

Introduction to Themed Section on “Belonging to Syria. National identifications before and after 2011”

The five papers in this themed section seek to explain national identifications with Syria, using diverse methods and focusing on various state and societal actors before and after 2011. They engage with the differentiation of national identities into their “ethnic/primordial” and “civic/constructed” elements and examine their meaning within Syria in various times and contexts. Since its independence in 1946, Syria has experienced strong tensions between sub- and supra-state identities and has experimented with diverse territorial nationalisms in their pan-Arab and specifically Syrian forms. Through a distinctive mix of ethnic Arab and civic ideological elements, they helped to forge unity among a multiplicity of ethnicities, tribes, and sects living in Syria and thus were moulded in tandem with the interests of those in power.

Like all nationalisms, and particularly those emerging from post-colonial contexts, Syrian nationalism is first and foremost a top-down construct. After Hafez al-Assad became President in 1970, his regime skilfully interwove the political programme of the Baath Party with a state-centred nationalism and personality cult to foster a loyalty base from above. The key element of the specific Syrian–Arab identity that emerged was a patriotic attachment to the state and its ruling family. In 2011, however, the regional Arab uprisings reached Syria and gave way to reformulations of the Syrian national contract from below: in the slogans of protestors, new ideas of Syria and the Syrian community emerged. Yet, with the country’s descent into civil war, and the involvement of regional and international powers, a unified Syrian identity once more came under serious scrutiny, while diverse ethnic, religious, and sectarian logics resurfaced (Phillips 2016; Khatib 2019; Hinnebusch and Saouli 2019; Pierret 2017; Hinnebusch 2016; Salloukh 2017). As a result, ethno-religious divisions often serve as the main frame of analysis for the Syrian war and its politics, to the detriment of other factors, including nationalism (Weiss 2018; Phillips 2015; Valbjørn 2020). The contributions of this themed section instead switch the focus to national attachments to Syria and their diverse interpretations. By considering multiple societal and political actors, the authors explore what it means to be Syrian before and after 2011.

Rahaf Aldoughli starts by discussing the development of Syrian state nationalism in its specific Syrian–Arab form in three periods: its antecedents in the pre-Baath era (1920s to 1960s); its development under Hafez al-Assad (1970s to 2000); and further developments since the take-over of power by his son, Bashar al-Assad (since 2000). She defines Syrian nationalism as a

“constructed primordialism” that incorporates a mosaic of ethnic and religious identifications under the banner of Arabism, while interweaving it with emotional and familial ties to the Syrian state and its Baathist leaders.

Haian Dukhan’s paper zooms in on the bonds forged between the state and diverse sub-state groups and examines what he calls a “dialectical symbiosis” between tribes and the state from 1970 to 2011. He reveals how many members of Syria’s tribes identified simultaneously with tribal and national bonds, integrating the two in a relatively harmonious way for many decades. This symbiosis, however, came to an end in 2011: since the early days of protests, tribal codes of honour and revenge were used against, rather than in support of, the Syrian regime, and tribes resurfaced as separate, self-reliant social groups willing to reassert control.

With their contributions, both Aldoughli and Dukhan present a complex picture of identifications with Syria that include constructed and primordial elements which have become interwoven with the state as an “Arab nation” and its Baathist leadership through a mix of coercion, inducements, and emotional ties. With the outbreak of the Arab Spring protests in 2011 and the country’s subsequent descent into conflict and civil war, however, these ties between state, leadership, and the nation were significantly ruptured. Contributions by Adelle Chevee, Kathrin Bachleitner, and Sarah Clowry explore the idea of Syria in this changed context, examining new and surviving ties of national belonging which persist despite, and perhaps even because of, the ongoing conflict.

Adelle Chevee’s paper examines the protestors’ revolutionary press, particularly the newspaper *Souriatna*, which sought to spread a new form of civic nationalism. Using these media, Syrians demanded recognition of citizens’ equality which was understood to be in opposition to both sectarian differentiation and state-produced nationalism represented by loyalty to the Syrian President (*Suriyya al-Asad*) as fostered over preceding decades.

Kathrin Bachleitner’s paper, on the other hand, examines national identifications expressed by a sample group of 200 ordinary Syrians, comparing differences between them based on refugee status and displacement. She finds that civic elements of nationalism are present in people’s visions of a future Syrian state, and that, within her sample, they take clear precedence over ethnic and religious identifications. Notably, this finding holds true among those who stayed in Syria as well as among those who became refugees.

