

**'What is in a Name?':  
the role of (different) identities  
in the multiple proxy wars in Syria**

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**Abstract**

**ABSTRACT**

Post-uprisings Middle East politics is frequently described as a 'regional cold war' involving proxy warfare that emphasises the role of shared identities linking external and local actors. But does the 'content' of identities impact proxy war dynamics? This article considers the present 'battle for Syria', a local conflict that became a theatre for multiple proxy wars involving actors emphasising identities on various levels, most notably national, religious/ sect and ethnic. It suggests that identity content does matter, with global powers more reluctant than regional players to back groups identifying at sub-national level, while foreign non-state actors are enthusiastic backers of sub-national identity.

*“What's in a name?  
That which we call a rose  
by any other name would smell as sweet”  
Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet**

In Shakespeare's classic *Romeo and Juliet* the young girl from the Capulets family rhetorically asks if it would make any difference if her beloved 'rose', Romeo from the Montegues family, had had another name. Are names – or identities - just empty labels, so that Romeo would still be the man Juliet loves if he had another name? While she believes so, as 'that which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet', the tragic ending of the famous love story does on the other hand suggest that names - and identities - sometimes make a difference.

The basic question raised by Juliet is not only relevant for loving couples from feuding families in Italy. It also links to a basic debate in the social sciences about identity politics: should different identities be treated as alike or does the 'content' of identities make a difference? While this fundamental question has not received much attention when it comes to how to grasp the dynamics of proxy wars played out in weak states with external and local actors subscribing to different kinds of identities, in this paper we are using the Syrian conflict to discuss whether, why and how it deserves more attention.

From the very start, the Syrian uprising was marked by a complex interplay between domestic and regional factors, where rival international and regional actors supported various local 'proxies.' The Syrian conflict represents an almost paradigmatic example of how a local conflict can be a theatre for *multiple* proxy wars involving a large number of different players.<sup>1</sup> They not only vary as regards their status as global/regional/domestic and state/non-state. They also differ when it comes to the extent to which local and external actors are linked through shared identities and, not at least, the nature of these identities, e.g., religion, sect, tribe, ethnicity or nationality. In

the debates about the ‘battle for Syria’ much has been published on the role of identity and external involvement in shaping and driving the conflict. Disagreements have centred on whether identity tensions were the cause of the war or a product of it<sup>2</sup> and over whether external actors have driven the violence or reacted to it.<sup>3</sup> However, only limited attention has been focussed on the relationship between identity and external involvement. Do differences between identities matter when it comes to why and how external actors are involved and whether the domestic and international implications of their involvement are the same? For instance, do global powers get involved for the same reasons and in the same way as regional actors, who appear to draw more on identity claims? Do some kinds of identities appear to be more useful than others when external powers try to mobilize local proxies? Do some identities appear to be more/less constraining/enabling than others? And does the involvement of external actors drawing on different identity claims impact dynamics among local actors in similar or different ways? In other words, are “identities more than just a name” to paraphrase Shakespeare?

In the following, these questions are explored in two steps. The *first* part of the paper examines the general and Middle East-specific debates on proxy warfare. It shows how regional players and non-state actors and not at least identity politics have received increasing attention, but points at the same time to how this has not given rise to much reflection on whether differences in the ‘content’ of different identities impact the dynamics of proxy wars. By drawing on Brubaker’s analytical distinction between a ‘diacritical’ and a ‘normative ordering power’ understanding of identities, we suggest that this issue deserves more attention. In the *second* part of the paper, we are using the multiple proxy wars in the Syrian conflict as a ‘laboratory’ to examine whether and how the nature and content of identities make a difference for how regional proxy wars are played out, both when it comes to the distinction between sub, territorial-state and

supra-state identities and different kinds of trans-state identities. Based on a comparative analysis that explores the interaction between a selection of fighting groups in Syria emphasizing different kinds of identities and their interaction with outside actors we make several conclusions. Firstly, that identity content does seem to matter to outside powers, with global powers far more reluctant than regional players to back trans-state identity groups such as those based on religion/sect or ethnicity. Secondly, that regional states are also wary of such ties, and seek to moderate the slogans of the religious/sect fighters they back, to make them more exclusive. Finally, foreign non-state actors, like ISIS and the PKK, show less reluctance, less constrained by international opinion and reputation.

### The Politics of (different) Identities in (Middle Eastern) Proxy Wars

As part of a discussion about external involvement in internal wars, Karl Deutsch half a century ago defined proxy wars as an ‘international conflict between two foreign powers, fought out on the soil of a third country, disguised as a conflict over an internal issue of that country, and using some of that country’s manpower, resources and territory as a means for achieving preponderantly foreign goals and foreign strategies’.<sup>4</sup> Deutsch was mainly concerned with the ‘global cold war’, i.e., the rivalry between the USSR and the United States, and his definition of proxy wars has subsequently been criticized for being too state-and global centric without sufficient attention to regional powers and non-state actors.<sup>5</sup> Against this backdrop, Mumford among others, has suggested an alternative definition of proxy wars as an ‘indirect engagement in a conflict by third parties wishing to influence its strategic outcome’ through the provision or training of manpower such as co-opted militias or other irregular combatants, the provision of material or money or the sharing or dissemination of information.<sup>6</sup> Based on this broader understanding, Mumford draws attention to how proxy wars are far from limited to the

US/USSR rivalry and he predicts that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be marked by ‘the re-emergence of proxy warfare as a primary mode of intervention, violence and (dis)order’.<sup>7</sup>

