The Mediterranean region, a major part of which is the area known as the Greater Syria region, has always attracted and served as a passageway for different peoples and civilisations. According to historians, more than thirty-eight different civilisations have passed through it at different times, some of which were mere passersby while others settled down, formed a national minority and left their imprint on the local culture. Not only was the region a refuge for people fleeing the ravages of history; as the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions, it was the arena of major civil and intra-religious warfare.

Today, as yesterday, the region is still an arena of outstanding conflicts and of others that are looming on the horizon; the religious intertwines with the national in these conflicts, which threaten with an explosion whose repercussions could spread well beyond the region, to more remote parts of the world.

Given its current political boundaries, inherited from the political games of the world’s powers in the region, Syria is a microcosm of the astonishing mixture of populations living side by side in the region. This has been a source of pride and anxiety for the local cultural and political elites, because diversity is a blessing when it is well managed, and a curse when it is not.

During the past few decades, the predominant image one had of Syria was of a country where citizens enjoyed their diversity within the framework of an all-inclusive national unity that other countries in the region could only dream of. However, tensions did surface from time to time to remind us that there were still some embers burning under the ashes, embers, which if exposed to the open air, were likely ignite and cause a huge conflagration. Today, one year after the outbreak of the revolution, the Syrian crisis is a clear example of this latent danger.

The main cause of the deepening cracks among the societal components is not diversity itself, but rather the bad management of this diversity, which has exerted its security pressure in order the keep a bright outer image of coexistence, regardless of the hatred and repulsions that this approach may create.

Regardless of the outcome, however, the current crisis in Syria is a historic opportunity to put an end to the mismanagement of diversity, and convene a national dialogue that would eventually lead to a new social compact. Not only would this compact entrench the legal, constitutional and social values of true citizenship, but it would also help avoid turning the blessing of diversity into a blind civil war with disastrous consequences.

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The Syrian Mosaic

Like other societies in the Middle East, Syrian society is an astonishing mixture of religious and national elements that made the country a real popular mosaic.

First: Syria’s National Elements

Arabs form the majority of Syria’s citizens, and there is a debate between historians and intellectuals on the origin of Arabism in Syria. Proponents of the Arab nationalist ideology believe that Syria has been Arab since people first settled there (i.e., since the Eighth Millennium BC) and, as such, all the civilisations that lived on its soil prior to the Arab Muslim invasion were Arab, meaning that Arabism has been Syria’s true and constant identity throughout history. Others believe, however, that Syria’s origin is non-Arab, and that it was Arabised as a result of the Arab Muslim invasion, and has remained so to this day.

Today, Arabs account for more than 80% of Syria’s population and, as its largest demographic group, have given it its national character; consecutive Syrian policies helped by entrenching this notion even further. Thus, the official name of the state is the Syrian Arab Republic, its constitution openly states the country’s Arab identity, and the state’s ideological machine promotes this identity by categorically denying its non-Arab origins, and even ignoring the presence of minorities whose national characteristics, like language, culture and traditions, are non-Arab. For example, school curricula do not even mention the presence of Kurdish, Armenian and Circassian minorities in the country.

Syria’s national elements could be divided into two groups: the indigenous population and migrant elements.

1. Syria’s Indigenous National Elements: we mean by that the national groups with deep roots in the region, which makes it difficult to determine exactly when they first settled the area. The Arabs belong to this category, as do obviously the Assyrian, Syriac and Kurdish minorities.

The origins of the small Assyrian and Syriac minorities go back to the Assyrian Kingdom of the Twenty-First Century BC. The Assyrians converted to Christianity and, until today, speak Eastern Aramaic in the North East of the country, and Western Aramaic (the language of Jesus Christ) in the area where most of them live today, close to the Syrian capital Damascus. It is a small minority whose numbers have been dwindling fast in the past few decades, due to high migration rates to Western European countries (mainly Sweden).

For their part, the Kurds make up to 15% of the Syrian population, i.e., around three million people; however, this number could go up or down since it is almost impossible to determine with certainty the real number of Kurds in Syria. This is not only due to the lack of accurate statistics (the last demographic and sectarian census were held in 1943), but also to the fact that many Syrian Kurds are well integrated in the larger Arab milieu, especially in big cities like Damascus, Aleppo and Hama.

