the majority is a predatory shark, and the minorities are small vulnerable fish.

One direct consequence of minority politics is that minorities must by definition always remain minorities; that is, their members are kept from engaging in different components or joining new coalitions that don't reference their minority statuses. This places limits on politics and society that, for much of Middle Eastern history, did not exist. The region, until modern times, was characterized by the constant formation of new majorities and minorities. Arab nationalism was an invented tradition that offered a chance for many people from static minorities to be equal partners in building a new political majority. Arab nationalism's defeat at the hands of the American-Israeli axis led directly to minority politics. This was especially so when that defeat was coupled with the "politics of eternity" that Hafez al-Assad successfully introduced in Syria ("eternity" referring to the planned duration of the Assad regime), and his building of a dynasty in the Syrian Arab Republic ("republic" not being a word one should associate with dynasties).⁹ Not a single word was heard from any Western politician against this monarchical transformation in the first modern Arab republic, nor one sentence from any of the anti-imperialist leftist organizations or intellectual authorities. Inauguration of a political eternity in Syria was not and is still not an issue of concern for either.

The Western and Russian interventions in Syria perpetuate the problem of minority politics (and minority vulnerability). They arise from the same roots—they are not something external to minority problems, and certainly not their solution. These interventions follow the same logic of previous failed attempts to structure the politics and society of Syria, dating to the early days of the so-called Eastern Question in the nineteenth century, through the French Mandate, and on to the Assadist rule of Syria.¹⁰

Colonial Patterns Repeat Themselves

The genealogy of minority politics dates back to the second half of the nineteenth century, when the Eastern Question

was a major preoccupation of European empires. At this time, imperialist ambitions to expand—with eyes cast on Ottoman lands—dovetailed with progressivism and self-righteousness to create a surge of concern for minorities in the Islamic world, and especially Christians. The view held that they were in constant danger, and that this stemmed from the indistinguishability of politics and religion in Islam.

European powers were looking for footholds throughout the Ottoman territories. After the commandeering of many Ottoman provinces in Greece, the Balkans, Algeria, Egypt, and Tunisia, the power balance between the "imperialist predators" didn't allow for the Sultanate's elimination. Predatory in the face of one another but far more vicious in the face of non-Europeans, these powers opted for sharing out spheres of influence to help settle scores among themselves. In this way, the French assigned to themselves the role of guardians of the Catholics and Maronites in the Levant, with the Orthodox being the share of tsarist Russia, and the Druze (in this instance not labeled Muslims) to be protected by Britain. In every case, Muslims were cast as the aggressors. This model has echoes today, with "altruistic" Russia sharing with Iran the burdens of protecting Alawites, Shia, and Christians, and the United States protecting the Kurds. As in the previous century, the danger from which all these communities must supposedly be protected is the "majority" of Arab Sunni Muslims.

Islamophobia helped many in the West and outside it not to see the mass murder in Syria that has been going on since 2012. Islamophobia, which is one face of what I call the Islamic Question (the other face is Islamism, both political and jihadist) is in a continuum with minority politics, and helps to normalize and globalize it.¹¹

The colonial project required using religion as a political tool, and colonizers' application of different ideas about secularism was rife with inconsistencies and hypocrisy. For example, France granted French citizenship to Algerian Jews in the early 1860s, but did not accord the same privilege to Algerian Muslims. In another instance of France's approach to religion abroad differing from the approach used at home, the French politician Leon Gambetta famously said in the course of the

following decade that for France, anticlericalism was not a commodity for export.¹² Secular France was notorious in this regard. The British were more pragmatic, but they came up with the Balfour Declaration that later led to the creation of Israel, the archetype of Western colonial hostility to the Arab world and to Muslims. Israel prefers the Assad state in Syria not only because it is an experienced guardian of the borders without a peace treaty, but even more because it plays a role in normalizing Israel as a state built on religious identity and the elimination of the Palestinian people, either through war or politics.

This background shows the connection between minority politics and the colonial politics that led to the European occupation of the Middle East, including Syria and Lebanon, following World War I. There is nothing altruistic or humane in this politics. Current neocolonial and postcolonial politics hardly depart from this logic. Far from being anti-imperialist or Third World nationalist, the Assad regime extends the values and practices of European colonialism by other means.

An effect of the Eastern Question ended up being the disenfranchisement of those groups who found themselves in the majority, which was newly defined under strict terms. The Ottoman state didn't represent or look after the interests of any majority of any sort. When Western powers decided they needed to privilege certain minorities in the time of the Ottoman Tanzimat (a period of reform in the nineteenth century), other segments of societies—the putative sociocultural majority—found themselves on the losing side of politics. This disenfranchisement is an integral part of the original and main purpose of minority politics. We cannot understand the massacre of Christians in Damascus in 1860 and the Maronite–Druze war in Lebanon the same year without this background in mind. Colonial protection of minorities led directly to more vulnerability of minorities—and of majorities, for that matter—and to ailing societies.

Lebanon itself was established by the French for the protection of Christians. The country's foundational belief is that the problem of one group is another group, which warranted mistrust between Lebanese Christians and

Lebanese Muslims. It worked well. Now, it seems that this system is kept together under the firm hand of a sectarian militia, Hezbollah, with its own version of a minority alliance.

