

# Popular Oral Culture and Sectarianism in Syria, a Materialist Analysis

Tuesday 6 November 2018, by [DAHHER Joseph](#) (Date first published: 1 November 2018).

**SyriaUntold this year published a series of testimonies reflecting on the issue of sectarianism in Syrian society and its links with popular oral culture. The contributions were written by Syrian men and women from different ethnic and religious background.**

## Contents

- [ROOTS OF SECTARIANISM](#)
- [THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF \(...\)](#)
- [SYRIA'S CONSTRUCTION OF A \(...\)](#)
- [INSTITUTIONS OF THE REGIME](#)
- [CONCLUSION](#)

Introducing this series on the “other” and oral sectarian culture in Syria, Mohammed Dibo, the editor-in-chief of SyriaUntold raised several questions to this not new, as he rightly reminds the reader, phenomenon of sectarianism. “Where did all this sectarianism come from? Where was this sectarian consciousness hiding?” [\[1\]](#). Or is it something entrenched in the “Arab” mind?

## ROOTS OF SECTARIANISM

If the answer is that sectarianism is the result of an essential and primordial component of the Arab / Muslim mind — as promoted by some academics and politicians ([i])—then on these premises no solution can be found outside the realm of a so called “consociational” sectarian political solution. This is the model in place in Lebanon and Iraq, which officially divides power between the various religious communities and ethnicities, while in reality serving the political and economic elites of these groups.

Alternatively, if this is not the case, as argued by this author and several testimonies in this series, the key question becomes: how and by whom is sectarianism produced and maintained? For what reasons?

Many of the testimonies emphasise how the Syrian regime exploits sectarianism to divide the Syrian people. For example, the writer Omar Kaddour [\[2\]](#) speaks of a silent war that became a declared project by the stereotyping of each identity ([ii]), while journalist and feminist activist Milia Eidmouni [\[3\]](#) explains how she had this constant feeling that Christians were guests in their own country and that they had to respect the regime that “provided protection” to her community. ([iii])

For his part, Ahmed Khalil [\[4\]](#) argues that the regime was not the only one preventing any real and public discussion of sectarian beliefs, although sectarian exploitation was the main tool used by Damascus to remain in power until today. Such discussion was also constrained by Syrian society and social traditions governing relations between the diverse communities of Syria. He cites for

example the issue of mix marriages, which were very rare and unwelcome by the vast majority in Syria. ([iv]) Many testimonies actually attested that within each community insulting jokes / stereotypes / expressions or a feeling of insecurity toward other groups were relatively common. Mohammed Dibo recalls exchanges with his Alawite family that reflected a fear of history repeating itself ([v]).

It is clear that opposition groups have not been innocent when it comes to instrumentalising sectarian discourses and practices, which have increased in the past few years. Moreover, some have portrayed the struggle in Syria as a primarily sectarian one and therefore one has to choose his / her camp between “Sunnis” and “Alawis” as described by Milia Eidmouni. ([vi]) Similarly, I remember that early on sectors of Syrian democratic and progressive activists would mock the characterizations made behind close doors by Syrian official opposition representatives of the Syrian National Council and Syrian Coalition to describe someone as “Christian (or Druze), but opponent”, “Kurdish, but nationalist (or patriotic)”, “Alawite, but honourable”, etc...

Sectarian identity has been increasingly equated with a political position by multiple camps. Unfortunately, this trend has not been restricted to conservative and Islamic fundamentalists groups among the opposition, it has become increasingly evident in liberal sectors as well. In a more sophisticated attempt to explain sectarian dynamics within the state of Syria, some liberal opposition personalities have not necessarily characterized the regime as Alawite, describing it instead as a authoritarian and privatized state run by the Assad family. This regime nevertheless adopted policies favoring religious minorities, leaving Sunnis generally “angry” at this situation as they felt discriminated against and excluded from clientelist networks. This sentiment sets the stage for discourses on the “oppressed Sunni” majority.([vii])

Although the dominant role of Alawi personalities at the head of the regime and its coercive instruments (the military and the secret services) is not in dispute, I will show that reducing the nature of the state or its dominant institutions to an “Alawite identity,” or favouring religious minorities and discriminating a whole community (Arab Sunnis) is problematic. This approach does not seize upon the complex networks of alliances made by the regime’s elite. Again this does not mean that sectarianism has not been a major tool employed by the regime in order to control and divide the Syrian population. There have been sectarian massacres and forced displacement by regime forces and its allies against impoverished Sunni populations involved in the uprising or at least suspected of sympathies towards it, while eliminating most forms of democratic and non-sectarian resistance in the country.

