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Religious, Ethnic and Gender Identity Politics in Syria

Development Policy Forum
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Introduction

The Syrian Center for Policy Research is implementing a research project on the identity politics in the Syrian conflict. The project includes four phases: The first, focused on a critical review of the literature and theoretical approaches related to the politicization of identities, concluded with a procedural definition, and defined a framework for research, which resulted in the first background paper, “The Identity Politics in Syria,” published within the Knowledge of War project 2022. The second, identified the most prominent manifestations of identity politics and mapped the main actors, policies and interventions associated with it; through participatory research with Syrian experts and actors within the framework of the Development Dialogue Forum; which resulted in this paper, “Religious, Ethnic and Gender Identity Politics in Syria.” The third, will include the implementation of in-depth field research, according to a participatory methodology covering the entire Syrian geography, and the research will use quantitative and qualitative tools designed based on the previous two phases. Fourth, the results of the previous phases will be used as inputs for local and national consultations to define priorities and develop options for overcoming the identity politics in the context of conflict. Accordingly, this paper relies on the previous paper, “The Identity Politics in Syria,” in reviewing the literature, theoretical framework, and definition. It provides an analysis of the identity politics in Syria based on an extensive research meeting within the Development Dialogue Forum. The paper concludes with a methodological proposal for future field research work (the third phase) to diagnose the dimensions of politicization of identities in Syria and the possibilities of overcoming it (the fourth phase).

Rebuilding the social fabric and establishing a new social contract in societies that have witnessed armed conflict is one of the most difficult challenges facing local communities and experts alike, especially considering the fragmentation of national structures and institutions, the persistence of the war economy, the absence of justice and law, and the investment of external and internal parties in politicizing some determinants of identity and involving them in the dispute. The bloody conflict in Syria during the past eleven years has witnessed systematic operations aimed at mobilizing individual and collective identities and turning them into a tool of conflict, thus bringing various affiliations and identities into the realm of conflict. This was through practices and policies of intimidation, incitement and hatred, group solidarities, demonization of the other, dehumanization, and amplification of sectarian, ethnic, political, gender, regional, and class differences; In addition to the management of diversity in a way that serves to deepen social rifts and involve social relations in the conflict by benefiting from an auxiliary regional and international context provided by several factors such as the ramifications of the American invasion of Iraq, and the expansionist role of regional countries such as Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia, which instrumentalized religious and ethnic affiliations to gain political and geographical positions, which exacerbated identitarian divisions. Consequently, the conflict in Syria has exacerbated existing grievances and created major new challenges that need long-term policies and initiatives to overcome.

Definition and Analytical Framework

The paper focuses on the concept of identity politics and its sectarian, ethnic, and gender manifestations. The purpose is to analyze the policies and practices that have exploited the diversity of identities in Syria in the service of the conflict. The analytical framework (Figure 1) was developed based on the available literature reviewed by the Center's researchers in the background paper¹ and the contributions of participants in the Development Policy Forum (November 29th-30th, 2021) on issues of identity politics; where twenty-three Syrian experts and researchers participated in the Development Dialogue Forum. They met virtually for two days, five hours per day. The participants were divided into three sub-working groups. The paper uses a framework based on the concept of development in its broad sense, and the framework of political economy; using a participatory approach.

The first group focused on the politicization of identity along religious and sectarian lines, the second on the ethnic level; and the third on the gender level. The discussions were based on an operational definition of the concept of "politicization of identity" that was later developed based on the outcomes of the dialogue and analysis of the relevant academic literature. The Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR) operationally defines the term "identity politics" as "a set of policies, practices, and discourses that aim at harnessing the affiliations and identities of individuals and groups with the aim of provoking group solidarity and involving it in conflicts or societal polarization, by reducing complex identities to a pivotal primary identifier, which is treated as essentially different and irreconcilable with other identifiers". These policies interact with culture and societal forces and are either adopted, acquiesced in, or resisted. Its proponents tend to focus on "identities," as the primary form of the "individual's" struggle for recognition, inclusion, and addressing the concerns of those marginalized by the state.²

The expanded concept of development³ focuses on expanding people's freedoms and choices, justice of opportunities, and human empowerment. It considers the economic, social, political, environmental and cultural aspects to analyze phenomena in their various contexts using a multidisciplinary approach and the intersections between social phenomena, political systems, and international relations. Political economy as a framework of analysis aims to understand conflict through the struggle of forces that contribute to the formation of political, social and economic phenomena. Therefore, the various phenomena are studied by identifying the main actors and their policies that affect these phenomena and their direct and indirect effects on society, and by identifying the segments most affected by them and the segments benefiting the most from them.

1- Syrian Center for Policy Research (2022): Identity Politics in Syria. A background paper, KnowWar, Vienna.

2- Dean, Jodi. (1996). *Solidarity of strangers: Feminism after identity politics*. University of California Press; Haider, Asad. (2018). *Mistaken identity: race and class in the age of Trump*. Verso Books.

3- Sen, A. (2004). *Development as Freedom*. Translated by Jalal Shawky, National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature (NCCAL). Kuwait.

Box 1: Three approaches in the social sciences to study the identity politics in the context of conflict

The first approach is known as the ‘primordialist’ approach, which also includes the ethno-nationalist movements. This approach treats the nation, the sect, the ethnic group, or nationalism as a naturally formed group of people united by fixed and deeply rooted bondages that distinguish them from others (Demmers, 2016; Geertz, 1973).

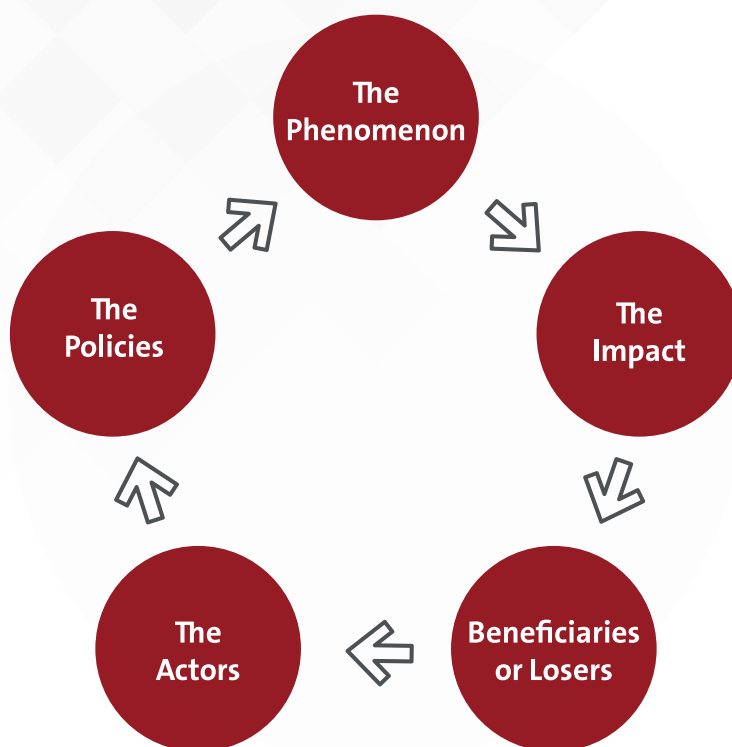
The instrumentalist approach is agency-oriented and does not deal with determinants of the ethnic or sectarian identity as something with an essential value or as being rooted in the human psyche. In fact, ‘sectarianism’ is generally understood to be a mere form of ideology, while ‘sectarian’ definitions are viewed as a means to an end and as a kind of superstructure that conceals the political and economic interests of politicians (Malmvig, 2017, 10). Political elites try to increase in-group cohesion and to “foment ethnic (or sectarian) violence to build political support” through a process “that has the effect of constructing more antagonistic identities, which favors more violence” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, 853).

The third approach, namely the social constructivist one, takes a middle ground between the instrumentalist and the primordialist approaches by realising that while ethnic/ sectarian/ national identities are not natural or substantial entities but rather imagined or socially constructed (Anderson, 1983), yet the identities of the group might be so strong that it impedes the ability of political elites to manipulate social identities to serve their interests (Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, 2019).