While it is generally acknowledged that the notion of proxy wars is still useful, it is at the same time also recognized that proxy warfare of today differs from the “Global Cold War” era. According to Mumford, proxy conflicts will in the future increasingly be driven by regional powers and (in)formal “proxy coalitions” of both state and non-state actors,<sup>8</sup> and Kaldor, among others, argues that actors will increasingly mobilize around ethnic, racial, or religious identities instead of previous emphasis on ideology so that identity politics will become an important dimension of future proxy wars.<sup>9</sup>

Current Middle East regional politics seems to confirm this expectation. In the debate on how to grasp regional politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings it has become common to speak about the (re)emergence of some sort of “regional cold war.” An important component in this rivalry is the prevalence of proxy wars in conflict-torn, weakened and therefore permeable states with regional powers clashing indirectly through local proxies, who are mobilized through appeals to shared identities based on religion, sect, ethnicity or tribe.

Contrary to the general debate on proxy warfare, this attention to regional players and not least to identity politics is nothing new in Middle East scholarship, where the role of (supra/sub-state) identity politics has always had a prominent position in the agenda.<sup>10</sup> Thus, there is a long tradition for perceiving the Middle East as a region marked by multiple identities in the sense that the territorial state identity has been challenged not only from below by sub-state identities but also from above by supra-state identities<sup>11</sup>, and the region has famously been described as a “vast sound chamber in which information, ideas, and opinions have resonated with little regard for state frontiers”.<sup>12</sup> This has provided ample opportunities for proxy wars, in particular in the

context of weak states with permeable borders. Here, foreign powers have been able to use trans-state identities to interfere and mingle in local conflicts (*outside-in logic*), and as a way of addressing the ‘ethnic security dilemma’<sup>13</sup> local actors have used trans-state identities to seek support from the outside (*inside-out logic*).

While Middle East scholarship may be very familiar with how identity politics influences proxy wars, there is still a gap in existing research, which need to be addressed in order to improve our understanding not only of dynamics of current Middle East politics, but also proxy wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century more generally. Much of past and current debates on the role of the politics of identities in Middle Eastern proxy wars have been about how the origins and evolution of *specific* trans-state identities can best be explained. Today much of the attention concerns Shia/Sunni sectarianism,<sup>14</sup> whereas it in the past was Arabism as reflected in discussions about how the idea of the existence of special bonds and obligations between Arabs had emerged, how it impacted Middle East politics and whether (Pan)Arabism was dead or if it had just transformed into new variants, maybe existing in parallel with territorial state identities.<sup>15</sup> Another classic theme concerns the question about the relative importance for the rise of proxy wars of strong trans-state identities compared to the presence of weak states.<sup>16</sup> In the current debate, this is reflected in a discussion on whether the current multiplicity of proxy wars across the Middle East region are caused by the rise of a “Shiite Crescent” or ‘an arc of state weakness and state failure running from Lebanon through Syria to Iraq.’<sup>17</sup>

There is, however, yet another dimension related to the politics of identities in the current Middle Eastern proxy wars, which has received far less attention. As reflected in the various identity prefixes for the current regional rivalry, which has been labelled as a new *Arab/Sectarian/Shia-Sunni/Iranian-Saudi/regional/Middle Eastern* cold war,<sup>18</sup> there also seems

to be multiple kinds of identities at play, when it comes to how different actors try to mobilize proxies. This raises the question if it makes a difference whether identities are based on religion, nationality, ethnicity, sect or tribe regarding why and how external actors are involved and whether the domestic and international implications of their involvement are the same? This question about possible implications of differences in the ‘content’ of different identities for the dynamics of regional proxy wars has not received much attention, but a brief detour to a related debate on identity politics suggests it should.

In his discussion of ‘Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence’ Rogers Brubaker introduces a basic distinction between a ‘diacritical’ and ‘normative ordering’ understanding of identities.<sup>19</sup> While his interest is specifically focused on *religious* identities compared to non-religious, his distinction seems also relevant for the present discussion about, whether differences in identities make a difference for the dynamics proxy warfare. According to a *diacritical* understanding, ethnic, religious, tribal or national identities can basically be treated as alike. Their relevance is limited to being a distinct marker useful for the drawing of borders between in-and out-groups, but they are basically ‘culturally empty’ in the sense that it is quite arbitrary which difference makes a difference. Conversely, the second understanding, which emphasises the *normative ordering power dimension of (religious) identities*, does instead direct attention to the *content* of specific identities. Thus, according to this perspective, identities have substance as they carry a normative dimension in the sense that they are associated with certain worldviews with implications for our notions about who we are, who likely friends/enemies are, what a threat is, who are under threat and who are threatening, what is appropriate behaviour etc. As a consequence, different identities cannot be treated alike and it is necessary to pay attention to what Brubaker – citing Barth – labels as ‘cultural stuff’.

Brubaker does not explicitly discuss how various kinds of identities may relate to proxy warfare, but the analytical distinction between a ‘diacritical’ and ‘normative ordering’ understanding of identities does also appear relevant for the present discussion. Thus, it raises the question about whether the nature and content of identities make a difference for how regional proxy wars are played out, both when it comes to the distinction between sub, territorial-state and supra-state identities and different kinds of trans-state identities (ethnic, sectarian, religious etc.)? These questions have not received much attention in past or current debates on proxy wars in the Middle East and more generally, so in order to remedy this gap in our knowledge about the place of identity politics in (Middle Eastern) proxy warfare, the remainder of this paper will turn to the Syrian conflict. It represents an almost paradigmatic example of how a local conflict can be a theatre for multiple proxy wars involving a range of actors emphasizing various kinds of identities. In this way, this conflict, metaphorically, almost constitutes an ideal ‘laboratory’ to study whether differences between identities make a difference, when it comes to why and how external actors are involved, and whether the domestic and international implications of their involvement are the same.

