Unmasking 'Religious' Conflicts and Religious Radicalisation in the Middle East

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Whether it is 'Muslim-Hindu' violence in India, 'Christian-Muslim' violence in Indonesia, 'Buddhist-Muslim' violence in Sri Lanka, 'Sunni-Shia' violence in Iraq, or, indeed, 'Islamic terrorism', the advertent follower of the news or reader of academic journals instantly encounters numerous references to contemporary or more recent conflicts that are deemed 'religious' or 'sectarian'. The marker 'religious conflict' instantly implies a conflict has religious root causes, a conflict is fought in the name of and over religious causes. Thus, the qualifier 'religious' serves simultaneously as a description and as an analysis; although, too often, it is not obvious what an author means when they attach the qualifier 'religious' to a conflict.[1] Moreover, reports of the number of religiously motivated casualties must be approached with caution; frequently, news reports suggest religious motives even in conflicts that are fought along ethnic or tribal lines, while the conflicting parties share similar religious outlooks (BBC News 2013).

Consequently, whenever one aims at discussing conflicts that have a potentially *religious* background, it is mandatory to raise the question *when and under what circumstances does a conflict qualify as a 'religious' or 'sectarian' conflict*? Is it sufficient that at least one party in a conflict has a distinctively religious outlook or identity? Is it sufficient to have 'religious' language involved? Or is it essential that the conflict, in order to qualify as a *religious* conflict, is fought a) by using religious justification or b) over contested truth claims or dogmata? Moreover, does religion have to be the (main) reason or is it sufficient if it is one of many? Finally, a conflict's transformability needs to be considered. As Hans G. Kippenberg (2011, 199–200) notes, although 'a link between religion and violence is neither impossible nor necessary', a religious interpretation of a conflict may alter its nature. Kippenberg's observation has implications not only for the parties directly involved in a conflict, but also for the (news) reporting of a conflict: altering the narrative might contribute to the creation of a reality that previously did not exist.

To be sure, conflicts are more than just the narrative about them; yet, narratives play a significant part in how conflicts are fought and what means are considered justifiable. For conflicts geographically situated in the Middle East, the tendency of labelling a conflict 'sectarian' or 'religious' is particularly common. Yet, ignoring other possible root causes undermines the possibility for conflict resolution. To tackle the issue of conflicts in the Middle East, this essay is divided into two parts. The first part aims at providing a brief overview of past conflicts in the region, including the changing narratives about them; the second part takes a closer look at the current conflict in Syria.[2]

Religion and Conflicts in the Middle East – A Brief Overview

If one concerns oneself with conflicts in the Middle East, then the focus lies instantly on the religion(s) of Islam, Shia-Sunni conflicts, and the concept of *jihad*. Yet, as Michael Bonner (2006, 120) notes, even the great *fitna*, the strife in the Muslim community after the third calif's death, was fought 'over leadership, morality, and the allocation of resources'. Bonner's observation suggests we be cautious when interpreting inter-communal conflict as religious right from the beginning of the history of Islam. Nevertheless, because the conflict was fought, as far as leadership was concerned, over two caliphs (successors) and, thus, assuming that the caliphate is associated with religious

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leadership and rule, it allows for religious reinterpretation. Although contemporary Islamist authors argue that at the heart of Islam lies the desire of an Islamic state that has to be created, if necessary, by force, Azmeh Wayel (2016) suggests that the Islamists' conceptions of the caliphate, understood as religious rule in a religious state, as a 'blue-print' for Islamic governance is essentially a misconception. Similar arguments can be brought forward against narratives of a 'Golden Age' during Muhammad's time in Medina. Here, it might be appropriate to speak of 'Golden Age' in the plural. Despite the fact that most Islamists today refer to Medina, Mecca, Damascus, Baghdad, or Delhi as similarly associated with golden ages of Islam that, ideally, have to be restored. Moreover, as Khálid Durán (1983, 712) notes, often 'it is difficult to assess what the "Medinese Model" really amounts to'. Finally, as Olivier Roy suggests (not completely without some mockery), despite the fact that Prophet Muhammad's time serves as a dominant vision today, it is not a vision that is

a transition of the past (why would it have taken Muslims fourteen centuries to notice that only the Prophet's model of polity is legitimate?). […] When they insist on the need to return to the time of the Prophet, Islamists and neofundamentalists alike are the first to say that no political formation in the Muslim world ever corresponded to a true Islamic state. The question of the state is, indeed, a very modern question (Roy 2007, 58, 62).