Our approach is based on the social constructivist approach, but it investigates the mechanisms and dynamics of sectarianisation and ethnicisation, not only top-down (the policies of the elite and political entrepreneurs), but also bottom-up (the policies of some local subjugating powers and warlords) (Pinto, 2017; Zeno, 2022). It also investigates how local communities have responded to attempts to politicise identities, and the overlap between these mechanisms and other determinants of identity, such as gender and class. Our approach stresses the importance of addressing phenomena in their historical context and the fact that politicising sectarian and ethnic differences in the Levant is a modernist phenomenon par excellence that came into being in the age of nationalisms and colonial hegemony, and also coincided with the emergence of intellectual movements and secular parties (Makdisi, 2017). At a later stage, the situation was aggravated after the failure of nationalist projects and the increased influence of the “fierce state”, as well as the subjugating powers dominating it, which are free from constitutional limits and at odds with society (Ayubi, 1995).

Source: SCPR (2022). Identity politics in Syria. Background paper, KnowWar project, Vienna.

The research methodology is based on a multidisciplinary approach, grounded in community participation. It seeks to diagnose the phenomenon, define the roles of actors and their policies, assess impacts on institutions, society, and the economy, and develops alternatives in a participatory manner through establishing community dialogue to explore options and studying the possibilities for application or change.



Analytical Framework, Figure 1

In the following pages, we will discuss the issue of the identity politics in Syria during the conflict, forms of politicization, actors' policies, and the effects of these policies. We will start first by discussing the politicization of religious identity, followed by the politicization of ethnic identity, and finally the politicization of gender identity, emphasizing that the dynamics of politicizing these identity identifiers are intersectional and intertwined. We conclude this paper by developing a methodological approach to be used during the field research phase (phase three), which aims to propose alternative policies based on the participatory methodology.

1. The Religious Identity Politics

The political use of religious or ethnic identities often transcends national borders, especially during periods of drastic change (civil wars, economic crises, refugee exodus). Therefore, the politicization of identity should be approached within the international and regional context, in addition to the local context. Reductionist accounts that attempt to evoke historical differences between religiously or ethnically diverse societies and communities as the root of conflict should also be avoided. This is because actors who invest in conflicts based on identities transform some differences into profound political and ideological contradictions, and link them to values and culture, so that these contradictions become fundamental and not open to negotiation or convergence. Therefore, a detailed study should be provided, and such study should analyze local and regional actors' policies throughout time and determine their role in the conflict and their impact on society. For example, it is

not possible to analyze the factors influencing the politicization of identities in Syria without examining the interaction between regional actors such as Iran, Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Russia and other countries, and their role in mobilizing identities supported by economic, military or political power on the one hand, and their relationship with local actors, where, in most cases, dependency relations on regional actors' projects in the region prevail, on the other hand.⁴

The prevailing climate of political tyranny in the region, coupled with the loss of legitimacy by many political regimes, has enabled the use of group solidarity that contributes to constructing the imagined enemy and mobilizing resources to confront it. Some non-state forces also used group solidarity to achieve political gains in light of the strangling of civil sphere and the absence of civil democratic powers.

The politicization of identity is based on the premise that a group defined by a single identity identifier, such as sect or ethnicity, has a consistent, distinct, and fixed culture, and the culture of the group and its identity identifier are considered as such identical. This, however, contradicts the complex concept of identity and the dynamics of identity formation in societies. By employing politics of "recognition" and cultural diversity which is based on reducing identities to single distinguishing identifiers, mainstream approaches have contributed to entrenching societal division and empowering de facto authorities that are not democratically chosen instead of reducing inequality and injustice. This is manifested in the minorities/majorities discourse that increases social fragmentation instead of fostering solidarity and integration. This results from ignoring the role of political, social and economic structures that create disparity, and trying to reduce political solutions to the process of recognition and compensation and excluding issues of similarities that transcends single-identifier-groups or political solidarity.

1.1 Forms of Identity Politics

Throughout the Syrian conflict, several cases have reflected identity politics based on religious and sectarian grounds emerged at the local, regional and international levels. Examples of this politicization at the local level include:

- The growing authority of the clerics in communities in the political, social and military spheres.
- The spread of religious/sectarian inflammatory speeches or warnings of the opponent's sectarian tendencies, through official (political statements) or unofficial (local leaders or intellectuals) channels. An example of this is the evocation of the events of Hama (1982) to display Sunni/Alawite victimhood and incite against the other.
- The spread of slogans and symbols with religious connotations at the expense of national symbols.
- Employing the minority/majority discourse on most political and social issues.
- The occurrence of incidents of assassinations, kidnappings and mutilation based on sectarian motives.
- The religious or sectarian character of the slogans and goals of some political movements or military factions.
- Elite cultural and knowledge production that examines the conflict from a reductionist identity perspective.
- The proliferation of conferences and initiatives based on sectarian and communal affiliations or dialogues based on the assumed representation of sects.
- Traditional media platforms that directly or indirectly use sectionalization and normalize violence against the different 'other'.
- Community polarization based on identities, including through social media.

⁴ Zeno, Basileus. "The making of sects: Boundary making and the sectarianisation of the Syrian uprising, 2011–2013." *Nations and Nationalism* 28.3 (2022): 1040-1060.

As for the regional and international levels, many phenomena associated with sectarian politicization have emerged, which interacted with, and affected, the local level. Examples include:

- Sunni/Shiite religious incitement speeches at the official level that reflect the Iran vs. GCC/Turkey rivalry, and linking the different conflicts in the region, including Yemen and Iraq, to contradiction on a religious/sectarian basis.
- Projecting religious and sectarian symbols on military, political and humanitarian support.
- The arguments set forth by non-state forces and intellectuals that focus on the religious dimension of the conflict.
- The role of regional media, which has become a platform for direct and indirect identity-based incitement.
- Designing political dialogues between forces that “represent” religious groups/sects.
- The growing use of a discourse that emphasizes protecting minorities/majorities and their religious symbols.
- The extremist discourse, which, in turn, created different responses from global actors.

These local, regional, and international phenomena were in conflict with other narratives and discourses that focused on the nature of the conflict as a civil society movement against tyranny, and a focus on rights, freedoms, and community solidarity. However, the slide towards militarization exacerbated the conditions of intolerance and the demonization of the other.

1.2 Actors' policies

For more than half a century, political tyranny in Syria has stifled, and continues to stifle, the public sphere, preventing social and political organizations from forming. This has led to the absence of public dialogue channels, the marginalization of the citizen's role in political participation, and the weakness of means of resolving conflicts. This, in turn, paved the way for the use of violence and the employment of group solidarity to obtain rights or express grievances, at the expense of more radical and inclusive forms of expression such as class solidarity.

Most political regimes in the region have used religious or nationalist identities to counter democratization based on citizenship. To maintain their power, they have relied on repression and group solidarity, neglecting the building of effective, representative, just, and accountable institutions. This was evident with the outbreak of social movements during the Arab Spring, whereby the different regimes prioritized confronting this democratic tide that threatened their monopoly on political power and their social and economic dominance. In addition to the use of force and repressive policies, the ruling authoritarian regimes adopted discriminatory nationalistic policies, such as depriving many Kurds of nationality. They also expanded the authority of religious institutions in coordination with the security services, and distributed positions and privileges based on regional / religious and personal loyalty.

At the outset of the Arab uprisings, there were many identity-based policies adopted by both the political regime as well as the non-state, non-democratic forces that were formed during the conflict.

The following are some examples of the manifestations of these policies:

- **Mobilization and Incitement:** such as using political/cultural discourses to support specific sect/ethnicity and/or accusing the other of adopting sectarian policies. This was evident in direct or informal official narratives circulated by social notables, military leaders, intellectuals, and media professionals. There have also been assassinations, arrests, or violations on a sectarian basis to mobilize different societal groups and deepen polarization and group solidarity to employ them in the presumed “existential battle”. Many parties slipped into reactions characterized by counter-sectarianism, which consolidated the division and fueled the cycle of politicization of identity: examples of this include killing and mutilation of corpses, the behavior of the security forces which included insulting religious symbols to humiliate detainees and dehumanizing ‘the other’ as a terrorist or an infidel. These practices were often documented in video recordings circulated in the media and social media to incite revenge against civilians whose only ‘crime’ was simply belonging to different religions and sects and had nothing to do with the conflict.