The Kurds live all over Syria, though there is a larger cultural concentration in areas where many of them live, like Rukn-El-Din and Jabal Al-Ruz in Damascus, Al-Barazieh quarter in Hama, and in the country’s northern and eastern regions, mainly in the cities of Qamishly, Darbasieh and ‘Amouda.
2. Migrant National Elements:
Incoming minorities, who form an integral part of the Eastern Mediterranean’s mosaic, came in groups of migrants each at a particular moment in their people’s history, or part of a people whose national identity was already fully formed. They are often the result of events in the not so distant past, like the Armenians, for example, who are a national/religious minority numbering around 200,000 citizens in Syria, alone. Many Armenians came to the region in search of refuge from massacres against them, perpetrated at the end of the last decade of the Twentieth Century by the Touranians, whose ambition was to found a Touranian Empire. The massacres began at the end of April 1915, and ended with the murder of over one million Armenians, and the exile of hundreds of thousands, many of whom sought refuge in this region.

The Armenians succeeded in preserving many of their national characteristics; they speak Armenian among themselves, perform their own religious rites (in both the Orthodox and Catholic Church) and practice their own social and cultural traditions. They are fully integrated in Syria’s urban social fabric (especially in the big cities of Aleppo and Damascus) and excel in a wide variety of professions, including tailoring, mechanics and music, and in a variety of specialisations like engineering and medicine.

The Circassians came from the Russian territories after the war between the Russian and Ottoman Empires, and tens of thousands of them settled in the villages between Iskenderun in the north, and Palestine in the south, mainly in the Golan Heights. Settling them in that area was part of an Ottoman plan aimed at building-up areas with known sources of water on the road between Damascus and Medina, in the Arabian Peninsula, to secure communication routes between Syria and the Hejaz, and foil British plans to control Egypt and Hejaz.

Just like the Armenians, the Circassians have remained a close-knit community linked by their national characteristics, which they were careful to preserve despite being the descendents of four different tribes (the Abzakh, Kabarday, Bzhedugh and Hatuqwey). They speak their own language among themselves, including a variety of dialects, and have high respect for their social traditions, especially those related to marriage, and for other forms of cultural expression. However, the Circassians differ from the Armenians in that they are more prone to gravitate towards public service, especially in the army and government administration. Moreover, whereas very few Armenians work in agriculture (except the descendents of the old Armenian Kingdom that once stretched down to the north-eastern corner of Syria), quite a number of Circassians work in the fields in regions where many still live, particularly in the rural areas to which their forebears had migrated.

Other national groups who migrated en masse also chose to settle in Syria after escaping the tyranny of the Ottoman Empire, including the Turkmens, Daghistanis, Aranaouts, Albanians, Chechens, Kazakhs and Bosnians. The fact that the latter communities are very small made them more likely to blend in society and disappear, and lose many of their particular characteristics.

Unlike mixed societies like the United States, Great Britain and other Western countries who play host to a large number of migrants from different origins, and have largely succeeded in integrating them within the mother culture, both indigenous and migrant
national minorities are careful to maintain their cohesiveness by safeguarding family relations and fostering communal solidarity. This helps form within the host community groups of people infused with a national fervour independent from that of the host country, a phenomenon that could eventually threaten the host community’s social fabric, unlike individual migrants whose only option is to integrate their host communities, as fast as possible.

The reason for the difference between these two cases could be the fact that in the former, the underlying national identity is “civil”, whereas in the latter it is “ethnic”.

Second: Syria’s Religious Components

If the Middle East is rich in national minorities because it has, essentially, always attracted and served as a passageway for populations from its wider geographic milieu, it is then extremely rich in religious diversity because it is the birthplace of the three monotheistic religions and, as such, has lived every conflicts, division and change that these religions have experienced. Syria has had the lion’s share of this history’s impact and was affected by it more than any other country in the region; it is an impact whose effects are still visible today, whether in the material vestiges of its past or daily lives of its citizens.

For example, there is an district in Damascus, which some like to call “the Holy Triangle”, that holds, perhaps after Jerusalem in Palestine, the largest number of holy sites belonging to the three monotheistic religions, in an area that barely exceeds one square kilometre. We see in people’s daily lives several examples of more than one religious sect sharing the same religious rites, each according to its particular belief. Among the most telling examples is the anniversary of Saint George (Al-Khider), which falls on the 6th of May, in which the faithful of both the Christian Orthodox community and Muslim Alawite community take part and perform the same rites, including a pilgrimage to Saint George’s Monastery and to the shrines erected in Al-Khader’s memory.