This is however very different than saying that the regime is against all Sunnis. The regime is not opposed to Sunni populations or a particular Sunni identity per se, as some has claimed, but to hostile constituencies, which have been in their far majority from Sunni popular backgrounds in impoverished rural areas and mid-towns, in addition to the suburbs of Damascus and Aleppo. Such simplification overlooks the Sunni support for the regime, especially in Damascus and Aleppo, and the Sunni presence within regime institutions and loyalist militias. Just as other religious and ethnic communities, Syrian Arab Sunnis were ‘formed’ through various elements (class, gender, regional origin, religion, etc.) and do not have a single political position. This was actually mentioned in the testimonies, especially regarding the ones writing from or on Damascus speaking about the social differences and the urban and rural divide.

Class has to be thus understood as a social relation, and factors such as gender, age, national and ethnic origin, citizenship status are part of what constitutes class as a concrete social relation. This has consequences as well on how Sunni individuals are treated differently by the regime, just as other individuals from other sects.

I argue, following the argument made by late Lebanese Marxist Mehdi Amel in the 1980s during the Lebanese Civil War, against any attempt to ascribe class position to one's belonging to a particular sect, and to build alliances on a sectarian basis. According to Amel, such alliances would further entrench the sectarian dynamic inherent to the system and thus strengthen the position of those in power. Instead, Amel advanced a position that highlighted the contradictory class nature of different communities, one in which the role of sectarianism helped to obscure relations of power and domination within the community itself.[viii]

Now I will try to explain the dynamics of sectarianism and how to try challenge it.

## **THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF SECTARIANISM: UNEVEN AND COMBINED DEVELOPMENT**

In order to understand the permanence of sectarianism and other elements mentioned by Mohammad Dibo such "ethnic discrimination, tribalism, regionalism, rural and urban tensions" in Syria and more broadly in the region, we have to look at the material conditions (the political and socio-economic system and structures locally, regionally and internationally) we and the people of the region live in to explain.

It is important first to remind that Syria is a dominated country on the international political scene characterized by uneven and combined development. [1] In this perspective, two important issues have to be analysed: 1) the nature of the state and its apparatus and 2) the state's popular base. As argued by academic scholar Gilbert Achcar, the analysis of these elements is much more complicated in societies rooted in uneven and combined development than in the case of a bourgeois democratic state ruling over a modern type of civil society. The reason is that archaic social structures and categories are mixed to a modern type of social stratification and where forms of archaic dominations are amalgamated with political institutions of modern inspirations.[ix] The main archaic remnants in the MENA region that affects the nature of the political domination and of the state are tribalism, regionalism and sectarianism, especially the latter in the case of Syria. These factors are inherited from the period preceding the bourgeois era, which ideologically promoted a national ideal. They correspond to an era where parental and lineage structures were determinant (tribalism) and where religion was the political ideology per excellence (sectarianism).[x] The degree of resilience and presence of these elements in the societies of the region varies according to its age and depth of modernization.[xi]

The explanation for the resilience of these factors should however not be found in any kind of Arabic or Islamic particularities, but is linked to the dynamics of uneven and combined development in a global capitalist system. Agents of modernization, whether foreigners or indigenous, have themselves used these archaic factors to consolidate their own powers. Lacking popular legitimacy, the various regimes of the region have generally nurtured tribal, sectarian and / or regional clienteles as guarantees against popular uprising, constituting the armature of power.

