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## The Historical Roots of the Social Conflict Phenomenon in Syria in the Context of Intergroup Conflict Theories

Gruplararası Çatışma Kuramları Bağlamında Suriye'deki Sosyal Çatışma Olgusunun Tarihsel Kökenleri



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### Abstract

Following World War I, the territories of Syria, which emerged from Ottoman rule, underwent successive phases of social conflict that have continued into the present day. Beginning with the French Mandate period and extending into the post-independence era - particularly during the rise and consolidation of Ba'ath Party rule - regional and tribal tensions gradually evolved into sectarian divisions. Under Ottoman administration, however, despite religious, ethnic, and sectarian diversity, intergroup conflicts remained relatively limited for nearly four centuries. Decades of research on intergroup conflict indicate that ethnic, religious, and sectarian communities can coexist with minimal hostility if unifying strategies are effectively implemented. One essential unifying strategy involves ensuring equal access for all groups to basic human needs such as security, livelihood, social support, recognition, significance, and comfort - consistent with the principles of equity. In contrast, favoritism toward specific groups tends to exacerbate competition and deepen hostility among communities. A major factor contributing to the failure to form a cohesive national identity in Syria was the social fragmentation deliberately fostered by the policies of the French Mandate administration. During the Cold War, Western imperialist powers intensified their involvement in the region, further aggravating intergroup divisions. The Ba'ath regime, inheriting this fragmented social structure, institutionalized favoritism toward the Alawite minority while pursuing repressive and exclusionary policies against other groups. These dynamics entrenched Syria's internal divisions, ultimately culminating in the outbreak of civil war in 2011.

### Öz

I. Dünya Savaşı'nın ardından Osmanlı hâkimiyetinden çıkan Suriye toprakları, günümüze kadar uzanan ardışık toplumsal çatışma evrelerinden geçmiştir. Fransız Mandası döneminden başlayarak bağımsızlık sonrasına - özellikle Baas Partisi iktidarının yükselişi ve kurumsallaşması sürecinde - uzanan bu dönemde, bölgesel ve kabilesel gerilimler giderek mezhepsel ayrışmalara dönüşmüştür. Oysa Osmanlı yönetimi altında, dini, etnik ve mezhepsel çeşitliliğe rağmen, gruplararası çatışmalar yaklaşık dört yüzyıl boyunca görece sınırlı kalmıştır. Gruplararası çatışma üzerine yapılan onlarca yıllık araştırma, etnik, dini ve mezhepsel toplulukların, birleştirici stratejiler etkin biçimde uygulandığında, asgari düzeyde düşmanlıkla bir arada yaşayabileceğini göstermektedir. Bu stratejilerin temelinde, tüm grupların güvenlik, geçim, toplumsal destek, tanınma, anlamlılık ve rahatlık gibi temel insani ihtiyaçlara, eşitlik ilkelerine uygun biçimde erişimini sağlamak yer alır. Buna karşılık, belirli gruplara tanınan ayrıcalıklar, rekabeti ve topluluklar arası düşmanlığı artırmaktadır. Suriye'de bütünleşmiş bir ulusal kimliğin oluşmamasının başlıca nedenlerinden biri, Fransız Mandası yönetiminin politikalarıyla kasıtlı olarak teşvik edilen toplumsal parçalanmadır. Soğuk Savaş döneminde Batılı emperyalist güçlerin bölgeye müdahalelerini yoğunlaştırmaları, gruplar arası ayrışmaları daha da derinleştirmiştir. Bu bölünmüş toplumsal yapıyı devralan Baas rejimi ise, Alevi azınlığa

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yönelik kurumsal ayrıcalıkları sürdürürken diğer gruplara karşı baskıcı ve dışlayıcı politikalar izlemiştir. Bu dinamikler, Suriye'deki içsel bölünmeleri kökleştirmiş ve nihayetinde 2011'de patlak veren iç savaşla sonuçlanmıştır.

**Keywords** Syria · Social Conflict · Sunni-Shia Relations · Psychopolitics · Sectarianism

**Anahtar Kelimeler** Suriye · Toplumsal Çatışma · Sünni-Şii İlişkileri · Psikopolitika · Mezhepçilik

## Introduction

For nearly four centuries, as in the broader Ottoman realm, Syria's diverse ethnic, religious, and sectarian communities coexisted under the overarching framework of Ottoman imperial identity, maintaining their distinct sub-identities while experiencing minimal intergroup conflict. However, as the Ottoman Empire began to wane in response to socio-political transformations in Europe from the 15th century onward—and particularly with the rise of nationalism in the 19th century—allegiance to the Ottoman supra-identity progressively diminished across the empire, including in Syria. By the late 19th century, the fragmentation of the Ottoman imperial structure led to the increasing polarization of internal groups along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines, growing heightened intergroup prejudices. This centrifugal process gained further momentum in the early 20th century, as evidenced by uprisings in major Syrian urban centers such as Damascus, Aleppo, and Hauran.

Syrian nationalists, seeking to sever ties with the Ottoman administration, envisioned the establishment of a Greater Syrian state that would unify Arabs across the Middle East under a singular political entity. However, the post-World War I geopolitical restructuring, marked by the imposition of the French Mandate, led instead to the territorial partitioning of Syria into five distinct administrative units. Through deliberate policy interventions, the French colonial administration reinforced the political salience of specific identity groups—most notably Christians, Alawites, and Armenians—while simultaneously suppressing Arab nationalist movements. These divisive strategies not only deepened intercommunal cleavages but also obstructed efforts to construct a cohesive national identity suited to the exigencies of the modern nation-state paradigm.

Following World War II, Syria's geopolitical significance drew the attention of global powers beyond Britain and France, most notably the Soviet Union and the United States. The entry of imperialist actors into the region, operating within the long-standing logic of the "divide and rule" doctrine, exacerbated both internal conflicts and external interventions between 1945 and 1972. While various axes of conflict persisted, the Sunni-Shiite divide emerged as the primary determinant of sectarian tensions. From the 1960s onward, the institutionalization of Alawite dominance under the Ba'ath regime further entrenched sectarianism as the principal mode of socio-political organization, superseding regional and tribal affiliations. Indeed, in post-World War II Syria, the interplay between external interventions and the autocratic policies of the Ba'ath regime reinforced sectarian stratification, rendering the formation of an inclusive supra-identity unattainable, even after eight decades of formal independence. Furthermore, a shared Islamic identity proved insufficient in mitigating sectarian antagonisms. Over time, these tensions escalated with the proliferation of armed Sunni and Shiite factions, ultimately culminating in the outbreak of civil war in 2011.

Empirical research indicates that social conflicts are more pronounced in deeply divided, heterogeneous, and multi-identity societies where fault lines are structured around "race, ethnicity, religion, and culture." Consequently, the construction of a unifying national identity in such socio-political contexts becomes particularly challenging. Due to the unequal distribution of resources among different components of



the nation, as well as psycho-political factors such as competition, identity, and prejudice, antagonistic intergroup relations are perpetuated. As a result, the construction of a unifying national identity that encompasses all societal elements remains unattainable. According to Muzafer Sherif's Realistic Conflict Theory, ethnically, religiously, or sectarianly segmented groups tend to focus on in-group specific goals rather than goals that serve the entire nation. In doing so, they develop prejudice and hostility toward out-groups. Similarly, Social Identity Theory posits that individuals belonging to segregated groups enhance their self-esteem not through identification with the broader nation, but through strong allegiance to their own group. Consequently, despite cohabiting the same territory, these groups perceive others as out-groups, fostering prejudice and, ultimately, increased conflict. Thus, Intergroup Conflict Theory suggests that hostility among groups stems not only from economic competition but also from key social-psychological dynamics such as identity processes and perceived cultural threats, which play a dominant role in the emergence and persistence of societal conflict.

In this study, the historical roots of conflict in Syria are examined through a social-psychological lens, utilizing the theoretical frameworks of Intergroup Conflict and Social Identity Theories. The central research question investigates the extent to which the policies implemented during the French Mandate period and the persistence of those policies have contributed to the protracted social conflicts in Syria. The study relies on qualitative historical design, employing both secondary and a limited number of primary sources, which are descriptively and analytically examined to answer the research question.

## 1. The Administration of Syria Under the Ottoman Rule

### 1.1. Demographic Structure of the Region: Religious, Ethnic, and Sectarian Diversity

The present-day territory of Syria has historically been situated at the heart of a region, the Central Middle East, which comprises Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Yemen, Oman, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries. Since late antiquity, this region has been shaped predominantly by Islamic civilization. Syria, which was conquered during the reigns of Caliphs Abu Bakr and Umar, underwent significant administrative transformation under the Umayyads, evolving from a tribal desert society into a structured state system.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the Ottoman conquest following the Battle of Marj Dabiq, Syria was under the rule of the Mamluks, one of the most powerful Turkic-Islamic states of the time. The region was incorporated into Ottoman territory in 1516 because of Sultan Selim I's eastern campaigns, and it remained under Ottoman rule for approximately four centuries, until 1918.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Cleveland, *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi*, trans. Mehmet Harmancı, Agora Kitaplığı, İstanbul, 2008, p. 22; Ira Lapidus, *Modernizme Geçiş Sürecinde İslam Dünyası*, trans. İ. Safa Üstün, MÜ ilahiyat Fakültesi Vakfı Yayınları, İstanbul, 1996, p. 89.

<sup>2</sup>*Doğuştan Günümüze Büyük İslâm Tarihi*, İlmî Müşavir ve Redaktör Prof. Dr. Hakkı Dursun Yıldız, C. 13, Çağ Yayınları, İstanbul, 1989, p. 24; "Şam'da Bulunan Başlıca Osmanlı Eserleri", (Çevrimiçi), <https://turkiyearchastirmalari.org/2025/02/03/yayinlar/infografik/samda-bulunan-baslica-osmanli-eserleri>, Accessed: 15 Ocak 2025.