1. The Islamic Component:

The Sunnis: The Sunnis are the largest religious community in Syria, accounting for between 70 to 75% of the population, most of whose members adhere to the Hanafi School. Although, until the mid 1970s, they formed the majority of the cities’ inhabitants, internal migrations from rural to urban areas brought in large numbers from other denominations, especially members of the Alawite community, which eventually reduced the Sunnis’ impact on the social, cultural and economic lives of the big cities. The Syrian Sunni community is known for its rejection of religious fundamentalism, which is why political life in Syria did not have a significant presence of the jihadi or salafi movements. The Muslim Brothers in Syria did not adopt the “armed struggle” slogan in their fight against the regime, at the end of the 1970s and early 1980s, except when it had no choice after being set upon by the hard-line “vanguard fighters” with their very harsh military tactics. However, although early in the first decade of the Twentieth Century, and coinciding with the American invasion of Iraq, a number of hard-line salafi groups began to emerge on the scene, influenced largely by Wahabism and jihadi groups. There existed at the same time several Sunni Sufi Schools known for their disdain for politics and religious fanaticism. The most important among these is the Naqshbandi order, whose headquarters in Damascus
manages millions of followers from China to North Africa.

**The Alawites:** The number of Alawites in Syria varies; while some statistics put them at 12% of the population, others put them at 20%. The Alawite community was once concentrated in the Western mountains, to which they began to arrive in the Thirteenth Century to escape extermination at the hands of the ultra-religious Ottomans, who deemed their religion a form of heresy that should be wiped out.

The Alawites' creed is a mixture between Neo-Platonic philosophy prevalent in Eastern Syria, and the Sufi tradition of Islam. At a certain moment in history, difficult to ascertain, the creed became shrouded in secrecy to protect it and its adherents against the Ottomans' persecution of minorities.

The Alawites suffered from misery and persecution throughout their history, and were only able to lead normal lives under the French Mandate when some of their youths received an education at missionary schools, while others joined the army. When Syria won its independence and established its own army, joining the army became the main ambition of poor Syrian young men, including the Alawites for whom the display of military insignia was the only way to gain a certain status in society. This explains the high percentage of Alawite officers in the Syrian Army.

**The Druze:** Estimates of the size of the Druze community in Syria range between 1% to 3%; the community is mainly concentrated in Jebel El-Druze (Jebel El-Arab), in the south of the country and in Al-Lajat and the Golan. This includes the inhabitants of territories occupied by Israel in 1967, who compelled their inhabitants to move further into the Syrian heartland, and tried to force the Israeli identity on those who stayed behind.

The origins of Druze are not known for certain, although some believe that they go back to the Pharaonic era in Egypt. What is certain, however, is that their current faith goes back to the early Eleventh Century, more specifically to the Fatimid Caliph Al-Hakem Bi-Amr-Allah who was killed in 1021, and whose followers escaped from to Greater Syria after being hounded in Egypt. The Druze were involved in many wars throughout their history, either in defence of their faith, which fundamentalist Sunni Islam rejects, or in disputes over territory with the Maronite Christians of Lebanon, in 1860.

Like the Alawite faith, the Druze faith is secretive whereby no strangers should ever learn much about it; it is transmitted only through “Musarrah,” (secret teaching). The Druze faith is a mixture of Greek, Buddhist and Islamic teachings.

**The Ismailis:** Syrian Ismailis, whose numbers vary from 1% to 3%, live in a number of medium size villages in the middle and West of the country, including Al-Salmiyah, Misyaf and Al-Qadmous.

During the Crusader era, the Ismailis played an important role in the country’s history, in particular a group of fighters erroneously known as “the Assassins” (al-Hashashin). The group took Misyaf Castel as its headquarters after the capture of Alamut Castle in Persia by the Mongols.

The Ismaili faith, which prioritises reason, is also one of the secretive creeds rejected by fundamentalist Sunni Islam. Today, a network managed by the Agha Khan Foundation oversees the community’s affairs worldwide, and provides a variety of services to its members.
The Shiites: This community, whose numbers are relatively small in Syria, lives mainly in Damascus, the nearby suburb of Sayeda Zeinab, and in a number of villages in Homs Governorate.

In recent years, a phenomenon of “tashyee’” (converting to Shiism) made its appearance mostly in the eastern region of Al-Raqqa.