- **Grievances and Cultivation of Fear:** Victimization and Cultivation of Fear: Issues of exclusion and marginalization have often been reduced to sectarian (Sunni/Alawite) or ethnic (Arab/Kurd) dimensions. The majority versus minorities discourse was also used in order to coerce individuals to identify with their imagined groups (sect or ethnicity). The discourse of victimhood is based on narrating historical violations and reproducing them as an explanatory framework for the motives and causes of existing violations during contemporary conflicts. Victimization has been used to demonize ‘the other’, on the one hand, and to internally dominate members of sects or ethnicities, on the other hand.

- **Targeting the Other and Collective Punishments:** Policies of killing, arbitrary arrest, and torture spread and were accompanied with sectarian or ethnic symbolism, and the use of violence exacerbated and turned later into systematic bombing, the use of internationally prohibited weapons, siege, and displacement, linking violence to the target’s religious or ethnic identity. Sub-identities emerged within the same sect, and hundreds of battles took place between groups that carry slogans of sub-identities (Salafi/Wahhabi/Muslim Brotherhood) or link religious identity to an ethnic one (Sunni Arab, Sunni Turkmen, Sunni Kurd) in a slide towards unlimited fragmentation. Examples include arrest or targeting on a religious/regional basis, besieging certain areas and providing aid for others who belong to another religion or sect, as happened in the Four Cities Agreement (Zabadani, Madaya, Kefraya and Al-Foua) in 2017.

- **Militarization and Financing:** Religious and ethnic identities have been used as a major tool in pushing society into internal strife and engaging in killing, subjugation, or exclusion practices. With the exacerbation of the effects of violence, group solidarity strengthened, and polarization deepened in a way that was used to justify the use of direct violence. This was evident in the adoption by the security military forces, formally or informally, of religious, nationalist or ethnic slogans and symbols, so that the battle becomes socially justified and the destruction of the other becomes even ‘a sacred mission.’ Regional powers supported these trends by linking military, political, social and financial support, including attracting fighters from outside Syria, with ethnic and/or religious slogans such as fighting ‘infidels’ or ‘terrorists’ or protecting the sect and its sanctities. The role of Saudi Arabia (supporting Salafi tendencies), Qatar and Turkey (supporting political Islamism represented by the Muslim Brotherhood) and Iran

(supporting political Shiism) has escalated as major powers seeking to turn the political and social transformation in Syria into part of their geopolitical projects using identity identifiers. Since late 2012, the military factions that have adopted the “Sunni” or “Shiite” jihad have dominated the space, declaring their hostility to civil rights and democratic movements.

- **Gains/Spoils in Power and Resources:** The subjugating powers built a system of incentives based on affiliation to projects that are rooted in religious/ethnic identity, such as including clerics in the political/military decision-making process or justifying the confiscation of people’s property and resources to reward participants in the fighting. Conflict over spoils emerged within the sectarianized forces, which turned into aggregations of warlords. This evolution disproved the claim that the battle was “principled” and based on identity. Consequently, the fight shifted from a holy war against the religious or ethnic “other” to the “ally” who is competing for resources or power.

- **Discriminatory Humanitarian Support:** Part of the humanitarian aid focused on the identity of the recipient community, with support directed through religious institutions or clerics. This includes the role of sharia councils in opposition-run areas or Russian support channeled through the Orthodox Church, which directs part of the relief through “Churches” or religious organizations overseeing the needy among “minorities” in the areas of the regime.

- **Civil Society Resistance:** At the beginning of the movement, protesters’ demands centered around issues of democratic change, freedoms, justice, and community solidarity. They also resisted the regime’s rhetoric, which sought to delegitimize the movement by accusing protesters of sectarianism as well as the rhetoric of some opposition forces that tried to portray the movement as a jihad against the “infidels”. With the intensification of the regime’s security and military oppression and influx of financial and military support from regional actors, the spaces of democratic political movement have shrunk, and the spaces of group solidarity have expanded, including among the ranks of media professionals and intellectuals. Furthermore, Some Western political and academic approaches reduced the issue in Syria to a war between religious and ethnic groups under the pretext of offering a “realistic reading” of the conflict, which contributed to the generalization of this framework that informed the organization of political dialogues between supposed representatives of forces imagined as unified by group solidarity. The imbalance of power between the democratic and the sectarianized forces led to dispersion, submission, or marginalization of civil forces.

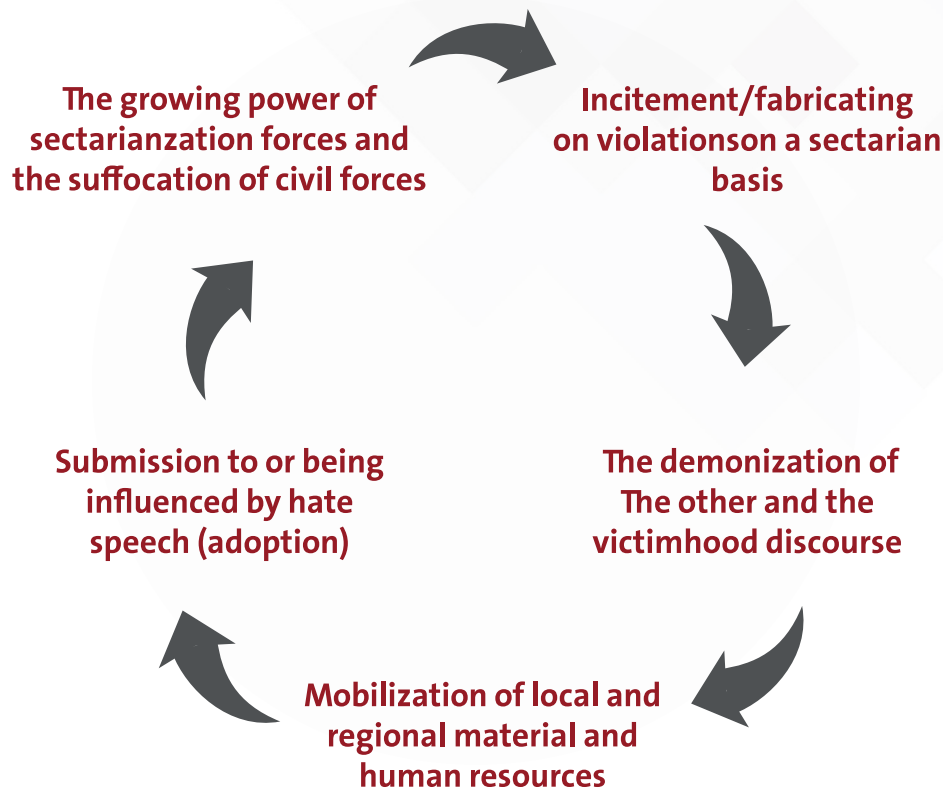


Figure 2: Identity Politicization During the Conflict

1.3 Impacts of actors' policies

The politicization of religious identities and their sectarian sub-identities by subjugating powers has led to the spread of “politics of victimhood” as a form of “identity politics”, the exclusion of democratic civil and political forces, harming the democratic project, and loss of hope for change among large segments of the society. Furthermore, the dominance of regional projects with a sectarian dimension has expanded and their control over internal forces has increased, which reduced the effectiveness of the societal role and weakened the momentum of the movement calling for freedom and justice.

As a result of the politicization of identities and the violence that accompanied it, the social fabric was torn apart. The societal forces that rejected the politicization of identity could not effectively confront the different subjugating powers, and the regime’s governance has turned into a totalitarian political tyranny that relies on destruction, bombardment and displacement to survive. New non-state forces that did not recognize democracy or participation emerged and adopted extreme rhetoric and practices. Society’s suffering doubled as a result of pressure from the forces that claim to protect it, yet impose their coercive authority on the one hand, and from the “enemy” forces that target it, on the other.

One of the effects of the actors’ policies was the spread of exclusionary cultural practices, customs, and symbols. Many intellectuals and activists produced or spread sectarian discourse and practices in response to the

regime's violence, and as a result of being influenced by the climate of fear and group solidarity, their adoption of pragmatic favoritism, or their submission to the de facto authorities, whose military and material capabilities expanded against their opponents. A culture of justifying violence has also spread, since 'the other' has become an existential enemy with whom one cannot coexist and thus shall be annihilated. The grave identity-based violations against some individuals and regions fueled the motives of killing and revenge. The merging of the image of tyrannical powers with their identity-based communities has become an accepted notion. The effects of these policies were not limited to Syria alone. In fact, the politicization of identity spilled over and crossed borders, and the region eventually became a destination for extremist forces and warlords, especially in Iraq and Syria, where the sectarianized forces invested in attracting foreign recruits and investors in religious identities from different countries around the world.