In Syria, the regime is a patrimonial one, in the traditional Weberian definition. In other words, it is an absolute autocratic and hereditary power, which can function through a collegial environment (parents and friends) and ownership of the state. The armed forces are dominated by a praetorian guard (a force whose allegiance goes to the rulers, not to the state), as is the case for economic means and the levers of administration. In this type of regime, it's a type of crony capitalism that develops, dominated by a state bourgeoisie. In other words the members and people close to the ruling families often exploit their dominant position guaranteed by the political power to amass considerable fortunes. The rentier nature of the economy strengthens the patrimonial nature of the

state as well.[xii] The centers of power (political, military and economy) within the Syrian regime are concentrated in one family and its clique, the Assad, similar to Libya under Moammer Qaddhafi or the Gulf Monarchies. This drives the regime to use all the violence at its disposition to protect its rule

Therefore, most of the patrimonial states in the MENA region are generally characterized by a deeply corrupt trilateral “power elite”[xiii] as explained by Achcar:

*“a triangle of power constituted by the interlocking pinnacles of the military apparatus the political institutions and politically determined capitalist class (a state bourgeoisie), all three bent on fiercely defending their access to state power, the main source of their privileges and profits”*[xiv]

In this perspective, and contrary to some states especially characterized by democratic bourgeois’ institutions and forms of governances, is it not possible to speak of the relative autonomy of the state in relation to the power elite.

On a more regional level, the rise of sectarian tensions after 1979 were mostly rooted as a result of the increasing political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran that instrumentalized them for political objectives. This rivalry therefore boosted Sunni and Shi’a Islamic fundamentalist movements throughout the region. Various authoritarian and despotic regimes in the region have also made use of sectarianism to consolidate their power and divide their population. This is also used to divert popular classes away from socio-economic and political problems by categorizing one group (according to its sect or ethnicity) as the source of problems in the country and as a security threat, which leads to repressive and discriminatory policies against it.

The key element to understand is that sectarianism is as a product of modernity and not as a reminiscent of past history preventing the modernization of these countries, or as something that is essential to the people of the region. In addition to this, sectarianism is a powerful mechanism of control over the course of the class struggle through its creation of ties of dependence between the popular classes and their bourgeois and petit bourgeois leadership. In this manner, popular classes are deprived of an independent political existence and instead are defined (and act politically) through their confessional status, which is in the interests of bourgeois leaderships as we have seen it in Syria and elsewhere in the region.

## **SYRIA’S CONSTRUCTION OF A PATRIMONIAL REGIME: FROM HAFEZ AL-ASSAD TO BASHAR AL-ASSAD**

The establishment of the modern patrimonial state occurred under the leadership of Hafez al-Assad following his arrival to power in 1970. He patiently built a state in which he could secure power through various means such as sectarianism, regionalism, tribalism and clientelism, which were managed on informal networks of power and patronage. This came alongside harsh repression against any form of dissent. These tools allowed the regime to integrate, boost or undermine groups belonging to different ethnicities and religious sects. This translated at the local level by the collaboration of various actors submitted to the regime, including state or Ba’th officials, intelligence officers, and prominent members of local society (clerics, tribal members, businessmen, etc.), who managed specific localities. The coming to power of Hafez al-Assad also opened the way for the beginning of economic liberalization, in opposition to previous radical policies of the 1960s.

Bashar al-Assad’s arrival to power in 2000 considerably strengthened the patrimonial nature of the state with a particular increasing weight of crony capitalists. The accelerated neoliberal policies of the regime led to an increasing shift in the social base of the regime constituted from its origins of

peasants, government employees and some sections of the bourgeoisie, to a regime coalition with at its heart the crony capitalists – the rent seeking alliance of political brokers (led by Assad's mother's family, Makhoul) and the regime supporting bourgeoisie and higher middle classes. This shift was paralleled by disempowerment of the traditional corporatist organizations of workers and peasants and their patronage networks and the co-optation in their place of business groups and higher middle classes. This did not balance or compensate however its former support base. More generally, the increased patrimonial nature of the state and the weakening of the Ba'th party apparatus and corporatist organizations rendered cliental, tribal and sectarian connections all the more important and was therefore reflected in society.

Following the uprising in 2011, the regime's repression and policies were largely based on its main base of support, old and new: crony capitalists, security services, and high religious institutions linked to the state. At the same time, it made use of its patronage networks through sectarian, clientelist and tribal links to mobilize on a popular level. Through the war, the deepening Alawi sectarian and clientelist aspect of the regime prevented major desertions, while patronage connections served as essential elements, binding the interests of disparate social groups to the regime.

The regime's popular base demonstrated the nature of the state and the way the power elite related to the rest of society, or more precisely in this case its popular base, through a mix of modern and archaic forms of social relations, and not through a constructed and large civil society. The regime had to rely mostly on coercive powers, which included repressive actions and installing fear, but not only. The regime could also indeed count on the passivity or at least non-active opposition of large sections of urban government employees and more generally middle class strata in the two main cities of Damascus and Aleppo, although their suburbs were often hotbeds of revolt. This was part of the passive hegemony imposed by the regime.

