

The Syrian Identity (1): An exploration of the legacy of colonialism illuminating the Diaspora of anation

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Abstract

The Syrian identity crisis in the form of the civil war is entering its eighth year, claiming the lives of approximately 400,000 people and provoking the displacement of more than eleven million people. Consequently, this article is motivated by the desire to demystify Syria through unveiling the complex internal dynamics and how these complexities came to be, in addition to a humanitarian concern for the human cost of the Syrian identity crisis. The focus is to investigate the effect of colonialism on the Syrian national identity. This theoretical investigation analyses sources from a post-colonial constructivist perspective and argues that the Syrian identity crisis can be traced back to colonialism. The results suggest that the Syrian experience of colonisation has informed current identity politics in Syria. Overall, the findings of this work suggest that former colonisers bear a degree of responsibility for the identity crisis that has since unfolded in Syria. This work contributes to understandings of identity politics. Explicitly, the significance of identity within the Syrian experience suggests that identity is a noteworthy factor that can shape both domestic and international politics and thus, requires more attention.

Keywords: *Colonialism, Identity, Syrian Diaspora, Syrianism, Westoxification*

Introduction

The Syrian Diaspora can be taken to mean the general migration of Syrians into, through and from Syria (Mehchy&Doko, 2011). In this article the authors are concerned with those inhabiting Syria only. Research²⁹ undertaken evidences the so-called 'Arab Spring' uprisings have renewed external interest in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) (Gause, 2011; Bellin, 2012; Çarkoğlu, et al., 2018; Scott and Carter, 2015; Avraham, 2015); yet, as McHugo (2014: 25) writes, "to the English-speaking world, Syria is a far-off country which relatively few people have made a serious effort to understand". The Syrian identity crisis in the form of the civil war is entering its eighth year, claiming the lives of approximately 400,000 people and provoking the displacement of more than eleven million people (Kaplan, 1993; UN News, 2018; CNN, 2018; Amnesty International, 2018). This forms the motivational foundations for this work, and authors have sought to demystify Syria by unveiling the complex internal dynamics and how these complexities came to exist. Further motivations have been engendered by humanitarian concerns arising from the devastating effects of Syrian identity crises.

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³ This article is based on and contains extracts from the unpublished Dissertation submitted for BA award at University of Birmingham 'The Syrian Identity: An exploration of the legacy of colonialism', by Isabel Morrell (2018).

Identity politics holds significance for the real world and is not merely a subject for theoretical debates taking place in the “ivory tower of academia” (Zemni, 2013: 136). The practical relevance and significance derive from its implications for nation-building and social cohesion. The interpretive nature of politics highlights the importance of identity and identification. Interpretation involves self-reflection: that is to say an individual considers and constructs an opinion based on inter-subjective narratives of self-identification, based upon shared experiences of history (Mattern, 2001; Hopf, 1998; Braun, 2007; Bhabha, 2004; Mivahara, 2015; Weedon, 2004). Moreover, identifications are used to categorise binaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’ which can lead to discrimination and antagonism (Hopf, 1998; Braun, 2007; Mattern, 2001; Derviş, 2015).

Accordingly, meaningful narratives of events and history are significant as constructions of history that imprint “the present onto the past” (Friedman, 1992: 837). Throughout the MENA’s modern history, inequality and exploitation have characterised the Global North’s⁴ interaction with the Middle East (Gelvin, 2005; Goldberg, 2016; Dowd, 2009). An example is the partitioning of the former Ottoman Empire following the First World War; indeed, the bizarre and large indent in Jordan’s border with Saudi Arabia is often referred to as “Winston’s hiccup” (Diener & Hagen, 2010; White, 2011), alluding to the seemingly trivial approach that the great powers took in the division of the MENA.

For Syria, colonialism⁵ plays a role in informing the national collective memory. The focus of this article is to uncover the legacy of colonialism within the Syrian national identity. The underlying argument throughout is that the Syrian identity crisis can be traced to colonialism. Findings of this study will demonstrate the significance of identity within domestic and international politics.

