

CONSTRUCTING SECTARIAN DIVIDE

A Case Study on sectarianism in Syria



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Abstract

Sectarianism has emerged in the post-2011 era as an essential factor in the politics of the Middle East. It is not realistic to discuss the political unrest of the contemporary Middle East without discussing Sectarianism. Syria today suffers a violent sectarian war that threatens ramification that can be felt everywhere in the Middle East. This study focuses on how political elites construct sectarian divides. Political speeches from Bashar al-Assad, Hezbollah and the Syrian National Coalition are studied carefully to understand their role in constructing divisions between the Islamic sects. The findings in this thesis show that each of the selected political elites is involved in creating sectarian divides to some degree. However, how they created such divisions? And, under what circumstances were these divisions created? are two questions that receive six different answers in this thesis.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Research question and aims	2
1.2. Outline.....	3
2. Theory	4
2.1. Conceptualizing sectarianism	4
2.2. Theoretical framework.....	5
2.2.1. Primordialism.....	5
2.2.2. Instrumentalism.....	6
2.2.3. Constructivism	6
3. Background	10
3.1. The conflict in Syria.....	10
3.2. Syria and sectarianism	12
4. Methodology	15
4.1. Research design	15
4.2. Data collection	15
4.3. Data samples	16
4.4. Data analysis	19
4.5. Limitations	20
5. Analysis	21
5.1. Before the battle of al-Qusayr.....	21
5.2. During the battle of al-Qusayr.	24
5.3. After the battle of al-Qusayr	26
6. Discussion and conclusion	29

References.....32

1.Introduction

Soon after the death of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad in 623 AD, the Muslims that were led by the prophet were left with the question of who is the rightful successor to Muhammad. The question of succession would result in years of political debates within Islam that would escalate to violence and divide into the Muslim communities. The issue of succession and its consequences has resulted in the creation of two different Muslim sects, the Sunni and the Shia. Muslims who subscribe to the Shia sect today believe that Ali the prophet's cousin who was raised by Muhammad since he was ten years old, is the rightful successor to Muhammad and is fit to lead the Muslims. The Shia sect rationalizes their choice by arguing that whomever success Muhammad should be from the same bloodline. However, Muslims who subscribe to the Sunni sect today believe that the right to lead Muslims should not be limited to the family but should be decided based on competence and a form of election. Abu Bakr who was a known loyal companion to Muhammad is the Islamic figure associated with Sunni as he was the leader that the Muslims at the time elected (Tomass, 2016). For the next 1400 years, the two sects have produced two completely different stories of how the succession happened and consequently two different ways of being a Muslim. It is true that a sectarian divide that originated in the 7th century is the most prominent factor in contemporary Middle Eastern politics. For centuries the Middle East has been the core geographical region for Islam and thus the region where sectarian divide manifests itself the most. Seventeen out of twenty countries in the region have a population of 75 per cent or more Muslims. Sunni is the most common sect in the Middle East while the Shia are only estimated to make 11-14% of the Middle Eastern Muslims. Iran alone contains around 70 Million Shia Muslim which Equal to 40 %of the entire world's Shia population (Pew, 2009). As for Syria, 12% of the population are Alawi which is a branch of Shia Islam, it is important to note that The Assad family who has been ruling Syria since the 1970s are Alawi themselves.

Moreover, 64% of Syrians are Sunni with the rest of the population is made up of Christians, Druze, and various others (Phillips, 2015).

1.1. Research question and aims

With the different Islamic sects being rooted in the Middle East, it is important to study their political, economic and social implication on modern societies. Moreover, such division within religion as spread as Islam is bound to create conflict, as it is the case in most of the Middle Eastern countries today. This thesis will only focus on the political aspect of sectarianism, more specifically on the political elites that are involved in contemporary sectarian conflicts, such that of the Syrian one. Abdo (2017) claims that Sectarian unrest will plague the Middle East for years to come (Abdo, 2017; 1). While, Valbjørn and Hinnebusch (2019) have quoted Heydemann in his prediction of a darker, more repressive more sectarian Middle East. Evidently, sectarianism in the post-2011 era is a real factor in the politics of the Middle East (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019). These gloomy predictions are now a reflection of what Syria has become, with darker, more repressive sectarian reality. It could be argued that what in principle started as a revolution in Syria is now an all-out sectarian war. This is not to dismiss the longing for freedom that the Syrians have expressed since 2011, but to describe the current dominant nature that has enforced itself on the Syrian scene. This thesis will investigate the role of selected political elites in Syria and their relationship in facilitating sectarianism. it will do so by aiming to answer the following question:

How do the political elites contribute to the construction of sectarian divide through their political speeches?

1.2. Outline

After a brief general introduction about the sectarian image of the Middle East and the introduction of the overarching research question, this thesis is structured as follows: The second section will be titled “Theory”, this section will include a the conceptualizing of sectarianism plus the different theoretical frameworks that this concept could be studied through. The theory section will be based heavily on the constructivist theoretical framework that will guide this research. The third section will aim at providing a brief overview of the Syrian conflict and the sectarian nature of Syria. This section was purposefully designed to follow the theory section as it is important to understand different theories on sectarianism before understanding the nature of the Syrian case. The fourth section will establish the methodology and the research design that this thesis will follow. The fifth section will be the analysis part, where nine different political speeches made by three political elites will be analyzed. Each speech will be summarized in order to proceed to the analysis part. Finally, a section on discussion and conclusion will discuss the themes and the nature of the speeches and will present the findings to answer the research question.

2. Theory

2.1. Conceptualizing sectarianism

Haddad (2017) argues that the literature on sectarianism in the Middle East lack a clear unified definition of what “sectarianism” is. Haddad examines 125 scholarly works on the subject of sectarianism, the data Haddad examines include both works of literature in Arabic and English. The majority of the work examined (83) did not attempt to define sectarianism. The lack of a unified definition of sectarianism resulted in having multiple and sometimes contradictory definitions of the term. One approach of conceptualizing sectarianism is for the term to encompass everything related to sectarian identity. Other approaches attempt to conceptualize sectarianism to be a term that includes more than religious categories, the approach often refers to antagonism between any set of subnational groups (religious, ethnic, political or regional). Another definition used in the literature often refers to sectarianism as a form of sect-centricity. However, the most common scholarly approach to conceptualize sectarianism is by referring to sectarianism as the sect-based equivalent of racism. Linguistically speaking, the word sectarianism has been used about different meaning across the scholarly literature. The word can be used as a reference to intersocietal relations, for instance, to describe “how the Arab world in the 21st century is characterized by sectarianism”. But the term could also be used to describe actions as in “practising sectarianism” (Haddad, 2017). In this paper we utilize sectarianism in its most common use which is to suggest hatred, discrimination and violence based on sect loyalty, although Haddad argues that sectarianism as a term does not need to be involved in a negative meaning, for this paper and when linking sectarianism to the Syrian conflict, such conceptualizing is then appropriate to use.