The Population Distribution of the Syria Region According to the 1914 Census<sup>3</sup>

Ethnic, Religious, and Sectarian Communities	Provinces			TOTAL
	Syria (Damascus, Hama, Hawran, and Karak)	Beirut (Acre, Tripoli, Latakia, Nablus)	Aleppo (Zor, Urfa, and Marash)	
Muslim	791.582	648.314	576.320	2.016.216
Orthodox-Catholic Greek	88.640	111.454	21.954	222.048
Jewish	10.140	15.052	12.193	37.385
Druze	11.727	-	-	11.727
Maronite	6.111	40.723	-	46.834
Jacobite	5.577	-	309	5.886
Syriac	3.079	491	2.956	6.526
Protestant	1.873	3.367	8.643	13.883
Armenian	413	1.395	40.843	42.651
Chaldean	351	19	356	726
Samaritan	-	164	-	164
Yazidi	20	-	316	336
Gypsy	-	-	159	159
Latin Catholic	2.991	3.367	1.776	8.134
<b>TOPLAM</b>	<b>918.409</b>	<b>824.873</b>	<b>667.790</b>	<b>2.412.675</b>

Recognizing the region as the "gateway to the holy lands," the Ottoman Empire attached great significance to Syria, consistently implementing security, public works, and infrastructure projects.<sup>4</sup> Following the Ottoman conquest, the southern part of Bilad al-Sham, an Arab province that included some eastern, southern, and southeastern Anatolian districts, became known as Palestine, while its mountainous region was designated as Lebanon. In 1549, the Ottoman administration established the provinces of Aleppo and Damascus. In 1864, an administrative reform merged the provinces of Damascus and Sidon under the name "Syria Province." According to the 1864 Provincial Organization Law, Syria Province consisted of Damascus as the capital, along with the districts of Homs, Tripoli, Jerusalem, Acre, Hawran, and Sidon, as well as 32 sub-districts. In 1872, Jerusalem was granted independent administrative status, and in 1888, the creation of the Beirut Province—comprising Latakia, Tripoli, Acre, and Nablus—led to a reduction in the size of Syria Province.<sup>5</sup> By 1907, the region that corresponds to modern Syria consisted of the provinces of Aleppo, Syria, and Beirut, along with the independent district of Zor.<sup>6</sup> Syria Province itself was divided into four districts: Damascus, Hama, Hauran, and Karak, while Aleppo and Beirut provinces were divided into 11 districts, and Jabal al-Lebanon, Zor, and Jerusalem held independent district status. According to 1914 population statistics, the total population of Syria Province was 918,409, comprising 791,582 Muslims, 88,640 Orthodox-Catholic Greeks, 10,140 Jews, 11,727 Druze, 6,111 Maronites, 5,577 Jacobites, 3,079 Syriacs, 1,873 Protestants, 413 Armenians, 351 Chaldeans, 20 Yazidis, and 2,991 Latin Catholics.<sup>7</sup> The Beirut Province, which included

<sup>3</sup>This table has been prepared by compiling the data from Kemal H. Karpat, *Osmanlı Nüfusu 1830-1914*, Timaş Yayınları, İstanbul, 2010, p. 352-374.

<sup>4</sup>*Osmanlı Belgelerinde Suriye*, Arapça Tercüme: Dr. Salih Sadawi, T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü, İstanbul, 2013; *Ortadoğu'da Osmanlı Dönemi Kültür İzleri Uluslararası Bilgi Şöleni Bildirileri*, V. 1, Atatürk Kültür Merkezi Başkanlığı Yayını, Ankara, 2001, pp. 219-228, Zekeriya Kurşun, "Hac ve İktidar: Haremeyn'de Erken Dönem Osmanlı İmar Faaliyetleri", *FSM İlmî Araştırmalar İnsan ve Toplum Bilimleri Dergisi*, V. 9, 2017, p. 282-311.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard Lewis, *Ortadoğu*, trans. Selen Y. Kölay, Arkadaş Yayınları, Ankara, 2003, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Bernard Lewis, *Ortadoğu...*, p. 47.

<sup>7</sup>Kemal Karpat, *Osmanlı Nüfusu...*, pp. 352-353.

the districts of Beirut, Acre, Tripoli, Latakia, and Nablus, had a population of 824,873, consisting of 648,314 Muslims, 111,454 Orthodox-Catholic Greeks, 40,723 Maronites, 15,052 Jews, 3,823 Protestants, 3,367 Latins, 1,395 Armenians, 491 Syriacs, 164 Samaritans, and 19 Chaldeans. The Aleppo Province, which comprised Aleppo, Zor, Urfa, and Maraş, had a population of 667,790, including 576,320 Muslims, 40,843 Armenians, 21,954 Orthodox-Catholic Greeks, 12,193 Jews, 4,982 Syriacs, 8,643 Protestants, 2,956 Syriacs, 1,776 Latins, 356 Chaldeans, 309 Jacobites, 316 Yazidis, and 159 Gypsies. At the beginning of the 20th century, the region had an approximate population of 2.5 million, of which nearly 2 million were Sunni and Alawite Muslim Arabs, Turkmens, and Kurds. The largest minority group was the Orthodox-Catholic Greeks, numbering 222,048. The Maronite population stood at 46,834, the Gregorian-Catholic Armenian population at 42,651, the Jewish population at 37,385, Protestant Arabs and Latin Catholics together at 22,473, the Druze at 11,727, the Syriacs at 6,526, and the Jacobites at 5,577. Among non-Muslim groups, Greeks were the largest in Syria Province, while Beirut had significant Greek and Maronite populations, and Aleppo had sizable Armenian and Greek communities. The Druze population primarily resided in the Hasbaya and Mismiye regions of Syria Province.<sup>8</sup>

These provinces were *miri* lands of the Ottoman Empire, over which the state exercised full sovereignty. They were subject to taxation and military service obligations and were governed by *beylerbeyis* (provincial governors) appointed by the central authority. In the Middle East, certain regions with special status were governed under the sheikhdom system by local ruling families loyal to the Ottoman Empire, while Mecca and Medina were administered under Ottoman protection with the status of "Sharifate."<sup>9</sup> As the political and administrative center of the region, Damascus encompassed the provinces of Aleppo, Syria, Beirut, and Mount Lebanon, covering an area of approximately 150,000 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 2.5 million.<sup>10</sup> Until the second half of the 19th century, the diverse population of Syria—consisting of various religious, sectarian, and ethnic groups—lived under the vast umbrella of the Ottoman Empire for nearly four centuries.

## 1.2. The Unifying Function of the Ottoman Supra-identity

Although identity is, politically speaking, an invention of the modern era, it is well known that humans, as social beings, and thus communities (groups), have possessed multiple identities even in pre-modern times due to the fundamental need for a sense of belonging, which has existed since primitive times. Belonging refers to an individual's identification as part of a whole, and with the development of this sense of belonging, various needs such as security, support, assistance, validation of values, feeling important and needed, and comfort are fulfilled.<sup>11</sup> As the sense of belonging strengthens, individuals integrate with the common values and goals of the social groups they belong to, and social identities emerge as concrete expressions of this integration<sup>12</sup>. The feeling of belonging to a broader group—whether religious, sectarian, national, or ethnic—corresponds to collective identity (large group identity), which is one of the types of social identity.<sup>13</sup>

Until the modern era, empires structured the lives of their subjects through political, economic, and socio-cultural institutions and the relationships formed around these structures. Within this imperial framework, not only the dominant religious, sectarian, or ethnic majority but also minority groups with

<sup>8</sup>Kemal Karpat, *Osmanlı Nüfusu...*, pp. 369-374.

<sup>9</sup>Mustafa Öztürk, "Arap Ülkelerinde Osmanlı İdaresi", *History Studies Ortadoğu Özel Sayısı*, 2010, p. 228-229; Albert Hourani, *Arap Halkları Tarihi*, İletişim Yayınları, İstanbul, 1997, pp. 274-275.

<sup>10</sup>"Eski Türkiye Yeni Türkiye", *Milli Nevsal*, Kanaat Matbaa ve Kütüphanesi, İstanbul, 1338 [1922], p. 140.

<sup>11</sup>Nuri Bilgin, *İnsan İlişkileri ve Kimlik*, Sistem Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 1996.

<sup>12</sup>Henry Tajfel, John C. Turner, "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict", *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, eds. W. G. Austin, & S. Worchel, Monterey, CA, 1979, pp. 33-47; Michael A. Hogg, Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications: A Social Psychology Of Intergroup Relations And Group Processes*. Taylor & Francis/Routledge, Oxford, 1988.