2. The Ethnic Identity Politics

The roots of the politicization of ethnic and nationalist identities go back to the period of the weakening Ottoman Empire, the emergence of nationalistic projects, and the subjugation of the former Ottoman provinces to British and French colonial control. Colonial powers institutionalized social relations within the borders of the new nation-states according to a reductive reading and understanding of society based on the assumption that there were essentialist differences between ethnicities, sects, and tribes, and an attempt to control them through violence or the containment of the local elites.

The region witnessed an exacerbation of the politicization of identity on religious and ethnic grounds in the post-independence period, as this was used for colonial purposes such as the role of British and Zionist forces to create a state based on Jewish religion in Palestine, or to achieve local political and military gains, such as in the Lebanese Civil War, the events of Algeria in the 1990s, and the persecution of the Kurds in Turkey and Iraq. The politicization of ethnic and nationalist identities was also used to achieve geopolitical purposes, especially after the failure of the Arab nationalist project and its ultimate decline, where the narratives of "Arabs vs. Persians" emerged during the first Gulf War, and "Sunni vs. Shiite" in the Saudi-Iranian competition in the region, which overlaps with the previous narrative by depicting the conflicts in the region as if it is between the Sunni Arabs and the Persian Shiites and their expansionist projects in the region. These narratives reached their peak with the victory of the "jihadist movements" in Afghanistan, and then al-Qaeda and ISIS, but this use worsened after the American occupation of Iraq and the outbreak of conflict in Syria, Yemen and other Arab countries.

2.1 Forms of identity politics

The politicization of ethnic/nationalist identities is very similar to the politicization of religious and sectarian identities. One of the many manifestations of nationalist/ethnic politicization is the regime's self-proclaimed role as a protector of religious or ethnic "minorities" against "extremism" and the tyranny of the majority. This was also evident in the disparity in the degree of exercising social, cultural and political freedoms among some ethnicities. For example, Armenians and Circassians were allowed to carry out cultural, educational and social activities, while other ethnicities, such as the Kurds, were prohibited from practicing the same activities. After

the conflict, divisions along Arab/Kurdish/Turkmen and others exacerbated, and political nationalistic rhetoric and slogans emerged leading to proposals for geographical division on an ethnic or nationalist basis. These propositions have found media and cultural platforms that nurture nationalist differentiation and fundamental difference with the other, and groupism manifestations have exacerbated with the increase in assassinations, arrests, or torture on an ethnic basis. However, the emergence of social movements organized on the basis of cultural, ethnic, or religious affiliations is not spontaneous⁵. It derives its foundations from the erosion of other forms of legitimacy claimed by the authorities. that came to power based on national or class affiliations, or developmental achievements.

2.2 Actors' policies

In the Syrian context, the roots of the current ethnic and nationalist discrimination against some components of the Syrian society predate the conflict. For example, the separatist government (1961-1963) used ethnic-based discriminatory policies against the Kurds, preventing them from using the Kurdish language and celebrating cultural holidays, and stripping thousands of their Syrian citizenship under the pretext of the 1962 Census. After the 1963 coup, the Baathist governments expanded these policies and encouraged the settlement of Arab residents in Kurdish regions (They were called Arab al-Ghamr referring to the Arabs affected by the flooding) to impose forced demographic change, in addition to discrimination in development and economic policies.

After the outbreak of the uprising in 2011, which called for progressive proposals to respect diversity and equal participation for all, some political actors implemented policies that invested in ethnic and nationalist differences to enhance their authoritarian governance, taking advantage of historical grievances. As mentioned above, these used similar politics of incitement based on religious or sectarian solidarities. The most prominent of these manifestations are:

- **Mobilization and Incitement Against the Other:** The Baathist Syrian and former Iraqi regimes have always accused the Kurds as being “separatists” and considered them a threat to the unity of the country. After the uprising, a quota-based policy and conflict over representation and seats within political organizations and coalitions prevailed. For example, some Kurdish forces considered their presence in the political opposition as representing the Kurds, and viewed ethnic representation as being as essential as religious representation. Therefore, it has become a prerequisite to have representatives of Turkmen, Assyrians or Circassians. The political dialogue between some opposition forces turned into competition over religious/ethnic as well as regional quotas.

- **Increased Polarization with the Emergence of Regional Projects:** Examples of these projects are the Turkish intervention, which excluded the majority of the Kurds from the opposition organizations and supported Arab and Turkmen political and military organizations that sought to displace Kurdish civilians from their areas (as is the case in Afrin). Other examples include the Kurdish project (Rojava) that focuses on the primacy of the issue of protecting the Kurds and the right to self-determination, or the Arab project that failed to turn into an inclusive liberation project in the post-independence period and turned into an exclusionary ideology that marginalized non-Arab communities.

⁵- Amin, Samir. (2003). *Beyond Decaying Capitalism*. Translated by Fahmiyya Sharaf al-Din and Sanaa Abu Shaqra, Al-Farabi, p. 250.

- **Victimization and Fear Cultivation:** Ethno-national forces invested in cultivating fear of, and inciting against, ‘the other,’ and portraying differences as if they were an irreconcilable and eternal conflict between ethnic groups. The armed conflict and the ethnically based targeting of communities and forces contributed to the deepening divisions.

At some stages, the regime provided military and economic facilities to the Kurdish forces which focused on the danger associated with the “Arab/Sunni” opposition movement supported by Turkey, especially after the attack of brigades of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Islamic opposition on the town of Ras al-Ayn in northwest Hasaka in November 2012.

- **Targeting the Other and Collective Punishments:** The “other” was targeted militarily and politically through killing, siege, looting, torture and symbolic violence, which exacerbated the sense of nationalist grievances and facilitated the success of ethnic-based forces in mobilizing human and material resources. The Turkish intervention in support of the opposition factions in northern Syria was marked by an ethnic/nationalist discourse that is hostile to, and seeks to target, ‘the other.’ The ‘war on terror’ which was launched by local forces primarily composed of Kurdish forces with US support, also strengthened ethnic incitement and the use of collective punishments. The discriminatory policies of the opposition forces in the north, in addition to their military operations, included campaigns of depopulation, appropriation of properties, or changing the names of cities and villages in the areas that they seized and were already inhabited by a Kurdish majority.

- **Political Representation on the Basis of Ethnic and Nationalist Consociationalism:** Although the Autonomous Administration (AA) put forward a project for a social contract based on participatory democracy, it rested on an ethnic-based consociationalism, and considered that the Kurds represent the Kurds and the Arabs represent the Arabs, which contributed to the deepening of the national schism, as it kept the central security, military and political decisions under the control of the Kurdish political forces. Furthermore, there are clear differences in how things are managed in the regions of Hasaka, Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor. Major changes also affected the educational system by establishing Kurdish, Arab and Assyrian schools, which led to the division among members of the new generation, raised in isolation based on the politicization of nationalist identity. In fact, many of school-age children became unable to communicate with each other due to language difference.

2.3 Impacts of actors’ policies

Dominating forces that instrumentalized ethnicized discourse and practices have shown their ability to intimidate their communities and suppress opponents amidst lack of accountability and dependence on external powers or alliances with them at the expense of building bridges of communication with local societal forces. Employing the mechanisms of traditional group solidarity, these forces provided incentives to loyalist or acquiescent, in the form of public services, jobs, or aid, and deprived others of such incentives, which led to the emergence of local rentier networks. In the cases of fighting, “spoils” were distributed among those involved, civil democratic forces were suppressed, and most segments of society were marginalized and excluded from participating in decision-making process. It should be noted that these forms of war economies constitute clear evidence of opportunism of the self-proclaimed “ethnic/nationalist” forces. While they mobilize for the existential struggle against ‘the other,’ they develop networks of war economies with this other, and they do not hesitate to punish those who rebel against their authority and their families, even if they belong to the same ethnic group. They also change their positions radically in response to shifts in the positions of external supporting states.