Yet, despite the current emphasis on the 'restoration' of the caliphate and the establishment of a truly Islamic state, even extremist movements like al-Qaida or the Islamic State disagree on the necessity of a caliphate and, if it is assumed to be necessary, whether it should come into place by force or as a result of a (longer) transformative process. While al-Qaida's al-Nusra Front regards the establishment of a caliphate and an Islamic state as rather a long-term goal and considers anti-Shiite sectarian violence contrary to its mission, Islamic State's Zarqawi and his successor Baghadi both see sectarian violence and the immediate formation of a caliphate as central to their ideology (Celso 2015, 48). It should be obvious from the disagreement between two of the most extreme Islamist movements about the legitimacy of sectarian violence that sectarianism is not necessarily at the heart of most conflicts in the Middle Eastern region.

Despite al-Qaida's and the Islamic State's extreme violence and, particularly for the latter, its powerful ideology, as Bente Scheller (2013, 39) notes, 'it may be more accurate to say that they [the Islamists] hijacked media attention – partly due to their agenda, but to no lesser extent because of the special focus on them that blew their significance out of proportion'. Although one cannot deny tendencies of re-Islamisation in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, including demands for Islamised states, one might be well advised to read this trend rather as a rejection of authoritarian secular rule and a demand for a state that 'exclude[s] corruption and personal power' (Roy 2007, 62–3). Another aspect that should not be neglected may be a clash between conservatism and a revolutionary, modernising approach. This tension as a potential source of conflict is particularly visible in the writings of al-Afghani and Ali Shari'ati but is of similar relevance in violent conflicts in Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century (Koch 2014).

If one looks at two of the most prominent conflicts, the Iranian Revolution and the still ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine, one may observe another phenomenon, namely the phenomenon of religious reinterpretation that also displays internal tensions between conservative and progressive forces. In a recent essay, Hans G. Kippenberg (2016) exemplarily reconstructs the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to show how a conflict over a territory eventually becomes redefined and reinterpreted as a conflict rooted in religious causes. Kippenberg shows how the conflict that was initially framed and understood within the context of International Law, transformed into a conflict that was interpreted as an essential part of salvific history. This transformation happened on both sides.

A few days prior to the Six Days War, Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook raised (with reference to Joel 4:2) the biblical issue of a divided country, although by then the majority of the Israeli citizens appreciated the partition of the previous British mandated territory by the United Nations. After Israel's victory in the Six Days War, followers of Rabbi Zvi Yehuda Kook reinterpreted the war as a war of salvation. Soon thereafter, some of his supporters settled in the West Bank. Israel's loss of territory in 1973, then, was interpreted as divine punishment. In this reading, the government had failed to act in accordance with the divine mandate given to the Israeli people. The messianic interpretation set a reinterpretation of the conflict in motion: the land is holy; Jewish settlements speed up salvation; the Palestinians have no right to the territory. After the Oslo peace process, the tensions both between more secular and religiously

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minded people and between Israelis and Palestinians escalated, culminating in the 1994 Goldstein massacre in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron that left about 30 praying Muslims dead and more than 100 others wounded (Kippenberg 2016, 69–71).

A similar reinterpretation of the conflict occurred on the Palestinian side. The *Palestine Liberation Organisation* (PLO), founded in 1964, intended to represent all Palestinians, independently whether they were Christians or Muslims. While accepting the initial UN partition, the PLO framed their resistance against Israel in secular terms as a fight of the Arab people against imperialism. Their counterpart, the Muslim Brotherhood, first favoured re-Islamising Palestinian Muslims over actively and violently resisting Israel. Yet, stimulated by the Iranian Revolution, a new generation of militant Muslims disapproving of the Muslim Brotherhood's the-time-has-not-yet-come-approach emerged. Militant Muslim groups mushroomed, leading to the first *intifada* in 1987. In an attempt to undermine the PLO's authority in coordinating the first *intifada*, Sheikh Ahmad Yassin, the founder of the Islamic Centre, initiated the formation of the Islamic Resistance Movement (*Hamas*) as one of the wings of the Muslim Brotherhood. While the PLO, following the logic of the 1947 UN resolution, continued to frame the conflict in national and pan-Arabic terms, *Hamas* forcefully aimed at devising the conflict in religious language: *Hamas* increasingly invoked the language of *jihad* and martyrdom; in the process, *Hamas* denied Israel all rights to Palestine, shaping a language of *Israel or Islam* ('Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it, just as it obliterated others before it') (Covenant of the Islamic Resistance Movement 1988).