<sup>13</sup>Elliot Aronson, Timothy D. Wilson, Robin M. Akert, *Sosyal Psikoloji*, trans. Okan Gündüz, Kaknüs Yayınları, İstanbul, 2012, p. 496.

distinct religious, sectarian, and ethnic identities developed shared behaviors and sentiments. For the survival of empires, unifying policies were adopted instead of divisive or antagonistic approaches toward different elements of society. Despite the vast diversity within imperial systems, a sense of commonality was achieved largely due to one of the defining characteristics of empires: their possession of great military and economic power. As long as the central administration ensured peace, justice, security, and prosperity, subjects of diverse backgrounds could develop a common sense of belonging and a shared identity based on loyalty to the state. The Ottoman identity, which emerged during the classical period, functioned as a supra-group identity, regulating the interactions of millions of individuals with diverse religious, linguistic, sectarian, and ethnic characteristics through legal, customary, and traditional norms and values.<sup>14</sup> Although the Ottoman Empire was a Muslim-Turkish empire, it was not exclusively an empire of Muslim Turks. Like all empires, it was multi-ethnic, multi-religious, and multilingual. While Muslims constituted the dominant group within the larger Ottoman collective, Turks, Arabs, Albanians, Bosniaks, and other ethnic groups coexisted alongside non-Muslim communities, such as Ottoman Greeks,<sup>15</sup> Ottoman Armenians, and Ottoman Jews. These dual identity<sup>16</sup> structures under the Ottoman umbrella demonstrated the empire's capacity to integrate multiple identities within its governance.<sup>17</sup> The formation of dual identity depended on the interaction between sub-identities and the supra-identity. For this interaction to occur, social institutions had to be organized in a way that allowed the preservation of sub-identities. The more an imperial system enabled sub-identities to thrive, the more dual identity models, as a form of collective supra-identity, could develop. Research indicates that ethnic minority members who seek to maintain their distinct identities tend to hold more positive attitudes toward the majority group when the dual identity model is encouraged. Consequently, systems that embrace dual identity models tend to be more peaceful and cooperative than those based on assimilation or segregation strategies. A strong supra-identity benefits both majority and minority groups when sub-identities are also strong. In such cases, both common and distinct identities can be simultaneously emphasized, effectively reducing intergroup bias, prejudice, and conflict.<sup>18</sup> Thus, despite their differences, various internal groups could sustain their existence under the same imperial structure with minimal conflict.

Indeed, the institutional structure and organization of the Ottoman Empire, which regulated the interactions and relationships of group members in political, economic, cultural, and social life, provided a suitable framework for the development of a dual identity model, thanks to the tolerance (*istimâlet*) policy it embraced. In Ottoman society, social life was structured around two primary spaces—urban centers and rural areas—where agriculture, craftsmanship, and trade constituted economic life. Additionally, the waqf (endowment) system regulated social life, encompassing institutions such as places of worship and educational establishments, while public spaces like markets and squares facilitated collective daily life practices. Notably, these shared spaces and experiences contributed to the collectivization of social life while preserving religious, sectarian, and ethnic sub-identities. Thus, by the late 18th century, in addition

<sup>14</sup>Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, "Some Psychopolitical and Social Psychohistorical Processes in the Formation of Classical Period Ottoman Identity", *Siyasal: Journal of Political Sciences*, V. 31, 2022, pp. 1-17; Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, "Psychopolitical Determinations on the Administrative and Economic Motivations of Classical Period Ottoman Identity", *Universal Journal of History and Culture*, V. 4, 2021, pp. 39-63.

<sup>15</sup>The fact that the Ottomans began to use the term 'Rum' to refer to Ottoman Greeks from around the late 17th century confirms this observation. Molly Greene, *Osmanlı Devleti ve Rumlar 1453-1768*, trans. Zeynep Rona, Kitap Yayınevi, İstanbul, 2015, p. 62.

<sup>16</sup>John F. Dovidio, Samuel L. Gaertner, & A. Valizic, "Intergroup Bias: Status, Differentiation, and a Common In-Group Identity", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, V. 75, 1998, pp. 109-120.

<sup>17</sup>Miles Hewstone, Brown, R., "Contact is Not Enough: An Intergroup Perspective on the 'Contact Hypothesis!'", *Contact and Conflict in Intergroup Encounters*, eds. M. Hewstone & R. Brown, Basil Blackwell, 1986, pp. 12-18.

<sup>18</sup>Demis E. Glasford, John F. Dovidio, "E Pluribus Unum: Dual Identity and Minority Group Members' Motivation to Engage in Contact, As Well As Social Change", *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, V. 47, 2011, pp. 1021-1024.

to internal processes within the Ottoman territories, a sense of cohesion, consistency, and continuity was established through mutual interactions and communication within society. Through the emergence of division of labor, shared norms, and common objectives, a certain degree of group consciousness and awareness<sup>19</sup> developed among the internal groups constituting the broader Ottoman collective—albeit at varying levels of identification across different communities.<sup>20</sup> This phenomenon largely explains the function of the Ottoman dual identity model within the framework of an imperial identity, which remained intact throughout the empire’s five-century existence, despite periods of profound transformation. Ultimately, this model played a crucial role in the establishment and maintenance of the Ottoman Peace (*Pax Ottomana*).<sup>21</sup>

A primary factor in the weakening of Ottoman collective identity and sense of belonging was, undoubtedly, the empire’s gradual loss of its former power in response to the accelerating transformations that had commenced in 15th-century Europe. The structural relationships between the administrative center and the periphery, as well as between political authority and its subjects, underwent profound transformations. These shifts were driven both by the internal disintegration of the Ottoman Empire as a military and political power and by the far-reaching technological and socio-political changes associated with the transition to industrial society in the broader global context. Between the 18th and 19th centuries, the Ottoman Empire experienced a significant decline in its capacity to function as a dominant military and economic power, thereby diminishing its ability to ensure peace, justice, security, and prosperity for its subjects. As a result, the activation of collective allegiance (*tabiiyet*) as a basis for social cohesion was increasingly weakened.<sup>22</sup> An unsigned manifesto addressed to the Arab populace by Arab nationalists vividly illustrates the tangible manifestations of this transformation. The declaration asserted:

*“The Ottoman government has become a state that can no longer protect its people from the attacks of foreign occupiers. Therefore, Arabs must now rely solely on themselves for survival. Trusting the central authority in Istanbul is tantamount to falling into a political abyss. (...) We implore you to join the sacred movement in Syria.”*<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, a direct appeal to the Ottoman Sultan underscored the empire’s declining capacity to fulfill its protective function, stating:

*“The Ottoman artillery and arms factories are no longer capable of properly equipping the army or replacing the weaponry and ammunition that will inevitably be lost in battle. Additionally, the empire’s southern regions—such as Basra, Yemen, and the Hejaz—are encircled by the naval forces of hostile states, poised for attack. (...) Since civilian populations are not armed like regular armies, they are in no position to resist the professional armies of Europe.”*<sup>24</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Vamik Volkan, “Transgenerational Transmissions and Chosen Traumas: An Aspect of Large-Group Identity”, *Group Analysis*, V. 34, 2001, p.79.

<sup>20</sup>For studies supporting this view, see. Halil İnalçık, “Osmanlı Tarihinde Dönemler Devlet-Toplum-Ekonomi”, *Osmanlı Uygarlığı*, C.1, haz. Halil İnalçık, Günsel Renda, T.C. Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı, Ankara, 2004, p. 15-17; Ahmet Yaşar Ocak, *Osmanlı Toplumunda Zındıklar ve Mülhidler (15-17. Yüzyıllar)*, İstanbul, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1998, pp. 91-92; *Anatomi Dersleri: Osmanlı Kültürü*, (Salı Toplantıları 93-94), Yapı Kredi Yayınları, İstanbul, 1995, pp. 31; Niyazi Berkes, *Batıcılık, Ulusçuluk ve Toplumsal Devrimler*, Yön Yayınları, 1965, p. 51, 165; Karl K. Barbir, “Osmanlı Dünyasında Kimlik ve Kimlik Oluşumu”, *Osmanlı Dünyasında Kimlik ve Kimlik Oluşumları*, eds. Baki Tezcan-Karl K. Barbir, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2012, s. 23; Suraiya Faroqhi, *Osmanlı Kültürü ve Gündelik Yaşam*, trans. E. Kılıç, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1998, p. 61; Ethem Eldem, Goffman, D., Masters, B., *Doğu ile Batı Arasında Osmanlı Kenti Halep, İzmir, İstanbul*, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 2000, pp. 1-18; Maurits H. van den Boogert, “Resurrecting Homo Ottomanicus: The Constants and Variables of Ottoman Identity”, *Osmanlı Araştırmaları / The Journal of Ottoman Studies*, V. XLIV, 2014, pp.17-18; Taner Timur, *Osmanlı-Türk Romanında Tarih, Toplum ve Kimlik*, Afa Yayınları, İstanbul, 1991, pp. 40-45; Aşkın Koyuncu, “Osmanlı Kimliği Üzerine Bazı Düşünceler”, *Hacettepe Üniversitesi Türkiyat Araştırmaları*, V. 1, 2004, p. 203.

<sup>21</sup>İlber Ortaylı, *Osmanlı Barışı*, Timaş Yayınları, İstanbul, 2007, p. 11.

<sup>22</sup>For detailed information, see Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, “Some Psychopolitical and Social Psychohistorical Processes in the Formation of Classical Period Ottoman Identity”, pp. 1-17; Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, Deniz Ülke Arıboğan, “Psychopolitical Determinations on the Administrative and Economic Motivations of Classical Period Ottoman Identity”, pp. 39-63.

<sup>23</sup>Zeine N. Zeine N., *Türk Arap İlişkileri ve Arap Milliyetçiliğinin Doğuşu*, trans. Emrah Akbaş, Gelenek Yayınları, İstanbul, 2003, pp. 142-143.

These statements unequivocally illustrate that the Ottoman supra-identity had lost its capacity to safeguard group members and to sustain a sense of collective self-respect.