2.2. Theoretical framework

This section will include three different theoretical frameworks that are often used to study sectarianism.

2.2.1. Primordialism

The first Strand of the literature covering sectarian identities and their dynamics is primordialism. Primordialism views the current sectarian unrest as a part of an ancient conflict between Sunni and Shia. This school of thought conceptualizes any sectarian conflict to be a reflection of the conflict that originated in the seventh century. Religious doctrine is then seen as the key driver for sectarian behaviour. Primordialism views communal identities to be attached to elements rooted in history, psychology and culture. According to the literature on Primordialism, sectarian identities are deeply rooted within sectarian societies that it overshadows other identities. (Valbjørn, 2020).

One of the biggest advocates for the Primordial school of thought, Abdo (2017) argues that sectarian conflict is likely to remain a prominent theme in the Middle East. Abdo's support that argument by describing how different sects are involved in a battle over the "monopoly on religious truth" (Abdo, 2017; 1). This battle is investigated by Ghobazdeh and Akbarzadeth (2015), their investigation shows that Islamic scholars often utilize exclusionist rhetoric to claim the monopoly on religious truth. A great example of this is the Wahhabism (a Sunni subsect) belief that argues for absolutism. The Wahhabi rhetoric insists that if a believer did everything correctly according to traditional Islamic believes and refrained from sinning, that believer could still be considered an apostate if they to love anything as much as they love god. This theological absolutism automatically creates conflict with any other sect that subscribe to different Islamic rhetoric, thus making sectarian identities conflictual by nature (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth, 2015). However, as it will be argued in the next section, the instrumentalist literature notes

that the sectarian identities as such cannot be conflictual as evidently, they have lived more years in peace than they did in conflict (Gause, 2014) (Zubaida, 2014).

2.2.2. Instrumentalism

On the polar opposite of the Primordialism, is the literature on instrumentalism. Instrumentalism is defined as an active process of manipulating group identity by Political elites. In instrumentalism, sectarian identity is viewed as a malleable concept that can be forged by political actors. The political actors in this approach are seen as rational elites who are often driven by material interests rather than religious ones. (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019).

Gause (2014) and Zubaida (2014) both analyze sectarianism through the instrumental theoretical school of thought. Their arguments are made on the bases that the current politics of the Middle East are similar to the politics of the Cold War. The Middle Eastern cold war though is played by Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both countries are involved in a contest for regional influence and are utilizing sectarian identities to reach their material goals. In that sense, the continuous sectarian unrest in the Middle East is not a battle of religious rhetoric between Sunni and Shia, but rather a battle for regional supremacy (Gause, 2014) (Zubaida, 2014). However, this approach reduces the magnitude of identities to merely props, such reduction suggests that identity and agency have minimal influence on behaviour. Moreover, the instrumental approach does not explain the rise of sectarian identities in comparison to the variety of other identities in the Middle East such as ethnic and tribal identities (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016).

2.2.3. Constructivism

The need to go beyond the primordial and instrumental theories has resulted in the emergence of constructivism. Constructivism is the theoretical middle ground in the literature on sectarianism. *This thesis will draw upon the constructivist theoretical framework.* The argument made by the constructivist school is that religious identity is not fixed but rather politically constructed. Constructivism,

similar to primordialism recognize the magnitude of religious identities, but unlike primordialism, it does not regard those identities to be conflictual in nature. Similar to instrumentalism, constructivism views political actors as critical entities in mobilizing identities. However, they ultimately disagree on the level of such manipulation (Hashemi and Postel, 2017) (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019).

This theoretical framework is separated from that of the instrumental by how and why identities are being manipulated. In the constructivist framework, identity mobilization is often associated with the threat of an existential crisis that is likely to affect the targeted identity. According to the constructivist theoretical framework, sectarian mobilization aims to construct a sense of insecurity to then promote the willingness to participate in military actions (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016). Unlike the instrumental theory, differences in sectarian identities are not disregarded in this approach but rather they are studied carefully with different political themes. Hashemi and Postel (2017) introduce the term “sectarianization” to better conceptualize the process of identity mobilization. Sectarianization is then referred to as the strategy by the political elite to pursuing goals by the active mobilization of popular sentiments within an identity. The term sectarianization was academically forged in the search for an answer to the highly debated question in the study of sectarianism, what explains the upsurge in sectarian conflict in the Middle East at particular moments in different Muslim societies? This question is important since many Muslim societies in the Middle East are cross-sectarian, however, conflict only happens at particular moments in those societies. The proposed term by Hashemi and Postel (2017) argued that political actors pursue political goals by mobilizing the sectarian identities. Moreover, by introducing the term sectarianization, the focus should be shifted toward the nature of the authoritarian legacy in the Middle East. Authoritarianism is central to the sectarianization concept as this form of political rule has been the blueprint for Middle Eastern politics, as opposed to other arguments that describe theology as that blueprint. For instance, authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have continuously manipulated sectarian identities to deflect demands for political change and democratization. However, it is essential to remember that the process of sectarianization relies on the constructivist theory, meaning that identity manipulation is based on a political structure that breed conflict from social

cleavages. Thus, we understand that the manipulation of sectarian identities would not be possible without differences in beliefs and historical memories that encourage specific sectarian groups into collective action. (Hashemi and Postel, 2017). To detect the act of sectarianization we draw upon two strategies that are often used by political elites to mobilize identity; Strategic Narratives, and the exclusionist rhetoric that is also known as Othering or Takfir.

