

Collective identities amid war and displacement:

Syrians and Syrian refugees re-imagine their country.

Abstract

This article is interested in Syrian and Syrian refugees' ties of belonging to their country in times of war and displacement. By looking at individuals, the paper follows a micro-level approach to research societal ties of belonging to a country that has slipped into war. It argues that during conflicts, the meaning and boundaries of national identity are grasped in individuals' re-imagination of their country in either more "civic" or "ethnic" terms. As a result of this process, national identity may gain an inclusive, civic meaning based on the idea of citizenship, or a more exclusive content based on the narrower confines of ethnicity and sect. Empirically, 100 Syrians and 100 Syrian refugees provided their vision of a future Syrian state in online interviews. The findings show that the majority of respondents' visions of Syria follows a civic rationale, with most survey participants linking their belonging to a future Syria with the broader ideas of citizenship, political rights, and participation, rather than identifying the country in ethnic/sectarian terms. Combined with the theories, these results offer a glimpse into the societal formation of a new Syrian "we" amid an ongoing war and continuing waves of displacement.

Introduction

"*Huriyya*" – "Freedom" – was one of the most frequently chanted slogans in the Arab Spring protests across the Middle East and North African region. When the Syrian uprising began in the early months of 2011, protestors there too held up signs and banners with the word "Freedom!" However, what precisely does "freedom" mean in the Syrian context and how do ordinary Syrians envision the "free Syria" that demonstrators demanded in the streets?

The lines chanted during the uprising only give us a rough indication of how such a Syria is imagined: "*Suriya, wahid, wahid, wahid!*" ("Syria is one, one, one"). Yet, from this,

we cannot gather what makes Syria one. Which ties of belonging hold the country together, and who belongs and who does not to “one Syria”?

During the protests, the call for Syria’s “oneness” was, without doubt, a direct response to the emerging official framing of the uprising as a sectarian attack on the Syrian state. From the beginning, the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad strategically painted the demonstrations as a “Salafist-terrorist” movement in order to dissolve and discredit the protests against his regime. The chant of “Syria is one” could, therefore, only have been an attempt to counter the official warning of an imminent “sectarian threat” to the country (Leenders 2013, 252).

However, “Syria is one, one, one” may very well signify much more than that. If we take it literally, it may point us to the emergence of a new national interpretation of Syria which understands the country as a nation-state (*Staatsnation*) unifying *all* Syrians. Such a notion would stand in stark contrast to that portrayed particularly in Western media, which since the beginning have described the country and its uprising predominantly in ethnic terms: different players exploit and manipulate a pre-existing mosaic of ethnic identities lying dormant below the surface of a repressive dictatorship. To help readers understand the complicated situation on the ground, news outlets have frequently provided maps of Syria with the presence of multiple ethnic groups depicted in diverse colours. Through this, journalists have described an ethnically divided country and its people as incited by the ethno-nationalist agendas of political actors.¹

However, if we take the slogans emerging from inside Syria at face value, we get a very different picture: “One, one, one! The Syrian people are one!” was also frequently chanted during the uprising. Such an expressed desire for the “oneness of the Syrian people” points to a national rather than “ethnic/sectarian” understanding of Syrian society, at least, among the protestors. Yet again this chant was also often used only in direct response to the regime’s slogan “One, one, one! The people and the president are one!” (Leenders 2013, 253).

Protestors' chants alone therefore make clear the aim to draw a line between the Syrian people and its regime. With this, protestors countered the existing Syrian nationalism in the form of *Suriyya al-Asad*, a widespread national identification before the uprising which personalised power around the country's leader and propagated an overlap between Syrians and their president (Ismail 2011, 542; see also Aldoughli and Chevee in the Themed Section of this issue). Nevertheless, from the mere rejection of "Syrianness" modelled around the person of the president, we cannot infer precisely how protestors imagined a new and different Syria. Hence, what did the cry for "freedom" during the Syrian uprising mean in essence? Which kind of social contract did the protestors envision for a "free Syria"? Should it be based on laws and responsibilities following a "civic" understanding of the Syrian society and Syria as a *Staatsnation*? Or is "freedom" merely asking for the removal of this particular regime and a new social contract based on religious or ethnic affiliation within a revised Syrian *Kulturnation*?

This article is interested in obtaining insight into ordinary Syrians' ideas of their state. It asks whether Syrians view the country and their belonging to it in either a civic or ethnic manner. The broad distinction of national belonging in a civic or ethnic rationale is put forward by, and unites, most studies of nationalism, national identity and citizenship (Brubaker 1992; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010; Shulman 2002). However, like all theoretical framings, it is not without its problems. While useful as ideal types, in practice, and especially in diverse cultural contexts, civic and ethnic notions take on a different meaning.

This article, therefore, starts with a theoretical framing of national belonging in general terms. Based on it, it seeks to understand what civic and ethnic ties of belonging mean in the specific Syrian context, before and after the uprising in 2011. To that regard, the article begins with briefly discussing pre-existing national beliefs in Syria and then goes on to factor in their complete rupture since the outbreak of civil war and waves of displacement. It then moves on to its own empirical analysis to get insight into what kinds of ties of belonging to

Syria persist among ordinary Syrians who remained in the country and among those who became refugees.

The data for the analysis were collected in 200 online interviews, 100 with Syrians and 100 with Syrian refugees. Interviewees were asked to rank their sense of belonging in national and ethnic categories. They were then questioned about their “narrative of belonging” to Syria, and explicitly, about their “vision of the future Syrian state and community.” In employing a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, the case study aims to grasp from its analysis a sense of who – in the opinion of the respondents – belongs and who does not belong to the national collective, and answers the following questions: what kind of social contract holds the Syrian community that they describe together? What is their understanding of Syrian citizenship? Moreover, is the Syrian in-group “re-imagined” (Anderson 1983) in either civic or ethnic terms amid civil war and displacement?

Civic and ethnic ties of belonging to a nation

Societies are held together by invisible ties that connect individuals. Any social grouping, ranging from the larger nation to sub-state units such as ethnic groups, tribes and sects, relies and survives on these invisible ties that bind individuals together. Within the humanities and social sciences, such ties have been more recently subsumed under the term “collective identity.” Building on this, collective identity, in this article, is understood as a sense of group belonging. However, with the identity term proliferating in the academic literature, the identity concept is multiple, vague, contested and often employed to mean a lot of different things (Benhabib, Shapiro and Petranovic 2007; Brubaker and Cooper 2000). It thus needs further specification as to how group identity is referred to in this research.