Moreover, this situation demonstrated that regime's popular base was not limited to sectors and groups issued from the Alawi and / or religious minority populations, although they were predominant, but included personalities and groups from various sects and ethnicities pledging their support to the regime. More generally, large sections of regime's popular base mobilized through sectarian, tribal and clientelist connections were increasingly acting as agents of regime repression. As argued by Steven Heydemann, "regime-society relations defined to a disturbing degree by shared participation in repression".[xv]

This resilience came at a cost however, in addition to increasing dependence on foreign states and actors. The regime's existing characteristics and tendencies were amplified. Crony capitalist considerably increased their power as large sectors of Syria's bourgeoisie had left the country massively withdrawing its political and financial support to the regime. This situation compelled the regime to adopt more and more a predatory behavior in its extraction of increasing needed revenues. At the same time, the clientelist, sectarian, and tribal features of the regime were reinforced. The regime's sectarian Alawite identity was strengthened, especially in key institutions such as the army and to a lesser extent in state administrations, which is an issue the Assad leadership will have to deal with following the end of the war in a war torn country. There was also a deepening and institutionalization of repressive exclusionary practices.

From this perspective, it bears noting that the Syrian regime since Hafez al-Assad's arrival to power in 1970 has used policies instrumentalizing sectarianism and primordial identities as a weapon to divide the Syrians both on religious and ethnic lines, while developing a double policy of repressing independent popular civic and secular organizations and political parties. It only allowed alternative organizations to develop under the control of the regime, while reinforcing sectarian and primary – including tribal – identities throughout contemporary Syrian history in different ways.

At the same time, sectarianism has also been instrumentalized by sections of the Syrian opposition, particularly Islamic fundamentalist groups but not only, and other foreign countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey, in order to build a following or mobilize constituencies on the ground against the Assad regime.

## **INSTITUTIONS OF THE REGIME: MAINTAINING PRIMORDIAL IDENTITIES AND REACTIONARY PRACTICES AND DISCOURSES**

The Syrian regime's institutions have also played an important role fanning sectarianism and ethnic hatred in society and maintaining other primordial identities or elements. The nature of political institutions is indeed a historically determined reflection of the class structure that has emerged in relation to capital accumulation. In other words, the state is not disassociated from the sphere of politics, which is not separated from the economic sphere. Similarly, it is a social relation or "the set of institutional forms through which the ruling class relates to the rest of society".[xvi] This is why seeing the regime as solely Alawite, notwithstanding the alawitization of some institutions, especially its armed repressive apparatus, does not grasp its dynamics of power and ruling system.

Furthermore, the regime does not serve the political and socio-economic interests of the Alawite population as a whole, quite on the contrary. The rising death toll in the army and other militias was made up of many Alawis; insecurity and growing economic hardships have actually created tensions and fuelled animosities against regime officials among Alawite populations.

It is interesting to see at the same time that the Assad regime, father and son, continuously also tried to minimize and hide all visible signs of Alawite religiosity and promoted assimilation into the Sunni mainstream. Bashar and Hafez al-Assad both performed public prayers in Sunni mosques, while Sunni mosques were built throughout Alawite majority populated areas. The regime did not allow any form of civil representation to establish a Higher Alawite Supreme Council and there are no public religious references for the Alawite community. The Alawis follow the same religious laws as the Sunni community regarding the law of personal status (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc...) and receive just like other Islamic minorities a Sunni religious education in schools, media and public institutions.[xvii]

In this perspective, sectarianism has never been a political end but remained a significant and key means of domination.