### **Syria as a Laboratory – A Pandora’s Box of Wars within Wars**

Since its outbreak in 2011 the Syrian conflict has drawn in a range of local, regional and global actors, both state and non-state players, producing multiple parallel international proxy wars within the domestic struggles. At various points, the war reflected proxy battles between: Saudi Arabia and Iran; Saudi Arabia and Qatar; Iran and the US; Iran and Israel; Turkey and the PKK; Russia and the West; the West and the Islamic State; and Russia and the Islamic State<sup>20</sup>. Moreover, identity has been a prominent feature of most of the groups fighting, sponsored and encouraged by these external players. Yet as the conflict has evolved, so have alliances, and several external



players have shifted sponsorship from one group to another. Such shifting sponsorship, and indeed the fact that others, such as Russia, remained consistent in the (national) identity groups they backed help to illustrate why the Syria conflict proves such as an interesting case study. Does the fact that external powers shifted from one group to another suggest one identity is more successful a mobiliser? Alternatively, does it tell us more about the identity of the sponsor than the group? Is the content of the identity important, or are the sponsors just pragmatically backing the groups they perceive as most successful in the hope of maximising their interests?

The Syrian conflict began in March 2011. Syrians peacefully took to the streets to protest the rule of President Bashar al-Assad, in power since 2000.<sup>21</sup> In the face of continued repression opposition militias formed to protect protestors and take on Assad's forces. With Assad seemingly determined to crush the opposition militarily, by the end of 2011 Syria had descended into a civil war between Assad's well-armed military and more poorly resourced rebel militias. In time, the conflict would be joined by two new forces: Kurdish fighters led by the PKK-aligned Democratic Union Party (PYD) pushing for autonomy, and the sinister Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) trying to build a 'Caliphate'.<sup>22</sup>

As anywhere, Syrians possessed multiple layers of identity, but from the conflict's beginning identity politics was prominent.<sup>23</sup> For decades, Assad and his father (President 1970-2000) promoted a deliberately ambiguous identity that at different times highlighted Syrian national identity alongside Arab and Islamic supra-national ties.<sup>24</sup> Sub-state ties were also indirectly fostered. The Assads were Alawi, a distant offshoot of Shia Islam, who made up roughly 12% of Syria. While talking the language of shared Syrian and Arab identity, the Assad's favoured members of their historically marginalised sect, placing them in powerful positions, especially within the military.<sup>25</sup> This frustrated some Sunni Muslims, 74%<sup>26</sup> of the population that had

traditionally ruled and now felt disempowered, even though the Assad regime did promote several prominent Sunnis. The Assads also wooed other non-Sunni minorities, including the 3% who were Druze Muslims and 8% who were Christians, presenting itself as a promoter of multi-faith secularism, but implicitly highlighting the difference between these groups and the Sunni majority. The Assads also continued the historical marginalisation of Syria's Kurdish population, 9% of the population, denying them cultural rights and provoking a nascent Kurdish nationalism. The Assads were not the only ones promoting contrasting identities. Syrians consumed a range of domestic and external material emphasising different religious, supra-national and sub-state identities, particularly as satellite and Internet technologies improved.<sup>27</sup>

For the analysis that follows, fighting groups have been selected over other units to analyse as they are more comparable than vaguer entities such as activists or crowds, plus they receive a clear indicator of external support in the form of arms and money. When the war broke out, a range of possible and prominent identities existed for such groups to emphasize and draw on: the *national* level, the *religious/sectarian* level; and the *ethnic* level. Many of the groups pushing these identities were consciously transnational – appealing beyond Syria's borders for identity solidarity – yet others limited themselves to a Syria-centric view. Yet these levels did not translate neatly into political sides: it was not the case that everyone fighting for Assad pushed a national tie, everyone fighting for the rebels pushed a religious/sectarian identity, and everyone fighting for the Kurds promoted ethnicity. Rather, most received support from fighters promoting most identity levels. Assad, for example, had overtly national groups in the form of his army, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), but also received considerable support from explicitly religious/sectarian Shia groups such as Hezbollah and the al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade.<sup>28</sup>

In terms of external engagement with and sponsorship of these groups, it is important to note their interactive nature, with both outside-in and inside-out dynamics present. On the one hand it was not the case that identity groups formed organically with no external input for foreign actors to then sponsor, but on the other they were certainly not simple proxies of outsiders bending to the will of international capitals. It is therefore necessary to examine this interaction between external and domestic forces.

## Comparing Syria's Fighting Groups

### *National*

Despite its characterisation as an ethno-sectarian conflict, the majority of fighters under arms in the Syrian conflict have fought for groups primarily claiming to represent *national* identity. By far the largest group was Assad's military, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA), which in 2015 was estimated to retain 125,000 troops, and its reserve paramilitary force, the National Defence Forces (NDF), believed to have up to 90,000 personnel.<sup>29</sup> Similarly at its peak the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) was estimated to include militia that totalled 50,000 in 2013. The Pentagon estimated the same number fought in the US-supported Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) four years later.<sup>30</sup> In contrast, the numbers fighting for groups drawing primarily on non-national identity such as religion or ethnicity was far smaller. While these non-national groups were often on the frontline of fighting and more visible, it is worth noting that players drew on national identity throughout the conflict – a tie that was never overcome or obscured even if others emerged alongside it.