Eventually, the way *Hamas* devised the conflict in Islamic terms mirrors almost exactly the Jewish reinterpretation of the conflict with reference and as an integral part of salvific history. Despite the fact that both sides of the conflict engaged in religious reinterpretations of the conflict and in the process contributed to religious radicalisation, the conflict itself is still a conflict over territory. Yet, the religious reinterpretation has created new realities that removed the initial cause of the conflict from sight.

The process of reinterpreting a conflict in religious terms that goes hand in hand with religious radicalisations is perhaps even more visible in the Iranian Revolution. Karen A. Feste (1996, 33) identifies as one of the most lasting results of the Iranian Revolution that 'Islamist movements have become a central force on the political landscape of the Arab world'. Furthermore, she emphasises that '[c]onservative and anti-Western sentiments in the Middle East were strengthened significantly by the Iranian revolution'. Yet, as Rob Leurs (2012) has shown, that the Iranian Revolution eventually turned in its perception into the Islamic Revolution of which Khomeini became the face is, at least partly, also the outcome of Western media coverage.

Indeed, if one takes a closer look at the parties and movements that were engaged in the revolution, one has reason to doubt whether the people's desired outcome was a theocratic state. In addition to the more secular oriented parties like *Tudeh* (The People's Party of Iran) and *The National Front*, particularly three groups are worth mentioning: The *Marxist Feda'i*, the *Islamic Mujahedin*, and the *Marxist Mujahedin*. The members of these guerrilla groups are part of the young intelligentsia. The *Marxist Feda'i* group is an offspring of *Tudeh* and the *National Front*'s Marxist wing. Most members of this group have a secular modern middle class background, though the other two groups also attract people with more traditional backgrounds. Despite the fact that the guerrilla movements did not receive much credit for their role in the Iranian Revolution, these organisations 'delivered the regime its coup de grâce' (Abrahamian 1982, 495). Another indication that for many the desired outcome was not an Islamic theocracy can be seen in a statement of the *People's Fedayi* (1979) that was published instantly after the revolution. The statement raises the concern that Khomeini's appeal to Islam might turn out to be just another means of oppression:

But if, on the contrary, the purpose of appealing to Islam and its teachings is the repressing of every opposing thought, form an opinion, the chaining of thought and revival of an inquisition and instruments of repression, the revival of the slogan of 'only one party' and the muffling of every freedom-seeking voice under the pretext of defending the Koran and the Shari'a, we are certain every liberationist patriot will condemn it and we believe that the people also will rise to expose and destroy it because they see it as a ploy in the hands of imperialism and reaction.

By contrast, members of *Tudeh* did not seem to expect the creation of a theocratic state as the revolution's outcome. On the contrary, at first, *Tudeh* aims at demonstrating that their party's goals are not in conflict, but in total agreement

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with Islam (Tabari 1979, 29–30). Later in an interview, however, Iraj Eskandari, the Secretary General of the *Tudeh* party, admits some disagreements with the religious leaders. Yet, for Eskandari (1979, 30b), these disagreements were only an issue 'if the matter concerned the creation of a theocratic state. But as far as we know, the Iranian religious leaders have not called at all for anything of the sort'.