The second major factor contributing to the dissolution of the Ottoman supra-identity was the emergence and growing influence of certain ideological movements that gained traction in the external world from the 19th century onward. These movements precipitated a paradigm shift centered on religious, national, and ethnic consciousness, posing an existential threat to multi-ethnic empires by undermining their integrative structures. From the late 18th century onward, the gradual decline of Ottoman power not only weakened imperial authority over Syria but also destabilized the broader Middle East, fostering the ascendancy of local power centers and exacerbating political fragmentation.<sup>25</sup> This weakening of centralized control further facilitated the intervention and territorial ambitions of European colonial powers in the region. The Middle East's geostrategic significance, particularly as a hub of key trade routes, coupled with the discovery of vast oil reserves—especially following the drilling of the first oil well in Pennsylvania in 1859—further heightened external powers' geopolitical and economic interests in the region.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, the Ottoman Empire's policy of integration into the "European Concert", driven by concerns over securing its future, as well as its measures aimed at preventing European powers—particularly through their influence over the non-Muslim subjects—from interfering in its internal affairs, intensified both external interventions and the reactions of the Muslim majority. The Imperial Reform Edict of February 18, 1856, issued to protect the rights and expand the privileges of non-Muslim subjects, had a profound impact not only on the imperial center but also on the Middle Eastern provinces. The new rights and privileges granted to non-Muslims dismantled the traditional status of the Muslim majority as the "*millet-i hâkime*" (dominant nation or *millet*), and the intended equality was soon perceived as detrimental to Muslims. Historically, non-Muslims in the Ottoman Empire had played a significant role in economic activities, often forming the wealthier segments of society. Their newfound political rights and the use of these rights for political purposes provoked strong opposition from the Muslim majority, further exacerbating polarization between Muslim and non-Muslim communities under the Ottoman rule.<sup>27</sup> In fact, European powers had already succeeded in establishing substantial influence over Ottoman Muslim territories throughout the 19th century, gradually asserting control over the region.<sup>28</sup> One of the frequently employed strategies for penetrating the Middle East was to incite conflicts by provoking local Christian communities, thereby providing an opportunity for external intervention. Indeed, in Aleppo, which had lost its former economic prosperity, the increasingly impoverished Muslim population grew resentful toward the wealthy Christian community—particularly the foreign-protected *beratlıs*—who continued to enjoy privileged status despite the newly imposed military and tax obligations introduced by the Tanzimat reforms. This growing discontent culminated in 1850 in the first violent Muslim-Christian conflict. Similarly, in 1860, sectarian clashes erupted between the Druze and

<sup>24</sup>Kral Abdullah, *Biz Osmanlı'ya Neden İsyân Ettik?*, trans. Halit Özkan, Klasik Yayınları, İstanbul, 2006, p. 86.

<sup>25</sup>Albert Hourani, *Arap Halkları ...* s.287; Zeine N. Zeine, *Türk Arap İlişkileri ve Arap ...*, p. 19.

<sup>26</sup>Cengiz Orhonlu, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Güney Siyaseti Habeş Eyaleti*, TTK Yayınları, Ankara, 1996, p. 3. The struggle for control over the region's oil resources later saw the involvement of the British-Dutch conglomerate Royal Dutch/Shell and the American firm Ottoman-American Development Company. Subsequently, on March 19, 1914, the British-controlled Turkish Petroleum Company was granted exclusive rights for oil exploration and extraction in the region. See. Önder Kocatürk, *Osmanlı-İngiliz İlişkilerinin Dönüm Noktası (1911-1914)*, Boğaziçi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2011, pp. 158-161; Kerem Alkin, Sabit Atman, *Küresel Petrol Stratejilerinin Jeopolitik Açısından Dünya ve Türkiye Üzerindeki Etkileri*, İstanbul Ticaret Odası, İstanbul, 2006, p. 23, 26, 27; *Osmanlı Belgelerinde Suriye*, T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı Yayın, İstanbul, 2013, pp. 92-95.

<sup>27</sup>Bernard Lewis, *Modern Türkiye'nin Doğuşu*, trans. Metin Kıratlı, TTK Yayını, Ankara, 1988, p. 116; Roderic H. Davison, "Ottoman Diplomacy at the Congress of Paris (1856) and Question of Reforms", VII. TTK Kongresi 25-29 Eylül 1970, Ankara 1973, p. 585.

<sup>28</sup>For further details, see. İhsan Süreyya Sırma, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin Yıkılışında Yemen İsyancıları*, Beyan Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008; Süleyman Kâni İrtem, *Osmanlı Devleti'nin Mısır Yemen Hicaz Meselesi*, eds. Osman Selim Kocahanoğlu, Temel Yayınları, İstanbul, 1999, pp. 130-134; *Osmanlı Arap Coğrafyası ve Avrupa Emperyalizmi*, eds. Ali Akyıldız-Zekeriya Kurşun, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2015, pp. 36-40; Hasan Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar- Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nda Osmanlılık, Erken Arap Milliyetçiliği ve İslâmcılık (1908-1918)*, trans. Türkan Yöney, Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, İstanbul, 1998, p. 120-125.



the Maronites in Mount Lebanon, prompting direct intervention by European powers. The French supported the Catholic Maronites, while the British backed the Druze, exacerbating the conflict, which soon spread from Lebanon to Damascus.<sup>29</sup> European intervention was met with strong opposition among Muslims, while such incidents also served as tangible evidence of the Ottoman Empire's declining ability to maintain control over the region in the face of foreign interference.<sup>30</sup>

Moreover, the nationalist movements of the era, as a prevailing ideological force, rapidly gained momentum through the interventions of European external actors. European states initially penetrated Syria and Iraq via missionary activities and subsequently consolidated their influence through economic ventures, such as irrigation and transportation projects.<sup>31</sup> In these regions, where the Muslim majority held dominance, nationalist ideologies of European origin primarily found resonance among Christian Arab communities. In this context, Lebanon, particularly the American University of Beirut, emerged as the epicenter of Arab nationalism.

The development of Arab nationalism in Lebanon was significantly influenced by figures such as Nasif Yaziji and Butrus al-Bustani. In 1857, the establishment of al-Jam'iyya al-'Umūmiyya al-Sūriyya (the General Syrian Society) marked the first organization in which Muslim Arab nationalists actively participated, expanding its influence to Istanbul and Cairo. Later, in 1895, the National Arab Committee, founded under the leadership of Abdurrahman al-Kawakibi,<sup>32</sup> adopted the primary political objective of uniting Arab communities of all religious backgrounds in pursuit of independence from Ottoman rule. The emergence and evolution of Arab nationalism were largely driven by European colonial powers, whose interventions played a pivotal role in shaping nationalist sentiments. However, the structural deteriorations within the Ottoman administrative system, which had begun in earlier periods, also significantly contributed to the receptiveness of these nationalist discourses. Thus, the rise of nationalism in the Ottoman Arab provinces must be examined within the broader framework of both external interventions and internal governance crises.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, many Arab nationalist circles justified their preference for alliance with European states rather than remaining under the Ottoman umbrella by citing their growing concerns for the future, as the Ottoman Empire was no longer capable of ensuring their protection. Consequently, nationalism emerged as both an ideological awakening that intensified separatist tendencies and a structural necessity, as the imperial model could no longer meet the needs of its diverse groups. Thus, the dissolution of empires was imposed as an inevitable reality of the era.<sup>34</sup>

To counteract these challenges and prevent the disintegration of the empire, the Ottoman state sought to implement a series of reforms from the second half of the 19th century onward. However, despite these measures, allegiance to the Ottoman supra-identity continued to weaken. This phenomenon not only reinforced Syria's trajectory toward separatism but also facilitated a significant increase in banditry, as European-supplied firearms became widely accessible to local tribal groups. During the critical juncture of

<sup>29</sup>Stanford Shaw, Ezel Kural, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu ve Modern Türkiye*, trans. Mehmet Harmancı, V. 2, E Yayınları, İstanbul, 1994, p. 183; Zafer Çınar, *Lübnan'daki Maruni ve Dürzilerin Siyasi Mücadeleleri (1841-1845)*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Uludağ Üniversitesi, Bursa, 2015; Mehmet Deniz Karakışla, *1840- 1861 Tarihleri Arasında Cebel-i Lübnan'da Dürzi-Marunî Çatışması ve Bu Çatışmanın Bölgeye Etkisi*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, Hacettepe Üniversitesi, Ankara, 2016.

<sup>30</sup>Abdülhamit Kırmızı, *Abdülhamid'in Valileri Osmanlı Vilayet İdaresi 1895-1908*, Klasik Yayınları, İstanbul, 2008, pp. 25-26.

<sup>31</sup>Remzi Kılıç, "Irak ve Suriye'nin Tarihi Coğrafyası ve XIX. Yüzyıl Sonu İtibariyle İdari Konumu", *Türk Kültürü*, V. 441, 2000, pp. 19-20; Abdülkadir Gül, Salim Gökçen, *Son Dönem Osmanlı Nüfusu ve Ecnabîler Meselesi*, Cedit Neşriyat, Ankara, 2010, p. 188.

<sup>32</sup>Ş. Tufan Buzpınar, "Kevâkibî, Abdurrahman b. Ahmed", *TDV İslam Ansiklopedisi*, V. 25, Ankara, 2022, p. 339.

<sup>33</sup>For further details, see. Zekeriyâ Kurşun, *Yol Ayrımında Türk-Arap İlişkileri*, İrfan Yayınevi, İstanbul, 1992, p. 84-86; Adil Baktraya, *Osmanlı Suriyesi'nde Arapçılığın Doğuşu*, Bengi Yayınları, İstanbul, 2009, pp. 221-225; C. Ernest Dawn, *Osmanlıcılıktan Arapçılığa*, trans. B. Aydın, T. Temiz, Yöneliş Yayınları, İstanbul, 1998, pp. 165-190; Selçuk Günay, "II. Abdülhamit Döneminde Suriye ve Lübnan'da Arap Ayrılıkçı Hareketlerinin Başlaması ve Devletin Tedbirleri", *Tarih Araştırmaları Dergisi*, V. 28, 1995, pp. 88-108.

<sup>34</sup>Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, *Suriye'de İşgal ve Direniş (1919-1922) Türk Basınına Yansımalarıyla*, Dergâh Yayınları, İstanbul, 2017, pp. 41-43.