Strategic Narrative is the active process in which political actors construct the meaning of the past, present and future of politics to influence and shape the behaviour of domestic and/or international actors. Political actors utilize strategic narrative to change the environment in which they operate into a setting that favours them (Miskimmon et al, 2013; 3). Political actors using strategic narrative can direct the public into a certain direction and get them to become a part of that narrative (Miskimmon et al, 2013;3-5). A narrative often begins with order, then a problem that disrupts that order and, a resolution that intends at bringing back the order (Miskimmon et al, 2013;7) (Antoniades et al, 2010). Political leaders manipulate discourses and frames into orientating the public. These discourses which are the raw material, the knowledge about science, history and, theology become part of the manipulation strategies by political actors with the goal of creating a certain narrative. Actors can only be part of a narrative based on their historical discourses (Miskimmon et al, 2013;10). Moreover, framing in a political narrative is the choice to organize events in or out of the narrative (Antoniades et al, 2010). Narratives are central to how actor perceive units of analysis, historical trajectories, and the identities of other actors (Miskimmon et al, 2013;20). A study done by Darwich and Fakhoury (2017) explains how political elites construct specific narratives using sectarian identities. The argument made by Darwich and Fakhoury also draws from the constructivist theory on its view on identity. The argument is based on the idea that political elites construct a security issue with existential threats to a specific sect by another sect in a certain society. Elites construct narratives in which certain sectarian actors are the source of existential threats. These narratives are then no longer instrumental but are instead political narratives that heightened the sense of insecurity and encourages sectarian mobilization and even military means. These narratives are dubbed as securitization, which in its core defined by the Copenhagen school in IR as the

process of transforming issues into security issues. When applied, the narrative of securitization enables political actors to utilize certain behaviour to address security threats (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2017).

The exclusionist rhetoric that is also known as *Othering* or *Takfir* (Declaring someone as an unbeliever) has often been used in the primordial literature to prove how each sect claim the correct knowledge of religious truth while simultaneously excluding the other sect (Holtmann, 2015) (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth, 2015) (Abdo, 2017). However, in this paper we argue that the Takfir rhetoric has originated by sectarian actors who aimed at mobilizing people with a specific identity against the others, thus making the Takfir rhetoric a part of politicizing sectarian identities. For instance, Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth (2015) introduce the infamous Abu Musab al-Zarqawi as a subscriber to the Takfir strategy. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was a leader in al-Qaeda and had a manifesto in fighting the “near enemy” in reference to the Shia sect, Abu Musab has continuously referred to the Shia practices to be fake and not part of the real Islam (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth, 2015). Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth aimed to show how sectarian identities can’t exist together because actors from both sides claim to practice real Islam. However, regardless of whether their claim is correct or not, our argument remains relevant as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi had intentions of mobilizing a certain sectarian identity against that of the Shia. Holtmann (2015) argues that sects maintain large transnational propaganda networks in which they practice the Takfir strategy (Holtmann, 2015).

3. Background

3.1. The conflict in Syria

In 2011 in an agricultural town named Dar' protests erupted over the arrest and torture of 15 schoolchildren. The schoolchildren were brutally tortured for scrawling graffiti that called for the overthrowing of the Assad regime. It is worth noting that the schoolchildren used the same slogan they had learned from watching the media coverage on the Egyptian uprising, not necessarily understanding the magnitude of such a slogan. The peaceful protests to release the children would be faced with force and complete disregard for the demands of the parents. The protest and their response would immediately cause a shock wave that caused other cities and hundreds of thousands of Syrians to demonstrate (Vincent, 2014). Three decades of oppression was to be challenged with mass civil resistance to the regime. The population grievances had at the time seemingly reached a tipping point. The population bomb did not help ease the situation for the regime. High birth rates and free education equalled rapid growth in an unemployed educated youth that would soon turn resentful. Fixed land resources combined with population growth did not fare well in rural areas, the rural youth were left without land and a stable income. In parallel, the already privileged part of society was enjoying further economic liberalization policies that would enrich them even further. The norm of corruption was becoming even less tolerable and this long-standing grievance encouraged further societal mobility against the regime. The brutality of the security forces was another important long-standing complaint, unlawful arrests and extreme torture were accepted and overused by the security forces. The security forces had a lot of freedom in the absence of any human rights or rule of law. However, the new generation had no fear of the ruling regime, mainly because they did not experience the 1980s suppression of the uprising in Hama in northern Syria. Moreover, the success of the uprisings in the neighbour

Arab countries had motivated the Syrians against the repressive regime (Hinnebusch et al, 2016).

Eventually, in 2011, the Syrian population took to the streets with mass protests all over the country. The protests were rooted in class disparities and were a response to the authoritarian rule by Bashar al-Assad. The protests initially started with a large proportion of educated youth with often cross-sectarian origins. The protests were peaceful by nature and their demands were for the Syrian regime to facilitate political reforms. The protesters hoped for a peaceful democratization process, a hope that appealed to the cross-class coalition. The government at the time consisted of a cross-sectarian combination of moderates and hardliners. The moderates were mostly Sunni and the hardliners were often Alawites (considered as a subset of Shia). Bashar al-Assad chose to silence the voice of the moderates in the government and to side with the hardliners. The results of this choice can be seen as a turning point in the Syrian revolution (Hinnebusch, 2019). Al-Assad hardline stand meant a violent response to the peaceful protests, a response in which escalated the situation from protests with hope for democratization to protests demanding the fall of the regime (Hinnebusch et al, 2016).

The regime's violent means to silence the protesters stimulated defections from the Syrian army into formulating the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Hinnebusch, 2019). The Free Syrian Army grew fast as defections continued from the Syrian army, soldiers that defected were those who chose to not participate in the repression of the Syrian people, a choice that the soldiers did not get to make if they were to serve in the Syrian army as the security apparatus enforced the execution of soldiers who refuse to open fire at protesters (Vincent, 2014). In the span of a few years, the peaceful protests were beginning to disappear, and military confrontation would take place instead. The situation would eventually turn into mayhem as explained by Levitt (2014) written statement to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee:

“The war in Syria is a humanitarian catastrophe. It threatens to tear the region apart along sectarian lines. It has injected new oxygen into groups and movements driven by violent Islamist ideologies, including but by no means limited to groups

formally associated with al-Qaeda. Indeed, we are now faced with a sharp rise in violent extremism from within both the radical Sunni and Shiite camps.” (Levitt, 2014).

A humanitarian catastrophe is unfortunately accurate. The Human Rights Watch World Report of 2019 numerically explain the disparate situation of the Syrian people, according to the report, the death toll in Syria has exceeded half a million Syrian. Furthermore, the conflict has created large displacement phenomena with over 6.6 million Syrian internally displaced and over 5.6 million seeking refuge globally (HRW,2019).