But moreover, institutions maintain through various ways the divides in the society. In the country, different rights and duties exist according to one's religious identity and ethnicity. The 2012 constitution for example stipulates that the president must be a Muslim man and that "the main source of law is the Sharia", which is discriminatory for the rest of religious sects and women. Syria also has eight different personal status laws, each of which is applied according to the religious sect of an individual. Christian communities follow their own laws, while Personal Status Law for all Muslims is based on a particular Sunni interpretation of Islamic Sharia, Hanafi jurisprudence and other Islamic sources. These laws also include major discriminations against women. This is without forgetting the new Decree No. 16 signed by Bashar al-Assad in September of this year, which was widely perceived as strengthening the role of the Ministry of Religious Endowment (Awqaf) in society by revising and expanding its responsibilities and its internal structure.[xviii]

In addition to what has been mentioned above, the patriarchal order is maintained by the maintenance of practices and legalized by law such as the so-called "honour crimes" (article 548), which are not penalized most of the time or of a maximum of 5 to 7 years, or the "legalized rape" (article 489) in the case of a married couple.[xix]

Similarly, the Arab ethnic identity is the supreme one in Syria, according to the constitution, while others are tolerated as subordinated identities or nearly forbidden like the Kurdish one. Kurdish populations in Syria have suffered discriminatory and repressive policies on the political, social and cultural levels since the independence of Syria in 1946. Heinous discourses are actually very much present today regarding the Kurds among regime and pro-opposition circles presenting them as separatists and agents of the west, which all have historical roots in the country,[xx] while as mentioned in the testimonies insulting jokes, social stereotypes and unease in hearing the Kurdish language in society are widespread.

This system of laws and this political framework, which are regulated along religious, ethnic and patriarchal lines, are critical to the maintenance of divisions within society. So despite the so-called “modernist” appeal of the regime, this latter has an interest in maintaining such laws as an instrument of division and domination.

## **CONCLUSION:**

Sectarianism in oral popular culture has existed for decades in Syria and predate the Assad regime. Previous rulers maintained primordial identities as key elements in their political systems. However, under the Assad regime and in line with regional political evolutions, sectarianism was nurtured and evolved, permeating multiple aspects of Syrian society. The question now is how to challenge it.

In Lebanon, the words of Lebanese Maronite Patriarch at the time Nasrallah Sfeir in 2010 on how to deal with the sectarian system have unfortunately become a mantra for the Lebanese ruling class as well as larger segments of society: “If we remove the confessionalism (sectarianism) of the texts before removing it from the minds, nothing will change”.[xxi]

In Syria, most of the approaches put forward to tackle sectarianism are better education, exchanges between different sects and ethnicities within society, a more inclusive history of the country, etc... These are all elements that are welcome and should be defended. However, these recommendations do not touch or challenge the core of the production and reproduction of these thoughts within society, which is the political system and its way of ruling.

As Karl Marx wrote « The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance.”[xxii]

A veritable challenge to sectarianism and conservative or reactionary thoughts can only occur with a veritable break with the ruling system and its ideas. As Lebanese Palestinian academic Ussama Makdissi wrote “to overcome sectarianism, if it is at all possible, requires yet another rupture, a break as radical for the body politic as the advent of sectarianism was for the old regime, It requires another vision of modernity ».[xxiii]

A sense of these elements were present at the beginning of the uprising with the massive participation from below of large stratas of the society, although certainly with contradictions. The self organization of protesters were able to pass through different political and social experiences changing their mindset, and challenging their own fears and norms imposed by society. Many



testimonies show that many activists and protesters went beyond prior sectarian and ethnic stereotypes, while the dominant discourse at the beginning of the protest was for the unity and freedom of the Syrian people and against sectarianism. Similarly, the first two years also saw important participation from women in demonstrations and activities in relation to the uprising. Women played an instrumental role in the civil disobedience movement since its earliest stages. At the same time, an important element in the involvement and participation of women in the uprising was the issue of breaking social codes and overcome traditional barriers. Female activists often agreed that the beginning of the revolution opened the door for women to challenge restrictive social conventions, whether those conventions were legal, familial, religious or social.[xxiv]

As argued by Mohammed Dibo “experience alone can be the purge or gateway to another state”. [xxv] However the remaining of the regime, militarization of the regime and the rise of Islamic fundamentalist forces imposed backward steps on these new emancipatory experiences.

The struggle against sectarianism and other conservative behaviours and discourses is part of the struggle against the Assad regime, and to establish a radical break with the past. This break with the sectarian policies of the regime also have to oppose the sections of the oppositions that are using and producing sectarian discourses and practices, as well as preserving and promoting reactionary behaviours such as patriarchy and ethnic chauvinism. Sectarianism can only be defeated by struggling in conjunction for democracy, social justice, secularism and real sovereignty against all foreign actors.