World War I, Syria became a battleground where the Ottoman Empire suffered heavy losses in its attempt to retain control over the region. However, with the British occupation of Damascus on October 1, 1918, followed by the capture of Aleppo on October 27, Ottoman rule in Syria, which had persisted since 1516, came to an end.<sup>35</sup>

## 2. The Process of Ethnic and Religious Segmentation and the Formation of Hostilities under the Mandate Administration

### 2.1. Sunni, Alawite, Maronite, and Druze administrative units

According to information provided by Sir Wyndham Deedes, a member of the British Secret Service's Egypt Branch, by 1916, three main political factions dominated the region. The first was led by Sharif Hussein, who had been appointed Emir of Mecca by the Ottoman Empire in 1908. In exchange for leading an Arab uprising against the Turks and Germans in alliance with the British, Sharif Hussein had secured a British commitment to support the establishment of Arab independence in these territories. The second faction consisted of Syrian nationalists who opposed French influence in the region, while the third group comprised Iraqi nationalists striving for Iraq's independence. On June 10, 1916, Sharif Hussein and his forces declared the beginning of the Arab Revolt in Mecca, Ta'if, Jeddah, and other cities in the Hejaz region, swiftly capturing Mecca, Jeddah, and Ta'if in the initial days of the uprising. While the majority of Arabs outside the Hejaz remained neutral, certain factions from Tripoli and Syria supported Sharif Hussein, and some Arab officers within the Ottoman military defected to join the rebels. Egyptian leaders such as Izzet Pasha al-Abid, Rafiq al-Azm, and Rashid Rida traveled to the Hejaz to demonstrate solidarity with Sharif Hussein. On October 28, 1916, Sharif Hussein formally declared himself the King of the Arab lands, and a pledge of allegiance ceremony was held at the Masjid al-Haram.<sup>36</sup>

During the final weeks of World War I, while Ottoman forces under the command of Mustafa Kemal Pasha were positioned between Riyaq and Damascus, and troops led by İsmet and Refet Bey were stationed in Homs, Emir Faisal, the son of Sharif Hussein, led Arab forces under the command of Nuri al-Said, accompanied by the British Army's 3rd Australian Light Horse Brigade, into Damascus on the morning of October 1, 1918. On October 5, following the Friday prayer at the Umayyad Mosque, a sermon was delivered in the names of Sultan Sharif Hussein and Emir Faisal, formally proclaiming the de facto establishment of an independent Arab government.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, the Damascus-based Arab government proved to be ephemeral. On September 15, 1919, an Anglo-French agreement placed Syria under the French Mandate, a decision vehemently opposed by Syrian nationalists, who initiated armed resistance against French control. On March 6, 1920, the General Congress convened in Damascus, and the following day, on March 7, it officially declared the independence of Greater Syria and proclaimed Faisal as its sovereign.<sup>38</sup> However, the Kingdom of Syria was short-lived. On July 24, 1920, a formidable French force comprising 15,000 troops, reinforced by tanks and aircraft, engaged approximately 3,000 Syrian fighters under the command of Yusuf al-Azma near Maysalun, on the outskirts of Damascus. After a six-hour battle, the Syrian forces suffered a decisive defeat,

<sup>35</sup>Osmanlı Belgelerinde Suriye, T.C. Başbakanlık Devlet Arşivleri Genel Müdürlüğü Osmanlı Arşivi Daire Başkanlığı, İstanbul, 2013, pp. 4-5.

<sup>36</sup>Kral Abdullah, *Biz Osmanlı'ya ...*, p. 49-110; Hasan Kayalı, *Jön Türkler ve Araplar...*, pp. 200-210; *Birinci Dünya Harbi'nde Türk Harbi III ncü Cilt Irak-İran Cephesi 1914-1918 1 nci Kısım*, Genelkurmay Basımevi, Ankara, 2002, pp. 104-110; William L. Cleveland, *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi*, trans. Mehmet Harmancı, Agora Kitaplığı, İstanbul, 2008, pp. 171-182; Işıl Işık Bostancı, "Suudi Arabistan Krallığının Resmen İlan Edilmesi", *Orta Doğu Araştırmaları Dergisi*, V. 2, 2003, p. 37.

<sup>37</sup>Bruce Masters, *Osmanlı İmparatorluğu'nun Arapları 1516-1918*, trans. Feray Coşkun, Doğan Kitap, İstanbul, 2017, p. 238.

<sup>38</sup>Ali A. Allawi, *Irak Kralı I. Faysal*, trans. Hakan Abacı, Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, İstanbul, 2014, p. 333-336.

and their commander, Yusuf al-Azma, was martyred, marking the collapse of Syria's brief experiment with independence.<sup>39</sup>

While Syrian nationalists aspired to unify the Arab populations of the Middle East under a singular political entity through the establishment of a Greater Syrian State, the aftermath of the Maysalun defeat resulted in the territorial fragmentation of the region under French mandate rule. Instead of fostering cohesion, the French administration pursued a policy of sectarian and ethnic division. Their principal focus was on the Maronite Christian population, leading to the creation of Greater Lebanon on August 1, 1920. This newly delineated state expanded beyond its historical boundaries by incorporating the fertile Beqaa Valley, previously under Syrian control. Consequently, while Maronite Christians constituted approximately 30% of the population of the newly formed state, Muslim and Druze communities were primarily concentrated in the coastal cities of Tripoli, Tyre, and Sidon. Under this framework, the Maronites, benefiting from French patronage, advocated for the independent state of Greater Lebanon, whereas the Muslim population largely supported the political unification of Syria and Lebanon. The French-sponsored Greater Lebanon project, which conferred privileges upon Maronites at the expense of the Muslim majority, exacerbated sectarian cleavages and intensified intercommunal antagonisms, thereby fostering an environment conducive to sustained religious and sectarian strife. Furthermore, on August 31, 1920, the French administration established the Alawite State in the Latakia region, where the Nusayri population was demographically concentrated. In October, two distinct administrative entities were formed in Aleppo and Damascus, regions that housed a substantial Kurdish population alongside a Turkmen community numbering between 40,000 and 50,000. By December 1920, this policy of fragmentation extended further with the establishment of the Druze State in the Hauran region, south of Damascus. Meanwhile, the Bedouin tribes inhabiting the Syrian desert were subjected to the military authority of the French Bedouin Forces, thereby reinforcing the colonial strategy of "divide and rule" as a mechanism for governance and control.<sup>40</sup>

According to intergroup relations theory, social categorization occurs instinctively among groups characterized by ethnic, religious, or sectarian differences, even in the absence of explicit competition or conflict. This cognitive process enables communities to structure their social environment into distinct and meaningful units. Once such categorization takes place, an inherent psychological tendency emerges, whereby individuals ascribe greater value and significance to their own group, thereby fostering in-group favoritism.<sup>41</sup> Enhancing intergroup contact and fostering conditions conducive to positive social interactions have been shown to mitigate, and in some cases even prevent, the escalation of these natural differentiation processes into antagonistic or competitive dynamics. Increased interaction between groups serves to reduce perceived threats and anxieties, thereby fostering social cohesion.<sup>42</sup> However, the French mandate administration pursued an entirely opposite strategy, reinforcing sectarian, religious, and ethnic divisions through the imposition of rigid territorial boundaries. By deliberately restricting opportunities for contact and interaction, this policy exacerbated intergroup isolation and entrenched social fragmentation, ultimately deepening societal divisions.

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<sup>39</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate: The Politics of Arab Nationalism 1920-1945*, Princeton University Press, 1987, p. 97; James L. Gelvin, *Divided Loyalties: Nationalism and Mass Politics in Syria at the Close of Empire*, University of California Press, 1999, s. 115-116; Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Syria and Iraq*, Frank Cass, England, 1995, p. 218.

<sup>40</sup> David Fromkin, *Barişa Son Veren Bariş Modern Ortadoğu Nasıl Yaratıldı? 1914-1922*, trans. Mehmet Harmancı, Epsilon Yayınları, İstanbul, 2016, p. 475; Ömer Osman Umar, *Osmanlı Yönetimi ve Fransız Manda İdaresi Altında Suriye (1908-1938)*, ATAM Yayınları, Ankara, 2004, pp. 454-463.

<sup>41</sup> Hogg, Abrams, Michael A. Hogg, Dominic Abrams, *Social Identifications*; Henry, Tajfel, *Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, *Annual Review of Psychology*, V. 33, 1982, pp. 1-39; *Differentiation Between Social Groups: Studies In The Social Psychology Of Intergroup Relations*, eds. Henry Tajfel, Academic Press., 1978, p. 63.

<sup>42</sup> Fiona Kate Barlow, W. R. Louis, M. Hewstone, "Rejected! Cognitions Of Rejection and Intergroup Anxiety as Mediators of The Impact of Cross-Group Friendships on Prejudice", *British Journal of Social Psychology*, V. 48, 2009, pp. 389-405.