3.2. Syria and sectarianism

When it comes to the study of sectarianism in Syria, there remains a divide in the literature about what motivates the political elites in Syria. the primordial school has produced literature that argues that religious, more specifically sectarian identity is the main identity for the political elites in Syria. an example of this literature could be seen again by Abdo (2017), Abdo motivates his argument by looking back at the early 1970s when Hafez al-Assad came to power and convinced the Lebanese Shia cleric Musa al Sadr to declare Alwite sect as an offshoot of the Twelver Shi'ism. Hafez al-Assad aimed to add the Alawite sect into a more mainstream group rather than what was then its status of a heretical sect outside the scoop of Islam altogether. In that sense argues Abdo that the Assad family considered religion to be a very important part of the nation's identity in which they rule. Moreover, Syria under Hafez al-Assad was the only Arab country to support Iran over their Arab neighbours in Iraq in the war of 1980-1988 between Iraq and Iran. which in turn showed Al-Assad commitment to a religious sect, over Arab ethnicism (Abdo, 2017; 55). Conversely is the belief of Gause (2014) who argued that the conflict in Syria is more strategic than it is religious. Gause a subscriber of the instrumental theory argues that the Syrian conflict is not divided as Sunni vs Shia but as Iran vs Iraq, the battle over region supremacy had to stop by Syria as

the regime of Bashar al-Assad was under threat, al-Assad who is very strategically important to Iran had to be protected at all cost by Tehran, while Saudi Arabia saw an opportunity to remove one of Iran's ally in the area and perhaps replace it with a Saudi loyal. The political elites in Syria are also seen as strategic thinkers rather than religious fanatics, the instrumental theory supports the argument that Al-Assad regime is only using the sectarian card to survive the rebellion and that the alliance made with Iran is based on common strategical goals rather than purely sectarian ones (Gause, 2014).

Hinnebusch (2019) in a study about the Ba'thist regime and sectarianism came to the following findings, sectarian identities in Syria were already in the political picture between 1963 and 1966 when the Ba'th party was divided over ideological differences, to overcome the power struggle within the party, rivals sought support based on their sectarian ties. The results were more in favour of closer-knit minorities than those of the regionally divided Sunni Muslims. Soon after, this strategy increased the minority composition of the regime elite. Under Hafiz al-Assad the Ba'th regime exploited sectarianism but has also had counter-measures that diluted it. for instance, Hafiz- al-Assad appointed trusted co-sectarian elites to control army unites and the security forces. However, Sunni's were still appointed in senior political positions and different military ranks. The social contract was then trading political loyalty for benefits, regardless of sectarian affiliation that translated into free higher education and government jobs for the middle class; lands for peasants; job security for workers all of which was provided regardless of the sect. The regime under Hafez al-Assad has maintained sectarian ties to their Alawi sect but was cross-sectarian enough to prevent mass Sunni mobilization. The situation was different when Hafiz's son, Bashar, came to power. Bashar attempts to attract investors through neoliberal policies evolved the Syrian regime into a version of authoritarianism that was more vulnerable to sectarian conflict. This new regime was more vulnerable to sectarian conflict mainly because Bashar's attempt at concentrating power to his hands meant pushing away the Sunni barons that were incorporated in his father's regime. Moreover, Bashar al-Assad and members of his family monopolized the new business opportunities that were available due to the new neo-liberal policies. Such action effectively meant enhancing the power of the Alawi sect and taking from that of the Sunni (Hinnebusch, 2019).

Christopher Phillips (2015) reinforced the points made by Hinnebusch by arguing that The Assads did not begin the trend of politicizing sectarianism in Syria, however, their strategies to remain in power accompanied by their economic and social interactions has created a sectarian tension. The Assads promoted a multi-layered Syrian national identity that was ambiguous by nature while simultaneously developing a politicized sect identity in today's modern Syria. Furthermore, Phillips disregard the primordial point of view as he argues that the Syrian identity is more complex than the narrative of ancient hatreds. Perhaps the most unique point that Phillips brings to the discussion about the Syrian conflict and sectarianism is that the current conflict in Syria is not a "sectarian war" but a "semi-sectarian" war. In his paper, he explains how sectarianism is indeed important to some actors in the Syrian conflict and could even be their primary motivator. However, many other actors are motivated by different experiences. The argument made suggests that with conflict as complex as that of the Syrian different actors will be motivated by different experiences thus it is inaccurate to call the Syrian war a sectarian war, however, it is also important not to disregard sectarianism and its magnitude on the conflict, therefore, Phillips suggests the term semi-sectarian to be more appropriate to describe the Syrian conflict (Phillips, 2015).

4. Methodology

4.1. Research design

This study will be designed as an interpretive single case study. The design aims to discuss the chosen case with existing theories; thus, this research will not develop new theories but will make use of already established ones (Gustavsson, 2019). The design will focus on the Syrian case and will aim at explaining the Syrian sectarian conflict and its relation to the political elites, using already existing theories.

Drawing upon the constructivist theory is the suggestion that political elites are likely to take part in the process of politicalizing sectarian identities. Then our methodology will aim at detecting strategies that lead to the politicization. This thesis aims at using the studies on Strategic Narratives and the Takfir rhetoric to detect patterns of identity manipulation (along the sectarian lines) by political actors and thus, providing empirical findings on the role of the political elites in the sectarianization of the Syrian conflict. In simpler terms, to understand the role of the political elites we need to be able to detect whom of them utilized sectarianization. Strategic Narratives and Takfir strategies are ways in which political actors can manipulate sectarian identities, thus by proving that a certain political elite used one of these strategies we can argue that they took a part of the process of sectarianization.

4.2. Data collection

This data will be collected for the propose of content analysis. The content analysis aims to uncover the real motives behind the observed items, as often is the case that

the meaning is layered in certain narratives. For instance, content analysis of speeches will account for the frequent usage of a specific word, or the frequent use of some terms rather than others (Bryman, 2012: 295). Moreover, the content analysis provides an opportunity to study entities that are otherwise difficult to study, for instance, political elites in authoritarian regimes or top military personal (Bryman, 2012: 305). The data will be mainly qualitative audio and visual materials, for instance, videotapes (Creswell, 2014: 240). This type of data is regarded as primary sources in the sense that they are the raw material. The raw material data are up for interpretation and analysis by the researcher with a certain framework applied (Klocke,2019)

4.3. Data samples

The data collected will be in the form of political speeches by political elites that are involved in the Syrian case. Speeches from Bashar al-Assad will be analyzed to examine the relation between the Syrian regime and constructing the sectarian conflict. Moreover, speeches made by Hassan Nasrallah will be examined to analyze the role of Hezbollah in constructing the sectarian conflict in Syria. Lastly, the Syrian National Coalition was chosen as the representative entity of the Syrian opposition and speeches by the Coalition will be examined to investigate links with the construction of the sectarian conflict in Syria.