Finally, Sarah Clowry explores the construction of identity claims within the initial stages of the Geneva Peace Process. She claims that, within Geneva I and Geneva II, the Syrian opposition and members of the international community reconstructed a vision of the Syrian people, depicting the nation as being united by suffering. She contends that this not only took

place against the backdrop of the mediation efforts but, moreover, was triggered by the negotiations.

Thus, each contribution, in its own way, sheds light on the multiple and changing forms of national identifications with Syria, and the constructed and primordial elements mixed into their context-specific interpretations. On the whole, the articles find that while ethnic, sectarian, and tribal elements have challenged Syria's state nationalism pre-2011 or have been incorporated into the legitimisation strategies of the state, to some extent they also persisted after 2011. Yet new civic forms of nationalism also surfaced, especially in the early days of protest (Ismail 2011; ICG 2011; Leenders 2012; Leenders and Heydemann 2012; Yassin-Kassab 2016). As part of these reformulated Syrian nationalisms, references were found to older, antagonistic sectarian and ethnic narratives, even if these were now combined with the civic ideas of citizenship, pluralism, and unity. With this, the contributors to this special issue trace continuous elements of Syria's nationalism but also its newer elements since the inception of the Syrian Republic in 1946, each providing a window into the transformation of diverse national identifications before and after 2011.

Civic and ethnic elements of national identifications

National identities are broadly studied in their "ethnic" or "primordial", and "civic" or "socially constructed", distinctions (Brubaker 1992; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010; Smith 1986; Bayar 2009; Breuilly 1996; Smith 1991; Benhabib, Shapiro, and Petranovic (eds.) 2007). An "ethnic nation", or *Kulturnation*, understands a national community as rooted in a shared heritage, language, religion, and culture (Meinecke 1970/1907). The "civic state", or *Staatsnation*, on the other hand, was born in the revolutions of the 18th century and their concomitant declarations of the rights of men. By definition, civic states socially construct or –as Anderson (2006) famously put it – imagine a community of equal, rights-bearing citizens united in patriotic attachment to a shared set of political practices and values (Ignatieff 1993: 6).

Although these ideal-typical ethnic and civic conceptions of nationalism originated in the European context, they were later adopted by independence movements all over the world. Especially in situations of colonial subjugation, such framed nationalistic ideas came to serve the liberation struggle against foreign rule and therefore were also present in the Middle East and its specific post-colonial context. On the one hand, the idea of a united pan-Arab nationalism designated Arabs as a *Kulturnation* and the standardisation of modern Arabic as its milestone towards shaping an ethnic attachment to Arabism (Tibi 1990). This national framing, of course, stood in opposition to both colonial powers, the Ottoman Empire and the

French and British Mandates with their tactics of “divide and rule”. On the other hand, diverse forms of nationalism based on civic ideas and ethnic identifications emerged in different Arab states post-independence. Thus, while civic and ethnic distinctions are useful, on closer examination pan-Arabism and each state nationalism can be seen to have relied on a mix of primordial and constructed logics to unite their peoples and advance particular national communities in diverse contexts.

Moreover, the meaning of “civic” and “ethnic” attachments itself also changes with time. Whereas a “civic” attachment to the state is derived from legal and political requirements, the boundaries of a community are transformed by changes in power and prevailing ideological commitments. Equally, where group membership is based on pre-existing racial characteristics, religious beliefs, and ancient traditions, the salience and meaning of “ethnic” attachments may change, multiply, or fade in different time-contexts (Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995: 80–82; Brubaker and Cooper 2000; Berezin 2002; Calhoun 2007 and 1992; Risse-Kappen 2010: 28, 36; Valadez 2007). Each nationalism, be it pan-Arab or state-based, therefore consists of a delicate mix of ethnic and civic elements, which interact and transform in tandem with one another.

To understand the complex and context-specific meaning of civic/constructed and ethnic/primordial ties in diverse Syrian nationalisms, the authors of this Themed Section therefore examine what “legal citizenship status”, “life on the territory”, “the political community”, and “adhering to the basic state ideology” meant under Syria’s state nationalism (Rahaf Aldoughli and Haian Dukhan) and for Syrians themselves after 2011 (Kathrin Bachleitner, Adelie Chevee, and Sarah Clowry). Furthermore, the articles explore national ties of belonging based on “ancestry and descent”, as well as the role of “dominant ethnic and sectarian groups” (Shulman 2002: 559), in order to understand a persisting but also transforming ethnic rationale contained in group identifications with Syria. With this, all articles highlight how civic/constructed and ethnic/primordial elements overlap in national identifications with Syria, and how their interactions changed over time.