The largest fighting groups drawing on national identity were, unsurprisingly, the regime's largest military institutions, the SAA and NDF. The SAA, as Syria's military, existed long before the conflict began, founded in 1946. Like most armed forces it utilises symbols and slogans

emphasising national identity: its banner being the Syrian two-star flag, and its motto is ‘Nation, Honour, Devotion’. It suffered considerable desertions and defections during the war, particularly from Sunni Arabs, and its officer corps and elite units was dominated by Alawis. However, despite this demographic shift in its composition, the SAA remained ostensibly inclusive and saw no adoption of explicitly Alawi or non-Syrian slogans or regalia. The NDF was more complex. Founded during the war in late 2012 to organise the thuggish pro-Assad *Shabiha* paramilitaries into disciplined units, the NDF acted as an umbrella for multiple paramilitary militia. Some of these did emphasise a non-national character, such as explicitly Shia or Alawi groups, while many were local and often dominated by the sect or ethnicity predominant in a given neighbourhood or region. However, the NDF’s name and symbols remained explicitly national: the badge, for example, was a Syrian map with an aggressive fist daubed with the two-star flag.

National identity also remained prominent among opposition fighting groups, although it faced a far stronger rival from various forms of Sunni Islamism and Jihadism. The FSA formed in Turkey in summer 2011 with consciously national slogans and symbols.<sup>31</sup> Within months dozens of opposition militia emerged across Syria, declaring themselves part of the FSA. Yet from the beginning the FSA faced a structural weakness: unlike the SAA, it was a newly established entity without a state apparatus behind it. Its nominal leadership had little direct control over the militia fighting in its name, something that various attempts to centralise command and control over the next few years failed to rectify.<sup>32</sup> Instead, from the beginning a plethora of militia adopted consciously religious and sect-based identities, which they did not see as contradictory with their membership of the FSA. For example, in Homs, a hub of early rebel activity, within months of the FSA’s announcement, one brigade named itself after Khalid ibn al-Walid, a companion of the Prophet, and had a division named after the anti-Alawi preacher Adnan Arour.

The national discourse of Assad and his regime was unsurprising. As the incumbent in the Syrian conflict, Assad's forces were fighting to preserve the pre-war status quo, so sticking with a pre-existing identity discourse made sense. Much of Assad's approach was to pose as protector of minorities - the Alawis, other Shia, Druze and Christians - and of secularism, winning over a segment of secular Sunnis. To narrow his support by endorsing a purely Alawi identity could have been counter-productive. In contrast rebel forces were newly formed and less beholden to pre-existing discourses. Unlike Assad's multi-sect supporters, most rebel fighters were Sunni Arabs, making it less costly for their leaders to emphasise that identity.

Interestingly, all external governments backing fighters in the conflict initially favoured groups with a national identity. Assad's main allies, Russia and Iran, were quick to send material support to the SAA: Tehran had sent IRGC advisers by the end of 2011, while Moscow continued to sell weapons despite calls for an international arms embargo.<sup>33</sup> As the conflict progressed Russia's position did not alter, with the Syrian military being its main proxy even when Moscow directly intervened in 2015. Iran's position was more nuanced and, as shall be discussed below, turned to non-national fighting groups, Shia militia, to shore up Assad from 2012 onwards. However, this was alongside not instead of national identity groups. Indeed, when given a major role in reorganising Syria's military effort, Iran, with support from Hezbollah, constructed the NDF, giving it a national rather than a religious/sectarian identity. As with Assad, this may have been a pragmatic choice. While Iran successfully recruited Shia militia from Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan to fight, there were very few indigenous Shia in Syria itself, barely 1% of the pre-war population. While these groups were mobilised along religious lines, narrowing the identity focus to just a Shia cause would have excluded other key Assad supporters to Iran's detriment.

Assad's main state enemies, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and the United States also initially backed national groups. Saudi Arabia and Qatar led public calls to arm the Free Syrian Army in February 2012 and by the end of that year both governments alongside Turkey and the CIA were facilitating the flow of money and weapons to the FSA. These governments made a concerted effort to make the FSA the leading rebel armed group, attempting to tie it to the exiled political opposition, the Syrian Opposition Coalition in November 2012 and arranging the FSA's greater centralisation. The desire to push national groups was led by a fear of some Islamist militia among the rebels, particularly from the US and Saudi Arabia. Both were keen to ensure the former military men of the FSA toppled Assad rather than Islamists, tied to either al-Qaeda or the Muslim Brotherhood. However, it is notable that religious groups became more favoured as the war progressed. Qatar and Turkey were already pre-disposed towards the Muslim Brotherhood and so gave preference to their armed groups within the FSA early on, and later Salafist and sectarian groups like *Ahrar al-Sham* that rejected the FSA altogether. Saudi Arabia, though more cautious, also eventually turned to Islamists – the Salafist *Jaysh al-Islam* opposed to al-Qaeda, the Muslim Brotherhood and the FSA, when it became clear that the FSA was not succeeding. It is worth noting that the US continued to sponsor groups nominally attached to the FSA or of a secular leaning, no matter how weak they ultimately proved on the ground.

Fighting groups emphasising a national identity therefore were significant players throughout the conflict. Russia and Iran, sponsored Syria's national military institutions, while Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the US initially backed opposition groups espousing national ties. The two global powers, Russia and the US, largely stuck to this formula, while the regional powers of Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Qatar, for various reasons, diversified their support to include religious/sect groups, often alongside, not instead of, national groups.

