

THE SYRIAN WAR:
RELIGIOUS & POLITICAL REPRESENTATIONS

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Introduction: the Syrian war in the wider context of Arab uprisings

The popular uprising in Syria, which was mostly ignited in the south of the country (Dar‘a), quickly took the form of a violent and extensive conflict, which soon became an open civil war. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, some 160,000 deaths have occurred since March 2011, but they are probably much more if we include the disappeared persons, plus all those who died out of malnutrition and disease because of the appalling sanitary conditions. This uprising if, in many instances, began peacefully, also sometimes adopted – and this from the very beginning – a verbal (and even physical) attitude which was very aggressive against the non Sunni religious communities (the Alawites in the first place because of their links with the regime, the other Islamic sects, perceived as collusive with the political system, and the Christians for similar reasons plus their purported hostility to Islam).²

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Another issue has to be considered: the uprising did not exclusively take place within the Arab part of the population (thus antagonizing Sunnis against Alawites on political as well as on religious lines) but also included the Kurds, this Syrian ethnic group (some 10% of the population) having promptly jumped onto the train of contestation in order to advance specific claims for autonomy (and even pro-independence demands). Thus, in spite of the – very late – public declared intention to naturalize some 300,000 Kurds living in Syria (but for the fact that only about 6,000 finally got identity cards by decree), in April 2011, the regime proved unable to prevent the Kurds from protesting and organizing. In October 2011, the Kurdish National Council in Syria was created to support the democratic claims put forward in other parts of the country. Yet, the local branch of the PKK (the Workers' Party of Kurdistan), the PYD, did not join the demonstrations and even prevented, sometimes very violently, fellow Kurds from opposing the regime's forces, in the hope that they could make in the end a good deal for the autonomy of Kurdistan, as in Iraq. Therefore, the different Kurdish factions have trodden a delicate path between tactically collaborating with Damascus, siding with protesters all over the country, and struggling against Arab (Islamist and nationalist) armed groups. But this thorny sub-conflict, which has a dynamic of its own, based on Kurdish aversion for the Arab sense of superiority as well as on fierce infighting, will not be thoroughly studied here since the problem is mostly ethnic and political, with few significant religious characteristics.

If there is no doubt that the regional context of the contestation (Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya) had a quasi-immediate effect in launching the Syrian crisis, one should not forget that the political, social, economic, religious, etc., frustrations were not only numerous and latent but also ready to flare up, under the pressure of an internal dynamic that can be defined as follows: the sharing of power which was (viewed as) totally inequitable (and working for the benefit of a minority religious community: the Alawites³) and the pressure of socioeconomic injustices which were (perceived as) blatant. But whereas some solutions, more or less consensual, were found elsewhere – in Tunisia and Egypt with free elections, in Yemen with the negotiated departure of the president, in Morocco with a constitutional reform controlled by the king, in Algeria with soothing economic measures, in Saudi Arabia with the purchase of social peace owing to gigantic subventions,⁴ no institutional process in Syria has so far allowed the crisis to calm down, and no political solution is in sight (the talks in Geneva have been more about squabbling and procrastinating rather than negotiating).⁵

It is thus interesting to ponder over the contradictions of the ‘Arab Spring’: through the expression of legitimate requests, the peoples have shown that their rights could no longer be denied. But the implementation of radical solutions in some instances (like the fall of the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes) have pushed some to believe that such sweeping transitions were possible elsewhere, whereas a little bit of realism should have indicated that any peaceful political evolution in Syria could only have been slow and controlled

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in order for the country not to sink into chaos, which is the case today. The Arab Spring has thus articulated very legitimate claims except that they were unachievable on the short term in Syria, unless the regime had been willing to engage into a progressive reform guaranteeing the security of the Alawite community and the preeminence of the army on public life, with a certain amount of political liberty expected to develop with time (more or less similar to what has happened in Turkey for over a decade). One could therefore say that the various Arab uprisings have had a negative effect on Syria (people killed, hurt, imprisoned, tortured, moved, plus the material losses) while trying to profoundly refashion an iniquitous but stable balance of coercion, which implied strictly controlled inter-confessional relationships.

The religious factor as a structuring element of the conflict

The importance of the religious factor has been deliberately minimized by the Syrian opposition in exile (especially the Syrian National Coalition, or SNC)⁶ since it wanted to give the impression that the whole people was united against the regime, and that the crisis was not a religious conflict but, on the contrary, a political fight encompassing all the communities (the Alawites amongst them) constituting the nation, whereas the reality on the ground has indicated – more and more overtly – the contrary ever since the very beginning. When the protests erupted, the demonstrations against the Syrian regime did not focus on religious and community differences but called

at first for the reform of the system and then, some time later, for its downfall (with the execution of the president), but very often from a patriotic stance which endeavored to federate all the people living on the national territory, but with the notable exception of some slogans and behaviors full of sectarian hatred.⁷

The regime, in order not to present itself as a system functioning for the sole benefit of a single community, and more precisely for the unique advantage of a small group belonging to the Alawite community (allied to the – Sunni – bourgeoisie for business matters), exerted itself to present the crisis as a conflict between a nationalist regime fiercely opposed to terrorist groups supported by foreign powers (and linked to al-Qa‘ida). All the pro-government media adopted the same stance.⁸ The regime did not put forward the hardly contestable (although rather limited at first) religious dimension of the protest⁹ in order not to alienate the Sunni part of the population which could still have been, if not favorable to it, at least not too hostile, and to give the illusion that the whole Syrian people supported it in its (ferocious) fight against ‘terrorist’ elements. But facts betrayed these voluntarily non religious representations: a huge presence of the Muslim Brotherhood¹⁰ within the opposition in exile and armed groups on the ground making use of an Islamic-nationalist speech (and even advocating *jihad*), on the one hand, *versus* almost exclusively Alawite armed units faithful to the regime, on the other.

Rapidly confronted with a real and intensifying jihadist threat (bombings, etc.), the regime started to modify its representation of the crisis through attempts to oppose a moderate and tolerant

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national form of Islam (in majority Sunni yet including all the other tendencies), which it pretended to represent and protect, to a violent and exclusive rival brand, imported and financed from abroad.¹¹ In March 2013, the Republic's grand mufti and the regime's rather discredited creature, Ahmad Badr al-Din Hassun, launched an appeal to all loyal Syrians to perform *jihād* in order to protect the Muslim *umma*, the Arab nation, and the national territorial integrity from foreign expansionist and Zionist plots.¹² Yet it clearly seems that the ranks were breaking even within the Alawite community, especially for young people who did not want to die for the Asad clan, as in Qardaha (the family's birthplace) after the promulgation of the *fatwa* when the military police required youngsters to join the army, which some vigorously refused.¹³ The grand mufti's *fatwa* was anyway quickly declared totally null and void by the Association of Syrian religious scholars which condemned 'Asad's forces and the Alawite community' for wreaking irremediable havoc on the Syrian nation.¹⁴

The assassination by mid-March 2013 of a senior cleric, sheikh Muhammad Said Ramadan al-Buti,¹⁵ along with some fifty people who died in an explosion¹⁶ while attending a prayer he was performing in a Damascene mosque, hurt the regime in such a way that it probably lost its last credible ally among the Sunni religious elite. A stalwart traditionalist and quietist devotee, hostile to secular Baathist ideology,¹⁷ al-Buti, in a weird and old alliance with the Asad family, encouraged the regime to 'cleanse' the country of Salafi zealots. When demonstrations started in March 2011, al-Buti gave credence to the regime, which denounced a 'Zionist conspiracy'.