Actor one, Bashar al-Assad.

The reasoning for including Bashar al-Assad in this study is almost self-evident. Bashar al-Assad is the sole representative of the Syrian regime and is personally involved in escalating the conflict by siding with the hardliners and inviting different regional militias to aid him in oppressing the Syrian revolution. The role of Bashar al-Assad and the violence that accompanies his decision making has been acknowledged by the vast majority of the literature about Syria. However, it is still debatable the severity in which Al-Assad regime has incited the sectarian conflict and if Assad relation to sectarianism is based on loyalty to his own sect or if it is merely a strategic use of it. Nevertheless, it is essential to include Bashar al-Assad

in any discussion about modern Syria and more specifically about the elite and their relation to sectarianism.

Actor two, Hezbollah.

The choice to include Hezbollah as a main player in the Syrian arena comes from the impact made by Hezbollah in aiding the Syrian regime. Over the years and most noticeably since 2013 Hezbollah fighters operated in significant numbers alongside the Syrian regime to regain territories that were lost to the rebels. The war in Syria was seen as a threat to the alliance of Iran and Syria, which made the involvement of Hezbollah imminent. Hezbollah involvement was supported and financed by Iran as they made sure not to lose their strategic ally in Syria. However, the Iranian support to Hezbollah was not a new phenomenon, Iran has always provided extensive material, training and logistical assistance to Hezbollah, it is estimated that Iran provides Hezbollah with \$200 million each year. Moreover, for Hezbollah, the alliance with the Syrian regime was vital because the latter has operated for years as a line of transportation for weapons and other strategic resources that Hezbollah acquired from Iran. Although Hezbollah was fast to declare his support to the Assad regime in 2011, still it was not until 2013 that the impact of Hezbollah was felt on the ground (Sullivan, 2014).

The beginning of 2013 marked Hezbollah's major military involvement in Syria with the important battle over al-Qusayr. Al-Qusayr was a primarily Sunni town controlled by the rebels, Hezbollah was set on helping the Syrian regime on regaining control of the area, however, Hezbollah did not only provide soldiers for the battle but has also controlled the planning and conduct of the operation. The battle over Al-Qusayr was essential in many ways, first, for the first time, Shia led militias were officially involved in a battle against the rebels who were mainly Sunni. Moreover, with Hezbollah being victorious in the battle, the Syrian rebel suffered a major blow militarily and psychologically. The Victory in Al-Qusayr started a new phase of Hezbollah involvement on the ground in Syria to regain control of the rebel's territories (Sullivan, 2014).

Overall, it is hard to understand the sectarian conflict in Syria without including Hezbollah to the discussion, as Hezbollah did not only serve as a Shia militia in

Syria but has also worked to unite the Shia militias under the Hezbollah commands, effectively making Hezbollah the biggest Shia-led military force in Syria. (Sullivan, 2014).

Actor three, The Syrian National Coalition.

The Syrian National Coalition was chosen in this paper as the representative of the Syrian opposition. To investigate sectarian manipulation by the opposition, it is valuable to inspect the biggest representative of the Syrian opposition. While Bashar al-Assad continues to rule Syria, the Syrian opposition has restlessly attempted to change that. The Syrian opposition movement has over the years gained legitimacy from major international actors and in 2012 The United States, the United Kingdom, the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) and France have recognized the Syrian National Coalition as the legitimate representative of the Syrian people. The move to internationally recognize the Syrian National Coalition as the representative of the Syrian people was described as a “big step” by then United States President Barak Obama. The recognition was indeed a big step economically and politically for the opposition and the Syrian people it represented, the recognition meant that the coalition can now receive economic support and diplomatic relationship with major international actors (Strashun, 2013). Overall, and regardless the level of recognition the Syrian National Coalition has obtained, the Coalition remains the biggest and most structured voice of the opposition, thus investigating their role concerning the sectarian conflict in Syria seems appropriate for this paper.

The speeches will be gathered with a timeline between 2012 and 2013, the main reason for this timeframe is that by 2012 the political picture was clear, and the opposition has found a legitimate representative. Moreover, the timeframe ends before 2014 as it could be argued that by then the conflict was already sectarian (Gause 2014, Zubaida 2014, Levitt, 2014, Sullivan, 2014), thus meaning the process of identity manipulation to construct sectarian narratives would've already been achieved before then. Moreover, the data samples will be gathered before, during and after the battle of al-Qusayr. As explained earlier in the section on Hezbollah, the battle for al-Qusayr was an important battle that marked the first

Shia led operation in Syria by a foreign Shia entity, thus giving the collected data a link to the sectarian development in the Syrian scene then.

4.4. Data analysis

This paper will make use of the two theoretical strategies (Takfir, Strategic Narrative) to detect patterns of identity mobilization along sectarian lines in accordance with the constructivist theory. The analysis will build on the theoretical work of the paper, meaning that if political actors were proven to use one of the two strategies, then that actor is involved in identity mobilization and thus potentially constructing sectarian conflicts.

Different provisions were chosen to observe and analyze. For instance, to observe the existence of a Strategic Narrative within a political speech, we rely on identifying the core components outlined by Roselle (2018)

- Character or actors: In a strategic Narrative, actors are those with agency and are portrayed as important to the narrative. Actors often include political parties, interest groups and social and economic classes, among others. Actors described in a narrative are often associated with characteristics, interests and predicted behaviour.
- Setting/space: in what setting/space is the action taking place. An attempt to understand how the system works. As with actors, the setting/space component is packed with assumptions. These assumptions and rationales are often used in locating issues that need resolutions or goals that need to be achieved.
- Action or conflict: Who is involved in conducting a certain action to whom? And what are the reactions and implications of that action? This component is often used to identify a perceived danger to a certain group by another.
- Resolution or suggested resolution: This part of the strategic narrative is important because it offers actions to resolve a conflict or certain unrest that targets the status quo (Roselle, 2018).

As for the Takfir strategy, we will observe and analyze content that relies on the othering rhetoric. The main theme here would be Faith (Iman) vs disbelief (Kufr).

In the debate of that theme different terminology could be used to declare someone from a different sect as a non-believer, for instance, the term “heretics” is often used to describes the Shia sect by the extreme Sunni groups (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth, 2015). Another word that is often used to increase sectarian tension is “Takfiri” the translation of the word is roughly those who declare others to be unbelievers, however, as Sullivan points out, the term is used to describe radical Sunni’s (Sullivan, 2014). Understanding these terms among other general terms that are associated with the notion of religious exclusion should help guide this thesis through the process of content analysis into a fruitful analysis of the political speeches.