Although local resistance against the mandate administration persisted sporadically, it was largely ineffective in significantly altering the course of events. To placate Syrian nationalists and their demands for a Greater Syria, the French undertook an administrative reorganization in 1922, merging the states of Damascus, Aleppo, the Alawites, and the Druze to form the Syrian Federation. The presidency of this newly established federation was entrusted to Suphi Bereket, a Turkish politician from Antioch who had previously served as the head of the Aleppo State. The first parliamentary assembly convened on June 28, 1922; however, in December 1924, the federation was dissolved by French General Weygand, leading once again to the administrative separation of Sunnis, Alawites, and Druze. Subsequently, on January 1, 1925, a new Syrian State was established, encompassing the states of Aleppo and Damascus along with the autonomous Sanjak of Alexandretta, where Sunni Muslims constituted the majority. The administrative capital was relocated from Aleppo to Damascus, further consolidating French control over the region.<sup>43</sup> The Alawites and Druze maintained their autonomy under direct mandate rule, with these administrative regions governed by a French commander and administered by French officials. Through this arrangement, the French effectively marginalized the Alawite and Druze populations from political participation, deliberately distancing them from the influence of Arab nationalist ideologies. This strategic isolation also impeded their integration with the nationalist movement centered in Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Homs, which sought to unify the region under a common political framework. Consequently, by early 1925, Syria was once again fragmented along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines, reflecting the French administration's overarching policy of reinforcing divisions and exacerbating intercommunal tensions.<sup>44</sup> Fundamentally, the mandatory authorities institutionalized the segregation of Sunni Muslims, Alawites, Druze, and Christians through the imposition of artificial administrative boundaries. However, the dominant political trajectory of the period was characterized by the emergence of nation-states, wherein diverse communities were integrated under a common civic identity to mitigate fragmentation. In stark contrast, the mandate powers deliberately accelerated ethnic, sectarian, and religious cleavages by implementing a policy of "ethnic representation." This was coupled with preferential treatment for select groups, thereby exacerbating intra-communal rivalries and fostering an atmosphere of sustained conflict. By partitioning the Middle Eastern territories into smaller and politically weaker entities, imperial powers not only preempted the formation of unified resistance movements but also solidified their own hegemonic control. The "divide and rule" strategy, a long-established paradigm of European colonial governance—which may be traced from the Roman Empire to the Habsburg dynasty—was methodically employed to perpetuate foreign domination. In this context, colonial authorities positioned themselves as indispensable arbiters of disputes that they had strategically fomented. By emphasizing communal distinctions and institutionalizing preferential policies, these interventions did not merely provoke sectarian strife but functioned as an integral component of a broader geopolitical calculus designed to ensure continued imperial hegemony.<sup>45</sup>

## 2.2. Policies of the Mandate Administration that Exacerbated Intergroup Competition

Within the administrative framework established under the authority of the French High Commissioner in Syria, senior bureaucratic positions were exclusively allocated to French officials, while Syrians were appointed to governorships and regional commissioner roles. However, these local administrators lacked autonomous decision-making authority, as their policies and actions were subject to veto by a French

<sup>43</sup>Ömer Osman Umar, "Suriye'de Fransız Emperyalizmi", *Fırat Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, V. 1, 2002, pp. 301-302.

<sup>44</sup>Ömer Osman Umar, *Osmanlı Yönetimi ve Fransız...*, pp. 454-455; Resul Bağlı, Songül Karahasanoğlu, "Türkiye'de Yaşayan Arap Alevileri (Nusayriler)'in Etnik ve Müzikal Kimliği", *Elektronik Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, V. 53, 2015, p. 51.

<sup>45</sup>Ilia Xypolia, "Divide et Impera: Vertical and Horizontal Dimensions of British Imperialism", *Critique: Journal of Socialist Theory*, V. 44, 2016, pp. 221-231.



advisor.<sup>46</sup> Consequently, French officials, who wielded full authority at the local level, played a pivotal role in disseminating narratives that accentuated communal distinctions, thereby reinforcing the overarching political strategy of the mandate administration. Intergroup relations typically manifest in two primary forms: positive interactions that foster cooperation and solidarity, or negative interactions characterized by antisocial behavior and violent conflict. A key factor contributing to intergroup hostilities is the existence of material conflicts of interest, as intensifying competition over scarce resources exacerbates animosities between groups seeking access to them.<sup>47</sup> Given that distinct social groups exhibit an inherent tendency to favor their in-group while denigrating out-groups, the presence of a competitive environment serves to further heighten intergroup tensions.<sup>48</sup> This phenomenon arises from the dual imperative of securing access to essential resources and preserving the integrity of group identity, thereby compelling groups to engage in confrontational dynamics to assert their social and political standing.<sup>49</sup>

The French mandate administration played a pivotal role in exacerbating intergroup hostilities, particularly in Alawite and Druze regions, by reinforcing sectarian divisions and promoting a minority-consciousness based on “separatist” narratives. These efforts were facilitated by the historically isolated socio-political structures of these communities, which provided a conducive environment for such divisive propaganda. For instance, while the Latakia region—home to the Alawite population—was historically impoverished and underdeveloped, the French mandate administration sought to emphasize and reconstruct the historical identity of the Nusayris (Alawites) to serve its strategic interests. French authorities actively propagated the notion that the Nusayris were neither Turks, Arabs, nor Muslims but rather the remnants of the Crusaders. They thus portrayed them as victims of mistreatment by both Turks and Arabs. This deliberate historical reconfiguration and targeted propaganda served to alienate the Nusayri community from the broader Sunni Muslim population, fostering antagonism and deepening sectarian divisions within the region.<sup>50</sup> In addition to efforts aimed at fostering a minority consciousness based on antagonism, the mandate administration also implemented specific measures to further isolate the Nusayris, particularly from the Sunni population. One such policy was the strategic militarization of the Nusayris against local Sunni Arabs. In 1921, the French mandate authorities actively employed the Nusayris as a military force against the Sunni Arab population, which deepened sectarian divisions and reinforcing intergroup hostilities.<sup>51</sup> From August 1920 onward, the Nusayri community was granted numerous privileges, including reduced taxation and various financial incentives. Additionally, they were permitted to establish their own courts, where legal cases were adjudicated by Nusayri jurists. These measures reinforced the internal cohesion of the Nusayri community while further distinguishing them from the broader Sunni population. Similarly, the Druze, the majority of whom resided in al-Suwayda, were among the ethnic minorities that played a role in national politics. Considered non-Islamic according to Sunni doctrine, the Druze were also among the groups favored by the French mandate administration. Through selective patronage, the French reinforced sectarian divisions, fostering a system in which minority groups were strategically elevated to counterbalance the influence of the Sunni majority.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>46</sup>William L. Cleveland, *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi...*, pp. 247-248.

<sup>47</sup>Muzafer Sherif, C. W. Sherif, “Ingroup and Intergroup Relations: Experimental Analysis”, *Social Psychology*, Harper & Row, 1969, pp. 221-266; Robert A. LeVine, Campbell, D. T., *Ethnocentrism: Theories of Conflict, Ethnic Attitudes, and Group Behavior*, John Wiley & Sons, 1972.

<sup>48</sup>Michael A. Hogg, Graham M. Vaughan, *Social Psychology: An Introduction*, Prentice Hall / Harvester Wheatsheaf, Londra, 1995, p. 321.

<sup>49</sup>Henry Tajfel, John C. Turner, “An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict”, *The Social Psychology of Intergroup Relations*, Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole, 1979, pp. 33-47.

<sup>50</sup>Tayfur Sökmen, *Hatay'ın Kurtuluşu İçin Harcanan Çabalar*, TTK Yayınları, Ankara, 1992, p. 97.

<sup>51</sup>Hanife Uslu, *Political Opposition Against The French Rule in Mandate Syria: 1920-1946*, Unpublished Master's Thesis, ODTÜ, Ankara, 2020, 110; Hatice Arslan, “Başlangıcından Günümüze Arap Alevliği-Nusayrılık”, *Mizanü'l-Hak İslami İlimler Dergisi*, V. 1, 2014, p. 109.

<sup>52</sup>Yeşim Demir, “Suriye'nin Mezhepsel Yapısı ve Etkileri”, *Yeni Türkiye*, V. 98, 2017, p. 51-58.



One of the divisive and competition-enhancing measures implemented by the mandate administration was the establishment of a military academy in Beirut, *Armée du Levant*, to train officers. Additionally, a Syrian Legion (*Troupes Spéciales*) was formed, composed of local groups such as Alawites, Druze, Ismailis, Christians, Kurds, and Circassians. However, the Sunni Arab population, perceived as a potential threat by the mandate authorities, was deliberately excluded from these military formations. This exclusion not only deepened the divide between the majority Sunni Arabs and minority groups but also reinforced sectarian fragmentation. By allocating military service opportunities primarily to minority groups from economically underdeveloped rural areas, the French administration effectively privileged these communities while further exacerbating social divisions. This policy led to the gradual integration of these minority groups into the French mandate system, while simultaneously fueling resentment among the Sunni Arab majority, who increasingly perceived the military institution as an instrument of foreign-backed sectarian favoritism.<sup>53</sup> The mandate administration also pursued a divisive policy by implementing measures that disrupted economic equality among groups. The French neglected investment in Sunni Muslim-majority regions such as Aleppo and Damascus while significantly increasing their economic focus on coastal areas like Lebanon. This economic favoritism further deepened intergroup discrimination and resentment. According to Group Threat Theory, members of a group perceive their own group's power and status as increasingly threatened when outgroups gain power. As a result, they exhibit more negative attitudes and behaviors toward members of other groups. The heightened sense of threat consequently fosters greater distrust and hostility between groups, further exacerbating social divisions.<sup>54</sup> According to the Integrated Threat Theory, intergroup anxiety constitutes a specific form of perceived threat, wherein heightened perceptions of realistic threats contribute to increased levels of anxiety in intergroup relations. The prolonged implementation of French mandate policies, which systematically favored Christian, Alawite, and Druze communities while politically and economically marginalizing the Sunni Muslim majority, engendered an environment of structural competition and intergroup rivalry. By incentivizing collaboration with the French administration among select minority groups, these policies reinforced mutual perceptions of threat and exacerbated intergroup anxieties, perpetuating hostilities and entrenching sectarian and ethnic divisions within Syrian society.