The question that has shaped this treatise has been: what impact has colonialism had on the Syrian national identity? Gelvin’s (2005) conception of colonialism informs, the acquisition of excessive control and influence over significant elements of weaker societies. This definition is useful since it does not limit exploitive domination to the formal acquisition of land through conflict and facilitates the study of informal interventions and neo-colonialism. The focus throughout this work has been primarily on Syria’s ‘modern’ history, from the twentieth century; yet, the analysis is rooted more broadly in Greater Syria’s history from the nineteenth century. The reason for this is the increased European interaction with the MENA, namely, the French Mandate that followed the First World War (Milton-Edwards, 2016; Gelvin, 2005).

⁴ The terms ‘West’ and ‘Global North’ are used interchangeably to refer to the dominant states in the international realm (Steans, 2015)

⁵ Gelvin’s (2005) conception of colonialism as acquisition of excessive control and influence over significant elements of weaker societies.

The Syrian identity is investigated using a deductive theoretical approach that draws upon the themes of identity, identification, the nation, nationalism and identity politics, alongside elements of post-colonialism and constructivism in an attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of the Syrian identity. 'Identity-politics' refers to how group categorisations and identifications are imbued in political activism (Wiarda, 2016). Taking a constructivist approach, enabled a social ontology and epistemology, whilst emphasising the role of norms, ideas, institutions (informal and formal), interests and a socially constructed reality (Steans, *et al.*, 2010; Fierke, 2010; Barnett, 2014). This work was approached from the analytical and critical post-colonialist perspective, seeking to implement a refocused approach to analysis and to demonstrate the lingering legacies of former colonial hierarchies in contemporary international relations (Nayar, 2010; Sylvester, 2014; Craggs & Wintle, 2016).

Nations and National Identity

In the literature reviewed, the nation, nationalism and national identity address questions of identity since all are concerned with collective identifications, and, central to all, is the idea of the nation (Heywood, 2003). Yet the 'nation' is a concept that is widely debated. Wallerstein (1984: 20) understands nations to be "solidarity groupings" within boundaries that are constantly subject to redefinition and social transmittal, whilst Smith (2010: 13) explains it as a 'human community with a shared history, common myths and distinguishable public culture whose members are all subject to common laws and customs'. Smith's approach is *primordialist* since there are cultural and linguistic commonalities that are historically embedded and instinctual; conversely, *situationalism* explains national identity as an interest, a reaction to evolving contexts and challenges (Smith, 2013; Brown, 2000). In contrast, Gellner (2006) argues that nations are modern inventions resulting from the development of industrialism and increased social mobility that required the creation of a common identity. Gellner's view is supported by Breuilly (2006) who maintains

that national identity is based on culture presently, owing to the transition into industrialism. Hobsbawm's (2012) approach to nationalism is *constructivist*. He understands the 'nation' as a concept that is constantly evolving; yet, nationalism is an ideology, instrumental to elite interests, power and exploitation (Smith, 2013; Brown, 2000; Forrest, 2004).

Anderson (2006: 6) propagated the idea that a nation is "an imagined political community", since members of a nation envision an "image of communion" with one another, but will never know or interact with most fellow members. Chatterjee (2012) rejects Anderson's theory since it attempts to universalise Western history and scholarship; similarly, Mayall (1993) highlights the problematic nature of applying a single conception of the nation to culturally heterogeneous states. Indeed, Kedourie (1993: 1) writes, nationalism is "a doctrine invented in Europe" that corresponds with Hroch's (2012: 79) understanding of the nation as a distinctly European process of historical development, defined as "a large social group integrated

through objective relationships...and their subjective reflection in collective consciousness”.

National identity has been historically important in European state-building: specifically, the creation of a national identity, spawned from a shared ethnicity, religion, language, culture or history, that forms a bond of unity and social cohesion between groups of people (Moreno & Colino, 2010; Minahan, 2002; Languèche, 2016; Luong, 2016). Said (2001a) draws attention to Western identifications of the *Orient*, the undefined geographical location in the East, that comprises Europe’s former colonies, where civilisation is fundamentally different to that of the West and exists as the Western *Other*. He argues that these images of the *Orient* have shaped contemporary Western thought. Warraq (2007) objects, arguing that Said has falsified history. Mart, *et al.*(2010) considers Said’s work to be an elaborate fantasy constructed on belief.