4.5. Limitations

An important limitation of this study is the inability to scientifically measure the levels of impact of the selected speeches on the sectarian divide. For instance, we can identify that a specific actor had a role in creating sectarian divides and how they create such divides, however, in this study we won’t be able to investigate the levels of the sectarian divides that the actor constructed. Such a measurement would require a different research design that aims to study sectarian incidents and sectarian confrontation following different speeches. Another limitation could be in the credibility of the findings as this thesis was written by a Sunni Syrian. To tackle such limitation, this thesis follows a theoretical and methodological approach that aim to justify the findings based on scientific criteria.

5. Analysis

5.1. Before the battle of al-Qusayr

Bashar al-Assad 2012/6/3: On June 6th Bashar al-Assad (2012) made an hour-long speech in front of the Syrian parliament to address the nation in times of national unrest. This speech was the 5th speech Assad made since the beginning of the Syrian revolution in 2011. The theme of the speech was the notion of conspiracy. International and regional conspiracy to overthrow the Syrian regime. In his speech, al-Assad was fast to dismiss that the unrest in the country is political or even economical, but it is instead a project set by international actors to destroy modern Syria. In the hour-long speech, Bashar al-Assad used the words (terrorism, terrorist, terrorists) 42 times, all of which were to describe those who oppose the country. Al-Assad viewed the evolution of the opposition as follows; failed peaceful protests from people who are often paid to protest, then turning into armed groups that are being paid to kill innocent people, then eventually becoming terrorists that conduct regular beheadings and bombings across the country. Furthermore, he explains that when the terrorists fail at achieving their goals, they start to instead create a sectarian divide to create sectarian tension. The speech continues to a very impressed parliament that clapped not too rarely, in the speech al-Assad in describing how he is to deal with the current unrest portray himself as a surgent who does not like bloodshed, still obligated to do surgeries because of the positive outcome (Al-Assad, 2012).

The speech by al-Assad did attempt to create a strategic narrative by asking the Syrian people to change their view on the news and instead of viewing everything as true until proven fake, they should view everything to be fake and fabricated until proven otherwise (Al-Assad,2012). Such strategy fits the description made by Miskimmon (2013) earlier in this paper when he explained that political elites

create a narrative that changes the setting around them into one that favours them and in doing so incorporating the public into a certain direction that benefit said elites (Miskimmon, et al, 2013; 3-5). Still based on this speech alone, it is not possible to locate any attempt at sectarian identity mobilization, because even though this speech fits the strategic narrative strategy to mobilize the public, it still does not include enough sectarian language to link this speech to identity mobilization based on sect.

Syrian National Coalition 2013/3/26: A historic speech made by Moaz al-Khatib (2013) then president of the Syrian National Coalition in the summit of the Arab League in Qatar 2013. The speech was delivered on behalf of the Syrian people to the Arabs and the world with a theme of crying for help against the rule of Bashar al-Assad and his regime. In the speech, al-khatib spoke against the radicalism of any sort. Moreover, he assured that the Syrians are united regardless of their sect, they are united against the regime. Furthermore, al-khatib suggested that the Syrian regime is not the saviour of minorities as advertised. On the contrary, the regime has always marginalized minorities such as the Kurds and the Druze. Al-khatib even claimed that al-Assad has tried to incite sectarian tension between the Alawites and the Sunni but has failed to do so due to the unity of the Syrian people (Al-Khatib, 2013). The language that was used by the Syrian National Coalition in this speech does not seem to attempt at creating a sectarian divide, instead, it aims at celebrating unity and to focus on national identity rather than the sectarian one.

Hezbollah 2013/4/30: This speech marks Nasrallah's acknowledgement of Hezbollah involvement in Syria for the first time (Sullivan, 2014). In the speech, Nasrallah (2013) speaks about different topics however, over 40 minutes of what is approximately an hour speech is about the Syrian situation. Nasrallah who has been a supporter of the Syrian regime explains that what is happening in Syria is nothing but an elaborate plan to destroy Syria. The plan is made by international and regional actors to suppress the regional influence of the Syrian government. Nasrallah delivers a message to the armed Syrian opposition that warns them not to continue their military means against the regime. Nasrallah continues his message by explaining that for 2 years the Syrian opposition hasn't been able to make any military impact over the Syrian Army. The message that Nasrallah

delivered is an obvious threat as he added that the Syrian regime has very powerful friends that will intervene and completely change the situation on the ground if necessary. Moreover, Nasrallah spoke in an assuring tone that the friends of the Syrian regime will not allow Syria to fall into the hands of the takfiri groups (Nasrallah, 2013). It is not shocking to conclude that the speech made by Nasrallah has a lot of religious undertone to it. Nasrallah uses the othering rhetoric in this speech, examples for this could be the frequent use of the word “Takfiri” which we explained earlier that is often used to describe Sunni or radical Sunni groups. Moreover, Nasrallah gives examples of how the “others” permitted the killing of anyone who belongs to the Syrian regime, even if innocent. He continues by giving an example of how even a state electrician that simply aim to do his job without any political agenda is a killing target for the opposition armed groups. Nasrallah claims that the clerics from the “other” group has continuously permitted the killing of innocents while clerics from the side of Nasrallah would have never permitted such actions (Nasrallah, 2013).

The claims made by Nasrallah in his speech seems to fit the explanation giving to the nature of the exclusionist rhetoric (Holtman,2015) (Abdo, 2017) and (Ghobadzdeh and Akbarzadeth, 2015) it does so by claiming moral religious victory for the clerics on the side of Nasrallah (who are Shia by default) against the clerics on the side of the Sunni majority opposition. The speech also contains the ingredients for a successful strategic narrative along the sectarian lines. For instance, Nasrallah claims to have heard threats that takfiri groups will destroy the Shrine of Sayyidah Zaynab as soon as they enter the city in which the mosque exists in (Nasrallah, 2013). The shrine is an important location for the Shia Muslims, it is also a famous destination for the Shia pilgrims around the world. The claims made by Nasrallah immediately create a security issue to the Shia Muslims. this example enforced the argument made by Darwich and Fakhoury (2017) earlier, that political elites construct a narrative in which a certain sectarian identity is threatening the core existing of the other sect. These narratives can mobilize individuals along sectarian lines and could even lead to violent ends (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2017). Political elites possess the ability to manipulate historical and theological events into a certain narrative (Miskimmon et al, 2013;10). The case of Sayyidah Zaynab shrine is a great example of such manipulation, Nasrallah managed to take a

theological artefact that meant a lot to the Shia sect and claim that it is in danger and need for protection. Not a month after this speech, Hezbollah was officially on the ground in Syria fighting alongside the Syrian regime.