### 2.3. Failures of the Mandate Administration and the Process of Unifying Fragmented Elements Around a Common Objective

With the mandate administration, France pursued an economic policy aimed at maintaining its political dominance in the Syrian region while expanding its economic interests. By integrating the local economy into a system of dependency on France, the mandate authorities ensured that Syrian industries remained unprotected against external competition by implementing trade policies favoring European markets. This lack of protection for local production resulted in significant declines in agricultural commodity prices, a reduction in purchasing power, and rising unemployment rates. The deepening economic deterioration, driven by the policies of the French mandate administration, exacerbated public discontent and fueled growing opposition to the mandate regime.<sup>55</sup> On the other hand, the mandate administration's inconsistent and preferential policies, its despotic governance at the local level, heavy taxation, and widespread corruption further deepened both political and economic instability in the region. The first organized opposition to the mandate rule emerged from the Druze, a mountainous community. By 1921, Druze dissatisfaction with

<sup>53</sup>Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate...*, p. 69, 81.

<sup>54</sup>Robert D. Putnam, "E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in The Twenty-First Century", *Scandinavian Political Studies*, V. 30, pp. 137-174; Hubert M. Blalock, *Toward a Theory of Minority-Group Relations*, Capricorn Books, New York, 1967; Alberto Voci, M. Hewstone, "Intergroup Contact and Prejudice Toward Immigrants in Italy: The Mediation Role of Anxiety and The Moderational Role of Group Salience", *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, V. 6, 2003, pp. 37-54.

<sup>55</sup>Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate...*, p. 83.

French rule had begun to manifest through various incidents. In response to French restructuring efforts in Druze territories, a rebellion erupted under the leadership of local chieftain Sultan Pasha al-Atrash. Although the French suppressed the initial uprising, they intensified their repressive measures in the region. Consequently, in 1925, the Druze launched a large-scale revolt under the leadership of Sultan Pasha al-Atrash, which swiftly spread across all regions of Syria. The Great Revolt of 1925 facilitated an alliance between the Druze and Syrian nationalists, fostering a collective resistance against French rule. The American historian of the Middle East, Philip Khoury, argues that the primary motivation behind this unification was the sense of humiliation experienced by the Muslim majority as a result of the complete control of their internal affairs by the French authorities.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, despite the preferential treatment afforded to certain groups, the French administration failed to implement policies that addressed the fundamental needs of all groups, including security, freedom, justice, self-respect, and political participation. The obstruction or denial of these basic needs often leads to conflict.<sup>57</sup> However, when groups share a common goal that can only be achieved through collective effort, intergroup conflict tends to diminish, and a degree of intergroup cohesion can be established despite existing differences.<sup>58</sup> This is because when a common goal is at stake, disparities in social power, unequal access to resources, and the adoption of differing values—factors that typically contribute to discord—can be mitigated through the shared significance of the collective objective. This shared value fosters the establishment of cooperative relationships, facilitating collaboration despite underlying differences.<sup>59</sup> During the Great Revolt of 1925, despite their ethnic and sectarian differences, Syrians managed to unite around a common goal due to their shared collective grievances against the mandate administration. This unity emerged despite the French authorities' persistent policies of ethnic and sectarian division. However, by 1927, France brutally suppressed the widespread uprising by bombing various regions, resulting in the massacre of thousands of Syrians.<sup>60</sup>

### 3. The Post-Independence Period: Syria's Incomplete Nation-State Formation

It is clear that the imperative of resisting an external actor, namely the French, functioned as a unifying catalyst for Syria's internal factions, transcending ethnic and sectarian divisions. As evidenced during the 1919–1920 period, when Sunnis, Alawites, Druze, Arabs, Kurds, and Turkmens collectively mobilized against the imposition of the French Mandate, a similar dynamic unfolded during the Great Revolt. Despite their distinct sociopolitical identities, these groups managed to coalesce around a shared objective, illustrating how external pressures could temporarily override internal cleavages and foster collective resistance.<sup>61</sup> In 1926, the drafting of a constitution for Lebanon further exacerbated Syrian opposition, as it was perceived as a manifestation of French favoritism toward the Maronite-dominated region. The Mandate administration was ultimately compelled to acknowledge the political formation *Kütletü'l-Vataniyye* (National Bloc), which had been established in 1928 by leaders who had persistently resisted the imposition of French rule since the aftermath of World War I. During this period, several key political figures emerged. Among them were İbrahim Henano, a Kurdish politician from Aleppo who had graduated from the Istanbul Faculty of Law; Haşim al-Atassi, a graduate of the *Mekteb-i Mülkiye* from Homs and leader of the Vatan Party; and Shukri

<sup>56</sup> Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and The French Mandate ...*, pp. 151-154; Hanife Uslu, *Political Opposition Against...*, pp. 70-72.

<sup>57</sup> Robert J. Fisher, "Intergroup Conflict", *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice*, Jossey-Bass/Wiley, 2014, pp. 230-252.

<sup>58</sup> Michael A. Hogg, Graham M. Vaughan, *Social Psychology ...*, p. 321.

<sup>59</sup> Jay Rothman, *Resolving Identity-Based Conflict in Nations, Organizations, and Communities*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, 1997.

<sup>60</sup> Ömer Osman Umar, "Suriye'de Fransız Emperyalizmi", s. 304-308. For further details, see. Michael Provence, *The Great Syrian Revolt and The Rise of Arab Nationalism*, University of Texas Press, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Hadiye Yılmaz Odabaşı, *Suriye'de İşgal ve Direniş ...*, pp. 190-191.

al-Quwatli, a member of a prominent mercantile family from Damascus and also a graduate of the *Mekteb-i Mülkiye*, who led the Independence Party. Eventually, in February 1928, elections for a Constituent Assembly were held in Syria, leading to the formation of the Nationalist Alliance, headed by İbrahim Henano and Hashim al-Atassi. The Constituent Assembly, dominated by Sunni elites from Damascus and Aleppo, pursued a principal objective: the expulsion of the French from Syria and the establishment of a unified Greater Syrian state.<sup>62</sup> The draft constitution prepared by the Constituent Assembly, which aimed for independence, was naturally rejected by the French authorities. In the subsequent elections held on March 30, 1932, the Nationalist Front was defeated, and the People's Front formed a new government. Although local Syrian factions had demonstrated unity against the Mandate administration during the Great Revolt, political and sectarian divisions persisted in the aftermath.

By the early 1930s, the Alawite population, which had grown to approximately 200,000 individuals, did not share the vision of a unified Syrian nation alongside Sunni Arabs. Meanwhile, the political rivalry between Damascus and Aleppo remained unresolved. The Aleppo branch of the Vatan Party, which was predominantly Sunni, was engaged in an ongoing competition with its Damascus counterpart, further fracturing internal cohesion. This political fragmentation among local forces weakened the collective Syrian cause, while tensions among religious minorities also resurged. Despite these challenges, the struggle for independence persisted, culminating in a nationwide general strike in 1936. Faced with the looming threat of World War II, the French authorities were compelled to sign an agreement on July 9, 1936, granting Syria independence—albeit on the condition that Lebanon remain separate. Additionally, the Druze and Alawite states were to be integrated into a unified Syrian state. In return, Syria agreed to recognize France's military presence, allowing it to retain control of two air bases for a period of twenty-five years.<sup>63</sup> However, rebellions erupted in the Alawite and Druze regions as demands for autonomy clashed with the broader push for national unification. In 1938, the French authorities reneged on the agreement, and in 1939, they suspended the Syrian constitution and dissolved the parliament. Consequently, the autonomous administrations of the Alawite and Druze states under French control were reestablished.<sup>64</sup> Domestically, Syria's political landscape underwent further fragmentation in the 1940s. The Vatan Party experienced internal splits, leading to the emergence of a new Aleppo-based party.<sup>65</sup> Simultaneously, more radical political movements, such as the National Action League and the Ba'ath Party, began to gain traction, marking a shift toward ideological polarization in Syrian politics.

As demands for independence grew more organized and forceful, coupled with France's serious struggles during World War II, the mandate administration was compelled to reinstate the Syrian constitution and allow elections in 1943. However, France remained reluctant to fully withdraw from Syria and relinquish its authority. Conversely, Syrian nationalists were determined to expel the French from the region. In this tense climate, clashes escalated between Syrian independence fighters and the mandate administration, leading France to once again bombard Damascus by air and land. A ceasefire was eventually brokered through British intervention, and in 1946, France was forced to recognize Syria's independence.<sup>66</sup> On April 17, 1946, the last French troops withdrew completely from the region. However, in the immediate aftermath of independence,

<sup>62</sup>Murat Köylü, *Ne Umduk Ne Bulduk*, Hiper Yayınları, İstanbul, 2017, pp. 37-38; Mahmut Bolat, "Fransa'nın Manda İdaresi Altında Suriye'nin Bölünmesi ve Aleviler Devleti", *Türk Kültürü ve Hacı Bektaş Veli Araştırma Dergisi*, V. 95, 2023, pp. 156-157.

<sup>63</sup>Peter Mansfield, *Ortadoğu Tarihi*, trans. Ümit Hüsrev Yolsal, Say Yayınları, İstanbul, 2012, pp. 290-291; Sabahattin Şen, *Ortadoğu'da İdeolojik Bunalım: Suriye Baas Partisi ve İdeolojisi*, Birey Yayıncılık, İstanbul, 2004, p. 96.

<sup>64</sup>William L. Cleveland, *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi...*, s. 250; Ömer Osman Umar, *Osmanlı Yönetimi ve Fransız...*, p. 462.

<sup>65</sup>Philip S. Khoury, *Syria and the French Mandate...*, p. 623; Mehmet Akif Okur, "Emperyalizmin Ortadoğu Tecrübesinden Bir Kesit: Suriye'de Fransız Mandası", *Bilig*, V. 48, 2009, p. 50.