Following a social constructivist view, the article looks at a sense of belonging as emerging from the process by which individuals make sense of who they are and what they want (Risse-Kappen 2010, 20). Making sense of who we are is usually done by way of *narrative* (Somers 1994). Narratives establish continuity between past experiences and the

present and future (Berenskoetter 2014; Cruz 2000). They are, as James V. Wertsch (2008, 122) calls them, “textual resources” which contain a sense of belonging, for individuals and groups. More so, the process of narration constitutes this sense of belonging in ever new ways (Olick 1999, 342). The constructivist (constitutive) definition of identities as narratives, therefore, goes strictly against essentialising identities (Somers 1994). Collective identity based on constitutive narration continuously changes and multiplies (Olick and Robbins 1998, 122).

In their constitutive function of a sense of belonging to social groups, narratives thus create sameness among insiders of any particular group (Hunt 2010, 3; Ringmar 1996; Smith, R. 2003). The resulting ties form a social identity by the production of both boundaries and meaning (Nagel 1994). Group belonging, therefore, depends on the specific rationale that constructs the features of in- and outgroups, be it on the substate or the national level. To get to this rationale, we must ask what individual group members narrate as the “common social purpose” that separates them from outgroups and characterises what is unique about the in-group (Abdelal et al. 2009, 19).

In practice, the possibilities for a common social purpose are infinite. However, this research, together with Reeskens and Hooghe (2010), distinguishes its definition of a group’s common social purpose according to only two broad underlying rationales:² a “civic logic” which assigns group membership based on the abstract idea of citizenship. This rationale locates the common social purpose in shared ideas and political creeds. It determines the boundaries of a community broadly and in open ways, often by pointing to membership criteria based on shared humanity as well as the ideas of liberty and equality derived from legal requirements and a legal definition of citizenship. In contrast to it, an “ethnic logic” assigns group membership in a more particular way, based on pre-existing characteristics, religious beliefs and traditions derived from ancestry and descent (Calhoun 1992, 2007; Eisenstadt and Giesen 1995, 80–2; Reeskens and Hooghe 2010; Risse-Kappen 2010, 28, 36;

Valadez 2007). Furthermore, the civic logic underwrites what is – in Meinecke’s (1970 [1907]) typology of nationalisms – widely called a “*Staatsnation*” based on a social construct among members of the “society” (*Gesellschaft*), whereas the ethnic logic underwrites a “*Kulturnation*” based on a shared heritage among the members of a “community” (*Gemeinschaft*) (Tönnies 1955). In the *Staatsnation*, the common social purpose is defined in civic terms: in the *Kulturnation*, in ethnic terms.

While these ethnic and civic distinctions certainly are ideal types, with countries often showing a mix of both, scholars of nationalism and citizenship have nevertheless established useful, concrete indicators which help depict national belonging in either civic or ethnic logics when expressed by individuals or political leaders. Stating their belonging to a country in civic terms would require actors to describe their national ties as “living in the territory,” “having legal citizenship status,” “expressing the will to join the political community” and “adhering to the basic state ideology.” Whereas those who follow an ethnic rationale in their belonging reference their “ancestry and descent”, most often, from “the dominant ethnic/racial group” (Shulman 2002, 559).³

With these general civic and ethnic conceptualisations of national belonging in mind, the next section explores the essence of Syria’s “state nationalism” since Hafez al-Assad came to power in 1970. It then examines the changes that these propagated national ties underwent when the power passed to his son, Bashir al-Assad, in 2000, before turning to its own analysis of people’s ties of belonging to the Syrian state.

Civic and ethnic ties of belonging to “Assad’s Syria”

National identity everywhere is a top-down political construct. To get to the “common social purpose” of any national identity, scholars usually look at the stories of political elites, to their official texts, rhetoric and symbols (Bodnar 1992, Gillis 1994, Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983, Schudson 1993, Smith 1991; for explicit IR work on this, see Banchoff 1999, Berger 1998, He 2009, Khoury 2018, Lind 2008, Müller 2002). With regards to Syria too, scholars have

extensively researched its state-produced nationalist ideology promoted by its political leaders, Hafez al-Assad and his son, Bashar al-Assad (Abboud 2016; Aldoughli 2019; Hinnebusch 2020a; Hokayem 2017; Lesch 2013; Phillips 2013, 2017; Wedeen 1999). In fact, the efforts that Hafez al-Assad undertook to form a “Syrian identity” are almost textbook examples of how to create a “common social purpose” for a rather diverse and “artificial” nation. Finding such a common social purpose is vital for any ruler and was even more essential for a president who belonged to the religious Alawi minority within a Sunni majority country.

When Hafez al-Assad seized power after a coup in 1970, he took over a “newly born Republic” that was “in many respects a nation without being a nation-state, a political entity without being a political community” (Farouk-Alli 2014, 216). To generate a popular loyalty base towards this state, and particularly towards his leadership, Hafez al-Assad relied heavily on the Baath Party and its widespread appeal of unity amongst *all* Arabs. By intermingling a Baathist Arab-nationalist agenda with his regime under the banner of *Wahda* (unity), *Huriyya* (freedom) and *Ishtirakiyya* (socialism), or, relatedly, *al-Wahda* (unity), *al-Karama* (honour) and *al-Jaysh* (the army), he soon created a unique Syrian state nationalism (Aldoughli 2019; Hinnebusch 2020a; Wedeen 1999). It mixed the ethnic elements of Arabism with the civic elements of a social contract based on a socialist-nationalistic ideology. Under the umbrella of an ethnic family of Arabs, a socialist contract served to construct cross-sectarian solidarities among the rural Sunni and Alawites into one Syrian nation (Hinnebusch 1989). Moreover, the Baath Party’s Arabism was secular in orientation, which only further emphasised Syrian nationalism’s specific combination of a civic–ethnic identity. In such a defined secular nation, *Taifiyya*, that is, sectarianism, and particularly Islamism were taboos (Schaebler 2013, 71). Syria’s state-promoted nationalism thus came to constitute a somewhat paradoxical mix of civic and ethnic labels that united a unique combination of secular and Arab elements, a socialist contract with a nation tied to its Baathist leadership in what Aldoughli in the Themed

Section of this issue describes as a “familial, emotive and constructive primordialism” (Aldoughli forthcoming).