5.2. During the battle of al-Qusayr.

Bashar al-Assad 2013/5/30: This interview was aired during the battle over al-Qusayr. When asked about the battle, and the involvement of Hezbollah to aid the Syrian regime, al-Assad answered that the involvement of Hezbollah is not simply aimed at protecting or aiding the Syrian government, it is instead linked to the ongoing fight against Israel. Al-Assad stated that the resistance would fight against Israel and their clients anywhere they exist even if it is inside Syria. He adds on, if Hezbollah was indeed in Syria to help the Syrian government, then Hezbollah would be centred in Aleppo and Damascus and not fighting in the small town of al-Qusayr. Bashar al-Assad continued his strategy of completely disregarding the grown demands of the Syrian people in changing his regime. Instead, anytime he was asked about the idea of resigning from the presidency, or when asked about his plans for the elections, al-Assad would be quick to answer that the Syrian people dictate all the actions he makes. The theme of this speech was similar to his speech in 2012, an international conspiracy on Syria, the event went a step further to call it a world war III on Syria. Also similar to his speech in 2012, al-Assad continued to address the opposition as terrorists who are backed by international and regional players (Al-Assad, 2013). Still, al-Assad showed no signs of using any strategies or languages that aim to mobilize people based on their sectarian identity. The sectarian divide was brought up in the interview when al-Assad was asked about any plans to divide Syria and claim an Alawites nation, al-Assad was fast to reject the idea of dividing Syria without addressing the sectarian notion of it.

Syrian National Coalition 2013/5/25: George Sabra who was newly appointed to the task of leading the Syrian National Coalition gave this speech as a call for arms to defend Syria against foreign invaders, specifically to defend al-Qusayr from the attacks by Hezbollah. Sabra calls out the Syrian regime for suppressing the Syrian

people who demand freedom and democracy. He adds on that now in Syria “radicalism is allowed to kill forgiveness” as he calls out the regime for being too radical in his response to the political conflict. Furthermore, he claims that entities with sectarian radicalism are recruiting Lebanese people to fight in Syria. Sabra recalls the war of 2006 when many Lebanese sought refuge in Syria and consequently asks the Lebanese people to remember the hospitality in which they were shown by the Syrians. (Sabra, 2013). As short as this speech was by the Syrian National Coalition, it was an important one due to unfolding events of that time. Compared to previous speeches, this one had a more aggressive tone against “radical sectarian entities”, However, nowhere in the speech did the speaker mention Shia or Sunni in specific nor did he attempt to mobilize a sect versus the other. The speech was aimed at the Syrian and the Lebanese people and not on the Sunni or the Shia sect. Moreover, it was structured as a warning for all sides to be cautious about sectarian conflict.

Hezbollah 2013/5/25: In celebration of Resistance and Liberation Day, a national holiday in Lebanon, Nasrallah gave a speech addressing the situation in the Middle East and the ramifications of Hezbollah involvement in Syria. In the time of the speech, Hezbollah was successfully leading the offensive on al-Qusayr. In his speech, Nasrallah repeatedly explained that the fate of Lebanon is linked to that of the Syrian. He suggests that if the Syrian regime is to be overthrown then Lebanon would be invaded by Israel and resistance will be dead. Hezbollah believes that the situation in Syria is no longer about democracy and freedom but is instead a war by takfiri groups with the support of the United States and Israel. These takfiri groups are as suggested by Nasrallah the biggest impactful entities on the Syrian scene. He adds on that the armed groups in Syria are now dominated with this takfiri mindset. These groups he explains tend to declare anyone who disagrees with them as an unbeliever that should be killed. They don’t negotiate, they don’t believe in a political solution, they just believe in acts of terror (Nasrallah, 2013b). As explained earlier, the word takfiri is used to describe Sunni or most commonly extreme Sunni groups, however, Nasrallah goes to extreme length in this speech to distance himself and his party from sectarian radicalism. Nasrallah explains that these takfiri groups are not only a threat to the Shia but Lebanon as a whole. Sullivan (2014) believes that this speech highlight more the sectarian vision of

Hezbollah. Sullivan argues that this speech focused on the threat of the Sunni extremists as an effort to gain larger support in Lebanon especially from the Shia followers (Sullivan, 2014). The argument made by Sullivan seems fitting to the theoretical framework of this paper, as mentioned previously political actor construct existential crisis (the invasion of Lebanon if the takfiris win in Syria) that is likely to affect a targeted identity (Lebanese). Moreover, Nasrallah utilizes the process of Strategic Narrative once more by changing the setting in Syria from protests against a corrupted regime, into a war by terrorist groups against a legitimate regime. Then in this speech, it is evident that Nasrallah attempts to mobilize the public into his side in the Syrian war, and this mobilization can be argued to have a sectarian element to it if we are to understand the speech through the element of the constructivist framework.

5.3. After the battle of al-Qusayr

Bashar al-Assad 2013/8/4: Al-Assad give this speech during Ramadan iftar meal in 2013. Al-Assad has kept the narratives that he has used earlier, international conspiracy, terrorists, and being the people's servant. Assad as it is often the case in his speeches frequently used terrorists to describe his opposition. We must hit terrorism before reaching any political solution, Al-Assad stated in an evident statement about military confrontation. However, in this speech, al-Assad does not only call out "international" and "regional" actors, he specifically adds countries with a Wahhabi mindset to the list. According to his speech, the countries that practice the Wahhabi rhetoric are responsible for the Syrian bloodshed and will not stop until they reach their agenda. He then again declares that the situation in Syria is not a revolution, its armed terrorist groups against the Syrian army (Al-Assad, 2013b). So far in this thesis Al-Assad speeches have not shown a strong connection to identity mobilization along sectarian lines, however, this speech can be analyzed differently. The sectarian language in this speech is notable when linking the terrorists and all their atrocities to Wahhabi countries that flourish on bloodshed.

Such link immediately creates a narrative that the Wahhabis themselves are no better than the terrorists.