One of the most important effects of these policies, in addition to the disintegration of networks of local mediators between the central authority in Damascus and the peripheries after the uprising, was the emergence of patterns of local and regional decentralization that became a new basis for competition and conflict between the local regions and the new elites over aid, external resources, and funds.

3. Gender Identity Politics

The transformation of the movement into an armed conflict, which was accompanied by systematic targeting of gender identifiers whose roots date prior to the conflict. This was evident at the societal, institutional and legal levels, and was heavily invested in during the conflict, which contributed to fueling the fighting and affecting its dynamics.

3.1 Forms of identity politics

In the military field, Syrian women had a major role in the social movement and peaceful revolutionary activities at the beginning of the uprising. However, the militarization of the uprising and the subsequent war led to the rapid decline of this role and the domination of men (voluntarily or forcibly) over society, especially with the expansion of military forces and their eventual transformation into de facto forces. Thus, attributing effectiveness in military actions to men--the largest percentage of combatants in Syria (95%) are men, according to the Syrian Center for Policy Research (SCPR)--was a clear investment in gender identities that affected both men and women and contributed shaped the dynamics of the conflict.

Since the early days of the movement in Syria, the politicization of gender identity was reflected in a greater restriction of movement for men, and a wider space for women who were relatively less susceptible to inspection at checkpoints and to interrogations. In addition, as military actions evolved, most of the dead in the Syrian conflict were males, and the same was true for the detainees, the kidnapped, and the forcibly disappeared. On the other hand, the largest percentage of the displaced persons in refugee camps and countries of refuge were women. This transformation over the past ten years caused a deep change in the traditional gender roles that dominated Syrian communities before 2011. The less severe restrictions on women at the beginning of the uprising, for example, allowed many activist women to take on the tasks of moving between conflict lines, carrying medicines, and humanitarian aid. Many women have become the sole breadwinners for their families, and they have become responsible for following up on family affairs in various institutions and departments.⁶ However, this change in traditional gender roles, which gave women wider spaces outside their homes by necessity, did not necessarily reflect a change in the role of man inside the home, and his assumption of broader tasks related to caring for children or the elderly. Nor did it result in structural change in the policies, laws and institutional structures that still largely violate many women's rights and restrict their freedom. Thus, the de facto change in women's role during the conflict years, can only be considered as temporary gains, and it cannot be ruled out that the decline in the intensity of military actions will lead to a return to the previous situation that imposes many restrictions on the status and roles of women in society.

⁶ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Syria Economic Monitor, Spring 2022: Lost Generation of Syrians. The World Bank.

With in this context of the conflict, many women were recruited and participated in militant activities, directly or indirectly. While it may be seen as a change in the situation of women in terms of breaking traditional roles, it also reflects a deterioration since women were engaged in a cycle of direct violence.

Moreover, the politicization of gender identity in the Syrian conflict was greatly reflected in the various forms of violence practiced against women, as many of them were subjected to arrest, hostage-taking, and other forms of physical and psychological violence such as captivity, stripping, and rape. In some cases, especially in the areas controlled by the Syrian regime, the politicization of gender identity intersected significantly with the politicization of religious identity, as veiled women in detention were forced to remove their veils, and their religious symbols were insulted, while women who were captured by Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam) and ISIS were subjected to the opposite practices such as forcing them to wear the veil and insulting their symbols and beliefs.

In addition to the direct violence that targeted women with the aim of inciting others to fight, the politicization of gender identity in the Syrian conflict was evident in the objectification of women, especially to reward military warlords and fighters, as many women were forcibly married off or “given” to Syrian and foreign men fighters. This resulted in many children of unknown parentage who were born as a result of these relationships, which makes these children face many legal and civil difficulties in the future.

In the social field, despite the active contribution of Syrian women in the field of work and production within public and private sectors, women are still treated as vulnerable and lack free will and ability, which resulted in a great deal of exploitation of women and stereotyping of gender roles. One manifestation of that is the constant focus on women and children victims among the civilians to elicit sympathy and pity, or incite revenge. In addition, some minor and non-minor girls were forced to marry to obtain financial assistance or shift the burden of these girls’ expenses from their parents to their husbands. This phenomenon has been documented among refugees in Lebanon,⁷ for example, but as some academic studies demonstrate, the documentation of such cases tends to be exaggerated and orientaling⁸. Furthermore, many women have also been subjected to sexual exploitation or harassment in return for receiving humanitarian aid, as one of the manifestations of the politicization of gender identity in the Syrian conflict.⁹

During the conflict years, the rates of societal violence against women remained very high, which includes, but not limited to, the so-called “honor crimes” and systematic domestic violence. The violations were not limited to physical violence, but extended to include psychological violence, which affected many former detainees in the regime’s prisons, in particular, as the stigma of the possibility of having been raped during periods of detention had a negative impact on their lives, all the way from skepticism, exclusion and societal rejection, to divorce cases, declaring the woman dead, or forced marriage to cover the issue up.

7- Karaki, Ali 2021: “An alarming rise in child marriage among Syrian refugees in Lebanon”. [Click Here](#)

8- Alhayek, Katty. «Double marginalization: The invisibility of Syrian refugee women’s perspectives in mainstream online activism and global media.» *Feminist Media Studies* 14.4 (2014): 696-700.

9- Syrian Center for Policy Research (2021), Participation in the context of asylum, Beirut. (In Arabic). [Click Here](#)

The politicization of gender identity in various areas of control had a clear impact as well. This impact is evident in the regulations on clothing and appearances of men and women in these areas and their intersection with religious identifiers of the de facto forces and their political agendas which they seek to impose in public spaces.

Beyond the dichotomy of a man and a woman, all other gender identities are criminalized, and these groups are subject to systematic violence and many repressive practices in all regions and by all controlling forces. This repression is largely reflected in society without the availability of safe spaces or legal or psychological protection mechanisms.

In the political field, the politicization of gender identity is mainly manifested in the systematic exclusion of women from political decision-making positions in general, albeit to varying degrees. The situation is relatively better in the areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration, where the joint presidency of men and women was imposed, or in the areas under the control of the Syrian regime, where there are women who head some political parties, or are candidates for the presidency or parliament outside the National Progressive Front list. By contrast, the situation of women at the political level is has significantly deteriorated in the areas controlled by the Salvation Government and the areas under the control of the Interim Government and the Turkish-backed National Army, where women are seldom present in political positions on the ground or even in training workshops. However, the representation of women, at best, remains a superficial representation, as they are excluded from influential positions in the field of security, politics, and economy.

Regarding the political platforms that are engaged in the political process aimed at ending the conflict, a better representation of women can be observed, although this reality is often the result of top-down policies, rather than being a product of conviction of the role of women and the need for their participation. This does not underestimate the feminist struggle that has developed over the last decade, resulting in movements, initiatives, and organizations that seek to empower and develop women's political and societal role. However, authoritarian structures and resistance to change still limit the ability of nascent organizations to confront them.

In the legal field, manifestations of the politicization of gender identity are evident through the consequences of systematic injustice, exclusion, and marginalization that women are subjected to in Syrian legislation and laws since before 2011, or those issued after that by the Syrian regime, or by the de facto forces controlling the different regions, especially when these laws overlap with the religious identifiers, or with social customs that aggravate the marginalization of women.

The matter became evident, for example, in the laws related to land, housing, property rights, and inheritance, where women are subjected to severe exclusion. The disastrous results of such reality were clear during the conflict, with the systematic destruction of many residential areas, forced displacement, policies to prevent the return of people, and the unfair urban laws, especially those recently enacted by the regime, which legalized the confiscation of the property of many Syrians because of their involvement in the movement and then the conflict.¹⁰ Real estate assets are often registered in the names of men, not women, and this systematic marginalization of women in matters of property rights has made the consequences of the laws enacted by the regime after

10- Human Rights Watch. (2018). Syria: Residents Blocked from Returning, HRW, [Click Here](#)

2011 more burdensome on them legally, economically and socially, especially in cases of the absence of men as a result of the security situation.

It has also made it more complicated for the displaced people to demand to get back their stolen property, especially for families whose men are absent, as women cannot come forward to claim property, and thus the family loses the right to their property due to the systematic marginalization of women in property ownership issues.