With the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, and the turnover of power to his son, Bashar al-Assad, however, these state-sponsored, secular, Arab and socialist ties of belonging to Syria were weakened. Towards the end of the twentieth century, both the ethnic and civic elements of Hafez’ version of state nationalism had disintegrated mainly due to broader regional and national developments. With regards to its ethnic elements, Arabism as the dominant political ideology of the Middle East had rapidly declined in popularity, and in its place slowly had risen Political Islam (Dawisha 2000). Once Islam as a political ideology gained strength within the Arab world, sectarian divisions and nationalistic tendencies began to tear apart the “Arab family.” In particular, Egypt, previously the strongest regional promoter of Pan-Arabism under President Nasser, had long pursued a clear national outlook, most visibly in its unilateral “land for peace” negotiations and peace treaty with Israel in 1979. With this move, one of Pan-Arabism’s central and uniting causes – the liberation of Palestine – lost its most powerful supporter. The onset of peace negotiations between the Palestinians and Israelis in the 1990s had further weakened the ideological portrayal of Israel as Pan-Arabism’s common enemy. Unlike his father in the wake of the Yom Kippur War, Bashar al-Assad in the 2000s simply could no longer make use of the same passionate and triumphant Arab rhetoric to unite and rally the Syrian people behind a shared Arab cause (Ajami 1992 [1981]; Browsers 2009; Olmert 2011).

However, not only had the ethnic Pan-Arab element continued to lose ground, but so had the civic elements of Syria’s state-sponsored nationalism (Ziser 2001). In particular, economic recessions and the introduction of liberal-economic reforms limited the regime’s ability to co-opt rural people using economic benefits. The economy’s neoliberal turn had slowly required Bashar al-Assad to abandon his father’s socialist contract with the Syrian people; yet this same contract had also secured their loyalty with the state (Hinnebusch

2020b). Shifting from what Perthes (2004) calls Hafez's "popular authoritarianism" to Bashar's "modernizing authoritarianism" hence cast yet another void into the country's common social purpose.

Furthermore, this void quickly filled from the bottom-up with religious and sectarian purposes which previously had persisted tacitly under the umbrella of the officially promoted Arab identity. While religious identifications gained a renewed significance on the societal level, from the top-down, Bashar al-Assad began to compensate for the dissolving civic (socialist and secular) as well as ethnic (Arab) elements of his father's nationalism and re-fashioned them around his leadership and person (Wedeen 1999). In the course of this process, the fading identity of the nation was refurbished with the identity of the president (Ismail 2011, 542). With this move, Bashar al-Assad "re-imagined" Syrian nationalism as *Suriyya al-Assad*, making himself the lynchpin of Syria's national identity. As Chevee describes in the Themed Section of this issue, the nation had gone from being a country for all "Syrian Arabs" to being "Assad's country" open to all those who follow the president (Chevee forthcoming). Broadly speaking and applying the terms of the outlined theories, between father and son, the civic logic behind Syria's common social purpose thus moved from socialism to capitalism, and from a national belonging that was inclusive towards Syrian Arabs to one for those who are loyal to the Syrian regime. It was in this national-ideological context that the uprisings began in 2011.

Conflict and displacement rupture ties of belonging to a nation

While there are no reliable data before 2011 on the sense of belonging to the nation held by the Syrian people themselves (Pearlman 2016, 22), any sense of group belonging is naturally neither fixed nor static but instead transforms with time and context. As the examples of Syria under Hafez al-Assad and under Bashar al-Assad illustrate, even state-promoted nationalisms undergo transformations. As it was shown above, such a process usually happens slowly and periodically and is grounded in a complex interplay of political, economic and societal

developments. However, change can also unfold rapidly. Especially where conflict and war break out, societies and their existing ties of group belonging are shattered quasi “overnight.” In the view of most sociologists and political scientists, war abruptly ruptures previously dominant societal meanings. It brings upon collectives what was first defined by Kai Erikson as social trauma: “By collective trauma I mean a blow to the basic tissue of social life that damages the bonds attaching people and impairs the prevailing sense of commonality.” For a collective to suffer trauma, it means that its cohesive identity is ruptured, “the ‘we’ no longer exists as a connected pair or as a linked cell in a larger communal body” and, as a result, “an important part of the self has disappeared” (Erikson 1976, quoted in Alexander 2012, 9). In the words of this article’s theoretical framework, through war trauma existing ties of belonging, and with them the meaning and boundaries of group identities, dissolve.

What scholars describe as “social trauma” is evident in the Syrian case after 2011 when the popular uprisings quickly escalated into a brutal war between the regime and a coalition of opposition forces. Over the next nine years of armed conflict, external, regional and international players entered into the fighting, only to escalate it into its current, protracted state. The traumatic consequences caused to the Syrian society warrant any description: the devastation to the country is enormous with entire cities and villages swept away, an estimated 470 000 people killed and 1.9 million wounded (Phillips 2017, 1). It also triggered one of the largest refugee waves in human history: roughly 5.7 million Syrians have fled the country to safe havens in neighbouring Middle Eastern states and beyond.⁴ According to the UNHCR, a further 6.6 million Syrians have been internally displaced (IDPs).⁵ In the light of these happenings, the Syrian conflict can – without any doubt – be characterised as a situation of social trauma in which existing national ties of belonging can be assumed to have been ruptured through conflict and displacement.

Reclaiming ties of belonging amid conflict and displacement

Wherever war ruptures identity, identity must be rekindled. To that regard and in the Syrian case, several new claims of belonging were put forward amid the ongoing conflict. First of all, these claims came from above: both warring parties, the regime and the opposition, used inclusive symbols such as rival Syrian flags and national slogans to assert their power to speak and fight for *all* Syrians. To that end, the two sides formed armed groups, the *Free Syrian Army* and the regime's new military institution, the *National Defense Forces*, both with the declared aim of defending *all* Syrians.