Postcolonial Movements

In the 1930s, Arab nationalism was the name given to the last political majority to be invented in Syria (and the broader region). As a utopian idea, Arab nationalism largely allowed for blending of Muslims and Christians, not to mention Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, and Ismailis. It also gave many Syrians a sense of partnership and fraternity.

Arab nationalism found support in Syria not because it corresponded to a “natural” political majority in the country, but rather because it was associated with emancipatory and progressive values acquired during the struggle against the Ottoman sultanate in the decades before World War I, and more so during the struggle against European colonialism in the interwar years. Ideas and values like national liberation, socialism, progress, anti-Zionism, and international solidarity were hegemonic among Arabs in Egypt, Syria, Iraq, and other countries. Arab progressivism was secular and perceived itself as part of the international struggle against imperialism, colonialism, and reactionary Arab oil monarchies in the Gulf up to 1970. It was only after the retreat of these values that Arab nationalism deteriorated, and the likes of Hafez al-Assad, Saddam Hussein, Muammar Qaddafi, and the wealthy Gulf monarchies became associated with the signifier “Arab.” Arabs were reduced to an ethnicity whose representatives were either bloody tyrants or the corrupt and trivial petrol sheikhs. The Islamist fighter would soon enter the stage. Reduced to an ethnicity, Arabism's bequest was not the universal rights it had once espoused, but instead the new fact—or new importance of the fact—of Arabs' ethnic majority in Syria.¹³

Arab nationalists like Michel Aflaq, a Damascene Christian who helped found the original Ba'ath Party in the 1940s, viewed their movement as being the champion of progressive values in the Middle East. In a later stage, ethnicized Arabism alienated around 15 percent of the country's population—the percentage of Syrians who are not Arabs. Interestingly,

many of those non-Arabs, including Armenians and Kurds, thought of themselves as Arab up to the 1970s, when the Arab identity was still progressive and emancipatory. In time, however, the “Arab” signifier was reduced under the sway of tyranny and rentier states to simply meaning ethnicity and difference.

Between modern Syria’s beginnings at the close of World War I and the Ba’athist coup d’état in 1963, the country was evolving toward reducing the political value of these differentiations. Urban Sunnis composed a majority in the political class, but there was not “Sunni rule.” In 1949, fixed sectarian quotas for the Islamic sects were abolished in the parliament (the Jewish quota was also abolished, while the Christian quota was kept), apparently without raising public outcries. Rather than considering every Syrian to be a Muslim, the state seemed to consider every Syrian to be an Arab. Perhaps the Christian quota was excluded for the purpose of reassurance: Syria had just gained independence three years earlier, and the French Mandate (1920–46) had been justifying itself through the protection of minorities, especially Christians. The lack of recorded outcry doesn’t mean that these developments passed without resistance by conservative social and political currents, but rather that the outcome of social forces was in favor of greater progression toward equality and citizenship.

When in power after 1963, however, Arab nationalism eventually collapsed under the weight of its own contradictions and the defeat of June 1967. It transformed from a progressive project into a narrow political ideology, embodied in a specific political party, the Ba’ath, which started its rule with a state of exception and by suffocating political life. In Syria, this political ideology in turn narrowed even more, becoming embodied in the person of Hafez al-Assad. What was once a unifying vision was used as an excuse for tyranny and pillaging, and for privileging the Assads’ clique.

Later, an emptied and value-free Arab nationalism remained an ideology of Assadist rule, owing to its usefulness in national and regional maneuvering, and at the same time in obscuring this maneuvering. Instead of serving as a ground

for convergence and unity, this degenerate form of Arabism was used to mask efforts to promote discord and conflict between Syrians, as well as between the Arabs of the Mashreq (the eastern portion of the Arab world)—societies and states alike.

In time, Syrian Ba’athism fully transformed from an ideology of mostly inclusive majority rule to a cover for sectarian political arrangements obsessed with the protection of minorities. Partly in the name of the protection of minorities, the Assad regime went to ever more excessive lengths. It has been a vital interest of the regime that Sunnis become more Sunni, Alawites more Alawite, Christians more Christian, Kurds more Kurdish, and so on. That is why the regime crushed leftist and secular organizations that sought to bring Syrians closer to each other on the basis of citizenship, and that opposed its sectarian policies. Ultimately, it mostly sought to serve the interests of a ruling clique whose main figures came from an Alawite background (a community that makes up 12 percent of the population), though it would never admit as much.

In this system, the disenfranchised segments of the sociocultural majority paid the price for the special status granted to minorities. But the bigger cost was to the fabric of Syrian society. It is impossible to establish a modern state based on such a bargain: the people were supposed to mistrust each other, but trust the authoritarian leader’s capacity for violence to enforce the current order. This politics turns the truth upside down. It considers the enemies of Syrians to be themselves, and their friends to be the Assad regime—or the Russians, the French, or the Americans. No country can be built upon such a basis—Russia, France, and the United States certainly are not. Trust and respect cannot be built on a foundation of mistrust.