Al-Murshidiyoun: The Murshidi call was launched in Syria on August 25, 1952, by Mujib Bin Salman Al-Murshid, grew within the confines of the Alawite sect and spread to the western mountains. The faith, which calls for virtue and morality, enjoys considerable support from the regime.

2. The Christian Component:

The Arameans were the first people to convert to Christianity, as did a few other Arab tribes like the Ghassanids, who lived in the southern Plains of the province of Hauran. Today, the Christian community is spread all over the country, in the cities as well as the countryside, with higher concentrations in areas with a long Christian historical presence, like Maaloula, Seidnaya and Wadi Al-Nasara. There is a disagreement on the real number of Christians in Syria; while official sources estimate their number at 10% of the population, i.e., 2,300,000 persons, a number of Christian religious leaders quote a lower estimate of 5%, or 1,150,000 persons, or less. In any case, in the past twenty years the number of Christians in Syria has gradually dwindled down, due to two main reasons:

- The high Christian migration rates mainly to the Americas and Northern Europe;
- The low Christian birth rates compared to those of Muslim families.

- Syrian Christianity gave the religion many saints and apostles, and some of the sites associated with these saints are still destinations for pilgrims from all over the world. Syria saw the emergence of several new Christian denominations and welcomed many waves of Christian immigrants from the east and north, which explains the astonishing variety of the Syrian Christian sects and churches today. There are eleven different Christian denominations in Syria, some of which go back to the First Century BC (the Orthodox Church) and others to the Nineteenth Century (the Protestant Armenians). From the point of view of size, the largest is the Greek Orthodox Church with around half a million followers, and the smallest is the Chaldean Catholic Church with six thousand followers, at most. Moreover, while the majority of Christians speak Arabic in their day-to-day lives (save for the Armenians who speak both Armenian and Arabic), church rites are performed in Arabic, Latin, Greek, Syriac and Armenian.

3. Syria’s Jewish Population:

History books, including Jewish ones, tell us that the Jews lived a happy and peaceful life in Syria until the establishment of the State of Israel; this changed the situation of Syria’s Jews, particularly after the June 1967 War, when many of them decided to emigrate to Israel or the United States. In 1992, after years of restrictions on their travel, the Syrian authorities lifted the ban allowing seven hundred Jews to leave the country, mainly to the United States. Today, only a few dozens remain mainly in Damascus and Aleppo.

Syria’s considerable religious diversity has always constituted, and still does, a rich source of knowledge and spirituality; there is
no doubt that belonging to a given component means enjoying an additional cultural asset specific to that particular element, which would enrich the culture. There is also no doubt that the coexistence between different cultures reduces the level of fanaticism, provided these cultures are allowed to open up to each other, in other words if they are given the chance to get to know one another. However, differences between religious components could become a time bomb that threatens the entire community with dismemberment, and probably division, if religious and national diversity is not managed properly and responsibly in a manner that places the national interest above the narrow interests of a particular group or ruling elite, and above the despotic instincts of a tyrannical potentate.

Governance of Diversity

Syria’s modern history did not witness any long or deep-rooted ethnic or sectarian crises that leave their unfortunate and lasting imprint on society. On the contrary, Syria has always represented to the world the image of a socially stable oasis at the heart of a region rife with sectarian and ethnic conflicts. It never experienced a civil war like in Lebanon, sectarian war like in Iraq, religious tensions like in Egypt, or ethnic conflicts like between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq, or the Turks and Kurds in Turkey. This is an undisputable fact. However, one cannot but wonder if this image is a reflection of an actual social situation, or an image superimposed on a situation that does not entirely conform to it. Is it true that Syrian society was, and still is, as strong and solid as a rock of granite with no cracks threatening its “national unity”, or is it like a swamp, tranquil at the surface but teeming with turmoil at the bottom?

The question might seem like an adventure with uncalculated risks because it could release demons that no one will be able to put back in the bottle; however, facts on the ground dispel this fear and give the question full scientific legitimacy. This is especially true considering where Syrian society is at today, one year after the revolution, and given the genuine fear that the political and moral conflict between the people and the regime would turn into a sectarian conflict between the numerically superior Sunni community and smaller communities (the Alawites in particular, and the Christians to a certain extent). The inescapable question today is the one that looks at the reasons behind this change in Syrian society, from one that accepted on several occasions, in the 1950s, Fares Al-Khoury, a Christian Protestant, as prime minister, voted the head of the Muslim Brotherhood out of Parliament in favour of his secular rival, and received Hafez Al-Assad in 1970 with sacrificial offerings in cities known for their religious conservatism, into a society where religious and national groups show signs of turning in on themselves and openly calling for more extremism, violence and rejection of the other. It also turned from a society in which the Kurds are an integrated and active element in the country’s political and civic life, with the aim of ensuring that all Syrians enjoy equal citizenship rights, into a society where a large segment of the Kurdish population\(^1\) refuses to make citizenship its main objective, and calls instead the right of self-determination. Such calls could eventually threaten the country’s national unity, and calling for them within the context