Shortly before his murder, al-Buti was still encouraging the faithful to wage *jihad* in the ranks of the Syrian army (compared once to the Companions of the Prophet) in order to defeat the would-be conspiracy against Syria. Whoever is responsible, the bombing of a mosque could only further radicalize an already sectarian conflict.¹⁸ And whereas the Syrian president accused the ‘obscurantist and unfaithful’ forces (*i.e.* the rebels), the then opposition’s leader and cleric Ahmad Moaz al-Khatib condemned such an attack against a place of worship, and pointed his finger at the regime (which could well have planned the killing to prevent Buti’s defection).

Sometime later (end of May 2013), in an attempt to show that the regime could still be viewed as the only legitimate representative of moderate and tolerant Islam as well as the sole bulwark against jihadism, a secret meeting took place in Barcelona between sheikh Hassun and American delegates (some of whom also held an Israeli citizenship). The Republic’s mufti seized this occasion to stress the willingness of his government to cooperate in order to fight and even eradicate what both countries perceive as terrorist groups.¹⁹

The (professional) core of the governmental armed forces is essentially Alawite: some 70% of regular soldiers and a huge amount of senior officers out of more than a thousand. This body, made of around 70,000 men at the beginning of the insurrection (probably less than 50,000 now), includes units that staunchly support the regime (like the 3rd and 4th divisions or the Republican Guard). When also counting the conscription army (that includes recruits from all communities but for the fact that many elements have defected and

that Sunni brigades are scarcely engaged for fear of desertion), the total would make about 300,000 soldiers, or a little less. The security services (almost exclusively made of Alawites, some tens of thousands of people) and the militias (or *shabbiha*, with many Alawites but not only, some 100,000 persons) should finally be added. Rough figures indicate that some 135,000 soldiers, intelligence officers, and militiamen have been killed since March 2011, about half of them being Alawite.²⁰ Plus (mostly) Shiite foreign fighters, some of them mercenaries, others volunteers: around 40,000 from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Afghanistan; and finally, some Russian advisers and soldiers. Yet an important amount of absconding has occurred among Alawite soldiers and officers, which clearly indicates that the conflict between the regime and the non-Islamist rebel groups is sometimes more political than religious.²¹

On the opposite side, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) used to regroup the bulk of the fighters: about 60% (at its highest) out of some 150,000 rebels, the majority of them being Sunnis, until the attractiveness of other more equipped Islamist groups progressively depleted its ranks and the creation of the Islamic Front in late 2013 stroke a decisive blow to its predominance. If the FSA has adopted a more nationalistic stance or less secular one although stamped with religious references (in variable proportions according to the places), other smaller but well equipped fighting groups that are clearly Islamist²² when not openly jihadist²³ would have joined. The combative Islamist posture of some FSA-affiliated brigades, which occasionally conveys an aggressive attitude towards Alawites *per se*,

combined with the militant speech and the intimidating behavior of a few FSA groups – to the point that one may even speak of ‘Free Syrian secret services’ which behave in some circumstances as arbitrarily as the regime’s intelligence agencies do, though on a larger scale for the latter – have helped the ‘official’ authorities to portray their adversaries as intolerant and fanatical so-called Muslims who want to slay coreligionists, as well as domineering and tyrannical fighters who reject law and order.²⁴ Foreign fighters, not numerous (probably more than 5% of the rebels?), have seen a regular increase in numbers with an over-representation of jihadists. And as far as (Syrian and non-native) elements performing *jihad* are concerned, they certainly constitute more than 10% of all fighters.

Albeit statistics are scarcely available, the following religion-based figures can be advanced: Sunnis (from the Hanafi and Shafi‘i schools) form some 70 (and even 75%) of the population, Christians are about 10% (some say a bit more, others less: down to 5%, due to emigration because of the war), Alawites are between 12 and 20% (although the latter figure could be exaggerated), Murshidites (an almost centenary scission from Alawites with whom they are often erroneously amalgamated) stand for some 1.5%, each of the Druse and Ismaili communities represents some 1 to 3%, and there are finally very few Imami Shiites. According to ethnic criteria, Kurds are between 10 and 15%, Armenians some 3% (or less after escaping the war-ravaged country), as much as the Turkomans and the Circassians united. Lastly, between 60 and 65% are Sunni Arabs. One can easily see from the approximate demographic data based on religion and

ethnicity as well as from the figures pertaining to the composition of the various armed forces that the Syrian crisis holds a clearly pronounced sectarian character: the governmental armed forces are mostly run by officers and soldiers from the Alawite minority (aided by foreign Shiite coreligionists), whereas the armed opposition groups contain very predominantly Sunni elements.

The Alawite ‘religion’ and the traditional hostility of Sunnism

The Alawite ‘religion’ can be considered as an offshoot from Imami Shiism.²⁵ According to biased and unfriendly medieval Sunni sources, the Alawite cosmogony would see in Ali (Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law) the embodiment of divinity, and he would occupy a preeminent place in the trinity constituted by the essence of the ineffable divinity and of its two hypostases: the prophetic voice that reveals to human beings the sense of life (Muhammad) and the initiator to the religious mysteries (a companion, Salman). This forms the thesis which sustains that the body of an imam can be the receptacle of divinity (*hulul*). The Alawite doctrine would believe in palingenesis (or regeneration) and metempsychosis (or migration of souls, *tanasukh*), temporary for chosen people but eternal for damned ones, the Milky Way being constituted by the souls of believers who became stars according to esoteric ideas (derived from Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism) and reminiscences from old pagan (Phenician) cults, the entire creed having been remolded in a syncretic and monotheist (partly Christian) perspective. From what is (supposed to

be) known, the primacy would be given to allegoric interpretations of the sacred Koranic text, which would allow for the non-observation of the literal sense of the revealed law (antinomianism or *ibaha*): paucity of mosques, consumption of alcohol, lack of fasting, and unveiling of women,²⁶ permissiveness in the regularity of the canonical prayers, etc., all of this being viewed as very serious anomalies branded by Sunnism as evident proof of irreligiousness, whereas these singularities are mostly related to the centennial influence of a poor and marginalized socioeconomic environment. Their so-called doctrinal exaggeration thus had (and partly still has) them classified within the loathed category of extremist and schismatic Shiites (*ghulat*).