This mistrust has deep consequences. Contrary to popular perception, sectarianism isn’t the origin of mistrust. The opposite is true. Mistrust breeds sectarianism. Sects become internal circles of trust, solidarity, and security only when the political system is untrusted, the public feels alienated, and there is a declining sense of control over life conditions.

These historical developments led to the formation of an “internal West”—dominant and privileged national elites from which the majority of the population is socially, culturally, and politically marginalized. It is thus quite obvious where Islamists come from when they claim to represent this majority, and Islam turns into a political and social resistance ideology—into “the solution.”

In light of this history, it is easy to see that neither the problems of minorities nor those of majorities are inherited from the distant past. Instead, they arise from the quality of political, institutional, legal, and social arrangements on which the Syrian public system is based today, with people in power taking advantage of inherited differentiations and manipulating them to preserve their own powers and privileges.¹⁴

The strategy that the Assad regime of the late twentieth century used to control Syria was based on a model developed in colonial times. It opened the door to a permanent civil war. Conflict between the minorities and the majority was all but inevitable. Syria has now passed through one of the cruelest rounds of this continuous war—the harvest of fifty years of shortsighted manipulation.

The Trap of Mandate

Long before the Assad dynasty resorted to Iran and its satellites, and then to Russia, to protect its ownership of the Syrian state, the Lebanese example demonstrated another cornerstone of minority politics: appealing to foreign powers to mediate between local communities. This reached a rare extent under the Mount Lebanon Mutasarrifate in the last decades of the nineteenth century. As “compassionate” (and imperialist) Western powers looked for Lebanese in need of protection from other Lebanese, there was a sudden proliferation of Lebanese communities in need of protection. The Assads’ Syria is another example of minority politics that precipitated the biggest threats to minorities in the modern history of Syria. In these cases, internal and external manipulation have led to temporary improvements in the conditions of minorities, but also to great calamities in the longer term. Minorities, because they are by definition in

the minority, are more likely to be affected by major political crises and instabilities than the majority. Still, minority politics has never led to sustainable conditions. No system that fuels discrimination, rivalry, and mistrust can be sustainable.

Apart from the long-term suffering of minorities, the very doctrine of their protection is completely detached from the demands of equality and citizenship, and from any secular political ideologies. It only leads to demanding special treatment of minorities in the political system—either a reversal of the Ottoman “dhimmi” status, which granted certain protections to non-Muslims, or perhaps a confessional system, whose Lebanese example is not encouraging.¹⁵

The West and Russia’s emphasis on the protection of minorities and minority rights in Syria is meant to serve the same agenda as the approach used in colonial times: the problem of some Syrian groups is other Syrian groups, and this can only be solved by intervention or guardianship.

Syria under Hafez al-Assad wasn’t fundamentally different from that model, except that the “guardian” of minorities was local. The relationship between Syrian groups, as well as the discussion revolving around this relationship, are largely the result of Hafez al-Assad’s version of minority politics, a “minorities’ alliance.” This politics led to the formation not only of a menacing Sunni majority, but also of vulnerable minorities. The dictatorship, in its quest to rule forever, created these divisions to stamp out any national challengers to its rule. Here again, out of supposed concern for the protection of minorities, the West and Russia are effectively perpetuating this Assadist politics, which in turn echoes French Mandate’s politics, which in its turn emanated from the intellectual and political premises of the Eastern Question of the imperial era. Only the guardian has been changing. Again, Islamophobia normalizes and globalizes this politics and entrenches it.

Embedded in this concept of mandate is a sense of the “colonial” treatment of subjects—that combination of extreme political coercion and cultural and class supremacy, driven by a “civilizing mission.” Under Bashar al-Assad,

who assumed power in 2000, this civilizing mission turned from having a socialist bent to focusing on modernism (the junior Assad promoted “development and modernization”) and secularism. The Assad brand of progressivism thus moved from the sphere of the social to the sphere of the cultural. Many of yesterday’s Syrian progressives are today’s culturalists. They explain our social and political problems in terms of the people’s mentality: their mission is “enlightenment,” and their political agenda is enlightened despotism. Under the Assadist mandate, just as under the French Mandate, the regime attributes to itself a sort of civilizing mission by applying the colonial policy of divide and rule.

Despite promises of eventual evolution to another political system, neither the Assadist mandate nor its colonial predecessors ever made a serious effort to build a nation-state based on the model of citizenship. Shortly before the uprisings of 2011, Bashar al-Assad himself spoke about the decades required until Syrian society would become “ripe” for reform.¹⁶ This abundance of time, and the dogmatic mention of decades and centuries, is a core part of culturists’ lingo and their intellectual tool kit. Since the uprisings began, Bashar al-Assad has proclaimed his regime to be “secularism’s last fortress,” something that calls to mind Israel’s proclamation that it is the oasis of democracy in the Middle East.¹⁷ The endgame for the Assad regime has always been achieving an international legitimacy that could justify the perpetuation of its guardianship. And the regime has been quite successful in obtaining it.