### *Sect/Religious*

More fighters may have formally stood under national banners, but the number of groups, emphasising religious and/or sect identity was far greater. While there were hundreds of religiously named fighting groups, here we will focus on a limited representative sample: two Shia groups in support of Assad, Hezbollah and al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade, two Sunni Islamist opposition groups, Ahrar al-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam, and two Jihadists, Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS).

Both Hezbollah and al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade mobilised along religious/sect lines, but in different ways. The latter was more explicit, having initially formed specifically to defend the Sayyida Zeinab Shia shrine in south Damascus from rebel attacks. By mid 2013 up to 10,000 Syrian and foreign Shia, especially Iraqi, had joined the brigade, which took its name from a son of Imam Ali.<sup>34</sup> Hezbollah had been present in Syria before 2013, but its Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah only admitted this in April of that year. Again, using sectarian language in a televised speech he declared that defending the Sayyida Zeinab shrine was justification, while also blaming the US, Israel and *Takfiris* (radical Jihadist) for the war.<sup>35</sup> However, Hezbollah's position differed to al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade. Nasrallah, in emphasising the US and Israel's supposed role in the conflict, which was limited in truth, was speaking to his supporters beyond the Shia, with Hezbollah long having positioned itself as a champion of Muslims, Arabs and anti-westerners in general.<sup>36</sup> The al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade in contrast, were newly created, had a single purpose and was less concerned to nuance its slogans.

Iran was closely involved in both militias dispatch to Syria. IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani reportedly requested Nasrallah step up his involvement in 2013 and then coordinated the role of all Shia militia once in Syria. Iran's reasons for turning to sect-based

fighters are manifold. Firstly, they had past experience of this working. Suleimani, who headed up Iran's support for Assad, had spent the 2000s in Iraq and was instrumental in developing Shia militia there. Faced with the prospect of Assad's collapse, calling on fighters from Iraq (and Lebanon) with battle experience and a track record of loyalty to Iran made sense. Secondly was the pragmatic component. In 2013 Assad was losing and Suleimani was unimpressed with his forces. "The Syrian army is useless!" he reportedly told an Iraqi politician, "give me one brigade of the Basij [Iran's paramilitary irregulars] and I could conquer the whole country."<sup>37</sup> This explains both the reliance on external Shia militia and the desire to build a new entity, the NDF. Suleimani did select some NDF brigades, either Shia or Alawi, to be sent to Iran for political training, reportedly as a back up in case Assad did collapse.<sup>38</sup> However, this was hedging. Iran utilised both Assad's national forces *and* Shia militia to achieve its goals.

Hezbollah, al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade and other Shia groups have appeared relatively consistent in their slogans, most likely as they are tightly controlled by Tehran. In contrast, the 'mainstream' Sunni Islamist groups have undergone considerable evolutions, sponsored by outsiders but certainly not controlled. Ahrar al-Sham for example, began life in late 2011 sporting a black jihadist flag, with a declared goal to, "completely overthrow the Assad regime in Syria and build an Islamic state whose only sovereign, reference, ruler, direction, and individual, societal and nationwide unifier is Allah Almighty's Sharia (law)" – framing itself as religious but national.<sup>39</sup> The founder of Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Zahran Alloush, was more explicitly sectarian, stating he would, "cleanse the Levant of the filth of Rafidis and Rafidism [Shias]," and that, "the Shi'a are still despicable and pitiful through history".<sup>40</sup>

Both groups benefitted from non-state external support in the form of private donations, largely from individuals in the Gulf.<sup>41</sup> Yet from the beginning, there were ties to anti-Assad



governments: Ahrar formed in Istanbul in 2012 with the likely knowledge of Turkish intelligence and received indirect aid from Turkish state charity IHH and Qatari government charities.<sup>42</sup> As the FSA declined, both Doha and Ankara turned increasingly to Ahrar as its main proxy. At about the same time, especially after Barack Obama refused to intervene against Assad in September 2013, Saudi Arabia began to turn away from the FSA towards Jaysh al-Islam and Alloush, who's father was an imam in Saudi. Yet their emergence as the main recipients of regional support contributed to a degree of moderation. Ahrar fought alongside *Nusra* for several years but eventually repudiated Al-Qaeda. Before then, with Turkish encouragement Ahrar rebranded, abandoning its black flag for a more moderate logo, reluctantly aligning with the exiled Syrian Opposition Coalition in 2015. Jaysh al-Islam, under Saudi tutelage moderated even more, with its leader Mohammed Alloush - who replaced Zahran after his death in 2015 – becoming spokesman for the entire Syrian opposition. While there may be some correlation therefore between a watering down of religious slogans with greater support from foreign state powers, it should be noted that this also coincided with the decline in fortunes of the rebels, perhaps offering other reasons for inclusive language.

The correlation between (relative) moderation and external state sponsorship is supported further when considering the two most extreme Jihadist fighting groups, *Nusra* and ISIS. While Qatar was accused of indirectly aiding *Nusra* and Turkey turned a blind eye to ISIS fighters flowing over its borders into Syria, there is no evidence that either government sought a formal relationship like that enjoyed with *Ahrar*.<sup>43</sup> However both thrived on non-state external support. Both emerged from the same entity, Islamic State and Iraq (ISI), and were established from the outside unlike the other domestically originating rebel groups. Both appealed from the beginning to a transnational Sunni Muslim identity. *Nusra* emerged in early 2012 with an overtly sectarian,

Jihadist and anti-western ideology, setting it apart from the majority of rebel groups at the time. By late 2012 the group had ‘nationalised’, attracting mostly Syrian fighters from rival rebel groups with its leader, Abu Mohammad al-Jolani, denying the group had a goal elsewhere than Syria.<sup>44</sup> This ideological shift may have been pragmatic, with Jolani recognising that most fighters attracted to *Nusra* had taken arms to fight Assad rather than join a transnational Jihad. It contributed to a split with ISI however, with Jolani refusing to subordinate to the newly created ISIS in 2013, but instead pledged his loyalty to Al-Qaeda.