Whatever the judgments of the medieval manuscripts on them, there is in the first place absolutely no evidence of a general continuity from the past to the present concerning their creeds and practices – that were and still are disparaged as heretical – all the more so since the building process of the modern Syrian state globally transformed the Alawites into a very secular community (through the army, the civil service, etc.). This community has thus largely been crossed by non-religious ideologies such as Arab nationalism (mostly in its Baathist version), communism, etc., which generates the following paradox: the accusation of schismatic heresy has been directed against the group that is probably the more secular (even if it can be assumed that heterodox beliefs still exist, particularly in the poorest and less educated segments of the community).

In order to condemn what he considered as outrageous doctrinal deviancies deserving the capital punishment, the Sunni theologian of Hanbali rite Ibn Taymiyya (who died in Damascus in 1328) promulgated against them a *fatwa* (a juridical opinion) that anathematized this community and called for its extermination on the ground of both conspiracy with the Christians (the Crusaders) and apostasy.²⁷ Let us cite some significant passages of this *fatwa* that launched a warlike appeal for collective murder: ‘[...] These people called Nusayriyya,²⁸ they and the other kinds of Qarmatians, the Batinis, are more heretical than the Jews and the Christians and even more than several heterodox groups [...] since they [Nusayris and other Batinis] are pretending before the uneducated Muslims that they are Shiis and loyal to the People of the House [*ahl al-bayt*] but in reality they do not believe in God, in his messenger, in his holy book, in obligation or prohibition, [they do not believe] in reward and punishment, in paradise and hell, or in any of the messengers prior to Muhammad [...] nor in one of the previous religions [prior to Islam].²⁹ [...] These Durziyya and Nusayriyya are heretics according to [the judgment of] all Muslims; their [methods] of slaughter are not permitted for eating nor [can a Muslim] marry their women. They refuse to pay the *jizya* [poll tax] and are considered *murtaddun* [sing. *murtadd*, apostate]. [...] They do not accept the obligations of the five prayers, the fast of Ramadan or the pilgrimage.³⁰ [...] These [Nusayris] should be fought as long as they resist, until they accept the law of Islam. [...] Their fighters should be killed and their prop-

erty should be confiscated. [...] They should be compelled to obey Islamic law; if they refuse they must be killed.³¹ [...]

Another scaring *fatwa* has to be recalled: that of Nuh Afandi al-Hanafi al-Hamidi, the Ottoman state's *sheikh al-islam*, which was promulgated in 1638. Here are some excerpts: 'Keep in mind that these renegades (*kafara*), oppressors (*bughat*), and debauched people (*fajara*) combine all the forms of impiety (*kufir*), infringement (*baghy*), and obduracy (*inad*) as well as the manifestations of depravity (*fisq*), Manichaeism (*zandaqa*), and heresy (*ilhad*). Those who tolerate their godlessness (*kufir*) and their heterodoxy (*ilhad*), whereas it is incumbent [upon the believers] to fight them and permissible to kill them, are infidels (*kafir*) like them. [...] Concerning the iniquity, they rose against the obedience due to the imam [...] for God said: {[...] Fight ye (all) against the one that transgresses until it complies with the command of God. [...]}³² This order is imperious. [...] They mock at religion and scoff at the clear divine law. [...] They deem licit what is forbidden and soil what is sacred. [...] They are infidels (*kafirun*) who estimate that the great Koran is false and who publicly insult the Prophet [...] through attributing this monumental event to his kin. [...] It thus falls [to the believers] to eliminate these execrable (*ashrar*), irreligious (*kuffar*), and profligate (*fujjar*) people, may they repent or not, since it is not licit to let them as they are, [even] against the payment of the tribute (*jizya*), nor to grant them a safeguarding (*aman*), be it temporary or permanent. It is allowed to reduce their women to bondage since the servitude of the apostate (*murtadda*) [...] is licit. [...]'³³

Useless to say, these *fatwas* and likewise anathematizing opinions were forbidden in Syria (at least before the chaos which started in March 2011) and could therefore only be found in private or very specific libraries. Just one example to show that present perceptions are highly inspired by medieval representations: Islamist and jihadist propaganda speaks more of the ‘Nusayri army’ than of the ‘regime army’, which would be more neutral.

A history loaded with sectarian blood spilling

In order to better understand the religion-related stakes on which the different media have built their views, we need to evoke a history that shows all too well the acuteness of a secular antagonism between Alawites and Sunnis, indeed even between Alawites and other minorities (especially the Ismailis with whom they share historical, theological, and geographical common points). After the 1305 *fatwa* started a series of aggressions, the bloodiest of which will be mentioned: the 1317 Alawite revolt led to a repression commanded by the Mamluk sultan (some 20,000 dead plus the obligation to build a mosque in each village); the 1344 military expedition in the Alawite region; the 1516 repression by the Ottoman sultan Selim (some 10,000 dead); the 1805 bloody confrontation between Alawite and Ismaili peasants (plus 1806, 1808, 1809, 1811, 1816, 1900); the 1811 four-month-long siege of the Alawite mountain by the Ottoman army; the 1832-1841 crushing of the Alawite resistance by Muhammad Ali’s Egyptian army; the many attacks of the Alawite country by Ot-

toman forces (1834, 1847, 1858, 1870, and 1877).

The theoretical end of internecine massacres after the promulgation of the 1909 Ottoman law on religious freedom calmed the old climate of mutual aggressions. The French mandate (1920-1946) also contributed to ease the community tensions, which nonetheless continued to exist, and encouraged the military promotion of Alawite, Druse, and Ismaili officers within what was to become the new national armed forces. After independence, the conservative political forces (which were aided by military rulers) did not create a situation where the Sunni animosities against the minorities could be exacerbated, in the sense that the traditional order was maintained (dominance of the Sunni landowners and bourgeoisie). But after the Baathist takeover in February 1963, the minorities (among them the Alawites) started to break away from their ancestral marginalization since the new regime included many officers from the edged out communities, and these are the ones that began their ascension in the state's apparatus.