The outcome of the revolution as an Islamic revolution certainly came for some with some surprise. As Morteza Motahari (1985, 208), the chief-ideologue of the Iranian Revolution has put it, Khomeini 'fought against oppression, injustice, colonialism and exploitation'. These issues can be read in religious as well as secular terms. Prior to the revolution, Khomeini consistently translated his message to the general public into secular language. Thus, the Iranian people had no reason to assume that Khomeini would consider the guardianship of the jurists as the *only* legitimate and just version of government. In this context it is worth noting that Ervant Abrahamian sees some roots of the Iranian Revolution in the 1953 coup. One significant side effect can be seen in the destroying of the base for more secular-oriented political parties, particularly *Tudeh* and the *National Front*. Although unintendedly, it strengthened the 'Islamic "fundamentalist" movements' (Abrahamian 2008, 122). As Misagh Parsa (1989, 1) suggests,

[t]he revolutionary struggle was largely carried out by a coalition of classes and political groups, each mobilised by separate interests and conflicts. Eventually, political power was transferred to a religious faction led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, who by then had garnered overwhelming popular support.

Thus, it is important to note that, although religious movements and a charismatic religious leader were involved in the revolution, these religious forces were not the only forces that carried out the protests. Yet, the more secular oriented groups failed to have their voice heard; for Khomeini and his followers, they served as a means to a religious end.

Religion and the Conflict in Syria

The question of who dominates the discourse about a conflict is also of some significance in the still ongoing Syrian conflict. While the current conflict has a long pre-history and has turned in parts into proxy-warfare with a number of regional powers directly or indirectly involved, it is useful to consider the event that triggered the civil war and humanitarian disaster in Syria. For this, we have to go back to the Syrian city of Dara'a in February 2011. Here, we meet 10 year old Abdulrahman al-Krad and his friends in the school yard. Inspired by the graffiti from the uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt Abdulrahman and his friends saw on TV, Abdulrahman buys a spray can with yellow paint and starts spraying some graffiti on the school walls. Eventually, he aims at spraying 'You've plundered the country, al-Assad'. Yet, Abdulrahman is not good at spelling and, accidentally, he omits the Alif in Assad, thus writing al-Sad, the dam or dike, instead of al-Assad, the lion. Neither Abdulrahman nor his friends realise that they did something that could get them into trouble; they were just playing.

The next day in school, all students had to take part in a spelling competition. Abdulrahman repeats his initial spelling error and was identified as the one who was responsible for the graffiti. He got arrested, interrogated, and tortured by the Syrian secret police. His father and at least 16, maybe 20, other children, all between nine and 15 years old, were also arrested and tortured.

At first, their fathers protested in front of the secret service headquarters, demanding their children back. Instead, the fathers experienced further humiliation. Eventually, this was one humiliation too many. Thereafter, the protesters demanded not just their children back, but also the governor's resignation. First, the regime responded with teargas; soon, the regime moved from teargas to sharp munition. On March 18, the first protestors died. With the slogan, 'Our Souls, our blood, we sacrifice for you, Dara'a', the protests spread throughout Syria (Krüger 2016). The regime's reaction, thus, has unnecessarily provoked the Syrian uprising that eventually escalated into the current civil war.

As many other rulers in the past, Bashar al-Assad has ignored fourteenth century Ibn Jama'a's advice when dealing with sectarians who revolt against their ruler's injustice. Ibn Jama'a (1934, 16.1–2) suggests that the ruler is advised to restore justice and fight the protesters only if they continue to revolt after justice has been restored. If they repent, he should accept their repentance. If they persist, he has to fight them. Instead of removing the apparent injustice,

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the Assad regime instantly turned violently against the protesters.

If one keeps in mind what actually sparked the conflict in Syria, one may instantly have some doubts about narratives that picture the conflict in Syria as just another sectarian or religious conflict. At the beginning, this was certainly not the case. Yet, reframing the narrative of the conflict instantly took place. The regime promptly accused the opposition of being sectarian Islamists. Eventually, each group accused each other of pursuing sectarian goals. By its enemies, the Assad-regime was and still is frequently framed as 'Alawite regime' (Phillips 2015, 359, 365). Yet, this does not mean that there is no religious dimension to it. In 2011, Assad's supporters, based on pre-existing fears, instantly assumed that the opposition could adopt a sectarian agenda. Yet, as Christopher Phillips (2015, 361) puts it

[o]n the regime side numerous Sunni bureaucrats dependent on government pay checks remained loyal, as did many in the middle class, including conservative Sunni merchants in Damascus and Aleppo, even if some secretly aided the opposition. […] Indeed, after the rebels attacked Aleppo in 2012, the mostly Sunni city was divided among economic, not sectarian lines: the wealthy west remained loyal while the rebels made a base in the poor east.