ISIS took up the banner of transnational Jihad, successfully freeing itself from the restrictive nation-state frameworks of other groups and appealing to all Sunni Muslims to join its newly declared Caliphate in 2014. As many as 27,000 foreign Muslims were estimated to have travelled to Iraq and Syria to fight for ISIS.<sup>45</sup> Unlike other rebel groups, the goal was establishing a state, not specifically defeating Assad. This meant that ISIS was unique in being the only force speaking completely outside of the national framework. All other religious identity groups, even *Nusra*, were restricted by the pre-existing parameters of the nation state system. In most case this could partly be explained by the desire to balance the wishes of foreign government allies, but in *Nusra*’s case there were no state sponsors. On the one hand perhaps *Nusra* was tempered by ISIS, and had to move into a more moderate ideological position. Alternatively, *Nusra* might be seen as pragmatic and reacted to the realities it faced.

Regional actors were therefore the principal sponsors of religious/sect groups and significantly shaped their role. The volume of Shia militia in Syria such as Hezbollah and al-Fadl al-Abbas brigade was primarily down to Iran who arranged their deployment, though also managed their ideological discipline. In contrast, Sunni opposition religious fighters formed more organically, but their fate and level of extremism was often influenced by external backing.

Forces backed by state actors, such as Ahrar and Jaysh al-Islam, moderated their slogans under external pressure, while radical Jihadists such as *Nusra* and ISIS were sponsored exclusively by non-state funds.

### *Ethnic*

Ethnicity was a less significant mobiliser than religion or nation with one notable exception: Syria's Kurds. The 10% of the pre-war population that were Kurds had good reason to turn on the Assad regime, which had historically discriminated against them. However, despite being mostly Sunni Muslims, the traditionally secular Kurds distrusted Islamists and Arab nationalists among the rebels. The Kurds were far from united however and rival political and armed groups emerged in the vacuum as Assad's forces withdrew from the Kurdish heartlands. Quickly though, one force came to dominate: the PYD and its militias the YPG and YPJ. Though their main rival, the conglomerate Kurdish National Council, received some support from the Iraqi Kurdistan Regional Government, this was dwarfed by the level of training, weapons and finance coming to the PYD from its Turkish ideological ally, the PKK. This helped the PYD militarily dominate the Kurdish regions, declaring the autonomous region of 'Rojava' in late 2013.

The evolution of the PYD's identity discourse appeared the reverse of the opposition fighting groups. Opposition groups appealing to the nation were obscured by those looking to a narrow Sunni Muslim identity, while the PYD began with a narrow appeal to Kurds then later widened to appeal to the Syrian nation. They created a wider umbrella, the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in October 2015 to bring non-Kurds onside. Whereas the PYD, YPG and YPJ retained traditional Kurdish flags and symbols of red, yellow and green, the SDF's logo was consciously more inclusive: a map of Syria, with its name written in Arabic, Kurdish and Syriac. Similarly Rojava, which means 'West' in Kurdish implying it is the western province of a greater

Kurdistan straddling Syria, Iraq, Turkey and Iran, was renamed the ‘Democratic Federation of Northern Syria’ in 2016, another inclusive gesture.

The external role in this was key. The SDF was formed after the PYD forged an alliance with the US against ISIS, with Washington keen to emphasise both the inclusive and democratic nature of its allies.<sup>46</sup> This was also a means to limit the fallout from US ally Turkey who saw the PYD as an arm of the ‘terrorist’ PKK. This shift in rhetoric from the PYD might confirm the pattern seen with the Islamist opposition: external state backers nudging their proxies into moderation.

Yet at the same time, some claim these shifts are superficial and the PYD remain primarily an ethnic militia. After all, the YPG/YPJ have not dissolved themselves into a single ‘national’ force, but remain separate as the best armed units in the SDF coalition. Though the SDF flag was raised after Raqqa was taken from ISIS in October 2017, soon huge posters of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan were displayed in the city centre, fuelling fears of a PYD/PKK ascendancy (MEE 2017). Similarly, critics charge that the councils popping up to rule former ISIS areas conquered by the SDF are dominated by the PYD, while elsewhere cultural ‘Kurdification’ is being forced on non-Kurds.<sup>47</sup> Some ask whether the US actually succeeded in shifting the PYD onto less ethnic focused, national and democratic ground.

While the Kurds and PYD have been most significant, other more minor fighting groups have also mobilised along ethnic lines. Syria’s Assyrian Christian community, the principal Syriac speakers, consist roughly 400,000, and some formed ethnically-focused militia.<sup>48</sup> The most prominent were the Syriac Military Council, which allied to the SDF and fought under the traditional Syriac colours of blue, red and yellow.<sup>49</sup> At the same time, another, rival Assyrian group, the Sootoro, broke away from the Syriac Military Council in Qamishli province to fight for

Assad. They adopted a different logo, also using red, blue and yellow, but their official photos often included a two star Syrian flag as well. Given their tiny number, it is unsurprising that no external actor, nor the few hundred thousand fellow Assyrians in Iraq suffering even greater persecution in recent years, has sent support to either set of Syriac actors.