In addition to real estate ownership issues, the issue of women's guardianship over their children has emerged as a new challenge that women face, especially in contexts of forced displacement and asylum, where many women were unable to travel with their children due to the absence of the father or legal guardian. In addition, women are unable to pass on their surnames or nationalities to their children. This has led to disastrous consequences, especially in cases where women married foreign fighters and gave birth to children of unknown parentage.

From the development perspective, the clearest manifestations of the politicization of gender identity in the Syrian conflict may be the large increase in the number of feminist and women's organizations, especially in areas that have fallen out of the regime's control, and we shall discuss them more in details in the sections dedicated to the various actors' policies. While many development programs and projects have increased the percentage of women employed in organizations, they continue to curtail their power in decision-making positions and reproduce traditional gender roles. It should be noted that many women have resorted to forming feminist organizations due to their marginalization in non-feminist civil organizations.

In the context of education, the politicization of gender identities had clear manifestations. Thus, despite projects of the feminization of education, which was greatly entrenched in Syria before the conflict years, the destruction of the educational sector, and the fact that many schools went out of service, made access to schools more difficult, as it often required traveling long distances amidst precarious security conditions to reach overcrowded and inappropriate schools, which has forced many parents to pull out their daughters of schools.¹¹

Hundreds of thousands of women were forced to work to support their families in the absence of a male breadwinner. This increased the participation rate of women in the labor force, but often under unfair conditions characterized by low wages, long working hours, and a lack of decent working conditions. Women have also been under tremendous pressure as they seek humanitarian assistance.

11- Zeno, B. (2021). Education and alienation: The case of displaced Syrians and refugees. *Digest of Middle East Studies*, 30(4), 284-294.

3.2 Actors' policie

3.2.1 Local actors

- **The Syrian Regime:** The Syrian regime was the party that used violence against women the most as part of its policies to instrumentalize gender identity. According to reports that documented violations against women,¹² the Syrian regime and its security apparatus were the main perpetrators of violations related to gender-based violence against women. It also used women as hostages in detention centers in an attempt get hold of their men (husbands, children, fathers, etc.).

The regime has also invested in the status of women in its areas of control to rehabilitate itself internationally by resorting to policies of comparison in which it presents some of the “freedoms” enjoyed by women in its areas of control by contrasting the “relatively open” lifestyles that women can enjoy with the situation of women who live in the north and northwest regions of Syria, where women’s freedom of dress, movement, and work were greatly limited. This superficial approach completely ignores the systematic exclusion and marginalization of women in

the legislative institutions and structures in the regime-held areas, which are characterized by the absence of the right to expression, organization and participation. It also ignores the reality of discriminatory development, especially against women, and the scarcity or poor quality of support services for the protection of women, especially those provided by public institutions such as protection homes, psychological support services for battered women. Besides, the regime imposes great restrictions on the work of independent feminist or women’s organizations in the areas under its control, while granting the Syrian Trust for Development the upper hand in controlling all aspects of women’s development work in the spaces where civil society operates. The regime exploited the formal inclusion of women from different social, religious and cultural backgrounds in political platforms, as is the case in the negotiating delegation, for example, in which the politicization of gender identities intersects with other religious and social identifiers. Finally, the regime’s policies to manage war and military operations, including general mobilization, recruitment and reserve policies, which targeted men in particular, led to imbalances in the societal structure between men and women in terms of the number of dead, missing, detained and displaced persons, in addition to exacerbating the disparity in education and empowerment rates among men and women, at the core of gender identity politicization policies.

- **Local Communities:** Some families were forced into marrying off minor girls and young women as a mechanism to cope with fear, displacement, and extreme poverty that many communities suffered from, where women are generally treated as a social and economic burden, which could be mitigated by marrying them off, so that they become the responsibility of their husbands. The discourse of some intellectuals also reflected a clear marginalization of women’s rights, seen in the exclusion of women from many cultural or research spaces under the pretext of the lack of qualified women. This is also evident in the disparagement of all discussions and proposals related to gender issues and dealing with them as non-priority topics, rather than as an integral part of a holistic struggle for rights and freedoms and as part of political action.

¹²- Human Rights Council. “‘I lost my dignity’: sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic”, Thirty-seventh session, February 26-March 23, 2018, [Click Here](#)

• **Syrian Civil Society Organizations:** Syrian civil society organizations have contributed to the problematic politicization of gender identities in the context of the conflict because their approaches to women's support, protection and empowerment followed the agenda and priorities of donor countries and international organizations. These organizations also contributed to reproducing gender roles in most of their programs. However, some feminists and feminist Syrian civil society organizations inside and outside Syria sought to challenge these mainstream approaches, by supporting women's political participation, asserting women's presence and effective participation in local government councils in defiance of the dominant powers and expanding consultations with women inside Syria and in the countries of asylum in a way that contributes to the engendering of the political process.

• **The Autonomous Administration:** The AA enacted a set of policies related to local governance and its structures that stipulate for a joint presidency that includes a man and a woman. This contributed to greater access for women to decision-making positions. However, this representation of women, despite its merits, remained superficial in many of its aspects. This can be seen, for example, in the ways customers of different departments treat women and men leaders in the region in a way that discriminates against women. This behavior can also be observed in the political and military talks and negotiations, in which the final arbiters in the actual decision-making process are influential men in the fields of security, politics and economy. This is because despite the governance system formulated by the AA and its effort to create a political system in the region, governance remains mainly in the hands of the security forces, rather than being based on effective institutional political structures. Moreover, the dominant societal culture, which continues to marginalize women, cannot be separated from the political and economic structures, but rather intersects with them and reproduces inequality in practice despite theoretical equality in some positions. It should be noted here that the laws enacted by the AA to empower and protect women and their rights are not enforced in all areas controlled by the AA. Rather, their enforcement intersects with the dominant nationalist identities in the regions, which creates uneven development in comparison with areas with an Arab majority and leads to sensitivity towards imposing change from above, especially considering the intersection between the politicization of gender identity and nationalist affiliations. This thorny subject requires field-based research during the next phase of the research.

When it comes to the military aspect, the AA has instrumentalized the enlistment of Kurdish women fighters in the military forces to build a progressive narrative that it can use when addressing the international community and trying to influence support and decision-making centers, especially when invoking comparisons with other regions and political and military forces in Syria. This propaganda recruitment was manifest during the fight against ISIS as part of what is called the "war on terror". Despite the breaking of stereotypical gender roles, the analysis must not overlook the intersection of the politicization of religious and nationalist identities with the politicization of gender identity, and that this politicization is part of the conflict and militarization, and it leads to great losses in the human capital of both women and men in the long run.

Finally, the educational policies in the areas controlled by the AA, which imposed a new education system in Kurdish for the Kurds, Arabic for the Arabs, and Syriac for the Syriacs, had negative results, as social segments were separated based on ethnicities, whereas many families preferred to continue their children's education in

government schools to ensure that they obtain accredited certificates. Thus, changing school curricula and imposing the Kurdish language was a factor that contributed to the reluctance of many (boys and girls) to go to school, as schools that pursue education in the Arabic language became overcrowded, and are rarely located in easily accessible areas. Girls often bear this burden more than boys, as parents are afraid, due to insecurity and the marginalization of women in the region, to send their daughters to schools under these circumstances.

- **The Salvation Government (SSG) and Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS):** The most prominent manifestation of the politicization of gender identity in the policies of the SSG and HTS is the objectification of women, which can be seen in the declared and published statements and policies of these forces. This includes policies that control women's clothing, freedom of movement, and work conditions within the areas controlled by these forces, and the ways in which they represent women in public and religious sermons, which also affect people outside their areas of control.

Legally, the SSG has suspended a set of laws that were fairer to women, while enacting a set of new laws that are more discriminatory against them. Militarily, HTS invested heavily in kidnapping and raping women during battles to inflame hatred and incite violence and conflict. On the development level, it can be said that investing in military action greatly contributed to amplifying the power of men in society through the consolidation of the role of the militants in daily life. This caused a change in the dynamics of women's lives and their societal roles, especially in employment, where the role of women is limited to working in education, organizations, or agricultural work, rather than in administrative offices, engineering, legal, or other fields.