Finally, these words in the struggle against sectarianism of my late Lebanese Comrade and friend Bassem Chiit make full sense for the case of Syria and our discussion: “It’s not a struggle for a more tolerant society. This is a class struggle, both a struggle against the dominant ideas and a struggle of the oppressed against the oppressors”. [xxvi]

## **Joseph Daher**

[1] Uneven and combined development usually involves the combination of the capitalist mode of production with pre-existing modes. Russian Revolutionary Leon Trotsky, who was the first to outline this new concept, for example described it the following way: “Historical backwardness does not imply a simple reproduction of the development of advanced countries, England or France, with a delay of one, two, or three centuries. It engenders an entirely new “combined” social formation in which the latest conquests of capitalist technique and structure root themselves into relations of feudal or pre-feudal barbarism, transforming and subjecting them and creating peculiar relations of classes.” Uneven and combined development affects the totality of a national society, not merely the economy.

[i] Major world leaders, public intellectuals and analysts have indeed increasingly portrayed all political tensions and mobilizations in the MENA region as conflict between religious sects combating each other for centuries, if not more. The Syrian uprising was no exception and was often presented initially as a war between Sunni and Alawi, or Sunni against religious and ethnic minorities. US President Barack Obama has spoken on several occasions of “ancient sectarian differences” as a means of explaining the conflict in Syria. These “ancient divisions”, he argues, propel the inability in the Arab world, which is “rooted in conflicts that date back millennia”. Previously to the uprisings in 2011, academic Vali Nasr explained that the nature of politics in the Middle East was rather rooted “in the old feud between Shi’as and Sunnis that forge attitudes, defines prejudices, draws political boundary lines, and even decides whether and to what extent those other trends have relevance.”

[ii] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/05/1-%D8%A7%D9%84-%D8%B4%D9%8A%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%B4-%D8%B4%D9%84%D8%B4%D8%B4%D8%B4%D8%B4/>



[iii] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/09/on-memorizing-the-fatiha/>

[iv] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/06/3-الاجل-الغاي-الاجل-الغاي-الاجل-الغاي/>

[v] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/05/الاجل-الغاي-الاجل-الغاي-الاجل-الغاي-الاجل-الغاي/>

[vi] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/09/on-memorizing-the-fatiha/>

[vii] <https://isreview.org/issue/107/revolution-counterrevolution-and-imperialism-syria>

[viii] Amel, Mehdi (1986), *Fil-Dawla al-Tâ'ifiyya*, Beirut: Dâr al-Farabi

[ix] Gilbert Achcar acknowledges that all societies are rooted in some forms of uneven and combined development, no society is without history and none is exempt from passed vestiges. However what is meant by uneven and combined development goes way past the normality of historic evolution to describe the combination of social logics different at the heart of the contemporary economic and / or political system

[x] Sectarianism still exists in Northern Ireland as a relic of past colonial time, but has otherwise disappeared from the rest of Europe, while regionalism still exists.

[xi] Achcar, Gilbert (2013), *Le peuple veut, une exploration radicale du soulèvement arabe*, Paris, Actes Sud, pp. 200-201

[xii] Rent is defined as a regular revenue that is not generated by the work carried out or commissioned by the beneficiary. The dominant form of state rent in the Middle East and North African region was mining rent, such as oil, gas and other mineral products. In addition to this, the Assad regime benefitted, at different periods, from a strategic rent in reward for its “struggle” against Israel. Economic growth during both Assad regimes was chiefly rent-based, depending on oil export revenues, financial assistance received or offered because of a particular political position and capital inflows including remittances. This rent-based growth was also anti-developmental in many ways as I will show in the text.

[xiii] As explained by Achcar the concept of “power elite” was elaborated by C. Wright Mills who designated the “triangle of power” in control of the State

[xiv] Achcar, Gilbert (2016), *Morbid Symptoms, Relapse in the Arab Uprising*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, p. 7

[xv] Heydemann, Steven (2013b), “Syria and the Future of Authoritarianism”, *Journal of Democracy*, Vol. 24, Num. 4, October, p. 71

[xvi] Hanieh, Adam. 2013., *Lineages of Revolt, Issues of Contemporary Capitalism in the Middle East*. Chicago: Haymarket Books, p. 14