Said (2001a; 2001b; 2004) is a prominent figure in post-colonialism; a similar thinker is Spivak (1988), who argues that contemporary Western relations with the non-West are hierarchical and that colonialism lingers somewhat in Western discourse and studies. Bhabha (2004) links post-colonialism with identity politics by suggesting that the coloniser constructs his identity against that of the indigenous. It follows then that the coloniser requires the colonised to exist in order to self-identify, explicitly, the binary indigenous Other, which allows the coloniser to create his own identity.

Westoxification

On the other side of this dichotomy is Ahmad (1984), who coined the term *gharbzadegi* (Westoxification) to denote the complicit promotion of Western identity and lifestyles. Ahmad (1984: 28) defines the East and West as economic concepts: “the West comprises the sated nations and the East, the hungry nations”. Westoxification, for example, was a central issue in the Iranian revolution and therefore impacted substantially on the Iranian identity, when Iranians united against the Shah in support of ‘de-Westoxification’. (Esposito, 2004; Hurd, 2008). Ultimately, however, Ahmad denounced the term *gharbzadegi*, on grounds that it formed an “unstable political alchemy” that made contrasting approaches appear to share common goals (Kohn & McBride, 2011: 37).

This East-West dichotomy has been interpreted famously by Huntington (1993: 22) as a “clash of civilisations”, referring to conflicting cultural entities, specifically, that of Islam and the West that characterises the post-Cold War world. His thesis has been largely discredited by a number of academics (Delkhasteh, 2011; Fox, 2002; Henderson, 2005), including, Said(2001b), who regard Huntington’s naivety and ignorance as sweeping generalisations that have been applied to current affairs incorrectly; yet, convincingly. Said (2001b) highlights the damaging consequences of defining the world in terms of the “West versus the rest” and of condensing complex identities into single categories such as the ‘West’ and ‘Islam’.

The MENA is a region that is often defined by the extent to which religion is intertwined within the state, and, despite its variance, Arabic

remains a unifying factor for the MENA as a powerful symbol of ethnicity (Myhill, 2006; Lee, 2014; Holt, 2013; Derviş, 2015). The Sunni-Shia divide is a widely discussed element of the supposed MENA identity (Derviş, 2015; Gonzalez, 2009; Abdo, 2017; Betts, 2013; Hashemi & Postel, 2017), in addition to the common history of exploitation by European powers that has renewed hierarchical relationships under the rubric of globalisation (Milton-Edwards, 2016; Henry & Springborg, 2010; Gelvin, 2005). Indeed, Gelvin (2005) notes that it is only post-9/11 that Americans have started to ask why the MENA hates them, when those in the MENA have been asking this question for over a century.

Lee (2014) notes that the nineteenth century European nation emerged following the development of widespread literacy and national literature, whilst in the Middle East, nationalism preceded the push towards mass literacy. Conversely, some authors emphasise the disparity of Middle Eastern identities (Lewis, 1999; Moaddel & Jong, 2017). Adib-Moghaddam (2018), for example, explores the distinct psycho-nationalism that is present in Iran. Whilst Helfont (2015) proposes that the MENA identity consists of ethnic nationalism, territorial nationalism and religion.

A seemingly important component in the Middle East self-identification is Arabism or Arab nationalism, the idea that all Arabs constitute a single Arab nation and are bound by a single compelling pan-Arab identity (Phillips, 2013; Dawisha, 2016; Wien, 2017; Kamrava, 2013; Porath, 2013). Arabism is understood to have emerged due to the British and French Mandates in regions formerly

known as the Levant and Mesopotamia (Gelvin, 2005; Fildis, 2011). Korany (2016) understands the unity of Arab states through their collective identifications of insecurity. Consistently, Lichtenheld (2015) discusses internal insecurities that are applicable to the entire MENA, namely, internal displacement, refugees, conflict spill-over and terrorism.