Nonetheless, the sectarian fear was not totally without reason. Since Hafez al-Assad took power for real in 1970, both members of the Assad family as well as high-ranking officials of the Ba'th Party had to suffer through periods of, although not always successful, assassination attempts, usually exercised by members of a more militant branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Neither Hafez al-Assad nor his son Bashar, who has been in power since 2000, however, has any sympathy for Islamist movements or ideas. To some degree, parts of the current Islamist outlook of the civil war can be seen as a backlash from the Islamist violence that fractured Syria in 1979–1982. Triggered by the killing of 83 Alawite cadets at the Military Artillery School in Aleppo, the regime's military and newly formed pro-regime militias acted forcefully against the opposition, not shying away from large scale atrocities and massacres; the regime even assassinated opposition leaders and journalists living in exile. Similar to today's situation, the Islamist uprising did not have the support of the majority of the Syrian population. As today, the rift exists more along class than creed lines. However, the crackdown on the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups led many into exile; some joined the Afghan battlefield or even moved to up to high ranks within the al-Qaida nomenclature, including the leading al-Qaida ideologists Abu Mas'ab al-Suri and Abu Khalil al-Suri. The latter served as top al-Qaida representative in Syria (Lia 2016, 546, 548, 551, 556).

Yet, instead of becoming a symbol of unity, the legacy of the 1979 revolt has turned into a symbol of discord that illustrates the widened 'gap between political Islamists and hardline jihadists on the utility and legitimacy of armed struggle'. While the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood distances itself from the hardliners, the jihadists oppose all political and non-violent means of regime change. For the hardliners 'it is all about how to learn to fight more effectively and harness all other efforts towards this aim, with a particular emphasis on how to raise and sustain ideological support for the "armed jihad only" position' (Phillips 2015, 557–8).

It is worth noting, however, that Hafez al-Assad's preoccupation with security made the tension between Islamist forces and the regime more severe than necessary. By security Hafez al-Assad meant the regime's or the state's security, not the Syrian citizens' security. His obsession with security certainly displayed some paranoid features; regime security, Hafez al-Assad considered an end in itself. The paranoia and regime's security obsession certainly did not go away when Bashar al-Assad took office. In order to consolidate his power base but also to address economic stagnation, Bashar al-Assad initiated economic reform that aimed at the integration of the Syrian economy into the world economy through market liberalisation. Yet, as it turned out, these reforms were almost exclusively to the advantage of the '"sons and daughters of the Ba'this' nomenklatura," who chose business careers rather than following their fathers in political or military careers' (Scheller 2013, 24). As a result, wealth became accumulated in even fewer hands. Simultaneously, Bashar al-Assad cut the farmers' diesel and fertiliser subsidies.

These economic reforms that disfavoured the mostly Sunni peasant population coincided with the 2006–2010 major draught and caused mass migrations into urban areas and certainly undermined the Sunni peasantry's support of the regime. In addition, the economic reforms weakened state institutions. Some of the state functions, particularly in the social sector, were filled by sub-state groups with a religious or ethnic identity and, thus, fuelled sectarian identities (Scheller 2013, 367–8).

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Yet, Bashar al-Assad also fueled sectarian conflict, although unintentionally, through other means. Similar to Pakistan and Saudi Arabia (Dorronsoro 2012, 34; Hegghammer 2012, 41–2) but also Iran and Iraq, Bashar al-Assad supported opposition groups in neighbouring countries in order to undermine his neighbours' regional power aspirations. When Turkey increased the pressure on the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), al-Assad, both father and son, actively supported the PKK. Before the 2003 Iraq war, Bashar al-Assad actively supported Iraqi opposition groups. Most of them had a sectarian outlook. At the beginning of the Iraq war, Syria kept its borders open and allowed busloads of (radicalised) foreign fighters into Iraq (Scheller 2013, 100, 180, 190). Although the motivation was either weakening the neighbouring states or keeping the US in Iraq busy to prevent an invasion of Syria, his policy fuelled sectarian tensions and emerging sectarian identities throughout the region as well as in Syria itself. In addition to the power vacuum that was created through the uprising in Syria, Assad's policy of the previous decades certainly filled Pandora's Box with more evils that were eventually released in what has turned into the twenty-first century's most violent conflict – so far.