- **The Interim Government (SIG) and the National Army (NA):** These forces are completely under the domination of the Turkish government, which has the upper hand in their areas of control. In fact, the conservative ideology they carry and are trying to impose in the region is one of the manifestations of the politicization of gender identity. Examples of this include restricting women's ability to work within government agencies, in engineering offices, or in human rights affairs, and limiting their areas of work to relief organizations and education. Recently, there have been efforts by the vice president of the coalition to launch a women's commission in the region¹³. This may contribute to playing a positive role in empowering women, confronting marginalization, stereotyping and discrimination against them, and respecting their rights. But this issue is also critical given that there are many feminist and women's organizations that may not be able to bring about institutional change. The discourse used by many prominent figures in the SIG is also characterized by exclusion and lack of commitment to women's rights or belief in the necessity of their political participation. This is reflected in the low participation rates of women even in the opposition bodies represented in the SIG.

- **Political Platforms of the Opposition:** Finally, it must be noted that the participation of women in the political platforms of the opposition that were active in the political processes during the past ten years, such as the Constitutional Committee and the Negotiating Delegation, still lacks commitment to, and belief in, women's rights and that the need to include them should be a priority in the agendas. Indeed, women's representation is still a result of European pressure rather than being a genuine internal policy.

14- National Coalition Of Syrian Revolution and Opposition Forces, Department of Information and Communication. (July 3, 2021), launch of the Syrian Women's Authority - Vice President of the National Coalition, official spokesman.

3.2.2 Regional and international actors

Foreign countries and international institutions have contributed to the complexity of the politicization of gender identity in Syria through direct and indirect policies. The following are some examples:

- **Russia:** The policies of recruiting Syrian youths to fight in the ranks of the Russian forces outside Syria (in Libya, for example), where many of them volunteered to join the fight due to poverty and the economic need to support their families, contributed to the worsening of the draining the Syrian society of men. This in turn reinforced the change in the dynamics of society and its demographic balances, and the resulting change in gender roles and responsibilities, without being reflected in greater empowerment of women due to the strengthening of the military role of men.
- **Iran:** Iran has played a more direct role by forming religiously conservative local militias and recruiting non-Syrian youths based on religious and sectarian criteria since 2013. This intersects with the politicization of religious identity in the Syrian conflict.
- **Hezbollah:** Hezbollah played a role similar to that played by Iran in Syria with regard to the politicization of gender identity, and its intersections with religious identity. It also had a role in the phenomenon of Shiitization which exacerbated local sensitivities and reinforced the master inciting narratives (Shiite vs. Sunni).
- **Turkey:** Turkey's policies in the areas under its control in northern Syria reflected the conservative religious ideology of the Turkish government to which the powerful opposition forces in the region submitted. This was evident with regard to the politicization of gender identity, such as the enforcement of the Islamic dress for women and other practices that limit women's freedom and restrict their ability to exercise their rights, as well as the oppression non-veiled women and women working with organizations.
- **Neighboring Countries of Asylum (Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan):** There are many academic studies and periodic international reports that address the impacts of these countries' policies on the legal status of refugees and how this is reflected directly and disproportionately on the experiences of men and women, both in terms of access to job opportunities and employment, education, movement, housing, and others. This, in turn, affects the status of men and women there, and the gender roles and responsibilities assigned to them. However, it is noticeable that women and children are portrayed in many reports as a vulnerable segment in refugee camps, a rhetorical strategy that forms part of the politicization of gender identity with the aim of using refugees as leverage to attract support and funding, especially from European Union countries. It should be noted that some women have been subjected to exploitation and harassment during smuggling operations across the borders of these countries, and this intersects with the issue of politicization of gender identity.
- **GCC Countries:** Some GCC governments and some individuals residing in the GCC played a direct role in the conflict through discriminatory humanitarian relief operations, controlling the management of some refugee camps and subjecting them to the funder's conditions, or conflict-related funding. This intersected with the po-

liticization of gender, religious /sectarian and nationalist identities. An example of this is the investment in financing specific groups and armed factions which follow extremist and exclusionary agendas to strengthen their power in the Syrian conflict. Another example also is the funding of some humanitarian agencies in a targeted manner in some schools, where curricula, recreational activities and specific management methods are imposed based on the ideology of these funding countries, which directly influences the culture of girls and boys at a younger age. This, in fact, may establish major imbalances in the future with regard to the politicization of gender identity.

- **European Union:** Some European Union countries supported relief and development projects that support women's right to work, education and political representation. This had a positive impact in terms of politicizing gender identity in Syria. However, some of these projects were top-down and non-inclusive in terms of linking funding in a bureaucratic manner to the quota principle, which led to superficial empowerment and sham representation that lacked effective long-term policy planning, on the one hand, and also led to doubts among some local forces about the feasibility of these projects and the agendas of the funding countries, on the other. The governments of the European Union countries also played a disastrous role in dealing with their female citizens who came to Syria to join ISIS. After the defeat of ISIS, these women and their children, who were not registered, were detained in prisons run by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria forces. Nevertheless, European countries did not allow the return of their citizens and sought to strip them of their nationalities, abandoning them and shifting their entire burden on the de facto forces in Syria, without investing in rehabilitating and helping them to ensure stability in Syria.

- **The United Nations and International Organizations:** Despite the significant progress made by development projects in terms of emphasizing the effective participation of women in formulating and gendering policies, many of the projects implemented on the ground followed a western centered approach towards women's empowerment in Syria. Huge funds have been spent to achieve this objective. Yet, this was not accompanied by an in-depth analysis and study of the reality of the politicization of gender identity in Syria. This resulted in designing programs and projects that were not appropriate to the context and did not consider the roots of gender imbalance, which was negatively reflected in a greater politicization of gender identity through the "demonization" of everything related to the feminist movement in many regions. In fact, the feminist agenda was depicted as the creation of a Western conspiracy, rather than as rightful, legitimate, and necessary demands. Furthermore, the empowerment of women's political participation, which was an important part of these institutions' projects, was not linked to economic and social empowerment, which once again reflects the fact that these programs are designed in isolation from the challenges posed by the local context. Additionally, many of the implemented economic empowerment projects ironically promoted the normalization of traditional gender roles more than they sought to build societies in which freedoms and rights prevail equally. Finally, the failure of the United Nations to recognize the rape of men as a war crime is problematic. Many cases of systematic sexual violence against men have been documented as one of the manifestations of the politicization of gender identities in the Syrian conflict, as it was used as a policy of humiliation and punishment in detention centers.¹⁴ Despite this, rape against men is not considered a war crime, unlike the rape of women, which is recognized by the United Nations charters as a war crime that does not lapse by the statute of limitations. Men who are victims of sexual violence

¹⁴- Human Rights Council. "I lost my dignity': sexual and gender-based violence in the Syrian Arab Republic", Thirty-seventh session, February 26-March 23, 2018, [Click Here](#)

face societal stigma and lack any form of psychological and institutional support, which forces them to be silent and isolated, and this has negatively affected the documentation of such violations and, consequently, issues of justice and accountability.

3.3 Impacts of actors' policies

Over the past decade, the radical changes that accompanied the uprising and subsequent conflict have directly impacted the demographic composition of Syrian communities and the gender roles and societal, economic, and political activity of men and women in general.

These changes led to temporary gains for women, especially as they expanded the margin of their movement, work, and economic and social activity to a large extent, but at the same time caused them heavy losses, which we have reviewed previously when discussing the phenomena and actors' policies related to the politicization of gender identity.

Men also suffered heavy losses due to the politicization of gender identity, which was evident in the high percentages of men among the killed and wounded, detainees, forcibly disappeared, and tortured ones. In fact, men were subjected to the worst types of violence and violations due to their association with military capacity.

In addition, the politicization of gender identity in the conflict contributed to the increase in the frequency of violence and the prolongation of the conflict, and thus contributed to the socio-economic developmental disasters that affected Syrian communities as a whole, especially in terms of education, health, employment, and economic opportunities, etc. It should be noted, however, that different social segments and regions were impacted disproportionately. But the systematic violence, the lack of protection, and the long history of women's exclusion made the effects of the losses on women many times greater in comparison to men. Therefore, the gains achieved by men and women in the past ten years, despite their different nature, are temporary and do not compare to the extent of the damage they have suffered as a result of the conflict. When it comes to women in particular, the militarization of the conflict led to the expansion of patriarchal authority and the dissolution of protection mechanisms, which made the limited margins that women gained during the war years in terms of their social, economic and political effectiveness no more than being coping mechanisms within the context of the current reality that men had to accept as a temporary situation. Therefore, the gains imposed by the de facto situation may not necessarily reflect a profound positive change that truly secures and supports women's participation on a larger scale.