Syrianism

One of the principal proponents of Arabism is Syria, self-identified as the “beating heart” of Arabism and “the fortress of Arabism” (Al Arabiya, 2013; Spencer & Sherlock, 2013; McAvoy, 2013). Arabism, although historically intrinsic to the Syrian identity, is not the sole element of the national identity. Indeed, the Syrian identity is understood to be made up of three competing components: Arabism, Syrianism and Islamism (Rifai, 2014; Gelvin, 2005; Pipes, 1992; Beshara, 2011). These components represent three different features present within Syria: Arabism refers to the idea that all Syrians belong to a collective identity that supersedes Syria itself and appeals to Arabs as the organic community; ‘Syrianism’ refers to a sentiment that appeals to the unity of the Syrian territory and its inhabitants, that is, a disparate ‘Syrian’ identity (Beshara, 2011; Groiss, 2011); and finally, Islamism is the prominence that Islam holds within Syria with regards to politics, culture and society, exhibited through social movements of varying intensity and control (Zemni, 2013; Marcotte, 2005).

Whilst much of the literature touches upon or alludes to colonial legacies in Syria (Gelvin, 2005; Korany, 2016; Charlcrafft, 2016; Milton-Edwards, 2016; Henry & Springborg, 2010;

Fildis, 2011; Rifai, 2014; Pipes, 1992; Beshara, 2011), no single work collates and focuses the colonial legacy specifically on the Syrian national identity. Given this gap in the academic literature, this article addresses this issue.

The Syrian Mosaic

The Syrian identity encompasses many group divisions within present-day Syria. Within the Syrian nationality, Arabs, Kurds, Armenians, Circassians, and Turkmen co-exist and Ethno-religious differences including Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Druzes, other Muslim sects, Jews and Yazidis are accommodated. Although Arabic is the main spoken language, Kurdish, Armenian, Aramic and Circassian are spoken, and English and French are widely understood (Jebb, 2004; Etheredge, 2011; Fisher, 2013; BBC News, 2011).

The Delicacy of Pre-Mandate Syria

To understand the extent of the impact of the French Mandate upon Syria's identity more fully, it is necessary to establish the prior societal context. Greater Syria was subject to many intercommunal clashes, Atiyah (1946: 1) states:

If ever there was a country in which every conceivable influence divine and mundane, physical and moral, inherent and extraneous, militated against national unity and the formation of patriotic sentiment, that country was Syria before 1914.

Interestingly, Greater Syria contained a divided society with little emotive connections to the territory. This is reiterated by Thompson (1861: 247-8), who noted the ethno-religious hatreds and the absence of a "common bond of union" and is summarised by Beshara (2011: 4) as a "battle of national struggle".

Numerous events exemplify the delicacy of pre-Mandate Greater Syria. For example, in 1860, Muslims and Druzes killed thousands of Christians and destroyed their living quarters in Damascus, following attacks made on Christians throughout Greater Syria: in particular, Aleppo in 1850 and Nablus in 1856, in addition to many bloodless tensions across other towns (Rogan, 2004; Chesterman, 2002; Fawaz, 2014). These conflicts have been attributed to a multitude of factors including a fear amongst Muslim groups of conscription, anger concerning taxation and resentment towards the Christian groups for their newfound power and economic influence through their European connections (Fawaz, 2014; Khoury, 1987). Tensions and discontent certainly featured within Greater Syria.

The attacks on Christians attracted an initial wave of French colonial interest; France performed a *mission civilisatrice*⁶ to protect the persecuted Maronite Christians. Their occupation was extended from a six-month mission in 1860 to one that lasted until June 1861 (Chesterman, 2002). Aside from protection of the Christians, French motivations included various cultural and religious reasons and interests in protecting the French connection that bridged the European economy with that of Greater Syria (Khoury, 1987; Kennedy, 2008; Milton- Edwards, 2016). This intervention formed a large basis of France's justification of its claim to Greater Syria and preceded France's 'divide

⁶*'Mission civilisatrice'* translates as 'civil mission' and was part of the "French cultural policy" in the late twentieth century (Burrows, 1986: 109)

and rule' policies that favoured Maronite Christians, ring-fencing them within a separated state of Lebanon (Gelvin, 2005). Thus, it can be deduced that firstly, intercommunal divisions predated the Mandate, and secondly, the French precursory venture into Greater Syria in 1860, established certain predispositions concerning societal strategy, favouring the Maronite Christians.