Syrian national coalition 2013/6/5: An important speech delivered by the president of the National Coalition at the time George Sabra. Sabra (2013b), starts his speech by declaring Hezbollah as an invader of the Syrian country. Sabra addressing the Syrians state that “a precious part of your country was invaded today”, the invaders that work for Iran plus the terrorist Syrian regime has now captured al-Qusayr. He continues to refer to Hezbollah as a terrorist organization who is now fighting across Syria. Sabra addresses the Syrians again “Syrians, liberate your country” as he describes Hezbollah to be a sadist, radical and a sectarian organization. He continues “You will win these terrorist sectarian groups and their leaders in Tehran” referring here again to Hezbollah. Sabra then moves to address the Shia of the world, “Let the Shia everywhere know that criminals have committed all sorts of atrocities in Syria while chanting Zaynab’s name”. Furthermore, he adds, another message to the Shia that what happened in al-Qusayr destroys the bond of brotherhood and unity between the Shia and the societies they live in (Sabra, 2013b). This speech by the Syrian National Coalition marks a shift in the language they used earlier into a more sectarian one. The agenda of the speech was a clear call for arms for the Syrians to fight the Shia invaders that are Hezbollah. Sabra utilizes the othering rhetoric in this speech by denouncing the acts of the Shia and in categorizing them with murderers and terrorists. The speech also involves a narrative in which the Shia are a danger to the existing of the Syrians around the country. Overall, the attempt to mobilize the Syrians in this speech can be argued that is motivated by a huge sectarian element.

Hezbollah 2013/8/2: At what was dubbed as “the day of Jerusalem” Nasrallah gave a speech that can only be described as sectarian by nature. The leader of the party spoke the current situation of the middle east and linked all the unrest that cover Iraq, Palestine and Syria with the enemy that is Israel. However, in this speech, Nasrallah shouted: “Let me speak as a Shia” as the crowd cheering intensified. A lot is being said toward us Shia, things that should not be said about another human being, it even goes further Nasrallah stated, it goes to the extreme of killing and bombing us Shia in Iraq and Pakistan and Syria. Nasrallah at the closing parts of

the speech shouted again “Call us what you please and keep killing us, we are the Shia and we will not abandon Palestine” (Nasrallah, 2013c). In this speech, Nasrallah speaks as a Shia for the Shia, he calls out the discriminatory actions against the Shia Islamic sect and paints a picture where Shia are under an existential threat from the regional countries around as a part of an international master plan by the United States. Moreover, he continues the frequent use of the Takfiri terminology to describe all those who oppose his party, especially the ones in Syria. To avoid being repetitive with the analysis, this speech will be discussed with the overall discussion on Nasrallah speeches in the next section.

6. Discussion and conclusion

After careful investigation of the political speeches made by the selected political elites in the Syrian conflict, we identified different levels of possible sectarian identity mobilization in the speeches. For starters, Bashar al-Assad. When analyzing speeches by al-Assad, common themes emerge from his speeches. An example of such a theme is the commitment to his narrative of fighting terrorism that was directed at Syria by international and regional actors. Another common theme is his total denial of the Syrian revolution, Assad views the Syrian population to be his supporters and anyone who participates in any sort of opposition is either paid to protest or is a terrorist. Only in one of the three speeches did the analysis detected a language that can cause the construction of sectarian divide. On the completely different side of the political equation is the Syrian National Coalition, the representative of the opposition. The Coalition speeches were different in nature by the one made by al-Assad. Their narrative always focused on the national case of Syria and their speeches were aimed against the violent practices of the regime. However, a shift in the severity of their language toward the Shia sect could be spotted. In their first speech, the Coalition has called for unity between all the sects and has claimed that the Syrian people are already united as Syrians. In the second speech, the language shifts a little toward warning messages from a possible sectarian conflict, it is important to note that the timing of the speech was made amid the battle over al-Qusayr which was the first official on ground involvement of the Hezbollah party. The last speech shows a completely different approach in addressing sectarianism, the coalition was no longer shy from calling out the Shia involvement in Syria. The speech was aired directly after the opposition lost the battle of al-Qusayr to the Shia Hezbollah soldiers, thus explaining the sudden change of language for the coalition. In the third speech, the Coalition whether it was intended or not has created a room to further construct the sectarian conflict that they accused Hezbollah in starting. Lastly, the analysis of speeches made by Nasrallah on behalf of the Hezbollah party, yield what some would argue are the

expected results. Hezbollah is as mentioned previously in the thesis a Shia party that receives support from Iran and work alongside Tehran's agenda. Similar to the Syrian national coalition the frequency of the sectarian language would increase with every speech, however, the severity of such language in any of Hezbollah speeches should not be compared to that of the Coalition as Hezbollah showed a high level of sectarian element in every speech selected. Hezbollah speeches all included the utilization of the othering rhetoric and with careful analysis through the constructivist theoretical framework, all of his speeches selected for this thesis include have the material for constructing narratives that foster sectarian divide and mobilize the Shia sect against the others.

In conclusion and by investigating all the selected speeches, this thesis answer the question of how political elites construct sectarian divide in Syria through political speeches. In Al-Assad speeches, there was an evident attempt to avoid the direct language of sectarianism, it was evident as he rarely mentioned the words Sunni or Shia, it could also be seen in the example of the second interview when he was asked about his opinion about a divided Syria with an Alawites nation, his response completely ignored the sectarian part of the question. Such caution around sectarian language makes sense for a president that belong to a minority sect, however, he frequently referred to the opposition as terrorists and in his last examined speech he linked those terrorists with Wahhabi Sunni countries, such linkage creates a room for sectarian divide and could fuel the sectarian conflict. The findings are different for the opposition, the Syrian National Coalition seemed to be supportive of a sectarian unity and was not discouraged to mention about this topic. The coalition first two selected speeches made no room to construct any sectarian divide, on the contrary, the speeches called for unity and cautiousness, however, when the opposition lost the strategic town of al-Qusayr to Hezbollah, the Coalition failed into the trap of abandoning the messages of unity and using the language of resentment and anger toward the Shia sect. The Shia interventions have caused such a response by the Syrian National Coalition that could further the sectarian divide. Lastly, Hezbollah continuous effort throughout the selected speeches to create a narrative with an existential threat to the Lebanese, the Palestinians and the Shia sect, has created a large space for identity manipulation. These existential threats reached the point where Hezbollah declared that if the takfiri opposition

groups in Syria overthrow the regime, then Lebanon will be invaded by Israel. Such a claim has the natural effect of creating animosity toward the opposition in general, and the Sunni opposition in specific.

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