Then again, while the mandate doctrine may have been built on false premises, the world it has constructed now poses real dangers for those that minority politics has defined as “minorities.” Before the Syrian revolution, these dangers were already real: many minorities experienced a sense of insecurity and widespread fear of receiving disdainful or condescending treatment, or of being politically or culturally marginalized, or of becoming second-class citizens. After years of war instigated by a sectarian regime that ultimately unfolded on sectarian lines, minority fears grew when the regime was endangered, and calmed down with the renewal of the Assad mandate under Russian and Iranian protection.

It also bears mentioning that being a minority does not, of course, make one virtuous, as a prevailing dogma in the West has it. Minorities are not necessarily defenders of equality and democracy, and they are not immune to harboring fascist tendencies—especially when their minority condition is coupled with privileges, whether political, material, or symbolic.

At least two generations of sectarian discrimination in Syria has paved the way for a movement in reaction: the majority politics embodied by Islamists. Here, I mean the idea that the majority, defined in identity-based terms, has the right to rule. In the vision of the Muslim Brotherhood, where Islam is a political ideology, minorities have rights as communities that are putatively equal to Muslims. In reality, however, Muslims are “more equal”—they are the reference point for law and society. For the Salafi jihadists for whom Islam is a political technology, non-Muslim minorities should be dealt with harshly, and Muslim minorities should convert to true Islam or be killed. These fascists with shaggy beards are the other face of the fascists with suits and neckties, like Bashar al-Assad.

A comprehensive strategy is needed to confront this form of majority politics. Otherwise, the actions of its proponents can legitimize minority politics, as it has already done in earlier years. The rise of Salafi jihadism in Syria between 2013 and 2016 gave credibility to Assadist discourse, as well as to the discourses of the Western powers, Russia, and the local ideologues who share their premises.

This political structure formed around minority protection is the structural reason why Syrian minorities have always been worried about their future. It is an axiom of minority politics that minorities are fragile, though privileged, and that their fragility should be preserved for minority politics to legitimize itself. More privileges are necessary to redress fragility, but privilege raises anger among the underprivileged and makes the privileged less secure. So the circle of vulnerability and privilege closes, with no way out. This is good for the providers of security. One constant of minority politics from the perspective of those who provide protection is that there should always be imminent dangers

to minorities, and that minorities should be afraid all the time. We protect you because you are afraid, but we need you afraid so that you ask us to protect you. And this goes along with a growing sense of discrimination toward and restlessness among many Sunnis—neither minorities nor the majority feel secure, and the gulf between their identities, priorities, and consciousnesses has steadily grown.

Still, responding to minorities' perception of insecurity by denying it or ignoring it provides no solution to the mandate trap. The insecurity of minorities is now one of Syria's national problems. Denying such a tangible issue provides an open invitation to any domestic or foreign power wishing to manipulate the country.

At the same time, the ultimate remedy for minorities' insecurity cannot be a promise of their protection. It must instead be a complete shifting of the political landscape to one in which rights and privileges are not linked to identity but rather to citizenship. There exists a toxic assumption that Middle Eastern societies, by their unchanging primordial nature, are made up of groups that cannot blend and socialize, whose interrelationship will always be rivalry and zero-sum, where whatever is gained by one side is lost by the other. This assumption cannot possibly sustain the needed shift of the political landscape, nor can it even constitute a livable country. The possibility that both sides win together or both lose together falls outside the scope of minority politics. So does the fact that all these sides are changing, and that our history is, just like other histories, one of continuous blending and of forming new differentiations, new majorities, and new minorities. Minority politics, cloaked in the language of modernism, has thus created highly explosive societies, loaded with hostilities throughout their institutions, culture, and psychology. Lebanon's contemporary history is a living testament to this, as is the history of Syria under the Assad regime.

The Temptations of Majority Politics

Even as one essential requirement of minority politics is that minorities face real and existential threats, the threat of majority politics was quite real for a while. And it capitalized

well on the fact that many among the majority have real grievances, and the easiest concept to attach their grievances to is their status as a disenfranchised majority victimized by privileged minorities. But clinging to this grievance covers no new ground. Such an approach merely turns minority politics on its head, rather than actually dismantling it.

I choose the terms carefully here to highlight that these issues are matters of politics, and not of identity. Identities are political constructs, not the opposite. Politics is not derived from identities, as many in Syria, the Middle East, and the West believe. In the same vein, a sectarian regime is a regime, not a sect, the way minority (and majority) politics is about politics, and not communities or identity. Syria has already lost the chance of minimizing the weight and role of culture (identity, and more specifically, religion and ethnicity) in its political system. We are back to neocolonial conditions, where a sectarian regime is protected by two powers—Iran and Russia—that openly express themselves in sectarian language, and on a background of flourishing Islamophobia in the West.

This situation maintains a high demand for majority politics among those who feel alienated, though many of them are not Islamists. I think that a sense of “ghubn” (a feeling of being discriminated against) is developing among many Sunnis, similar to the one Muslims of Lebanon developed before the Lebanese war in 1975. Although this sentiment currently lacks a language to express itself—Islamism has for some time been progressively going out of favor among wide swaths of Sunnis—it is bound to find an outlet in one way or another.