In the spring of 1964, a wave of nationalizations initiated by the secular, socialist, and Arabist Baath ended in fierce urban demonstrations that started in Hama (where a call to *jihad* was launched, which caused the shelling of the great mosque by governmental forces). The same troubles happened a year later. In February 1966, a Baathist internal coup modified the composition of the regime, that became increasingly and virulently pan-Arabist and vehemently Marxist. But the excesses of this adventurism led to another internal coup (November 1970) conducted by Hafiz al-Asad, the minister of

defense, who became president of the Republic. When a rather secular project of constitution was proposed in 1972-1973 (Islam did not have to be the state's religion), troubles erupted in the conservative Muslim part of the population, which compelled the regime to step back (Islam only needed to be the president's religion). From 1976 onwards, a strong political and religious Sunni opposition set the country ablaze with bomb attacks and assassinations. In June 1979, an attack against the Aleppo military academy resulted in the death of some 80 Alawite officer cadets. Riots in Aleppo and Hama ensued, and the repression left some 2,000 dead in Aleppo. The troubles extended to the south of Aleppo, in Jisr al-Shughur where some 150 civilians were killed (March 1980) after a violent Sunni opposition denouncing the regime as secularizing and thus irreligious. Arrests, tortures, and executions became common in this context of fierce community feuds and expeditious emergency justice. In June 1980, around 500 political Islamist prisoners were massacred in Palmyra prison after a failed assault on president Asad. Then, in April 1981, a collective slaughter (some 400 people dead) was carried out in Hama in retaliation for a bloody attack against a neighboring Alawite village.

The crisis culminated in February 1982 when an Islamist insurrection flared in Hama (with the killing of Alawites, Baathist members, and Christians) before being crushed by the regime's forces: a part of the city was totally destroyed and an unknown number of people were decimated (maybe up to 20,000 in about two weeks). This marked the end of the Muslim Brotherhood's opposition and

even existence in Syria for years to come. It is obvious that the memory of these sad events is very present in the minds of the antagonist sides today since the religious and political aspects of the conflict have rapidly become intertwined, with a mutual fear of collective vengeance, which events can barely refute. On a purely theological, doctrinal, and jurisprudential ground, and confronted by such religious attacks, a justification was carried out by many Alawite sheikhs as well as secular personalities (mainly) from the same community, with the regime's acquiescence. The purpose was to neutralize conservative Sunnism arguments, which considered Alawites as heretics, in order to protect the whole community in general and to ensure the durability of the system in particular. Many of these works were published in Syria during the 1990s, with relatively important publicity but without any visible influence on the Syrian Sunni part of the population, not to mention foreign Sunnism. Even the Lebanese Shiite clerical authorities do not seem to have given a lot of credit to these publications, which strove to justify the Islamic orthodox character of the Alawites.

The revivification of Sunni animosity *vis-à-vis* Shiism

The political tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran during the past decades have turned into a regional conflict between Sunnism and Shiism (which includes Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the Lebanon). With the exception of particular political stakes, this belligerence between Islam's two main trends is reminiscent of the ancient

wars between Catholics and Protestants that continued until a not too remote period of Europe's history, with all of the preposterous creeds and irrational behaviors that these tensions brought with them (that is, the raucous and degrading execration of a part of humankind for abstruse Byzantine reasons).

It may thus seem that many Sunni preachers (among whom, Syrians³⁴) have tried to revive the religious animosity of yore, one of them being the sheikh of Egyptian origin Yusuf Qaradawi who more than once branded the Syrian regime as criminal on the grounds of political disagreements as well as of doctrinal divergences, but without mentioning the atrocities committed by some Sunni rebels.³⁵ The initial silence of the Qatari channel al-Jazeera – Qaradawi's favorite rostrum – on Syrian events (so as not to hurt Damascus for political as well as financial interests) was broken after a few weeks by this preacher on this television channel, which carried subsequently a fatal blow to the relations between Syria and Qatar. Since then, it clearly seems that the coverage of events by al-Jazeera has been radically modified to vilify the Syrian regime, depicted as criminal. One should moreover note that Qaradawi has apparently not taken a public stance against the fierce repression implemented by Bahrain (owing to Saudi foreign troops and Pakistani mercenaries) to silence the national unrest, but he has on the contrary qualified the Shiite opponents of people spreading ill-feeling and discord despite the fact that the discriminations towards them clearly appear to be numerous.³⁶

Another influential Sunni preacher, the Egyptian Safwat Higazi, close to the Muslim Brotherhood and furthermore president of

the Association of Sunni clerics, promulgated (March 2012) a *fatwa* calling for the murder of president Asad, while even making it clear that whoever had access to him without attempting to assassinate him committed a deadly sin. Slaughtering Bashar al-Asad, according to him, was thus the concern of the entire Muslim nation. Other similar *fatwas* have been issued like the one put forward by the Islamic Legitimate Body of Rights and Reformation (an independent body of Muslim scholars) under the pretext that the Syrian government armed forces do not respect the sacredness of the mosques, kill innocent civilian lives, and rampage about the country, yet with a noticeable underestimation of the virulence of some armed groups fighting the regime and occasionally (purposely or not) killing innocent people as well.³⁷ Safwat Higazi has moreover made some inflammatory remarks against Egypt's Copts as well as against Shiite religious figures, going so far as to threaten a Shiite Kuwaiti religious leader with death.³⁸

Another preacher to mention is Adnan al-Aroor, native of Hama and a former soldier from the Syrian army³⁹ who fled the country during the ferocious repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s. Living in exile in Saudi Arabia, he has become a Wahhabi cleric quite easily advocating the excommunication (*takfir*) of his adversaries. Pointing to the non-Sunni schools and tendencies of Islam, he has subjected the Alawite community to public obloquy, taking up again Ibn Taymiyya's *fatwa*. By the middle of the 2000s, he started running a program on TV Wisal, a Kuwaiti channel, and has said in a recent broadcast that he divides the Alawites into three

categories: those who have supported the opposition, those who have remained neutral (and to whom no wrong will be done), and those who have collaborated with the regime, the fate of the last being the following: ‘Those who sully sacred things will go through the chopper and their flesh will be fed to dogs.’⁴⁰ If the leadership of the FSA was rather hostile to him at the beginning, it finally got close to him (end of 2012) because of his rising ideological influence within rebel ranks as well as due to much needed military Saudi backing. Saudi media, for their part, describe him as a rather moderate personality who is simply calling for peaceful protest.⁴¹ Aroor also appears regularly on the widely watched satellite channel al-Safa (broadcast from Saudi Arabia) where he is known for his programs criticizing non-Sunni Islamic minorities fighting with the Syrian government. Out of a surge of Arab chauvinism, the sheikh has also warned Syrian Kurds against any wishful impulse for autonomy.⁴² Some moderate Syrian clerics criticize his radicalism while other Sunni scholars (like the Saudi sheikh Salih al-Fawzan) view him as an impostor. Regardless of his theological standing and media artfulness, he has recently launched virulent attacks against the al-Qa‘ida-loosely linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) whose unbending interpretation of Islam and transnational military strategy oppose both national religious traditions and Saudi interests.⁴³

Besides, ISIL, created in Iraq in 2006 and active in Syria since 2013, a fanatical jihadist movement more involved in interne-cine strife against challenging (Arab and Kurdish) armed groups, and also implicated in numerous acts of violence against civilians (‘revo-

lutionary' looting, repression, torture, and murder), whereas its military record against governmental troops is poor (for it aims in the first place at controlling a vast expanse of (oil-rich) land in the north and north-east, not at fighting around Damascus or in other contested zones), has nevertheless been used by the Syrian regime as a scapegoat to justify the repression against the opposition (armed or not), globally depicted as the embodiment of Islamist terrorism. The assumption that ISIL is empowering the sectarian divisions in Syria is questionable for two reasons: firstly, ISIL is for a large part a foreign group, operating in a region with no huge concentration of government forces, and because the sectarian splits are anterior to its activity in Syria.