Next to their explicitly national agendas, however, a multiplicity of ethno-sectarian claims were made on both sides, and attracted several different sectarian actors such as the Syrian Kurds, Hezbollah, various Iraqi Shia militias and radical Sunni groups, most evidently Jubhat al-Nusra, to enter into the conflict (Phillips 2015, 359–60). As Pinto (2017, 123) put it, the “push for sectarianization” came from all directions: from the top-down (state-generated), the bottom-up (socially generated), the outside-in (fueled by regional forces) and the inside-out (the spread of conflict into neighbouring states). These different sectarian actors again put forward diverse claims as to who the Syrians are and how their nation should look.

As such, among the political players in Syria we find a multitude of agendas containing different ethnic but also civic logics of meaning-making in their competition to forge ties with Syria and represent *all* Syrians. While existing scholarly work so far has explored these political agendas and their instrumental manipulation of Syria for their own purposes (e.g. Abboud 2016; Hokayem 2017; Lesch 2013; Phillips 2017), the ideas the Syrian people themselves have about their country have received less research attention, at least within the political sciences (Pearlman 2016, 2017).

To fill this gap, this article focusses on the societal meaning-making processes as they emerge among the people. For that purpose, it distinguishes between those who experienced war trauma and those who experienced flight trauma. Compared to those who remain within a country, refugees are outside the sway of central power, in addition to being exposed to new

ideas and ties in their host countries. They, therefore, may articulate separate claims for meaning-making and create a different narrative of their community than those who remain in the country. Through what Foucault pointedly called “the solidarity of the shaken” (Foucault, quoted in Edkins 2003, 5), both groups may forge diverse ties of belonging that formulate a different and new “we” for their society. In both cases, their visions of their home country, however, may refer to primordial, more particularistic (ethnic/sectarian) but also more universalistic (civic) contents when it comes to “re-imagining” their national group.

The empirical study in the next section therefore asks about the ties that still bind Syrians and Syrian refugees to their national group. In the midst of war and displacement, what does it mean for ordinary people “to be Syrian”? Moreover, how do Syrians and Syrian refugees envision their country?

Sampling data on Syrian and Syrian refugees’ ties of belonging to Syria in 2019

To understand how ordinary Syrian citizens affected by war and flight trauma construct ties of belonging to their country, I conducted – together with two research assistants – 200 online interviews (in 2019) among Syrians who stayed in Syria ($N = 100$) as well as among those who left the country as refugees ($N = 100$). The two sample groups were later successfully tested for their statistical comparability concerning gender, age and educational level (see Annex II, Part 2). Especially in conflict areas, online surveys are useful because of their mobility, accessibility and anonymity. Interviews were furthermore carried out in Arabic, and followed strict ethical guidelines. To recruit respondents, we first created a sampling frame that identified individuals in a variety of geographic locations within Syria (important to do justice to the divisions within Syria) and across Middle Eastern, European and North American countries hosting Syrian refugees. Yet, because we followed a snowball method in the wider social and professional networks of the Syrian research assistants, the sample has limitations when it comes to representativeness, yielding disproportionately large numbers of

participants who are higher educated, and who are middle-aged men when compared to the entire Syrian population (Sue and Ritter 2016). It is essential to note that the aim of this analysis is not to project beliefs extracted from this sample onto the entire Syrian population, but rather to gain a glimpse – through respondents’ narratives of their nation – into what Syrianness might mean amid conflict and displacement.

To analyse the collected data, a mixed-methods approach was employed. In the interviews, respondents first described themselves by the fundamental characteristics of gender, age, profession, place of residence and highest level of education. They were further asked to assign themselves to a specific identity category with which they felt closest associated. Herein the options given were “Syrian” or an “ethnic/sectarian group” of their choosing. Equally, respondents rated how proud they were to be Syrian on a scale of 1 to 5. While these initial questions followed the established practice of the *World Values Survey*, which measures collective identifications globally, the questionnaire designed for this study went beyond the format of closed-ended categorisations of the “I” and posed several open-ended questions to better understand the rationale behind the respondents’ choices.

In contrast, the focus in the questionnaire’s second part was on the respondents’ social “we.” This part was designed to convey the content shared with the desired social group, i.e. in this case, with other “Syrians.” To that regard, respondents specified their vision of an *ideal future Syrian state and society*. Note that it is not the number of respondents that matters for such a research endeavor but the deeper dive into each answer’s content by way of qualitative analysis. Accordingly, the insights gained from this qualitative analysis are an important step in the wider context of a quantitative statistical analysis of the sample. Altogether, applying this mixed-methods approach to the collected answers allows for a glimpse of a new common social purpose envisioned by Syrians themselves.

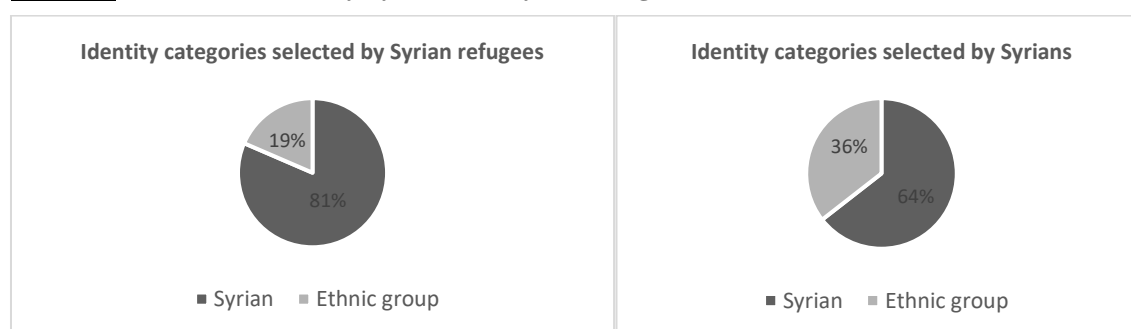
In order to explore respondents’ ties of belonging to Syria, the theories suggested investigating the civic and ethnic rationale that binds respondents to their desired social

group. To that end, all answers were first inductively grouped into civic and ethnic logics, or a mix of both, which became the codes (1) civic and (2) ethnic for a follow-up statistical analysis. While a full list of coding descriptions is provided in Annex I, the question about *a future Syria* was coded with (1) when the answers contained an apparent reference to (liberal) democracy, a civic state and society based on the rule of law and the idea of citizenship, a separation between religion and politics, a pluralistic yet unified “Syrian mosaic of sects” with a strong protection of minorities or the demand for free market competition. In contrast, answers were coded with (2) when respondents desired a Sunni majority government but no democracy, the rule of law with no explicit mention of political freedoms, substantial autonomy for or of particular ethnic groups, an end to foreign influences (in the sense of disturbing the uniqueness of Syria) or an Islamic regime and Islamic constitution for Syria.