One possible outcome is consociational arrangements for sharing power among communities, as in Lebanon. This is not likely in Syria, however, because of the demographic weight of Sunnis. I suspect that no international voices have been heard calling for such arrangements because they are aware of Syria's demographics. But a modified formula of this regime is possible, wherein the Assads occupy the position of praetorian guards of the system, a position occupied by Hezbollah in the Lebanese model. I do not exclude the possibility of Islamists being part of these arrangements. It

makes a lot of sense that we would see an alliance between agents of minority and majority politics and politicians. Both are sectarian, and are both adamantly against citizenship politics and democracy.

While minority politics neutralizes or marginalizes atypical individuals from majoritarian backgrounds who do not endorse this politics, majority politics, whether in alliance with minority politics or not, marginalizes atypical Sunnis. It marginalizes them because it is based on mainstreaming an assumption that a typical Sunni Muslim is a pious believer who is socially conservative and politically Islamist, and ultimately close to either the Muslim Brotherhood or the Salafis. Indeed, Syria has already witnessed this outcome in the last few years of war, with nihilist elitist groups like the Nusra Front, the Islamic State, and the Islam Army (“Jaysh al-Islam”) targeting many Sunnis who were deemed inadequately devout, or apostate. Partly, this is because the supposedly “typical” Sunni is hardly common at all. Estimating the percentage of Syrians who fit this “typical” mold is impossible. But it is certain that when international media reports that “70 percent of Syria is composed of Sunni Arabs,” it disguises a huge diversity of practice and identity within this “majority.”¹⁸ This is particularly noteworthy because an unreserved employment of the signifier “Sunni majority” can potentially involve a political agenda to impose homogeneity and sectarianization on Syrian Sunnis, and perhaps to recruit them in explicitly religious or even extremist groups in order to hold power. Without this process, the Sunnis of Syria do not constitute a “sect” (though it may be said that Islamists do).¹⁹

At its core, the politics of the Islamization of Muslims—or rather the Sunnization of Sunnis—is as incoherent and unfounded as the Ba’athist politics of the Arabization of Arabs. Moreover, if the politics of the Arabization of Arabs led to the political and moral disintegration of Arab nationalism, the politics of the Islamization of Muslims undermines the general Islamic association, which in theory includes Shia, Alawites, Ismailis, and Druze. It also undermines the already fragile Sunni association—potentially breaking it into the “sects” of the Muslim Brotherhood, Salafis, and Salafi jihadists. And indeed, in the years of war in Syria, groups

inspired by these different ideologies have frequently been at each other’s throats—even as the Syrian regime and much of the international community have regarded them all as undifferentiated terrorists. Even aside from one’s opinions on Islamization’s implications in terms of lifestyle and culture, it is a political dead-end, leading to splintering into ever-smaller groups that are just as mistrustful of each other as they are of non-Islamists—just the way minority and majority politics have done their best to achieve.

International observers are mistaken in thinking that “cultural Sunnis” have a particular tendency to become Islamists. They are also mistaken in thinking that there is a common cause between Islamists in particular and Sunnis in general, though the wish to wash away diversity is an undeclared aim of majority politics (and minority politics, for that matter), and particularly its Islamist strain. There is a great deal of diversity within Sunni communities in Syria. The Islamist covenant underpinning the unity of all Sunnis is simply one single interpretation of Islam. Further, it is an eminently contemporary interpretation, which is formed by the intellectual tools of our time—its coercions and its political, social, psychological, and epistemic constraints. The contemporary Islamist covenant is no more legitimate than any other interpretations of the Islamic corpus formed a thousand years ago.

Islamists are a product of the contemporary historical crisis: a foundering of nation building, including the building of a modern sovereign state capable of war and politics. They aren’t exclusively a product of Syria’s inherited culture or that of Arabs, despite their ideology stating otherwise. Islamists are one facet of a crisis whose other manifestations include sectarianism and minority politics in general. As such, the problem of Islamists needn’t be tackled as separate from other problems of sectarianism and minorities, or as if solving the problems of sectarianism and minorities is conditional upon or a prerequisite for the solution of the Islamist problem. These are all different manifestations—rather than causes—of a forcible deactivation of social, political, and cultural dynamics. Islamists put forward the past as an answer to the questions of societies whose historical horizons are blocked by “politics of nature,” according to ancient Muslim

scholars—that is to say, politics of sheer power and violence. In other words, these are societies that are stripped of their future but left with an open road to the past. The Islamic solution can alleviate a temporary Sunni resentment, but cannot form a new majority that serves as the basis for a nation of citizens. An end to the politics of eternity is a vital need in Syria and the Middle East.

Whatever is dangerous to minorities is also dangerous to majorities. Looked at this way, majority politics such as Islamism are actually just another iteration of minority politics. The only true majority politics is democracy.