Another smaller ethnic group were the Turkmen, living mostly in northern Syria along the border with Turkey. Like the Assyrians, several militia formed along ethnic Turkmen lines, largely on the opposition side.<sup>50</sup> Unlike the Assyrians, the Turkmen militias received considerable external support from Ankara. In this case ethnic identity mattered greatly, as president Erdogan had long claimed that Turkey had a duty to protect ethnic Turkmen. As the war evolved and Turkey's rebel proxies proved less reliable, more was invested in the Turkmen, seeing them as a guaranteed ally, despite having at most 5,000 fighters in total.<sup>51</sup> In 2016 when Turkey created a new force to invade northern Syria to clear ISIS from its border, known as Euphrates Shield, various Turkmen militia under the banner of the Syrian Turkmen Brigades played a leading role. Turkmen wore light blue coloured armbands, a traditional Turkmen colour, to distinguish themselves from Arab fighters. However, even though Turkey has co-opted the majority of Turkmen militia fighters, it should be noted that ethnic solidarity with Turkey was not universal, and a handful of Turkmen militia allied with the SDF rather than Ankara.

The PYD's experience therefore reflected the difference between state and non-state sponsors observed above. When backed exclusively by a non-state actor, the PKK, they were more exclusionary, focusing on sub-state-Kurdish identity, but when they aligned with the US from 2014 they ostensibly moderated their slogans to form a more inclusive, national entity. The Assyrians, in contrast, too insignificant to receive external support, remained exclusively ethnic.

The Turkmen, meanwhile, were backed heavily by Turkey despite being very small in number specifically *because* of their identity, suggesting that some identities do matter more than others.

### Concluding reflections...how identities are more than just a name

In the beginning of this paper, we asked – paraphrasing Shakespeare - whether ‘identities are more than just a name?’ Against this background, we posed a series of questions on how external actors engage with local forces using different identities as part of proxy wars. We asked firstly whether global powers got involved for the same reasons and in the same way as regional actors; secondly whether some identities appear more useful than others when mobilize local proxies; thirdly if some identities appear more or less constraining or enabling; and finally, whether the involvement of external actors impacts dynamics among local identity-driven actors in similar or different ways?

From this exploration of the different identities emphasized by fighting groups in the Syrian conflict and their interaction with outside actors, we can point to several notable observations that answer these questions and point to areas of possible future research. Firstly, regional powers were far more willing to back religious/sect based fighting groups than global powers. While all external powers began the war favouring nominally national-focused groups, over time the regional powers – Iran, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey – turned to religious/sect-based fighters. In contrast the two main global powers, the US and Russia, but also the UK and France, continued to favour national groups. Indeed, in the case of the US, it insisted an ethnic-based proxy, the PYD, adopted a more national agenda, by becoming the SDF, to justify its support.

This is a second notable observation: that external state actors tried to moderate their proxies. This is perhaps surprising, as state governments have frequently been accused of radicalising the fighters in Syria by sponsoring religious/sect groups. However, the picture is more

nuanced and once a relationship was established, governments sought to re-brand and moderate their allies. This was seen with Saudi Arabia and Jaysh al-Islam, Turkey with Ahrar al-Sham and the US with the PYD.

In contrast, a third observation is that independent non-state actors tended to be more radical and exclusionary. This was certainly the case of ISI's sponsorship of first Jabhat al-Nusra and then ISIS. Similarly, the PKK's early support of the PYD coincided with its most Kurdish nationalist positions, before being publically tempered by the US. This might suggest that while state actors are constrained in whom they sponsor by concerns of international reputation, non-state actors have no such impediments.

In terms of further research, one area of interest to emerge has been what makes some identities more successful as the basis for fighting groups. In particular, it is curious that Kurdish ethnic identity was successfully mobilised to form a powerful and effective force in the PYD, while Sunni Muslim religious/sect identity produced a wider range of forces with mixed results. There are several possible explanations for this that require further study. It is possible that Kurdish nationalism was more coherent and easily importable, given its development in Iraq and Turkey in previous decades, while Sunni Muslim identity remains highly contested within the Islamic world with a range of competing Jihadist, Islamist and secular interpretations. Alternatively external actors may have played a role: the PYD benefitted from having only one patron, the PKK, for the early years of the war, while Sunni Muslim groups had Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey, ISI and other private Gulf funders pulling them in different directions.

Also of benefit in the future would be to compare the Syria conflict with other cases involving identity-based actors and their external backers. The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s, for example, would be an interesting comparison as they had a very different outcome. In the 1990s

leaders quickly abandoned Yugoslavian identity for those of Serbian, Croat, Slovene etc., while in Syria Bashar al-Assad and many of his opponents continued to promote a Syrian identity. Might this suggest that the Syrian identity has been more successfully established than the Yugoslavian tie, or is this more a consequence of demographic pragmatics: Yugoslavia's ethnicities were geographically concentrated while Syria's sub-state groups were more interspersed making exclusionary identities, such as Alawism, counter-productive. Alternatively, might we again look to external backers: the Yugoslav wars did not attract foreign interest and support until far later than in Syria, perhaps allowing for less early moderation in identity. Detailed comparisons with this and other cases could prove enlightening.

While Romeo may have concluded that the solution to his and Juliet's dilemma was to simply change his name and, 'henceforth I never will be Romeo,' the Syrian conflict suggests that identities, and the values external actors place in them, cannot be so easily dismissed. Yet this is not always the positive association assumed. Regional actors such as Saudi Arabia and Iran are not instantly drawn to sub-state sectarian proxies, but rather turn to them only *after* national groups appear to be failing. These sub-national identities are even more repellent to global actors like Russia and the US who, possibly to maintain their international reputations, strongly prefer backing national ties. Only sub-state groups, free from the constraints of international norms seem to immediately turn to sub-national identities.