Another example of the delicacy of late-Ottoman Greater Syria is the execution of Arab nationalists in 1916. On the 6th May, fourteen martyrs were hanged in Beirut and seven in Damascus; these were nationalists who had sought support from the French Consul-General in Beirut, Georges-Picot, to achieve independence from the Ottomans (Farha, 2015; Fawaz, 2014). Incriminating correspondence between the nationalists and Georges-Picot was discovered by Cemal Pasha, attributable to forewarning by the former translator for Georges-Picot, Philip Zalzal (Fawaz 2014; Farha, 2015). This day is remembered each year in former regions of Greater Syria as Martyrs' Day and is referred to by the Ba'th Arab Socialist Party (BASP) as the starting point of the "Greater Arab Revolution" (The Telegraph, 2014; The Daily Star, 2017; Volk, 2010; SANA, 2017a; The Baath Arab Socialist Party, 2015). The annual remembrance of this event and its significance as the initial catalyst of Arabism within Greater Syria is accompanied by the recollection of France's failure to protect the martyrs. The BASP suggests that Arabism originated as a fully indigenous anti-colonial movement before the French assumed administration of Greater Syria and before the defeat of the Ottomans in the First World War.

Shortly after the Arab nationalists' martyrdom, Georges-Picot, with the help of Sir Sykes, sequentially determined the borders of the MENA in the Sykes-Picot Agreement (The Avalon Project, 2008). According to Al Jazeera (2016), this agreement is resented across the MENA to this day, since the MENA "continues to bear the consequences of the treaty". Perhaps then, the annual celebration of Martyrs' Day reminds Syrians of the failure of Georges-Picot to protect the Arab nationalists in addition to his other famously damaging imprint in the MENA. Since this is a national holiday, it has become a norm and is very much a part of Syrian culture and thus of the Syrian identity. This suggests that part of what defines Syria in terms of culture, and hence its identity, consists of a recollection of French failures and imperialism and the need to express anti-French sentiment.

Strategies of 'Divide and Rule'

France decided to sub-divide its mandated region into autonomous units to the detriment of Syrian unity and identity. Although the French Mandate existed to "facilitate the progressive development of Syria" (The League of Nations, 1923:177) for its forthcoming independence, Syria was constructed, not based on altruistic efforts, but on self-interested strategies (Gelvin, 2005; Fildis, 2011). It is recognised by scholars that 'divide and rule' strategies were implemented to stifle the progress of Arab nationalism and the formation of a unified national identity (Fildis, 2011; Kaplan, 1993; Zamir, 2000; Roshwald, 2001; Brockett, 2007). Explicitly, the French severed strategic regions to isolate certain ethno-religious groups. Aleppo and

Damascus were created as two separate units. In 1922, the Jabal al-Druze, inhabited by the predominantly Druze minority, with the region behind Latakia, where a large population of the Alawite minority group resided, were formed into separate administrative units with separate governors and elected congresses (Khoury, 1987; Fildis, 2011; France Diplomatie, 2015). Further, whilst Aleppo, Damascus, Hama and Homs were placed within one administration in 1925, the Alawite and Druze areas were formally separated from the rest of Syria until 1942, aside from a period between 1936 and 1939 (Fildis, 2011; Kaplan, 1993). The formal segregation of the Alawite and Druze populations from the rest of Syria deepened the dividing lines between ethno-religious groups, which enabled the French to achieve their goal of preventing the progression of Arab nationalism and national unity. As Fildis (2011) explains, Arab nationalism was unable to become a nationwide movement owing to the wide dispersal of Syrian minority groups, which rendered political unity and ultimately, the formation of a Syrian national identity, nearly impossible.