If one takes a look at Syria in 2015 or 2016 and asks who is fighting whom, then the picture looks more or less like the graphic below. The Kurdish problem, however, has been ignored here, primarily because the Kurds in Syria stayed relatively passive for a long time. The situation is different in Northern Iraq, where Kurdish militia are among the more active groups fighting Islamic State forces.

The question is, of course, not only who is fighting whom, but also, and more importantly, for what reason. Moreover, it is also important to notice which external forces are supporting whom and what is the rationale behind it.

First, the al-Assad regime: Their main domestic forces are the regular Syrian army (or what is left of it) and the *Shabiah*-militia. The *Shabiah*, recruited primarily from Alawite communities, usually fights alongside the Syrian army and is known for its brutality. The Alawite communities and particularly the *Shabiah*-militia stand and fall with the Assad regime. Thus, they have nothing or all to lose and, consequently, fight until the very end, which also might be their end.

Although the Assad regime is basically bankrupt, it has three external allies: Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah. All three promised unconditional support to the Assad-regime whose one and only goal is the regime's survival and restoration. In a way, Russia is among the most puzzling cases here. Before the Syrian revolution, Russian-Syrian relations had significantly cooled down; during the 15 years period prior to the uprising, Russia had treated Syria at best indifferently. Yet, the more isolated Syria becomes internationally, the tighter Assad-Russian relations become. By contrast, the Arab League supported in one way or another Syrian opposition groups early on in order to achieve regime change, if necessary, by force. Despite having stronger economic ties with some of the Gulf countries, Russia has supported the Assad regime for the following reasons:

- Fear of Islamism: Russia's fear of Islamism is rooted in the country's own experience in the Northern Caucasus and it 'projects its own security concerns from its experiences in the Northern Caucasus on Syria' (Scheller 2013, 205).
- Its rivalry with the United States.
- Geopolitical interests in the region: Presently, Russia has just one military base in the Middle East in Syria; Russia sees Syria as its entry gate to increased economic activities in the Middle East.

Russia supports the Assad-regime with military equipment. In addition, Russia is involved in military activities in Syria, primarily through air-strikes. Because Syria is bankrupt, the question is, who pays for the military support and weaponry. It has been suggested, although not confirmed, that Iran is picking up the bill.

Iran

With Iran, Hafez al-Assad had built ties immediately after the Iranian Revolution. Both regimes are tied by pragmatic reasons rather than by shared ideology. Since the Iranian Revolution, both countries are also rivals for regional leadership; nonetheless, they share a number of similar interests. Moreover, in phases of increasing international isolation, Syria was almost the only ally Iran possessed in the region – and vice versa. What Iran fears most at

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present is regime change that might replace the current regime with a Sunni dominated one in Syria. A Sunni regime would certainly cooperate with Saudi Arabia or the Gulf States rather than with Iran. Thus, for Iran, the survival of the Assad-regime essentially means avoiding regional and international isolation.

Hezbollah

Over the last decades, Syria has more or less constantly supported Hezbollah in Lebanon. Particularly after the end of the civil war in Lebanon, Syria had an interest in keeping its neighbouring state dependent, especially as far as foreign policy is concerned. For Syria, Hezbollah was also a factor in Syria's opposition to Israel and in its support of the Palestinian cause. Hezbollah's unconditional support of the Assad-regime, however, has caused a legitimacy crisis for Hezbollah; by now, their survival depends almost entirely on the survival of the al-Assad regime (Alagha 2015).

One of the only secular opposition groups in Syria, there are a few more but they are so marginal we can ignore them here, is the *Free Syrian Army* (FSA). Their recruits are primarily deserters from the Syrian army; although not perfectly well organised and, thus, less effective than they could be, their one and only goal is the removal of the Assad-regime. Early on, they were supported by Turkey, both with weaponry as well as through military training.