Moving beyond Mandate Rule

The dilemma facing Syria now is how it can move beyond the premise that a significant portion of the populace requires being guarded from big masses who would, given the chance, make their ways of life and very identities impossible. If anything, the way has become more difficult because of the renewal of the mandate of minority politics, with implicit international patronage. Under the distorting lens of the powerful narrative of minority politics that had already been well established before the Syrian revolution, international media and policymakers saw the rise of the Islamic State, in one sense, as another example of the danger of majority rule in the region. Never mind that Islamic State fighters were mostly foreign, that its most numerous victims were Syrian Sunnis, or that there is ample circumstantial evidence that the Assad regime was happy at their rise. With the militant group's social media-ready performance of ultraviolence still imprinted in their retinas and minds, most international observers—even those who may not have ulterior motives—are accepting that the Assadist mandate is preferable to the alternative. These observers carry with them (or within them) their own identity-based politics, especially when it comes to Islam, which has been essentialized and made Other for ages. Minority politics has articulated this fear more specifically: the danger that the Islamic State embodies the very nature and essence of the cultural majority.

Syria's task is to achieve freedom while also moving past the

mandate model. There are many paths to this goal, though certainly some have been closed or blocked with serious obstacles because of years of war. Solutions start with looking to the grassroots rather than to authoritarianism—to poverty and displacement rather than identity and religion, looking below rather than above, to the people and not to the elites. The most effective approach to the protection of any minority is through the common struggle of people from different origins for equality. The worst approach—and the approach favored by too many in the West and in Russia—is the isolation of minorities from other groups through minority politics.

At this point, I would like to ask Western readers to reflect on this hypothetical question: suppose an authoritarian rule developed in the United States, Britain, Germany, or France, with a worrying tendency toward tyranny. Suppose one of these regimes imposed active restrictions against migrants of color, who are members of minority groups. What percentage of the population would actively fight for democracy in these countries? One wonders whether, among the ranks of such activists, one would find those Middle East experts, special envoys, and “realistically thinking academicians and journalists” who were suspicious or dismissive of the Syrian struggle for change and democracy. I am afraid that global minority politics has corrupted the privileged West as well. Maybe the day is not far off when it will be said that democracy in the world was defeated in Syria.

Typology

It is helpful to create a typology of models for statehood and see where they come from, and what they may lead to. Based on the contemporary historical realities, whether in Syria, in the region, or in the world, we can distinguish between four possible types of relationships between the political majority (in power) and the cultural majority (in society).

In the first model, the cultural majority is the political majority, in the sense that the reigning elite descends from the cultural majority. This, of course, provides no comfort to minorities, since it usually leads to second-class citizenship,

even when the ruling elites use minorities in certain positions to appear more national. Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are examples in the Middle East of this approach being put into practice. Europe can also be seen, in a certain light, to be using this model. Democracy that had developed before the era of globalization in a way that respected minority rights, and not only majority rule, is in a crisis. Migrants are not yet well included in this model. Moroccan historian and novelist Abdallah Laroui has pointed to the fact that the dhimmi system today is actually applied in the European, liberal democratic, Judeo-Christian West, and that the dhimmis of Europe are the Muslims.²⁰

In the second model, the political majority is from a cultural minority or minorities. This is the model of South Africa before the 1990s, and the one the Assad regime imposed in Syria. As we have seen, not only does this model not solve minorities' problems, but it also creates new ones when there is an inevitable backlash from the disenfranchised majority. Further, over time this model can lead to a state that is more familial and sectarian than national—again, as is the case in Syria. And after almost eight years of savagery and genocide, with sects being turned into ethnicities, we might be heading toward an apartheid system where the internal privileged West rules the internal racialized “black” majority.

In the third model, the political majority is formed in partnership between the majority and the minorities, according to their demographic proportions or to an agreed-upon rule. This model is illustrated by the Lebanese consociational system—the root of the country's paralysis and its civil wars (both hot and cold)—which apportions power based on changing demographic or political weights of the myriad Lebanese communities, as well as regional and international power balances. But Lebanon itself is leaving this model, with Hezbollah being the real sovereign power in the small country.

In the fourth model, political majorities and minorities are distinct from cultural majorities and minorities. In this last model, the political majorities and minorities vary according to a specific political order, and the culture changes only slowly. This form neutralizes the political impact of cultural

differentiations. The only “quantitative” criterion is the ballot box. Political majorities change here, along with political minorities, making no room for a sense of injustice or exclusion by cultural group. This democratic model is both morally and politically superior to the others. The correct beginning for this is to put an end to the politics of eternity, which requires a never-ending war against any future change in Syria.

Syria's challenge during the revolution was to transition from a “minoritarian” regime (the second model) to a democratic system (the fourth model), without succumbing to the temptations of a majoritarian or confessional model. But we lost the battle.

A broad-strokes review of the main actors' positions and strategies shows just how difficult it has been for Syria to navigate this winding road. But it also shows that, as always, there have been possibilities for change, and that there are still aspects of the country's experience in the last eight years that make a desirable outcome possible.

Intellectual Alternatives

In properly addressing minority politics, Syrian public actors don't have public expressions of thought to which they can make reference. There is no ready model for discourse that is informed by historical facts and precedents and inspired by the principles of national politics and the values of justice. Our experience in the last eight years, indeed in the last half-century, dictates that we radically criticize the seduction of majority politics for us to be in a better position to resist it.

Conventional national discourse is invalid because it disregards facts and holds them back in the name of the “national unity” doctrine. The regime has used this discourse to cover its sectarian formation and incriminate those who try to put the issue on the agenda of public debate. The standard definition of national unity in the Assads' Syria has always been standing in one line behind the wise historic leader, the esteemed president Hafez (or Bashar) al-Assad.