The formal divisions were accompanied by further strategies to ensure intercommunal fractures. Firstly, the Sunni Syrian population were subject to higher taxes and unable to access the larger development subsidies that the Alawite, Druze and other minority groups enjoyed (Ma'oz, 2014; Kaplan, 1993). Secondly, France encouraged the recruitment of Alawites, Druzes, Kurds and Circassians into their *Troupes Spéciales du Levant* [Special Troops of the Levant, tasked with maintaining order] (Tucker, 2016; Kaplan,

1993; Dam, 2011). These troops were used, for example, against Muslim rebels and the Christian population during the 1925 revolt (Ma'oz, 2014; Kaplan, 1993).

Two particular implications associated with France's strategic approach adversely impacted on Syria's future prospects for national unity. Firstly, the policies created resentment among Syrians, especially Sunnis who were subject to higher taxes and not only under colonial domination, but also patrolled by the residing minorities. This is reiterated by Kerr (2015: 10), who notes that Alawites were "despised for their disloyalty" to Greater Syria and Arab Nationalism. The French divisive strategies contributed to Syrian societal dislocation, and France achieved its goal of preventing the progression of Arab nationalism and political unity in Syria. Thus, rather than "facilitating progressive development" as the League of Nations (1923: 177) prescribed, the French accepted the consequence of exacerbated societal fractures in order to suppress Arab nationalism and inhibit Syrian unity, ultimately, to maintain control of the region. Consequently, following the French decampment in 1946, Syria was subject to deep political and societal instability, up until the last military coup that brought in Hafez al-Assad, due to the competing sub-identities and nationalisms that could not achieve nationwide backing (Jebb, 2004; Moubayed, 2006; Gelvin, 2005). Explicitly, the French enhancement of Syrian societal dislocation prevented any trace of unity, and ultimately, no single political or social movement could be embraced by the nation since internal Syrian divisions had been institutionalised for nearly a quarter of a century.

The second implication refers to the specific ethno-religious appointments within the *Troupes Spéciales du Levant*, this had lasting implications for Syrian politics, for it engendered the rise of the BASP to power. The policy engendered more Alawites to pursue a military career, which created an overrepresentation of the Alawites within the military, which ultimately, spilled over into politics (Jorum, 2014) and became the means by which political power was attained. Following the French decampment, Syria witnessed numerous military coups, thus shaping the way in which power was attained in independent Syria. Following the 1963 coup, the BASP held an increasing monopoly of power and after 1966, the military elements within the party rose (Charlcraft, 2016). To conclude, a legacy of the French Mandate continues to linger as a consequence of France's self-motivated, divisive strategies, which sequentially, paved the way for the BASP and the Assad dynasty. The primary observation here, has been encapsulated aptly by McHugo(2014: 28) who writes that the chaos of parliamentary life in Syria under the Mandate and post-independence "is part of the story of descent into dictatorship". The significance of this lies in the humanitarian reality of Syria's recent history: namely, the human rights abuses committed by both Hafez and Bashar al-Assad for nearly half a century (Human Rights Watch, 1996; 2018; Macleod & Flamand, 2011; Black, 2010). The French Mandate inflamed societal dislocation and ultimately, left Syria in a state in which it was unable to attain real stability.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that the implications of French self-interested, divisive policies on a society previously susceptible to intercommunal divisions were detrimental. It has been shown that the little societal unity during the Ottoman rule appears to have been worsened through French divisive strategies. Indeed, the Mandate hindered the progression of Arab nationalism and prohibited national unity. The long-term implication of the French military recruitment policies with respect to the proportional growth of the Alawites within the armed forces that sequentially, brought the BASP to power, can be understood. The sectarian nature of the French Mandate precedes Hafez al-Assad's enforced identity stability.

In subsequent articles the authors explore the influence of Hafez-al-Assad and the present ruler Bashar al-Assad's in the development of Syria, the rise of Syranism and the place of Islamism in Syrian history.

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