Islamic Front and *Jayah al-Sham* are rather umbrella-terms. In order to identify opposition groups that may be Islamist in their outlook but distance themselves from al-Qaida and the Islamic State, Saudi Arabia insisted that they unite under one umbrella. *Islamic Front* was formed in November 2013 'in response to Saudi Arabian concerns over ISIS and al-Nusra'. *Jayah al-Sham* is a similar umbrella group supported by Saudi Arabia and formed in September 2013. It consists of more than 50 different opposition groups from the Damascus region. It has been suggested, though unconfirmed, that Saudi Arabia has supported Islamist Syrian opposition groups with approximately $5 billion (Atwan 2015, 28–52).

Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya and *Suqour al-Sham* (Falcons of Syria) have a strong Islamist identity. While *Harakat Ahrar al-Sham al-Islamiyya* has a Salafist-jihadi identity, it nonetheless cooperates with the *Free Syrian Army*. *Suqour al-Sham* shares much of Islamic State's ideology but differs on one significant issue: Their commander Abu Issa or Ahmed al Sheikh 'has called for an Islamic State but does not believe this should be imposed by force, as Islamic State does' (Atwan 2015, 108).

In addition to a number of other groups with marginal influence, *al-Nusra* and Islamic State related groups play a key role in opposing the Assad regime. The *al-Nusra* front, originally initiated by al-Baghadi, who later called out the caliphate, and led by Abu Muhammad al-Julani, was for al-Baghadi the Syrian arm of Islamic State in Iraq, thus forming ISIS. Yet, al-Julani saw his allegiance with al-Qaida's al-Zawahiri. Thus, *al-Nusra* is more of an al-Qaida than an IS related group, though the differences may appear marginal. Under Haji Bakr, a former colonel of Saddam Hussein's air force intelligence who is closely related to al-Baghadi, however, ISIS already had a stronghold in the Aleppo area (Kaválek 2015, 15).[3]

While the conflict has attracted thousands of Sunni foreign fighters, for the Syrian people 'the shared accident of being Sunni Muslims has not bonded together opposition to Bashar al-Asad's allegedly 'Alawi regime any more than it has prevented Sunnis from collaborating with it' (Hamdan 2015, 31). Yet, although the majority of the Syrian people have not become radicalised, another factor contributes to Islamising and radicalising the conflict; namely, the alleged impossibility for secular groups to receive (foreign) support. As Carsten Wieland (2013, 19) notes, '[w]eapons and money are coming from Islamic forces. So those groups that claim to be Islamists will get the weapons to defend their families and villages. Some have grown beards and use religious symbols just to get access to weapons and resources'. Nonetheless, radicalisation has its limits. Particularly the strategy of classifying regime supporters and Muslim minorities as un-Islamic and, therefore, allowing them to be killed, turns out to be counterproductive. In Syria, 'jihadi groups mobilise against ISIS'. If confronted with 'ISIS's fanatical imposition of sharia', some of the groups that still support ISIS insurgences may simply rebel (Celso 2015, 39).

Conclusion

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Conflicts, however, are not always what they are, but also, transforming narratives about them may change perception of the conflict entirely. Yet, a changing narrative does not necessarily mean that a conflict's root causes have disappeared. They are only harder to identify. While one can already observe in older conflicts the power of reinterpretation that, in tendency, favours religious over secular readings, current conflicts, like the ones in Syria and Iraq, in particular are marked by another dimension; namely, existing power vacuums that allow sectarian non-state movements to engage in the conflict and to attract a significant amount of media attention – with a tendency of blowing their significance out of proportion. While in the conflicts narrated above some sectarian elements certainly exist, their role is at best part of the conflict, and sectarian issues usually do not belong to any of the current conflicts' root causes. Thus, in most cases, it is more appropriate to speak at best of partial sectarian conflicts or of conflicts that are partially (ab)used for sectarian goals. Yet, can we speak about a religious conflict if a party that was not present initially tries to use it for its sectarian goals that are unrelated to the conflict's original causes?

Notes

[1] This is even the case for the widely praised study by Brian and Finke (2011).

[2] The essay's first part draws upon Koch (2015).

[3] Haji Bakr is reported to have been killed in January 2014.

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