Without attempting to reach exhaustiveness, let us cite another preacher, the Saudi cleric Salih al-Luhaydan who has recently declared that a third of the Syrian people (probably, according to him, the Alawites in addition to the Christians, the Ismailis, and the Druze) could be killed if this ensured the security of the two remaining thirds (certainly the Sunnis).⁴⁴ Last but not least, the Lebanese preacher from Saida, Ahmad al-Asir, who was first affiliated to the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, then to the Pakistani Tabligh movement, and then to salafism, has publicly said that the Alawites were slaughtering Sunnis, a stern and poorly balanced statement on the Syrian civil war that the local media passed on for different reasons. More generally, it is clear that all the Sunni reactionary media (those of the *salafi* brand like al-Hikma TV, al-Nas TV, etc., plus similar sites on the web) actively diffuse this kind of

hostile messages against the Syrian regime, perceived (not without any evidence) as related to one single community, itself stigmatized as heretical and despicable.

The media's political role

As religion is often exploited for political aims, overtly or insidiously, by the Arab regimes that get a part of their legitimacy from Islam, it seems important to analyze the political role devoted to the media as well as to ponder over their religious impact since, in most cases, religion only aims at consolidating stances related to political and economic matters (with concrete material interests, not connected to spirituality). Many media that could be described as 'Arab and Sunni' have extensively covered since the spring of 2011 the misdeeds and crimes of the Syrian government armed forces.⁴⁵ And the more these media are sensitive to conservative or even reactionary Sunnism, the more virulent their critics are against president Asad's regime, sometimes with a direct religious condemnation. On the contrary, the same media are more reticent to show the abuses committed by the rebel factions against the government military (like the torture of war prisoners and their execution in dubious conditions), the militiamen (only viewed as thieves and murderers, which they truly often are), and even civilians from the minorities (whenever they are considered as informers). The many media hostile to Damascus thus contribute to the creation of a consensus, within the (Arab and Muslim) public opinion, which suggests that no controversy

should reasonably be raised about the criminal nature of the Syrian regime.

Al-Jazeera, the Qatari channel created in 1996, derives its informative value from the presence of various correspondents in numerous dangerous places, as well as from resorting to local informers hidden in war zones who communicate via the internet. These networks of professional and amateur journalists offer an incommensurable window into understanding what is going on. Yet the regions still loyal to the Syrian regime are not covered,⁴⁶ which renders the presentation of facts unbalanced. The good relations between Qatar and Syria deteriorated after March 2011, which was reflected in al-Jazeera's programs, because of a very clumsy management of the crisis by the Syrian authorities (declarations of appeasement which did not match the ferocity of the repression) and humanitarian motives (the impossibility of remaining insensible in front of such a blind and collective quelling). Whereas Qatar got close to Iran in the 1990s to escape from the pressure exerted by Saudi Arabia, and subsequently stroke up relations with Syria at the beginning of the 2000s (which allowed this country to break out of its isolation after the murder of ex-premier Hariri in 2005), the Syrian crisis has been the occasion to redirect the Emirate's diplomacy towards Saudi Arabia,⁴⁷ with the relinquishing of the privileged ties formed with president Asad's regime (and incidentally with Iran). Although religious affinities do not appear to be predominant in this new partnership, one should nevertheless admit that a Sunni axis has been built between

Doha and Riad (with the addition of Ankara) to bolster the (predominantly Sunni) Syrian opposition and counter Teheran's ambitions.⁴⁸

France 24 TV channel offers a coverage that is rather unfavorable to Damascus, thus reflecting the official position of the French government that is torn between conflicting considerations: a decade-old relationship with Bashar which has turned into an irreversible disgust for the atrocities he can be held responsible for on one side, and a fear that the regime's (chemical) arsenal may fall into the hands of jihadists (as in Libya) on the other. The French broadcasting radio station RFI (Radio France International) has adopted the same stance. It seems that neither France 24 nor RFI have focused on the religious element in order not to inflame an already complex conflict by considerations other than political, in the sense that religious beliefs and community allegiances are difficult to overlook since they are organically related to primordial identities, whereas political disputes may (at least theoretically) always find some sort of solutions.⁴⁹ The religious paradigm is thus viewed as an useless focus on insuperable and fierce antagonisms. The non-religious treatment of the war has also been motivated by the fact that the French authorities can hardly contemplate to see the entire Alawite community (which cannot reasonably be collectively accused of active complicity with the regime's savagery) defamed, marginalized, and brutalized, and refuse to see the Christians presented as (even passive) collaborators and consequently chastised.

It has to be highlighted that the French mandate in the Levant (1920-1946) outrageously favored the minorities to better dominate

the country: a separate Alawite statelet was created (1922-1936) to weaken the Syrian nationalist forces, and Alawites were moreover recruited into the mandatory security apparatus (before it became the national army after independence). Quite similarly, France never loosened its efforts to protect the Christians living in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine because it is morally and legally responsible for the Levant's Catholics ever since the treaty between king François Ist and the Ottoman sultan Soliman (1536). One of the fears that prevent the French government (and the state media) from branding the confessional argument in order to explain the random violence lies maybe less in compassion for the Syrian Christians' fate than in the brewing dangers which threaten the Lebanese Maronites if war were to set aglow in Lebanon.