[xvii] <http://syriaexposed.blogspot.ch/2005/03/myth-no-7-alawie-is-still-religious.html>; <https://www.aljumhuriya.net/ar/131>; Wimmen, Heiko (2017), “The Sectarianization of the Syrian War” Wehrey F. (ed.), *Beyond Sunni and Shia, the roots of sectarianism in a changing Middle East*, Hurst, London, p. 73

[xviii] It extended the powers of the Minister at different levels. Firtsly, the proposed decree permitted the ministry to establish its own commercial establishments, whose revenue would go directly to the ministry’s treasury, giving it complete financial independence, without passing

through the Central Bank or the Ministry of Finance. The ministry could now outsource its property, set up tourism projects (like restaurants, hotels, and cafes) and rent its land to investors. The Decree 16 provided also for full tax exemptions for the workers in the religious field of the Ministry and waqf properties. As a reminder, the Minister of Awqaf was already the richest institution in Syria, as a result of a constant flow of charity funds and the large tracts of property that it owns, registered as religious endowments since Ottoman times. The decree allows the Ministry to govern financial and educational institutions in addition to governing artistic and cultural production, as well as establishing a religious group called “The Religious Youth Group”, to train and supervise mosque preachers, monitor public vice, and make zakat an obligatory tax for Sunni Muslims. It also establishes pre-university Sharia schools and religious councils in mosques, independent of the Ministries of Education and Higher Education. This decree also led to the strengthening of the ministry’s role at the expense of the Grand Mufti, in a power struggle of influence and material benefits (notably control of financial donations to religious charitable institutions) between the two sunni religious institutions. The decree actually authorised the minister of Awqaf to appoint the grand mufti of the republic, a right previously vested in the presidency, and limits his tenure to three years, renewable only through the minister’s approval, while stripping the mufti of the right to chair the Higher Awqaf Council, which every mufti has enjoyed since 1961, giving the job to the minister. The decree provoked significant opposition and criticisms, from both loyalist and opposition circles denouncing a deepening of the process of islamization of Syrian society. The decree was submitted to numerous amendments by MPs in parliament limiting some of the expansion of powers of the Ministry (notably the tax exemption for workers in the religious affairs, or no influence in affairs of other Ministries), although not completely. The final version of the decree after the amendments had to be adopted by Bachar Al-Assad at the time of the writing.

[xix]

[http://swnsyria.org/????????-????????-????????-????????/?fbclid=IwAR1Hu8cUhegNNCfMTgpJyfgX\\_jlM210rDfEOHIG3T7aOFo1GE7IkhIBsSxQ](http://swnsyria.org/????????-????????-????????-????????/?fbclid=IwAR1Hu8cUhegNNCfMTgpJyfgX_jlM210rDfEOHIG3T7aOFo1GE7IkhIBsSxQ)

[xx] In the 1950s and 1960s, Kurds in Syria were the main scapegoats of rising Arab nationalism in Syria – including during the UAR and afterwards with the Ba’thist rule from 1963. They were presented as hired agents working at the service of powerful foreign enemies, especially American and Zionist imperialism.

[xxi] [https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/643757/Sfeir\\_desavoue\\_Berry\\_sur\\_la\\_deconfessionnalisation.html](https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/643757/Sfeir_desavoue_Berry_sur_la_deconfessionnalisation.html)

[xxii] <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01b.htm>

[xxiii] Makdissi Oussama (2000), The culture of sectarianism, community, history and violence in nineteenth- century Ottoman Lebanon, p. 174

[xxiv] <https://dawlaty.org/booklet/TheSyrianNonviolentMovement.pdf>

[xxv] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/05/???-????-????-???-????-????-???-??/>

[xxvi]

<http://quefaire.lautre.net/que-faire/que-faire-lcr-no10-janvier-mars/article/divisions-confessionnelles-et>

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## P.S.

- Syria Freedom Forever, November 1, 2018:

<https://syriafreedomforever.wordpress.com/2018/11/01/popular-oral-culture-and-sectarianism-a-materialist-analysis/>

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## Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 46778), [Ethnic and Other Divides: The “Other” and Oral Sectarian Culture in Syria](#).

[2] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/05/when-yazid-is-neither-good-nor-bad/>

[3] <http://syriauntold.com/2018/09/on-memorizing-the-fatiha/>

[4] ESSF (article 46778), [Ethnic and Other Divides: The “Other” and Oral Sectarian Culture in Syria](#).