Despite the increased effectiveness of the role of women in various communities inside Syria and in countries of refuge, this change has not been accompanied by any systematic development in the structures and policies that govern the legal, institutional and cultural status of women in Syria. Therefore, we must be careful not to exaggerate the impact of this role change after the uprising, conflict, and displacement, because when we examine development indicators in general, we will find that the negative impact on women was greater than that on men in terms of education, job opportunities, for example.¹⁵ Hence, in the next stage of the field research, we should investigate and analyze the impact of these changes and how they affect and are affected by other forms of politicization of identity identifiers.

15- Syrian Center for Policy Research (2022), *Hope Under Siege: Voices of adolescents on education and ICT during the Syrian Conflict*, SCPR, Vienna.

4. Conclusion and next step: Methodological approach and the field work

This paper is a continuation of a previous paper (entitled “The Identity Politics in Syria” (SCPR, 2023) as part of the KnowWar project, which focused on reviewing the literature and theoretical approaches, and concluded with a suggested conceptual framework for identity politics in Syria. This paper focuses on diagnosing the most prominent manifestations of religious, ethnic, and gender identity politics in Syria, mapping of the main actors, and the most important policies and interventions related to it, based on an extensive research dialogue with in the Development Policy Forum

The paper identified many forms of divides based on religious or ethnical identities inside Syria such as: the growing influence of the clerics in communities in the political, social and military spheres; the spread of religious/sectarian inflammatory speeches; the spread of slogans and symbols with religious/ethnic connotations; employing the minority/majority discourse on most political and social issues; the associations of incidents of assassinations, kidnappings and mutilation based on religious/ethnic motives; and the social media polarization based on religious/ethnic divides. On the regional and international levels, many phenomena associated with sectarian/ethnic politicization have emerged, such as Sunni/Shiite religious incitement speeches at the official level that reflect the Iran vs. GCC/Turkey rivalry, and linking the different conflicts in the region, including Yemen and Iraq, to contradiction on a religious/sectarian basis; projecting religious and sectarian symbols on military, political and humanitarian support; the identity based content of regional media, which has become a platform for direct and indirect identity-based incitement; and designing political dialogues between forces that “represent” religious/ethnic groups/sects.

The paper identified key actors and categorized their policies that fueled religious/ethnic based polarization as follows: Mobilization and Incitement; Grievances and Cultivation of Fear; Targeting the Other and Collective Punishments; Militarization and Financing; Gains/Spoils in Power and Resources; and Discriminatory Humanitarian Support. The report also highlighted the civil society as a key actor in identity politics. Its main role has been to resist religious and ethnically based divides. As protesters’ demands in 2011 centered around issues of democratic change, freedoms, justice, and community solidarity. They also resisted the regime’s rhetoric, which sought to delegitimize the movement by accusing protesters of sectarianism or separatism as well as the rhetoric of some opposition forces that tried to portray the movement as a religious based one. However, the imbalance of power between the democratic and the sectarianized/ethnicized powers led to dispersion, submission, or marginalization of civil forces.

In the realm of gender identity politics, the paper monitored multiple manifestations and policies. The peaceful uprising, which presented a promising vision for the role of women in the future, turned into an armed conflict dominated by men, and policies and interventions that violate women’s rights aggravated. The politicization of gender identity has manifested itself in horrific forms of gender-based violence, including murder, rape, kidnapping, detention, and forced marriage. Societal stereotypes remained stubbornly persistent, in many cases subjecting women to exploitation, societal violence and sexual harassment. In the political arena, women’s rep-

resentation was largely superficial, lacking any substantive empowerment in decision-making processes. Legal frameworks further marginalized women, particularly in matters of property rights, inheritance, guardianship, and nationality. Despite the expansion of women's roles through civil society organizations and initiatives, and the resistance to repressive and exclusionary policies by political and social actors, confronting the injustice to which women are exposed requires more efforts to confront the subjugating powers.

This preliminary assessment of the key forms and policies associated with identity politics will be the basis to identify the specific research questions for the next step (the field research). The paper concludes with a methodological proposal for future field research to diagnose the dimensions of identity politics in Syria and the possibilities of overcoming it.

This proposal for future field research aims to analyze factors and conditions that led to the selective politicization of some identifiers that were used as tools for mobilizing (human and material) resources in some specific contexts, which serves the interests of local and regional subjugating powers, and how local communities interact with these policies across time and space.

Within this methodological framework, the future research will adopt several qualitative and quantitative research tools (mixed methods), including critical literature review, in-depth interviews with key informants in the local communities, focus groups, textual and discourse analysis of political statements and some influential newspapers and social media, as well as organizing dialogues to discuss research results and their applicability.

The research will be carried out by a research team consisting of:

- a central team responsible for design, supervision, writing, and follow-up on adherence to research ethics and objectives.
- a research team located in the field site.
- a textual and discourse analysis team.
- key interlocutors from the local community as well as participants in research dialogue.

The geographical scope will include Syrians inside and outside Syria, and the studied areas will be determined based on geographical distribution, population size, and the disparate impact of the conflict.

Our approach to analyzing and understanding the mechanisms and consequences of the instrumentalization of identity politics during the Syrian conflict has three dimensions:

- **The first dimension:** It investigates the mechanisms, procedures, policies, and actions used by the warring parties to politicize and mobilize some identity identifiers in order to understand how, when, and who started targeting and weaponizing these identifiers.
- **The second dimension:** It refers to the interaction of societal forces with identity politics during conflict, specifically within the response spectrum of identification with or resistance to identity politics; how communities have reacted to identity politics (to what extent they have been drawn in or resisted), and how identities have changed and been affected by conflict. This dimension also investigates whether and where identity-based polarization was the root of the conflict, or a consequence and manifestation of it, or a tool employed by subjugating powers and investors in the conflict.

- **The third dimension:** It addresses the destructive and continuous impact of identity politics in deepening the rupture of social networks, eroding the Syrians' social capital, and creating means for instigating new and future conflicts.

This conceptual framework allows for (a) understanding the pre-conflict historical circumstances, then (b) documenting, monitoring and analyzing the direct use of identity politics during the conflict, (c) understanding local communities' interactions with identity politics during the conflict, in order to provide (d) nuanced theoretical frameworks and practical policy alternatives to address identity politics, and proceed towards restoring social capital and overcoming the effects of conflict.

Strategic alternatives and practical recommendations during the next phase will focus on issues of dismantling authoritarian structures, rebuilding social relations, and taking into consideration the political, economic, and social transformations resulting from the war, including the radical changes resulting from the displacement of more than half of the population inside and outside the country. A set of alternative policies will be developed to overcome the destructive impact of identity politics, in addition to proposing inclusive initiatives that enhance solidarity and social cohesion. The SCPR's approach is grounded on fieldwork as a basis for developing developmental economic initiatives and interventions so that they are based on solidarity, inclusion, equality and strengthening social capital, which contributes to the development of community and economic ties, and enhancing the ability of local communities to confront political forces that invest in identity politics. We shall emphasize here that the proposed solutions will be temporary, not comprehensive. The starting point is to re-establish lines of communication between the various parties, especially since many Syrian regions have witnessed the development of temporary and changing decentralized patterns of governance according to the change in the de facto forces that dominated these areas during the past ten years. Therefore, it is important to develop research tools and expertise, and to create pressure mechanisms to enable people to demand their rights and influence the policies of the de facto forces.

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Introduction to the Development Policy Forum

The Development Policy Forum, started in 2019, is a space for Syrian men and women to put forward ideas and alternatives and discuss them in a cumulative manner in which experience and knowledge intersect to jointly produce some concepts and visions that can be used in the short and long term to limit the collapse happening in Syria. The Syrian Center for Policy Research's Development Policy Forum initiative seeks to encourage critical analysis of the challenges posed by the conflict in Syria, and to explore policy alternatives while analyzing the impact of existing policies undertaken by actors at the social, economic and institutional levels.

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