Results from the empirical sample: belonging to Syria follows a civic rationale

The collected data yielded the following results: a clear majority of respondents described themselves as belonging to the national identity category “Syrian” (81% of Syrian refugees and 64% of Syrians),⁶ with the rest choosing the following ethnically defined group belongings (in order of frequency of selection): “Arab”, “Sunnah”, “Kurdish” and “Shia” (see Figure 1 and Annex II, Part 1).⁷

Figure 1: Self-identification by Syrians and Syrian refugees (answers in %)

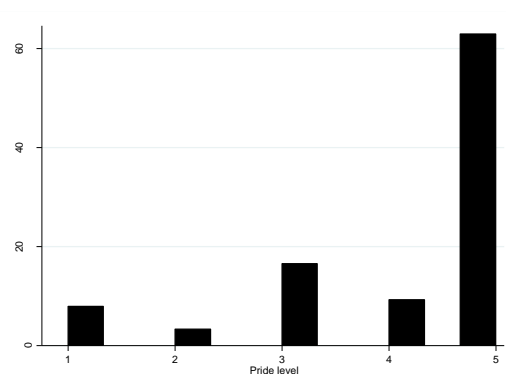


The preponderance of the Syrian identity category is not surprising. As laid out earlier, in Syria a strong nationalistic and state-sponsored sentiment in the form of a Syrian-Arab

nationalism pre-existed the conflict and was promoted by Hafez and his son Bashar al-Assad. Equally consistent with existing literature is the difference between Syrian refugees and Syrians when it comes to their self-categorization as “Syrian” (statistically significant at the 1 per cent level). It speaks to the widely shared insight that subnational and local differences matter less with an increased spatial distance from the home country. Relatedly, scholars also find stronger nationalistic sentiments in diaspora communities (“long-distance nationalism”), notably when the group is excluded from the host society (Benhabib, Shapiro and Petranovic 2007; Betts and Loeschner 2011, 18; Kastoryano 2007, 163–8; Van Hear and Cohen 2017).

That “Syrian” is the strongest identification category among respondents is furthermore supported by the prevalence of a great national pride despite the situation on the ground in Syria: over 60 per cent of respondents considered themselves “very proud” to be Syrian (see Figure 2). Refugees are, to an even more significant extent (in statistical terms, the difference between them is statistically significant at the 5 per cent level), proud to be Syrian compared to their counterparts who remained within the country.⁸ This finding too is in accordance with the sentiment that scholars term “long-distance nationalism” as well as with the reality that most Syrian refugees remain excluded from their host societies.

Figure 2: “On a scale of 1 (not proud) to 5 (very proud), how proud are you to be Syrian?” (answers in %)



However, the prevalence of the national over diverse ethnic self-identifications in addition to a great national pride per se does not say much about the respondents’ ties of belonging to Syria. According to the theories and the analysis of Syria’s state nationalism

presented above, respondents' Syrian and ethnic identifications can both be based on either a civic or ethnic rationale. In other words, for all the given self-identifications and selected levels of national pride, the rationale that binds individuals to their "we" is equally likely to follow a civic or ethnic logic. Before coming to any conclusion, we must therefore work out – through a qualitative content analysis – the rationale that respondents follow when they narrativize their "we", that is, their common social purpose, beyond the simple classifications of their "I."

When looking closely at respondents' shared social purpose in a qualitative evaluation of their answers, we find an overwhelming presence of what was described above as a civic rationale in a majority of answers, with even stronger civic connotations among refugees than among those who remained within Syria. In particular, demands for a democratic, civic state based on the rule of law and secularism, as well as for a unified, yet pluralistic nation and society frequently appear in respondents' vision of a future Syria. Expressed in the words of a female Syrian refugee, now living in Canada:

I want Syria to be the same geographically. However, politically, I wish for democracy, but never a religious government. I am against religion ruling the government. I want elections with different political parties competing against each other.

Along similar lines, a male participant from Raqqa provided his vision of a future Syrian state:

The ideal situation would be a civic and democratic state, consisting of institutions rather than individuals. A single and unified state that recognizes all its peoples and the rights of these peoples under "the roof of one country." A parliament with an elected government according to international standards with a message of peace and love, instead of a message of hatred and terrorism.

These two answers from the Syrian refugee community and from within Syria are representative of a majority of respondents' visions. In their own words, Syria should be "democratic," "civic" and "united." While survey participants most often expressed these three components, their meaning in the specific Syrian context requires further explication.

With regards to the attribute democratic, only some understand democracy in distinctively liberal terms and emphasise political liberties, free speech, party competition and bureaucratic institutions. Whereas most respondents, when expressing the wish for democracy, only convey the wish "not to be ruled by a military regime." For instance, a male refugee from Damascus now living in France desired "a democratic, pluralistic country ruled by the people, not the army and intelligence." Equally, a female Syrian refugee from Damascus wished for "a democratic country where power is traded peacefully; where the security services do not control the people." However, when pressed for further details, she added a more explicit, liberal element to the kind of democracy she envisions for Syria: "A democratic country where liberties are preserved, and laws apply to everyone; and where fair opportunities are available for all and where there is equality between all the communities and ethnic groups in rights and duties. I wish for Syria to be a civic country!"

While the expressed desire for a "democratic Syria" certainly meant freedom from military rule, if not a liberal, rule-based government by the people, more difficult to interpret is respondents' frequent use of the term civic. Some specify it as meaning something along the lines of liberal/civil values by mentioning "tolerance," "pluralism," "individualism" or even "citizenship." Others clearly connect it to "secularism." Their "civic state" is, in the words of a Syrian woman from Aleppo,

A secular and pluralistic state where all rights are guaranteed, and duties are performed; a state where the rule of law prevails. In such a state, there is no discrimination among Syrians, no financial and administrative corruption, no lack of judiciary independence, and no influence or interference of clergy and religion in

politics. Instead, a social contract guarantees the participation of everyone and allows us to formulate a constitution.