Moreover, national ties of belonging, be they civic or ethnic, are never purely top-down constructs but comprise diverse societal actors and groups, embedded in specific transnational, regional, and global environments (Bodnar 1992; Eriksen and Jenkins 2007; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Schudson 1993; Gillis 1994; Müller (ed.) 2002). Furthermore, external actors too play a role in moulding national identities. The contributors to this Themed Section take up these manifold perspectives: Aldoughli focuses on Syria’s nationalism generated by political elites; Bachleitner and Chevee concentrate on socially generated identifications;

Dukhan on the interaction between state and tribal groups; and Clowry on the influence of international diplomacy on national identity constructions. With this, however, all authors acknowledge that national identities are always multiple and contested, whether from the top–down, or the bottom–up, or the outside–in.

The Syrian nation contested

What is the meaning and essence of Syrian nationalism, and what constructed civic and primordial ethnic elements did it combine over the course of the past century? The notion of cultural affinity with the Lands of Syria (in Arabic, *Bilad al-Sham*) first grew in strength in the late 19th century. It was related to a general cultural Arab awakening, the so-called *Nahda*, in which Arab Christian intellectuals from what is nowadays Syria played an important role (Gelvin 1998; Schayegh 2017; Beshara 2014). From the start, ethnic, religious, and civic logics of belonging were present alongside each other. In response to outbreaks of communal violence in 1860, for example, the “uniting love for the homeland” was first invoked to foster co-existence among the people inhabiting Greater Syria (Makdisi 2019: 64–74; al-Bustani 2019). To temper sectarian divisions, Arab intellectuals from early on began to emphasise the idea of an Arab, and a Syrian, nation, while advocating a separation between religion and the state. In an attempt to gain greater autonomy within the Ottoman Empire, this period therefore became the first catalyst for different forms of Syrian nationalist expression (Hourani 1983). In the territory that is now Syria, these ideas soon attracted a growing number of Arab Ottoman officers, bureaucrats, and urban notables in what were at the time predominantly Sunni towns. The first, albeit short-lived, institutional and territorial expression of the nascent idea of an Arab Syrian nation came in the form of Faisal’s Arab Kingdom between 1918 and 1920. The dream of an independent Arab state with a liberal constitution and protections for ethnic and religious minorities, however, remained out of reach (Thompson 2020). Instead, and in the Wilsonian spirit after WWI, the Mandate system was set up by the newly established League of Nations which divided the Arab lands into Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Transjordan, and Palestine, with the promise of guiding them into “maturity” as full nations (Schayegh and Arsan 2015). Successive committee meetings of the Mandate powers then regularly assessed Syrians’ readiness for independence, in processes that have echoes in those described by Sarah Clowry in the second decade of the 21st century.

However, in Syria, under the French Mandate, while external European influence grew, so too did Arab and nationalistic sentiments. This time, these sentiments manifested first and foremost as an expression of opposition to colonial rule. Over the following decades, the anticolonial

struggle gave rise to a robust, new nationalistic solidarity across classes and cities, uniting especially the Sunni urban notables of Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs. Their alliance finally resulted in the formation of a National Bloc which paved the way to Syria's independence in 1946 (Khoury 1983 and 1987; Provence 2005). Notably, Syrian nationalists became strongly suspicious of a separate administrative independence, or the political organisation of specific ethno-religious groups, because French policy in Syria and Lebanon crucially relied upon non-Sunni religious communities, especially Christians but also Alawites and Druze (White 2011).

After Syria's independence in 1946, the state elites from the National Bloc and nascent opposition movements all sought to inscribe themselves into the nationalist imaginary and mould it to their liking. However, not only Sunnis but Christians and Alawites now began to embrace and refashion Arab nationalism (Watenpaugh 1996; Arsuzi-Elamir 2003; Landis 1997; Aldoughli 2016). In the tumultuous period of the mid-20th century when Syria became an arena for regional rivalries in the Arab Cold War, the Pan-Arab Baath Party was turned into a political programme for change which led to a series of coups. Inspired by a primordialist version of ethnic Arab nationalism, the Baath started to recruit widely among non-Sunni Arabs, in particular among Alawites and Druze, and soon became for them a vehicle by which to bid for power. Like the National Bloc, the Baath Party was Arab nationalist in principle; thus it was well placed to legitimise the ascent of (often) military officers from peripheral regions to the highest echelons of the state (Drysdale 1981). Once in power, however, these army officers transformed Arab nationalism from an ideology largely expressing Sunni Arab interests into one that legitimised the power of non-Sunni religious minorities.