The Islamic discourse, in turn, is positively fixated on Islam and Muslims (Sunnis in the case of Syria). Syrians cannot be unified on an Islamic basis, nor can even Sunnis. Islamic Syria is by no means the alternative to Assadist Syria. It is one thing to resist discrimination against Muslims and Islamists who want to be equal to others in a free and democratic system and another to Islamize the state or society, or to strive to be “more equal” than others in a country with many confessional groups.

Conversely, the mainstream secular discourse is negatively and exclusively fixated on Sunni Islam and Islamists, and starts from the same premises of the protection-of-minorities doctrine, which makes it fluctuate between ignoring this detrimental doctrine and colluding with it. Syrian secularism has always been detached from values of equality and freedom, and its main proponents, like Aziz al-Azma, the late George Tarabishi, and Adonis, failed to say a word against massacres against their people and the long jail sentences imposed on political dissidents, even for like-minded leftists and democrats. They raise the banner of the tyranny of the majority that was introduced as a critique of democracy by the likes of Alexis de Tocqueville and John Stuart Mill. At the same time, they keep silent in the face of the real tyranny that has caused two big wars in Syria, in the early 1980s and in the current decade. State worshipping can be an open road to fascism, especially when we have a privatized and denationalized state like the one owned and ruled by the Assad dynasty.

And wherever a communist discourse exists, it tends to consider the minority–majority cleavage as a distorted manifestation of class struggle, or as a direct result of imperialist manipulation, which ultimately leads to disregarding the problem or backing up the conventional national discourse. The traditional communists in Syria are now dull, middle-class people, lacking any will to fight for change or even defend their autonomy. They have been an integral part of Syria’s political death, as members of the National Progressive Front, formed in 1972, and led by the Ba’ath party. Issues of democracy, political autonomy of popular organizations, and political pluralism have never gained any importance in their thought.

To move beyond the Assadist mandate, Syrian activists need to rethink minority and majority problems and handle them with care. For one, I suggest that today’s minorities’ problems are one facet of a larger multifaceted national problem: our lack of any majority in Syria. This in turn is one aspect of a dynamic transformation of our society into one of minorities, which makes for the ideal conditions for an oligarchic-minoritarian rule that prioritizes its staying in power and dividing the ruled—forever. The vital condition for a dynamic, changing majority to come into existence in Syria is that bigger numbers of Syrians enter the political field. The more, the better.

The revolution was about owning politics: gathering in public spaces, speaking openly about public issues, and protesting against the powerful. The active popular appropriation of politics that enables the masses to struggle for better conditions of life is the basis for solving the problems of sectarian conflicts. Sectarianism and minority politics are strategies of political control and elitist privileges. We play the game of the regime and its patrons when we counter minority politics with majority politics, as opposed to countering with popular politics or with nationalizing the privatized state. The existing political arrangements not only prevent Syria from overcoming this situation, but are also a crucial factor in its preservation.

A Monstrous Problem

There is a basic practical principle that can be a valid starting point for change. This principle is that prospects to solve public problems increase when people’s engagement in the public sphere increases. The larger the number of public actors—regardless of their backgrounds—the greater our chances of overcoming static majorities and minorities. Large numbers encourage blending and diversity, as well as further expansion of the public sphere. The greater the number of publicly active citizens, the more likely they may belong to nonelitist milieus, and the higher the chances of “disarray,” “blending,” and de-sectarianization. On the other hand, the fewer the number of those publicly active, the more likely old differentiations may be activated and gain

political and public value. Even if the existing regime hadn't activated these differentiations to divide, and thus weaken, the population it controls, opportunities for social and political upward mobility under such a regime are inevitably dependent on the activation of these differentiations and capitalizing on them. Further, the fewer the public actors, the more likely they may be "identifiable"—in other words, the more likely they will be distinct or very identity-salient, and the more the system will develop an instinctive resistance to blending and hybridization. A sectarian instinct will prevail.

Opening up the political system to large numbers—to "the people"—is the first step in overcoming the problems of minorities. Such an opening of the system doesn't, by itself, ensure broader historical horizons that will automatically prevail over minority politics. But without an opened system, horizons cannot be unblocked.

Unfortunately, such a system simply cannot be achieved in the current circumstances in Syria. A circle cannot be squared. We lost the battle for change in Syria; and the battle for democracy on the global level appears lost for good. I think we can now talk about a Syrian Question, because of its complex of sectarianism and religious rivalries and hatreds on the one hand, and, on the other hand, problems related to who the masters are—who has power and the right to kill people. Yet another issue is that of external interventions and imperialism. The Syrian Question is a monster. These three elements nurture each other in a vicious closed circle.

Muslims aren't the Christians' problem, nor are Christians the Muslims' source of troubles; Sunnis aren't the greatest threat to Alawites, nor is it the other way around—as many sectarians would like to believe, religious and "secular" alike. Nor are Arabs endangered by the Kurds, or the cause of the Kurds' frustration, as frantic nationalists like to argue. Such prescriptions solve nobody's problems, and instead contribute to the problems and troubles of everyone. Minority politics will only produce more majority politics and sectarianism. They lead, at best, to "solutions" like a confessional system, and in all cases to a lingering catastrophe.