While in this answer the idea of a civic Syria is explicitly linked to the separation of religion and politics, it is important to note that in Arabic, civic and secular can have the same meaning. Therefore, participants often used the term civic to mean a secular state in which religion is separate from politics. In fact, the more frequent use of the term civic instead of secular is not surprising as civic has less of a connotation than secularism, which in recent decades has become associated with values that contradict Islam. Civic, on the other hand, sounds less threatening in that regard and, in addition, aligns with the wide-spread and very popular idea of Syria as the “cradle of civilisation.” The latter highlights Syria’s distinctiveness and long history; both have been found, in this survey, to provide a vital source for national pride among respondents. The call for a civic state, therefore, also implies the desire to reconstruct an “indigenous” or more “authentic” polity that represents the Syrian “civilization” in contrast to – what Ismael and Ismael (2013) call – the “uncivil Arab state.”

While a majority of answers expressed a wish for a “civic state” which tacitly implied a separation between religion and politics, a handful of respondents explicitly desired an Islamic government for Syria. Their idea of Islamic rule, however, always came with a clear disclaimer against extremist thought:

In terms of religion, Syrians are used to a simple understanding and applications of religious rules. I prefer such an understanding, which is mostly concerned with abiding by Islamic ethical standards, and which is distant from extremism. (response from a male Syrian from Deir al-Zour)

Also from this answer, we see that wherever respondents desired religion to be a part of politics, even Islamic rule was understood in a specifically “Syrian way.” With this, they interlink their idea of a religious Syria once more with the understanding of the country as the “cradle of civilization.” They do so by interweaving religion with the country’s long history

of coexistence and its unique mixture of a plurality of religious ideas and groups. With this, the minority of respondents who desired no separation between religion and politics also seemed to interpret Islamic governance in more civic terms.

Equally shared by all respondents, however, was the wish that Syria must be “united”. This sentiment referred first of all to Syria’s territorial integrity and the desire to keep its geographical borders intact. A female respondent, originally from Sweida and now living in Turkey, explained that any future Syria must have “national and geographic unity between all Syrian cities and governorates without cutting off any part of the Syrian territory.” Like her, all respondents emphasised unity at least under the broad idea of keeping the country’s boundaries, in addition to retaining its “independent sovereignty,” as a male Syrian refugee also from Sweida and now living in Vienna, expressed it. The wish for independent sovereignty always also implied the desire for “the departure of foreign powers” from Syria.

In a significant number of responses, however, unity went beyond geographic integrity and political independence for Syria and explicitly meant the unity of the Syrian people “under the roof of one country,” to use the words of a respondent from Raqqa. In these answers, unity described a “pluralistic” state and society. Some, with this, as a male inhabitant of Homs explained, wished for “co-existence with other minorities within a unified country,” while most saw such a pluralistic coexistence of diverse groups rendered possible only with democracy. In fact, a large number of respondents described their ideal state as “a pluralistic democracy” or equally – in the exact words of a male refugee from Homs now living in Italy – as a “civil democratic state for all Syrians,” or even “for all citizens” – as a female refugee from Damascus now living in Turkey explicitly mentioned. Such a state – in the words of a male respondent from Palmyra – “respects everyone and treats everyone equally regardless of their beliefs or gender.” A male refugee from Latakia now living in Saudi Arabia also described his idea of such a “democratic civil state”: a state “in which all citizens are equal in

duties and responsibilities before a new and strong law and constitution that represents the aspirations of the Syrian people.”

While most respondents envisioned their future Syria as a “pluralistic democratic state” that unites all Syrians, some – and most often those belonging to the Kurdish minority – expressed the wish for more decentralisation within such a democratic state: “I wish for a secular, democratic, parliamentary state, preferably a state which is decentralised, because the people of each region know their needs best” (male Syrian refugee from Latakia, now living in Holland). Along similar lines, a Kurdish respondent from Efrin explained his vision for Syria as

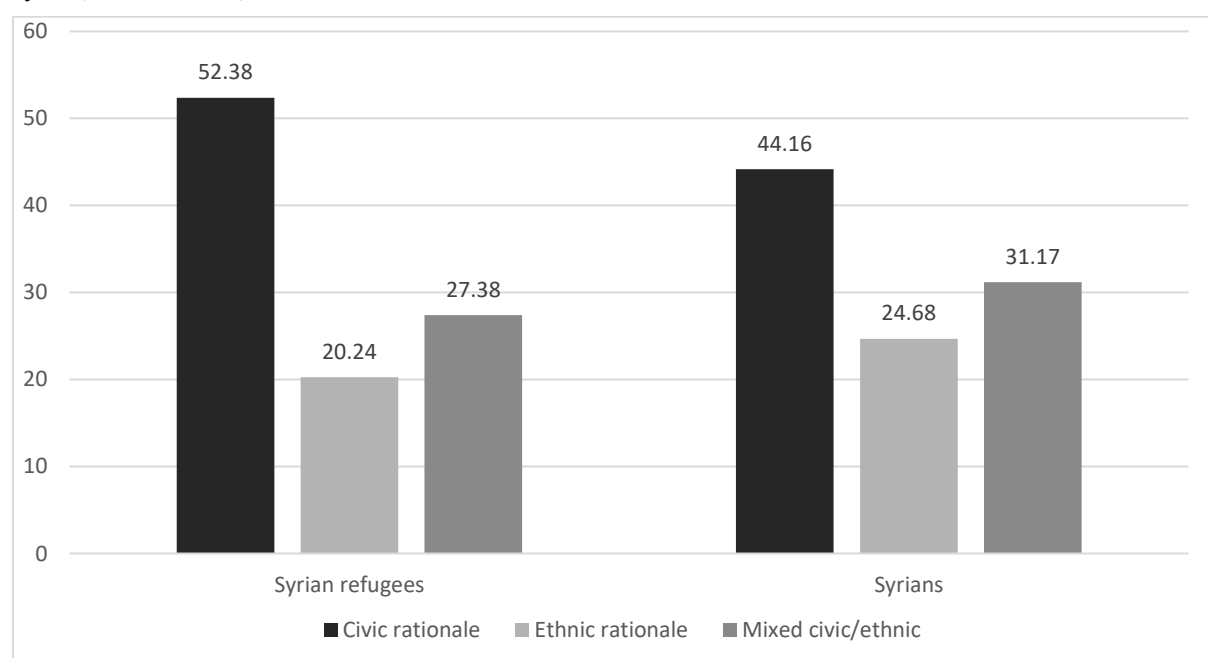
A civic, pluralistic and democratic state where human rights, freedoms and security are all guaranteed as well as equal opportunities and justice. The state should have a centralised presidential system with wide sets of power given to the regions. This state should have a civic constitution that respects human rights, fights extremism, and preserves the social and cultural richness of Syria by protecting minorities and their liberty.