More generally, it seems that the majority of the foreign (Western) media have adopted a rather cautious stance towards the Syrian Christians as well as *vis-à-vis* the other religious minorities (Druze and Ismailis essentially), given the fact that the conflict looks inextricable, that these minorities are not collectively responsible for the regime's roughness and lawlessness, and that they will necessarily be part of the hoped for political solution (which means that their sensibilities and anxieties must be respected). On the other hand, the salafi and jihadi media forcibly utter obstreperous critics and threatening admonishments in the hope that these minorities will rapidly distance themselves more sharply from the regime, which would therefore be doomed to fall shortly. The visit of the Lebanese Maronite patriarch to Damascus (February 2013) was thus covered in an

ambivalent way: was he attempting to morally legitimize the regime (as a so-called traditional protector of non-Sunnis) or merely transmitting an apostolic message of faith to all Christians in such hard times? Finally, the presence in France of many Syrian opponents, regularly invited by the media to comment on the Syrian conflict, offers a political (rather than religious) analysis of the crisis since they are on the whole secular-minded. For different reasons, the far right political party, the National Front, which struggles against the rising influence of Islam in France, stands almost alone since it opposes any foreign intervention in Syria, firstly on the ground of the ‘intangible principle of national sovereignty’ which its ideology professes, and secondly because any eventual interference to help topple the regime would probably benefit the more radical Islamist fighters.⁵⁰

Religious representations: towards consensus or controversy?

Media like al-Jazeera that have endeavored from the very beginning to tarnish the Syrian regime and counter its propaganda have undoubtedly adopted positions sympathetic to the Islamist main trend represented by the Muslim brotherhood, which has tried to dominate the opposition in exile.⁵¹ If it has met a large echo among anti-government Syrians, this channel has been perceived by the other Syrians as a very biased media striving to create chaos in order to promote obscure and doubtful interests. The religious character of the conflict has also been strengthened in June 2013 when the Saudi Su-

preme Committee for the Pilgrimage decided to bestow exclusively on the SNC, the political body in exile, the prestigious responsibility of organizing the *hajj* to Mecca, which concerns some 20,000 Syrians each year. Five offices outside Syria and three within the 'liberated' territories have been open, and they are the only agencies accredited by the Saudis to promulgate the necessary permits, in what stands for a fierce political rivalry about the monopoly of this paramount canonical Islamic duty.⁵²

The creation in November 2013 of the Islamic Front, financed by Turkey and Qatar with the patronage of Saudi Arabia, has changed the military situation since the seven armed groups which compose it comprise altogether between 50 and 80,000 fighters, more than the mildly Islamist and nationalist-inclined FSA, and may offer a credible Islamist alternative (oscillating between the Brotherhood and salafism) to the dreadful global jihadists (like Jabhat al-Nusra or JN, and even more ISIL). On the battlefield, since the Brotherhood has only recently been able to organize itself into a single powerful military protagonist,⁵³ much of the weaponry has gone to visible and radical (jihadi) groups (like Liwa al-tawhid and Ahrar al-Sham) which have been legitimized through their militant prowess and (not always neutral) foreign press reporting. The Islamic Front's ferocious battle against ISIL has been hailed by the Aleppo clerics as a victory on 'whom has never submitted to God's law [...] nor handed over the criminals to sharia courts.'⁵⁴ The Mujahidin Army, recently (end of 2013) organized in the north-west and which comprises eight fighting groups, has also engaged in fierce warfare

against ISIL to drive it out of Syria on the grounds that it has ‘outraged God’s power’ and has spread ‘corruption and civil strife’ among Syrians and Muslims.⁵⁵ These two military initiatives, apart from the tactical changes they may create on the battlefield, will certainly alter the internal and foreign perceptions about the actors’ nationalist and religious credentials.

The president of the Damascus-based Muslim Clerics’ Association, Usama Rifa‘i, a pious and revered preacher from the capital’s suburbs, has gone through (sometimes violent) tribulations which may reflect both the complexity and the worsening of the situation. Having at first urged his followers not to protest violently – or even not at all – and remain meek, while softly criticizing the regime with purely moral exhorting,⁵⁶ he was shortly afterward assaulted by some Alawite militia in his mosque and badly wounded whereas the worshippers were severely beaten and viciously abused,⁵⁷ in spite of his unheeded calls for help to some ‘friendly’ intelligence service.⁵⁸ More recently, conscious of the fact that the situation has dangerously deteriorated and that (indirectly) supporting the regime (or in reality just tolerating it) may be the least bad option to ensure a minimum level of stability (for Damascene Sunni Muslims first and then for the country) in front of rising global jihadist threats, he has sternly maligned ISIL for ‘deeming permissible the spilling of Muslims’ blood’.⁵⁹ In so doing, he is one of the prominent and consensual personalities to have taken part in the reshuffling of the political and religious cards in the least possible controversial way. This may in a way have heartened the regime, although the latter has up to now

seemed to prefer a disastrous *modus vivendi* with ISIL, a scarecrow and one of the internal attrition tools directed against the whole armed rebellion, whose basis have been spared by the government air force's attacks.⁶⁰

If the Geneva talks (which ended in February 2014) have not scored any decisive goal for neither the regime nor the political opposition, since the former has used this forum for procrastinating while the other has endeavored to buttress its legitimacy, it nevertheless emerges from the diplomatic wrangling that the regime has succeeded in regaining a bit of much needed recognition, for it is – yet very cautiously and reluctantly – considered by Western chancelleries as an acceptable option so far as uncontrollable jihadists dominate the battleground. The Ma'an massacre (mid-February 2014), when some 50 Alawite civilians were slaughtered by jihadists who cut women's and children's throats in a retaliatory raid, sounded like a godsend for a regime at bay and in desperate need of sectarian barbarians to demonize.

¹ Senior lecturer (authorized to supervise researches) at the University of Le Havre (France) in Arabic language and civilization, Ph.D. in political science obtained from the Institut d'études politiques (IEP) de Paris.

² Very virulent threats were voiced during some demonstrations, like in Qatana (some 15 kilometres north-west of the capital), in the spring of 2011, against Alawites whose 'throats had to be slit' and Christians who had to be 'expelled from the country'. Similarly, some cases of sectarian murders (against Alawites and Ismailis) were reported (for instance near Masyaf, west of Hama), according to some field research we conducted in October 2011. Yet, these expressions of hatred were not as widespread as the regime pretended.

³ Whereas a huge amount of political prisoners used to be from the Alawite community, from 1970 onwards, which invalidates the thesis according to which this group has collectively benefited from the accession to power of Hafez al-Asad.

⁴ Around \$40 billion, according to different estimates.

⁵ During the beginning of 2011, some important measures of appeasement were taken by president Asad to calm down the crisis: cancellation of the state of emergency and authorization of peaceful demonstrations in April, general amnesty in May, multi-party system in August, etc. But the concomitant brutality of the crackdown has impeded any negotiated solution. A new general amnesty in October 2013, similarly, had almost no effect on the intensity of the protests, not to mention the June 2014 presidential elections (with three candidates) disparaged by the opposition. Will the general amnesty, which has been announced a few days after this election, and which may concern tens of thousands of jailed persons, be enough to create a climate propitious to genuine negotiations?