With the take-over of power by Hafez al-Assad in 1970, ethnic and civic logics were re-shuffled once more in a new, state-sponsored Syrian–Arab nationalism. Through the Baathist ideology, the Arab ethnicity served to smooth out sectarian divisions. Their discussion was shunned, and public adherence to the secular Baathist ideology became a requisite. Under the banner of *Wahda* (unity), *Huriyya* (freedom), and *Ishtirakiyya* (socialism), or, relatedly, *al-Wahda* (unity), *al-Karama* (honour), and *al-Jaysh* (the army), the Assad regime forged alliances with both Sunni elites and the rural people of the surrounding countryside (Aldoughli 2019; Hinnebusch 2020; Wedeen 1999). However, this mix of civic and Arab ethnic ties prevailed only in the initial decades of Hafez al-Assad's rule. Across the region, the attraction of the Arab ethnicity soon began to wane, and religious sentiments gained renewed strength, with rival ideological and sectarian actors such as the Muslim Brotherhood quickly resurfacing (Lefèvre 2013).

As a result of these developments, Syria's state-sponsored nationalism was forced to juggle its secular Arabness with the integration of religious Sunni demands. The first Muslim uprising in the city of Hama in 1982 was suppressed violently; however, below the surface, the regime began to incorporate more and more religious elements into its state-sponsored idea of the nation. This deliberate embrace of Islamic norms slowly shifted the Baath's avowed secularism towards a religious nationalism for the purpose of binding Sunnis' loyalty to the regime (Pierret 2013; Pinto 2011; Aldoughli 2020 and 2021; Bakour 2020). From then onwards, a state-sponsored Sunnism sought to deflate sectarian challenges by tentatively broadening the definition of publicly acceptable displays of religiosity in a process that resembles the state's appropriation of tribal ties that Haian Dukhan describes in his contribution.

Along similar lines, the regime's socialist contract with the rural Sunnis gave way to neoliberal economic reforms around the turn of the century. By the time power was passed on to Bashar al-Assad in 2000, a state-sponsored nationalistic sentiment based on the Baath's socialist solidarity had started to dissolve (Van Dam 2015). At the same time, however, these neoliberal economic reforms also led to the formation of new alliances with the Sunni bourgeoisie, especially in Damascus. Over time, each of the discussed solidarities – ethnic and religious, rural and urban, working class and bourgeois – therefore intermingled with multiple, state-sponsored efforts to bind the Syrians into a common national framework.

Throughout the 20th and early 21st centuries, diverse political and societal actors thus formulated and re-formulated a multitude of Syrian nationalisms to suit their contemporary political interests. In addition, regional developments also influenced the ideas and contours of Arabism, Islamism, and Syrian nationalism. Moreover, Syria's evolving forms of nationalism illustrate the intertwined developments and contestations between national, sub-national, and supra-national identities in the post-colonial Middle Eastern context (Dodge 2020; Haddad 2020; Hinnebusch 2020; Lord 2017). These identities are not mutually exclusive, as many would have it, but are multiple, and inter-related. To illustrate, the Baath Party, for example, retains a pan-Arab spirit and operates a regional command in which Baathists from other Arab states are represented, even though Arab nationalism in one country has long become the norm rather than the exception. Furthermore, and despite its avowed secularism, the Baath has embraced elements of religious nationalism, even in Syria. Moreover, sub- and supra-national identities compete with a state-sponsored nationalism, and diverse counter-nationalisms are embraced by oppositional actors, including those in exile. Altogether, this complex process of state formation, political and ideological formulations of nationalisms, and the emergence of

oppositional discourses explains the explosive quality that competing visions of Syria would develop in the 2010s.

Moreover, with the onset of the Arab Uprisings in 2011, and the outbreak of civil war, Syrian identities were not only transformed but shattered: In times of social trauma, commonly accepted meanings and boundaries of existing national ties come under scrutiny (Alexander 2012; Bell (ed.) 2010; Edkins 2002 and 2003; Hutchison 2016; Kissane 2020). As devastating as such a situation is, “trauma time”, however, equally constitutes a laboratory for societal processes of renewed meaning-making. As Rahaf Aldoughli, Kathrin Bachleitner, Adeline Chevee, Sarah Clowry, and Haian Dukhan illustrate in their contributions, both societal actors and the state integrated ethnic and civic elements in their idea of the Syrian community; and especially since the outbreak of civil war, each party to the conflict tries to present itself as more “authentically Syrian” by adopting a set of symbols, slogans, and narratives that despite their similarities refer to competing mythical pasts and embrace diverse “communities of Syrians” (Phillips and Valbjørn 2018). Through these, they invoke old and new civic and ethnic ties and reinterpret their meaning in a radically changed context post-2011. Thus, even if the country that Syrians knew before the war has largely disappeared, the idea of Syria has certainly not done so.

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