As is apparent in these two answers, the idea of a “pluralistic but decentralised state” came with varying degrees of federalism and autonomy for minorities. Unsurprisingly, autonomy was predominantly emphasised by those who gave their national identification as belonging to an ethnic minority such as Kurdish, as well as, to a lesser degree, by those who identified as Shia. Furthermore, it is necessary to point out here that the use of the terms pluralistic and federal have the same tension as civic and secular in Arabic. Pluralistic as a value is a reflection of the diversity of Syria’s population. For instance, the word “component” (*Mukawin*), as in a fraction of the population, kept coming up in many answers in connection with the emphasis that Syria must include all of its “components.” Generally, respondents show great pride in the *Mukawinat* (plural for *Mukawin*: the different components that make up the Syrian people), and the frequent use of the term pluralistic reflects this pride. Federal,

on the other hand, is about pluralism but includes the political notion of self-determination; therefore, it was mostly used by those who explicitly stated belonging to a minority, mainly the Kurds.

With democratic, civic and united appearing as the most frequently mentioned terms in respondents' vision of a future Syria, and even after considering them in their context-specific liberal, secular and pluralistic meanings, the initial, qualitative interpretation of the collected data finds a protruding civic rationale behind the construction of meaning and boundaries of Syrianness. A follow-up statistical analysis of the two sample groups (Syrian refugees and Syrian residents) further confirmed this in numerical terms.⁹ In both groups, a clear majority of respondents gave a civic *vision of their ideal future Syria* (see Annex II, Part 3).

Figure 3: Civic and ethnic rationales followed by Syrian refugees and Syrians in their *vision of a future Syria* (answers in %)

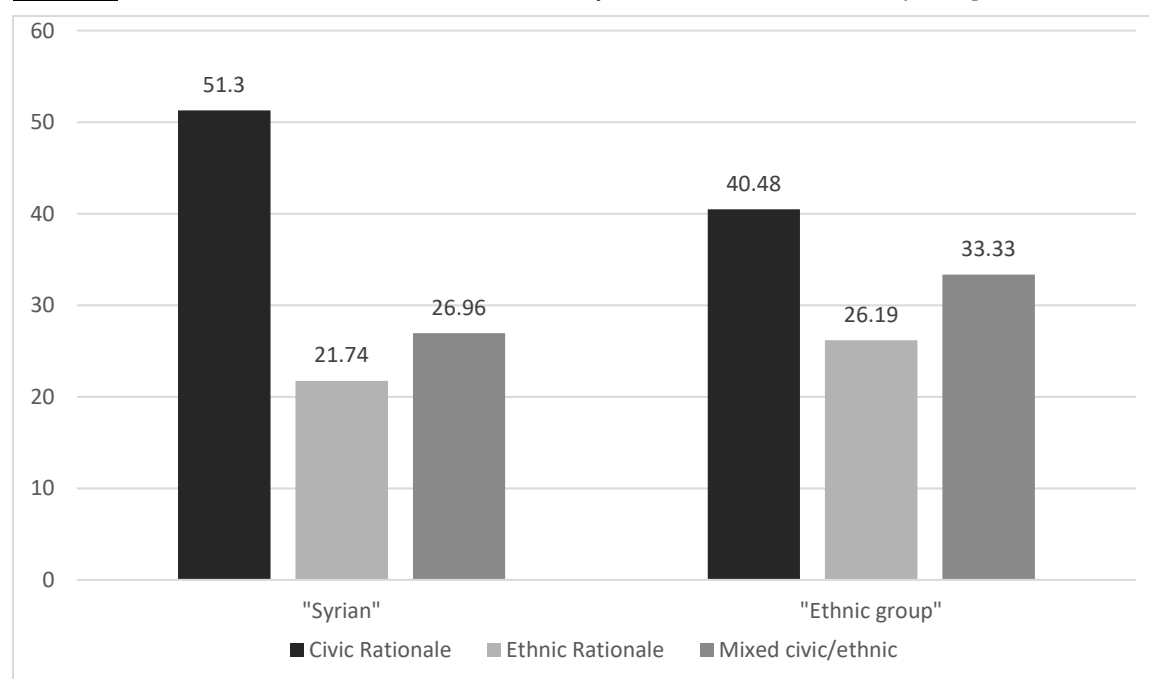


As is illustrated in Figure 3, when asked about their vision of Syria, 52 per cent of Syrian refugees and 44 per cent of the Syrian residents described their ideal nation according to a civic rationale, compared to 20 per cent of refugees and 25 per cent of residents whose vision of Syria followed an ethnic rationale (see Annex II, Part 3, A and B). Overall, no

statistically significant difference was found between refugees and residents in terms of the rationale behind their view on a future Syria. This finding also holds when answers containing a mix of civic and ethnic rationales (1.5) were excluded from the statistical analysis as not to invite interpretative bias (see Figure 3 and Annex II, Part 4, A and B).¹⁰

Altogether, we can therefore conclude from these findings that a civic rationale predominantly guides respondents' vision of a future Syria in both sample groups. It follows that, on the societal level, meaning and boundaries of belonging to "Syria" seem not to have narrowed. This finding contradicts the assertions of mainstream Western media that Syria's national identity contracted into ethnic confines during the ongoing civil war. Most interestingly, the statistical analysis also demonstrates that respondents who stated that they identify first as Syrian do not have a higher probability of following a civic rationale in their vision of an ideal future Syria than those who self-identify with an ethnic category (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Civic and ethnic rationales followed in "Syrian" and "ethnic" identity categories (answers in %)



As Figure 4 shows, and after controlling for the characteristics of age, gender, educational attainment and refugee status, the self-categorisation of Syrian does not explain

whether someone follows a civic or an ethnic rationale. This finding holds both in terms of simple counts and in the results of regression analysis. From a simple means test perspective, on average therefore one's civic or ethnic rationale does not matter as to whether the person identifies as Syrian or as an ethnic group member (see Annex II, Part 5). In fact, a majority of those who chose an ethnic group as their primary identity still follow a civic rationale in their vision of Syria's future.