⁶ The opposition in exile had obviously much more leeway to organize and present a 'coherent' analysis of the conflict than the people struggling inside Syria, who were submitted to a brutal repression, which did not allow them to hold political gatherings.

⁷ See note 2. It is impossible to have a precise idea of this sectarian hatred, which remains in any case a peripheral element among a population who is rather tolerant, even though some trends of Syrian Sunnism are very conservative, and even reactionary. The author of these lines remembers, for instance, having listened a few years ago (before March 2011) to some sermons given in mosques situated in Qabun, a popular and traditional suburb of Damascus. As it was not conceivable to publicly excommunicate the Alawites, the preachers had only the (controlled) possibility to describe Christians as 'infidels and heretics'. Similarly, Alawite peasants in the Hama countryside admitted (during field research and interviews) their support for the regime, although they were poor and neglected by the central authorities, by fear of being 'slaughtered by Sunni extremists'. If the regime has, in a Machiavellian way, used this fear for political purpose, this feeling of alarm was nonetheless very real.

⁸ Like some private TV channels: Sama, al-Dunya, al-Ikhbariyya (Syria News), and the public ones. The private Syrian channel based in Dubai, Orient News, has covered the events quite differently since it appears to be a little more balanced and critical: it thus admits that atrocities have been committed but tries to distance the president from the carnage carried out by the official armed forces. For Arab News Network, the channel owned by Rif'at al-Asad (an uncle of the president with connections to Algeria and Saudi Arabia) and that broadcasts from London, the coverage is more critical, probably for internal family feuds about power. This chan-

nel may thus try to offer a credible alternative to the Alawite community (which pays a high tribute to the fighting), to the Syrian opposition (yet with dubious results because of Rif'at's previous involvement in the repression against the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1980s), and to the foreign countries which favor a political change, but without insisting too much on the rebellion's religious commitment. The ANNA news agency, based in the separatist part of Abkhazia (the irredentist claims of which are supported by Russia), is for its part rather famous for its footage of the Syrian conflict. Its diffusion of war images via the internet clearly indicates a bias in favor of the regime.

⁹ The majority of the Alawite community continues to support the regime whereas Christians are hesitant and divided (yet mildly supportive), like the Druses and Ismailis. On the contrary, Sunnis are on the whole (but with many exceptions) opposed to president Assad, for different reasons, in part religious. For the divisions within the body of the Sunni preachers, see http://www.academia.edu/1493604/The_Role_of_the_Mosque_in_the_Syrian_Revolution.

¹⁰ Raphaël LEFÈVRE, 'Révolution et violence en Syrie: l'héritage des Frères musulmans', in *Maghreb Machrek*, n° 213, Autumn 2012, p. 65-81.

¹¹ Like Jabhat al-Nusra, the jihadist organization formed between the end of 2011 and the beginning of 2012, the official al-Qa'ida's franchise in Syria, which is fiercely hostile to the Alawites, condescending towards the Christians, and responsible for many bombings (which killed civilians, purposely or not).

¹² <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/2013/03/13/chroniques-du-delitement-6-bachar-al-assad-en-appelle-au-jihad>.

¹³ <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=663305027029108&set=a.216769301682685.74668.216452971714318&type=1>.

¹⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=IHKdR5D4MZY.

¹⁵ Thomas PIERRET, *Baas et islam en Syrie. La dynastie Assad face aux oulémas*, Paris, PUF, 2011, 329 pages.

¹⁶ According to a video, the explosion may be fake since the people seem to have been killed by gunshots.

¹⁷ See Dr. Mohamed Saïd Ramadan AL-BOUTI, *Le jihad en islam. Comment le comprendre et comment le pratiquer?*, (translation by Mohamed Nabil Al-Khayat), Damascus, Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 328 pages.

¹⁸ <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/?p=18242>.

¹⁹ <http://all4syria.info/Archive/85590>.

²⁰ The following figures are just approximations, inferred from field research, interviews, and internet sites (through the matching up of available data with other informations). Fahd al-Masri, the speaker for the General Command of the Free Syrian Armed Forces, based in Paris, is one valuable source of information: <http://www.adnkronos.com/AKI/Arabic/Security/?id=3.2.1098461728>. Another one is the blog run by a former French diplomat, Ignace Leverrier: <http://syrie.blog.lemonde.fr/author/syrie>. See also Tam Hussein's investigations. And Stéphane VALTER, 'Rivalités et complémentarités au sein des forces armées: le facteur confessionnel en Syrie', in *Les Champs de Mars*, n° 23 (Winter 2011), dossier: *La place et le rôle des armées dans le monde arabe contemporain*, review of the Institut de recherche stratégique de l'École militaire, Paris, La Documentation Française, April 2012, 171 pages, p. 79-96. And 'La structuration des forces armées en Syrie par le facteur religieux', in *Moyen-Orient*, n° 17, January-March 2013, p. 34-39.

²¹ <http://all4syria.info/Archive/73461>, <http://all4syria.info/Archive/72951>.

²² Nur in Idlib, Dhu al-Nurayn and Malik in Homs, Tawhid in Aleppo, Suqur al-Sham in the west of Jabal Zawiya, Ansar al-Islam and Islam around Damascus, etc. (data from the beginning of 2013). See also the Ansar al-Sham battalions (near Latakia and Idlib): <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55066> (March 2014).

²³ Jabhat al-Nusra, Faruq in Homs, the Front of Syrian Revolutionaries (with Ahrar al-Sham), Umma in the north-east and centre, al-Muslimun yusharikun, Fajr al-Islam in Aleppo, Firqat Sulayman al-Muqatila in Hama and in Jabal Zawiya, Shuhada al-Sham, Qisas, Ghuraba al-Sham, etc. Aron LUND, *Syrian Jihadism*, UIbrief, n° 13, sept. 2012.

²⁴ See for instance the creation of an extended security branch within the resistance around the capital, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dbkvB_8OylY.

²⁵ Stéphane VALTER, 'La réplique à Ibn Baz (1912-1999) de Abd al-Rahman al-Khayyir (1904-1986)...', in *Bulletin d'études orientales* (Institut Français d'Études Arabes de Damas), n° LV, 2003, p. 299-383.

²⁶ The very conservative tendencies of Sunnism, followed by the Orientalist tradition, have incorrectly imagined that the Alawite women could be given as an offertory to initiated people, by immorality and because the women are supposed to be deprived of (celestial) souls.

²⁷ This *fatwa* was partially translated by Edward SALISBURY, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, tome II, 1851. Then a more complete translation was written in French by Stanislas GUYARD, 'Le fetwa d'Ibn Taimiyyah sur les Nosairis', in *Journal asiatique*, sixth series, tome XVIII, August-September 1871, p. 158-198. The present quote comes from Yaron FRIEDMAN, *The Nusayri-Alawis: An Introduction to the Religion, History, and Identity of the Leading Minority in Syria*, Leiden, Brill, 2010, 325 pages, p. 188-197.