<sup>66</sup>"Syria: World War II and Independence" (Online) <https://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/578856/Syria/29922/World-War-II-and-independence>, 25 Şubat 2025.

the Nusayris (Alawites) launched a resistance movement demanding autonomous governance. Following the suppression of this uprising, the Syrian government abolished the privileges that the French mandate had previously granted to the Alawites and Druze.<sup>67</sup>

Syria had finally achieved independence; however, without having fully established state institutions or a well-structured civil society, nor successfully forging a unifying Syrian national identity, it soon found itself once again as an object of imperial rivalry in the emerging Cold War world order. This new phase also brought shifts in domestic politics: the influence of the Sunni elite began to wane, while the power of officers from rural areas, trained in the military academy established by the French, steadily increased.<sup>68</sup> The military coup led by Husni al-Za'im in 1949 marked the beginning of Syria's long history of military interventions in politics. In line with the Western powers' objective of maintaining their global dominance, external influences on the region remained significant in the post-World War II era. Syria's geopolitical significance not only sustained the interests of Britain and France but also attracted the Soviet Union and the United States to the region. Consequently, in the newly emerging bipolar world order, Syria entered a new phase characterized by political and social instability.

In the post-World War II period, a significant portion of conflicts worldwide were socio-ethnic in nature and predominantly occurred in the Third World.<sup>69</sup> The interventions of imperialist powers in these regions often exacerbated the intensity of these conflicts. In Syria, however, the Sunni-Shia struggle rather than ethnic conflicts emerged as the defining characteristic of the regional tensions.<sup>70</sup> Since the era of the French Mandate, Syria's economic, political, and military dependency on external actors—including European powers, the Soviet Union, and the United States—had significantly impacted the state's autonomy and its ability to address domestic group needs. As conflicts prolonged, social actors became increasingly reliant on external support and aid, leading to the systematic involvement of foreign powers in domestic affairs. Over time, decision-making authority increasingly shifted into the hands of external actors, resulting in the Syrian state losing control over both its internal groups and, more broadly, its own governance and society.<sup>71</sup> Even after gaining independence, social fragmentation persisted in Syria, and the policy of favoring certain communities, inherited from the French Mandate, continued. From the late 1960s onward, while the military's influence in politics grew, Ba'athist, Alawite (Nusayri), and Druze groups—essentially non-Sunni factions—began receiving preferential treatment. In 1966, Druze officers were completely eliminated from the army, consolidating military power in the hands of the Nusayris. The subsequent purges removed the remaining Ismaili and Sunni officers, paving the way for Nusayri General Hafez al-Assad's military coup in 1970, which initiated a 30-year period of uninterrupted one-man rule.<sup>72</sup> Until his death in 2000, Assad was repeatedly elected with nearly unanimous votes. During this period, Sunnis constituted 74% of the total population, while Nusayris accounted for 12% and Druze for 3%. Despite being a minority group, Nusayris continued to benefit from preferential policies, while the urban Sunni Muslim majority's political influence was deliberately weakened. Instead, rural-origin, non-Sunni groups were elevated to power, and Sunnis were systematically marginalized from the army, intelligence services, and security apparatus. In domestic politics, rather than fostering a unifying national identity, the Assad regime increasingly emphasized a

<sup>67</sup>Ömer Osman Umar, *Osmanlı Yönetimi ve Fransız...*, p. 510.

<sup>68</sup>Hanife Uslu, *Political Opposition Against...*, p. 120-129.

<sup>69</sup>Edward E. Azar, Paul Jureidini and Ronald McLaurin, "Protracted Social Conflict; Theory and Practice in the Middle East", *Journal of Palestine Studies*, V. 8, 1978, pp. 47-48.

<sup>70</sup>Bayram Sinkaya, "Şii Ekseni Tartışmaları ve İran", *Avrasya Dosyası*, S. 13/3, 2007, 39-41; *Mezhepler, Etnisite ve Çatışma Çözümü*, ed. Reyhan Doğan, TASAM Yayınları, İstanbul, 2015, p. 60.

<sup>71</sup>Edward E. Azar, *The Management of Protracted Social Conflict: Theory and Cases*, Dartmouth, 1990, pp. 11-12.

<sup>72</sup>William L. Cleveland, *Modern Ortadoğu Tarihi...*, pp. 442-443.



Shiite Muslim identity.<sup>73</sup> The Ba'ath regime's preferential treatment of the Nusayri minority necessitated a shift toward an authoritarian governance model, wherein sectarian considerations played a central role in the structuring of the administrative apparatus. In alignment with its autocratic and patronage-based policies, the regime systematically employed repression, forced assimilation, and even acts of mass violence against non-Nusayri groups, particularly in response to the mobilization of Sunni resistance movements, most notably in Aleppo.<sup>74</sup> As in the French Mandate period, intergroup economic inequalities persisted under the Ba'ath regime. The coastal regions, where the Alawite population was concentrated, received significant economic investments, thereby exacerbating the socio-economic divide between Alawite and Sunni Muslim areas and further fueling sectarian tensions. At the same time, regions with a predominantly Kurdish population were systematically excluded from economic development projects. Moreover, Syrian Kurds were stripped of their political rights, rendered stateless, and subjected to Arabization policies, further entrenching their marginalization within the state structure.<sup>75</sup> In conclusion, despite having gained independence over 80 years ago, Syria has yet to establish a unifying national identity that encompasses all Syrians, nor has a shared Islamic identity been sufficient to eradicate sectarian conflicts. Over time, these conflicts became increasingly radicalized with the emergence of Sunni and Shia militant factions, ultimately escalating into a full-scale civil war in 2011 that lasted for nearly 13 years. The divide-and-rule policy implemented by the French Mandate, which sought to exploit Syria's ethnic and religious divisions to maintain colonial dominance, laid the foundation for Syria's enduring political instability and persistent conflict in the following decades.

## Conclusion

The persistence of social conflicts in Syria from World War I to the present underscores the region's long-standing instability. The primary cause of these conflicts lies in the challenges associated with regulating the coexistence of diverse religious, ethnic, and sectarian groups. A secondary but equally significant factor has been the intervention of external actors since Syria's independence, often through policies that exacerbated intergroup hostilities. Notably, despite the absence of modern governance paradigms, large-scale sectarian and ethnic conflicts were not prevalent in Syria until the late 19th century under Ottoman rule. This relative stability was largely attributable to the Ottoman Empire's governance strategy, which, rather than imposing cultural homogenization, maintained a dual-identity framework that preserved sub-identities while ensuring collective security, recognition, and social cohesion. This model effectively mitigated intergroup bias and antagonism, fostering an environment of mutual interdependence rather than sectarian rivalry.

For nearly five centuries, the Ottoman administration successfully upheld a harmonious multi-ethnic order with minimal conflict by adhering to a two-pronged governance approach: first, by leveraging the central authority's economic and political dominance to address the needs of diverse communities, and second, by permitting cultural and religious autonomy in exchange for political allegiance to the empire. However, from the mid-19th century onward, the Ottoman state's declining administrative capacity, coupled with the rise of modern nationalist movements, precipitated the empire's fragmentation.

With the advent of the French Mandate administration, policies diametrically opposed to those of the Ottoman period were implemented, laying the groundwork for sectarian fragmentation and intergroup

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<sup>73</sup> Mezhepler, *Etnisite ve...*, p. 27.

<sup>74</sup> Abdülhalik Bakır, Süleyman Pekin, "Kuzey Suriye'deki Türkmen Yerleşimlerinin Çağdaş Tarihi ve Stratejik Altyapısı Üzerine Genel Bir Değerlendirme", *Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları*, V. 242, 209, pp. 89-130.

<sup>75</sup> Robert Lowe, "The Syrian Kurds: A People Discovered" (Online) <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Middle%20East/bpsyriankurds.pdf>, Accessed: 11 Ocak 2025.



antagonism. Rather than fostering national unity under a centralized political framework, the Mandate authorities deliberately restructured administrative divisions along sectarian lines, thereby curtailing cross-group interactions. Moreover, by promoting a minority consciousness, the French administration institutionalized perceptions of threat and competition, fostering a sense of communal insecurity and antagonism. The Sunni Muslim majority was systematically politically and economically marginalized, while Maronite, Alawite, and Druze minorities were accorded disproportionate political and economic privileges, thereby entrenching socio-political cleavages.

Simultaneously, France's economic policies entrenched Syria's dependency on external actors, exacerbating socioeconomic disparities and inter-sectarian tensions, while positioning themselves as an indispensable arbiter in these conflicts. Unfortunately, this governance paradigm was carried over into post-independence Syria, where sectarian favoritism and political exclusionism became defining features of the Ba'athist regime. The sectarian divide, particularly along Sunni-Shiite fault lines, was further deepened by external interventions, solidifying sect-based political affiliations and impeding the formation of an inclusive national identity. Over time, sectarian hostilities became self-perpetuating, intergenerational grievances were entrenched, and the possibility of establishing a unified, supra-ethnic national identity was foreclosed.

As this analysis demonstrates, the French Mandate's institutional legacy was transposed into Syria's post-independence political, social, and economic structures, constituting a fundamental historical determinant of the country's protracted social conflicts. The enduring legacy of colonial administrative fragmentation, external interventions, and sectarian governance paradigms has precluded the formation of a cohesive national identity, ensuring the continuity of conflict well into the 21st century. Indeed, the authoritarian rule of the Assad family, political repression, economic instability, and social injustice, coupled with tensions between the Sunni majority and the Alawite minority regime, culminated in a civil war that persisted until 2024. The fragmented ethnic and sectarian composition of the opposition—comprising secular and Islamist Sunni groups, Kurdish nationalists, and regional tribal factions—once again underscored the notably weak development of a cohesive national identity in Syria at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Moreover, throughout the course of the civil war, international actors such as Russia, Iran, and the United States became involved in the conflict, reflecting a historical continuity in the region's geopolitical dynamics.



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