There are several possible explanations for the prevalence of a civic rationale also in ethnic identifications. When it comes to those who chose the ethnic category Arab, their idea of Syria is likely to follow the Baath party's official state nationalism which – as was described above – combined secular elements with the idea of a modern Syrian–Arab nation. Those who selected ethnic identifications such as Sunnah, Shia or Kurdish, on the other hand, are likely to be attracted to the civic notions of “self-determination” and “pluralism” precisely because they stand in opposition to the state-sponsored national identity entangled in centralised power structures and an Arab dominance (Ismail 2011, 542; for similar conclusions, see also Aldoughli, Chevee, Clowry and Dukhan's contributions to the Themed Section of this issue). As a result, even those self-identifying with ethnic groups, in this study's sample population, have been found predominantly to follow a civic rationale when defining their vision of the Syrian nation and society.

Conclusion

This article has explored individual Syrians' national ties of belonging amid an ongoing war in Syria and its concomitant waves of displacement. Grounded in the general distinction of national ties into following either a civic or ethnic logic, the study found an overwhelming presence of a civic rationale underpinning the understanding of Syrianness in its sample groups. In respondents' answers, the attributes democratic, civic and united came up most frequently when describing their vision of the Syrian community and nation. Particularly interesting in this regard was also the finding that there was little difference between Syrian

refugees and Syrian residents; nor did their self-assignments to the identity category Syrian or a specific ethnic group seem to matter: all interviewed people predominantly embraced civic ideas of the Syrian nation.

Based only on the sample population of this study, the “free Syria” that protestors demanded in 2011 therefore seems to carry the attributes democratic, civic and united. Democratic, in most answers, implied more than just the end of authoritarian rule and often included a hint to liberal political freedoms. Equally, the civic description was frequently used as synonymous with secular, and united clearly described a unity of Syrians as a pluralistic society within the existing territorial boundaries of the state. According to this study’s 200 survey respondents, the slogans chanted during the uprisings – “Syria is one, one, one!” and “One, one, one! The Syrian people are one!” – may therefore be explicated as the demand for a pluralistic unity of a variety of peoples and beliefs made “one” as citizens under the roof of a democratic, secular Syria.

With this finding, the case study contributes to diversifying the widespread idea about the stubbornness of the ethnic element in the Syrian conflict. At the societal level, if we can infer anything from our small sample to the broader population, the boundaries of our respondents’ Syrian identity appear to centre around a civic notion of citizenship, thus widening the Syrian in-group, instead of contracting it by way of ethnic divisions. This observation seems to hold irrespective of whether the respondent fled beyond the borders or stayed within Syria. From the bottom-up, and at least when extrapolating from the minds of the Syrian individuals making up this study’s sample groups, a civic form of nationalism seems to prevail among the Syrian people.

Future research is encouraged to pick up the outlined contours of a “civic nationalism” emerging among Syrians and to test it within larger population samples. From it, scholars could develop the context-specific notions of civic and ethnic nationalisms further and locate them within the Middle Eastern context more broadly, as well as within Syria in particular.

Going beyond the academic interest in diverse forms of national ties and their developments and transformations, I am inclined to believe that such a research agenda also bears the potential to generate policy-relevant insights into what political conditions and which kind of peace agreement could attract a return of refugees and the displaced. Ultimately, however, when it comes to application, it will be up to the Syrians themselves to transport their vision of a civic Syria into a shared Syrian reality.

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¹ Based on a collection of newspaper articles on the Syrian conflict in the UK's *The Guardian* and *BBC News*, Germany's *Der Spiegel*, and Austria's *Salzburger Nachrichten*, in a timeframe between 2011 and 2018.

² The definitions build upon Risse-Kappen (2010, 36), who differentiates the substantive content of collective identities into a) *differentia specifica* in terms of constitutive norms, common purpose, and sacred or civic identity constructions, (b) in- and outgroup distinction in terms of primordial, sacred or civic identity and (c) degree of contestation on a continuum between settled and consensual, and fluid and deeply controversial. The approach selected in this article concentrates on (b), and additionally integrates Eisenstadt and Giesen's (1995, 80–2) detailed definitions of primordial and civic identities.

³ Please note that the terms civic and ethnic here refer to the definitions given, and do not imply the (often loaded) connotations and meanings they carry in other contexts.

⁴ Numbers based on UNHCR data, with the latest updated numbers on 20 September 2019 being 5,642,322 refugees in total. See <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria> (viewed: 27 September 2019).

⁵ The numbers on Syrian IDPs are based on UNHCR, “Syria Emergency”: <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/syria-emergency.html> (viewed: 27 September 2019).

⁶ The difference between the two samples, Syrian refugees and Syrians, when it comes to their self-categorization as “Syrian” is statistically significant at the 1% level (see Annex II, Part 1, C).

⁷ These results reflect the category that respondents selected. Where multiple identities were given, the category stated first was used for this analysis. With regards to ethnic identity categories, the respondents in this sample only selected “Sunnah”, “Shia”, “Arab” or “Kurdish”, with one respondent mentioning their belonging by birth to the Alawi group, however, added their identification as strictly “Syrian”.

⁸ The difference between the two samples, Syrian refugees and Syrians, when it comes to national pride is statistically significant at the 5% level (see Annex II, Part 6).

⁹ The two subsamples are balanced in terms of their average age, gender and level of education: concerning these characteristics, there are no statistically significant differences between the sample group of Syrian refugees and those living in Syria. As a result, the hypothesis that the two groups share the same baseline features cannot be rejected. Hence, the responses of the two interviewee groups may be comparable from a statistical analysis point of view (see Annex II, Part 2).

¹⁰ No statistically significant difference was found between the two sample groups, Syrian refugees and Syrian residents, when it came to their narrative of conflict and their vision of a future ideal Syria (see Annex II, Part 4).