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<sup>1</sup> Malmvig, ‘Wars within Wars’, 67.

<sup>2</sup> Abdo (2017) and Laborie Iglesias (2013) see Sunni-Shia tensions at the root of the conflict while Phillips (2015) and Pinto (2017) see challenge this, placing the emphasis on other factors.

<sup>3</sup> Phillips (2016) and Van Dam (2017) emphasize external actors among the drivers of the conflict in contrast to others, such as Hokayem (2013) and Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami (2016), who see external actors as being sucked in once the war has begun.

<sup>4</sup> Deutsch, ‘External Involvement in Internal Wars’, 102.

<sup>5</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*; see also Hughes, ‘Syria and the perils of proxy warfare’, 523.

<sup>7</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Mumford, *Proxy Warfare*, 103.

<sup>9</sup> Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, 7, 79-82.

<sup>10</sup> For an overview see Valbjørn, ‘Introduction: The Role of Ideas and Identities’.

<sup>11</sup> Gause, ‘Sovereignty, Statecraft and Stability in the Middle East’; Barnett, ‘Sovereignty, nationalism, and regional order’; Hinnebusch, ‘The Politics of Identity in the Middle East’.

<sup>12</sup> Noble, ‘The Arab System’, 56.

<sup>13</sup> Posen, ‘The security dilemma and ethnic conflict’.

<sup>14</sup> Hashemi and Postel, *Sectarianization*; Wehrey *Beyond Shia and Sunni*.

<sup>15</sup> Phillips, *Everyday Arab Identity*; Valbjørn, ‘Arab Nationalism(s) in Transformation’; Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*.

<sup>16</sup> Salloukh and Brynen, *Persistent Permeability*; Gause, ‘Sovereignty, Statecraft and Stability in the Middle East’; Salamé, ‘The Middle East: Elusive Security’.

<sup>17</sup> Gause, ‘Beyond Sectarianism’; Salloukh, *Overlapping Contests and Middle East International Relations*; Wright ‘Imagining a Remapped Middle East’.

<sup>18</sup> Gause, ‘Beyond Sectarianism’; Ryan ‘The New Arab Cold War’; Stephens, ‘The Arab Cold War Redux’; Santini, ‘A New Regional Cold War’; Salisbury ‘Yemen and the Saudi–Iranian ‘Cold War’; Koebbl ‘Saudi Arabia and Iran: The Cold War of Islam’;

<sup>19</sup> Brubaker, ‘Religious Dimensions of Political Conflict and Violence’, 5.

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- <sup>20</sup> Abboud, *Syria*; Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising*; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*; Malmvig, 'Wars within Wars'.
- <sup>21</sup> Lesch, *Syria* 69-86.
- <sup>22</sup> Lister, *The Syrian Jihad*, 221-260.
- <sup>23</sup> On multiple layers of identity, see Halliday, *Nation and Religion*, 48-51. On early displays of identity see Ismail, "The Syrian Uprising."
- <sup>24</sup> Phillips, *Everyday Arab Identity*; Phillips, *Battle for Syria*.
- <sup>25</sup> Droz-Vincent, 'State of Barbary'.
- <sup>26</sup> 65% were Sunni Arab, 10% Sunni Kurds
- <sup>27</sup> Lynch *Voices of the new Arab public*, 1-28.
- <sup>28</sup> Sullivan, 'Hezbollah in Syria'.
- <sup>29</sup> Barnard, Saad and Schmitt, 'An eroding Syrian Army'; MEE, 'Who are the pro-Assad militias'.
- <sup>30</sup> Cockburn 'West suspends aid'; Kenner and O'Toole 'The Race to Raqqa'.
- <sup>31</sup> Ziadeh, 'Revolution in Syria', 98.
- <sup>32</sup> Lund, 'The Free Syrian Army'.
- <sup>33</sup> Phillips, *Battle for Syria*, 149.
- <sup>34</sup> Mahmoud and Chulov, 'Syrian war widens Shia-Sunni schism'
- <sup>35</sup> Black and Roberts, 'Hezbollah is helping Assad'.
- <sup>36</sup> Valbjorn, 'Arab nationalism(s)', 165-167.
- <sup>37</sup> Phillips *Battle for Syria*, 161.
- <sup>38</sup> Weiss and Hassan, *ISIS*, L2044.
- <sup>39</sup> Chabkoun, 'Syrian Revolution's Path'.
- <sup>40</sup> Landis, 'Zahran Alloush'.
- <sup>41</sup> McCants, 'Gulf charities'.
- <sup>42</sup> Pierret, 'Salafi Jihadism'.
- <sup>43</sup> Dickson, 'Turkey turns blind eye'.
- <sup>44</sup> Pierret, 'Salafi Jihadism'.
- <sup>45</sup> Kirk, 'Iraq and Syria'; Hassan, 'ISIL and the numbers game'.

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<sup>46</sup> Jane's Intelligence Review, 'SDF plays central role'.

<sup>47</sup> Haid, 'The Ramifications of the SDF'; Balanche, 'From Qamishli to Qamishlo'.

<sup>48</sup> al-Abed, 'Syria's Assyrians'.

<sup>49</sup> al-Abed, 'Syria's Assyrians'.

<sup>50</sup> New York Times, 'Who are the Turkmen'.

<sup>51</sup> Arpacık, 'Turkey, Syrian Turkmen team up'.