²⁸ The depreciatory term for Alawites (that indicates a kinship with Ali) since 'Nusayri' refers to a medieval (9th century) eponymous Iraqi propagandist.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 192.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

³² Sura XLIX, *The Inner Apartments*, (*al-Hujurat*), verse 9.

³³ For a French translation and the Arabic reference, VALTER, 'La réplique à Ibn Baz...', *op. cit.*, p. 380-381.

³⁴ The conservative thinker Muhibb al-Din al-Khatib (1886-1969), the Muslim Brother Said Hawa (1935-1989), the theologian Abu Basir al-Tartusi (born in 1959) who nonetheless remains sometimes critical of those who want to practice *jihād*. See Thomas PIERRET's works, <http://edinburgh.academia.edu/ThomasPierret>.

³⁵ Qaradawi has spoken of the Syrian army which is still loyal to the regime as a purely confessional army (*jaysh ta'ifa*). <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zLsox0UPiJk>.

³⁶ http://www.dailymotion.com/video/xhso25_qaradawi-la-revolution-au-bahrein-est-sectaire-chiite_news#.US-GUR2fhbA.

³⁷ <http://www.egyptindependent.com/news/egyptian-fatwa-says-assads-death-necessary>.

³⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=j_3m10LZ4mU.

³⁹ He may have been dismissed for rape accusations according to some rumors.

⁴⁰ <http://blogs.mediapart.fr/blog/thomas-pierret/281012/propos-du-cheikh-adnan-al-arour>.

⁴¹ <http://english.alarabiya.net/articles/2011/08/06/161116.html>.

⁴² <http://www.ekurd.net/mismas/articles/misc2012/8/syriakurd595.htm>. The Islamic Front, recently created under the aegis of Saudi Arabia, also categorically rejects any wishful irredentist Kurdish claim.

⁴³ <http://www.altawhid.org/2013/10/28/>. Romain CAILLET argues that ISIL has no more link with al-Qa'ida: <http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54017>.

⁴⁴ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=boX2d4qrBkI>.

⁴⁵ http://www.muslimvideo.com/tv/search_result.php?search_id=alawi+syria&search_for=any&x=38&y=9.

⁴⁶ Mostly because the accreditations of the channel's journalists were rejected by the Syrian authorities.

⁴⁷ By mid-2007, the Qatari authorities seem to have acquiesced in controlling al-Jazeera's programs dealing with the coverage of internal Saudi affairs. http://www.gremmo.mom.fr/sites/gremmo.mom.fr/files/docs/Activites/Zoom_sur_syrietaqatarnov2011.pdf. Qatar had invested some \$6 billion in Syria before the upheaval.

⁴⁸ The arms shipped at the behest of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to supply Syrian rebel groups are usually going to hardline Islamists rather than to more secular-minded opposition groups (like the FSA that the West wants to bolster), while at the same time these two states fear arming global jihadists (like JN and ISIL) for security reasons, since such fighting organizations may later revert their arms against Saudi and Qatari interests. Two prominent Saudi sheikhs, Ali b. Abbas al-Hakami and Abd Allah al-Mutlaq, issued in June 2012 a *fatwa* forbidding nationals to go to Syria in order to perform jihad on the pretext that such an initiative was an act of insubordination against the Saudi sovereign and could disrupt order (<http://www.muslm.org/vb/showthread.php?482539>). On the contrary, private salafi donors from (or via) Koweit do not hesitate to finance generously the more radical Islamists.

The Iranian regional policy aims at securing the axis between Teheran, Baghdad, Damascus, and the Bekaa valley in Lebanon, in order to alleviate the bur-

den of the sanctions imposed by America and its allies, and to promote national interests. This axis is thus not as much based on religious affinities (which do exist) as on common perceptions about which kind of political order is more beneficial. See Nikolay A. Khozanov's analysis in <http://www.fairobserver.com>. Concerning the assumption that Iran has put oil on the Syrian fire, it would rather seem that Teheran has at first pushed for some kind of national dialogue, for fear of seeing chaos in an allied country. In the summer of 2011 (with already some 2,000 people dead), the Iranian president declared – with some degree of dishonesty – that ‘governments must respect and recognize their nations’ rights to freedom and justice’ and that ‘military repression is never a good solution’. But when disorder and violence expanded, it finally decided *nolens volens* to help president Asad’s regime, which it still supports as long as it is useful to Iranian goals.

⁴⁹ As what happened in the Ivory Coast in April 2011, owing to the pressure exerted by French forces (under UN mandate). Although the case of Kosovo is political (power struggle around land and material advantages), the ethnic, linguistic, and religious factors (mostly between Serbs and Albanians) are so acute that the situation is far from being stabilized.

⁵⁰ According to an interview given to the pro-regime Syrian channel Sama.

⁵¹ The Muslim Brotherhood has been whole-heartedly supported by Qatar, a generous funder of the opposition to president Asad, and also by Turkey, which have both tried to impose their agenda on the battleground like on the Syrian National Council, and then (after November 2012) on the Syrian National Coalition, two political structures within which the Brotherhood has not hesitated to back secular and liberal personalities (like the Christian leftist Georges Sabra) to better promote its own goals through friendly coalitions. After the election in July 2013 of Ahmad Assi Jarba, Saudi Arabia’s man, as leader of the Syrian National Coalition, the Brotherhood’s position has been weakened and it has been forced to look after new partners. See Raphaël LEFÈVRE, <http://www.mei.edu/content/saudi-arabia-and-syrian-brotherhood>.

⁵² <http://all4syria.info/Archive/86042>.

⁵³ R. LEFÈVRE, <http://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2013/10/29/militias-for-syrian-muslim-brotherhood/grhq>. And on the same subject, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/9450587/Muslim-Brotherhood-establishes-militia-inside-Syria.html>.

⁵⁴ <http://www.altawhid.org/2014/01/05>.

⁵⁵ <http://www.altawhid.org/2014/01/04>.

⁵⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3XSsIBeYfg0>.

⁵⁷ <http://www.syrrevnews.com/archives/7986>

⁵⁸ The State security's interior branch itself could not prevent some believers to be killed by the *shabbiha* gang led by Mujahid Ismail, the delinquent and criminal offspring of an Alawite officer involved in the 1982 Hama massacre.

⁵⁹ <http://www.altawhid.org/2013/11/16/>.

⁶⁰ It is still unclear how ISIL's takeover of Mosul province (beginning of June 2014) will affect the religious representations of the Syrian war and of the other regional conflicts. But the sure thing is that this violent reshaping of borders will wreck chaos and modify the alliances.