Syrians need to search for a rule by the many—but not a rule

by the many in the service of an identity-based majority, but rather in the service of justice and equal rights. Until such a vision is pursued, without the intervention of foreign powers or the self-appointed guardianship of local elites, Syria faces new cycles of its ongoing catastrophe.

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Notes

¹ For this dual structure and examples of dual discourse and the underlying structure of power, see the last chapter of my book, *The Impossible Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 213–89.

² See an Al Jazeera clip posted to YouTube on March 25, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3LTxmdifjCA>.

³ The insistence on calling Da'esh "the Islamic State" in the West—and the systematic ignoring of the name that Syrians came to call this monstrous nihilist group in the course of their resistance to it, in the service of supposed professional consideration—denies our political, ethical, and epistemological agency. Calling it "the Islamic State" implies a genealogical interpretation that signifies the group is derived from Islam. It is thus with reluctance that I use "Islamic State" in this report, for the sake of consistency with the series to which it belongs. But I ask the reader to keep in mind my objection to this translation.

⁴ See Nader Hashemi and Danny Postel, "Introduction," in *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, ed. Hashemi and Postel (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–22.

⁵ As of February 2019, there were nearly 5.7 million Syrian refugees in neighboring and regional countries, according to the UNHCR (the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees). See "Operational Portal: Refugee Situations: Syrian Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>. There were also some 6.2 million internally displaced people. See "Internally Displaced People," UNHCR Syria, accessed February 25, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/sy/internally-displaced-people>.

⁶ See Gardiner Harris, Anne Barnard, and Rick Gladstone, "Syrian Crematory Is Hiding Mass Killing of Prisoners, U.S. Says," *New York Times*, March 15, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/15/world/middleeast/syria-assad-prison-crematory.html>. There is also a famous Amnesty International report on this topic, "Syria: Human Slaughterhouse: Mass Hangings and Extermination at Sadnaya Prison, Syria," February 7, 2017, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/5415/2017/en/>.

⁷ I discussed this topic at length in my essay "The Community of 'What Remains': Syrian Sunnis and Politics" (Arabic), *Al-Jumhuriya*, October 18, 2012, <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/237>.

⁸ Kamal Jumblatt, the progressive Lebanese Druze leader, talked about this in the 1970s on a regional scale that transcends Syria, after the Syrian regime intervened in Lebanon. Most probably, this was the cause of his assassination by regime agents in 1977, months after the Assadist mandate over Lebanon had begun. At the time of his assassination, Jumblatt was the leader of the Lebanese Nationalist Movement allied with the Palestinian resistance, against whom the regime intervened militarily in 1976 with American approval. See Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

9 I borrow the expression “politics of eternity” from the American academic Timothy Snyder, and I give it the meaning of staying in power “forever,” as the regime describes its position, which involves permanent war against the future and change, dividing the ruled and pitting them against each other, and the potential of genocide. In Arabic there is an etymological relationship between “abad” (eternity) and “ibada” (annihilation), so one can say that you cannot stay in power forever without committing genocide against your people.

10 The “Eastern Question” referred to the uncertainty about the future control of the Middle East and North Africa during the twilight of the Ottoman Empire

11 I discussed this issue at length in my last book in Arabic, *The Conquered Imperialists, Arabic* (Beirut: Riad El Rayyes Books, 2019), 79–134.

12 See Lanxin Xiang, *The Origins of the Boxer War: A Multinational Study* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003).

13 Here, I use “Arabism” to refer to the quality of being Arab. It may stand in opposition to sectarianism, as well as regionalism (“Syrianism” or “Jordanianism”). Arab nationalism can be interpreted as political Arabism, whose main aims were unifying Arab countries, liberating Palestine, and modernizing our societies and unifying them. When Arab nationalism is detached from these aims, we get “Arab” as an ethnicity, which applies more to the Arabs of the Gulf.

14 Central in this are the bonds of patronage and clientelism. They are discussed in my book *The Impossible Revolution*, in the final chapter.

15 Under the dhimmi system, Christians, Jews and some other religious communities were recognized by Muslim authorities as being under the “sovereignty” of Islam. It is a sort of autonomy within the lands where Islam was prevalent, with the religious leaders of these communities being the natural representatives of them in the sultanate. They paid taxes (“jizya”) and showed loyalty to the authorities, and enjoyed protection in return.

16 See “Interview with Syrian President Bashar al-Assad,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 31, 2011 (a month and a half before the eruption of the Syrian uprising), <https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703833204576114712441122894>.

17 Interview with Bashar al-Assad, *RT Arabic*, November 8, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiS8XcWFbfU>.

18 The problem is not that the 70 percent figure is inaccurate per se, but that it whitewashes the diversity among Sunnis.

19 See Haj Saleh, “What Remains;” and *Conquered Imperialists*, 147–85.

20 Abdallah Laroui, *Tradition and Reform, Arabic* (Beirut: Arab Cultural Center, 2008)