\(^1\) The Kurdish Congress included representatives of ten Kurdish Syrian parties and, five more parties joined in late February 2012.
of the country’s unity does not mitigate the possibility of this actually happening.²

The social fault lines the the social mosaic of the Eastern Mediterranean implies are not new. However, the period of national liberation and the concomitant struggle to secure and strengthen the country’s independence have fostered among the public a strong sense of unity, which in turn helped entrench a number of modern political and/or social notions (democracy, secularism, equality, national unity...). These have largely replaced sub-national cultural notions and weakened the hold of the sub-national components over individuals and society. Syria is the clearest example of this social unification dynamic and the spread of its modern notions, and this is what precisely validates the question about the reappearance of sectarian and isolationist discourses and stories about the real strength of sub-national elements, making it deserving of attention and an answer.

It is very easy for us, when searching for answers to this question, to look straight at various regional and international factors; however, no one in his right mind would dismiss the role that these factors have played or their impact on various social upheavals in the region. These factors range from the world’s desire to control the sources of oil, and hence the attempt to thwart any effort to establish a strong entity capable of impeding its colonial ambitions, to the fundamentalist Islamic wave that ignites, wherever it goes, fanaticisms and hatreds we thought had disappeared for good. There is also Israel’s assigned role as a forward bridge in the strategy to control the region, a bridge that needs constant strengthening by rendering its enemies weaker, as well as other factors besides. We believe, however, that this impact would not have been so strong and, incidentally, will not succeed in reaching its objectives in the future, had local society found the strength necessary to fight back against it. We therefore believe that our society’s fragility has been the fertile ground on which these outside factors were allowed to prosper, and play a role in our internal affairs. Diversity is a distinct characteristic of this region; if well managed, it becomes a factor of strength and solidarity, and if mismanaged it becomes a factor of weakness, and there are signs that this is what has actually happened in the past decades in Syria, especially since the turn of this century. A look at diversity management in Syria reveals a number of characteristics worthy of attention. They include:

1. Distortion of the Elite-Formation Mechanisms

In a society, any society, particular mechanisms develop to allow the citizens to utilise their mental, artistic and physical talents and abilities, whether innate or acquired, to attain a higher status in society, and these together are the country’s social elite. This means that the citizens who make up this elite distinguish themselves according to a set of values that society has agreed upon and accepted, based on the principle of equal rights and opportunities that citizenship guarantees.

However, although some of these mechanisms are in civil society’s hands and fall within this society’s natural structure and organisation, the majority are in the hands of the state, which should control and steer them in the interest of society, as a whole. In a natural setup, these two responsibilities

² See the final Communiqué of the Kurdish National Congress held in October 2011.
complement one another in a manner whereby each undertakes to produce the elite in its particular domain, and the state often benefits from the recognised skills of civil society’s elite in running the affairs of state.

Under normal circumstances, citizenship lays the legal and practical foundations of the elite forming mechanisms. It provides all citizens with equal opportunity and grants them equal rights and responsibilities without prejudice, and regardless of the individual’s personal affiliations.

Those who monitor the Syrian regime’s behaviour cannot but notice the extent to which it has managed to distort this process, whether at the civil institutional level (the media, popular organisations, sports clubs, etc.) or the official institutional level, especially institutions with real power in the country (the army and security services). It is worth pointing out here to the security services, in particular, where it is obviously clear how real authority rests in the hands of individuals mostly from one particular religious denomination, while entire national groups are kept at bay.

This forceful intervention in the elite-formation mechanisms has distorted these mechanisms and fostered among sidelined groups a sense of worthlessness and alienation. This helped reawaken and give new life to latent cracks within Syrian society.

2. Double Standards in the Treatment of National Groups

As we saw earlier, we can distinguish two national groups in the Syrian society: one indigenous, and the other migrant. An assessment of these two groups’ conditions shows that when the ideological Arab nationalist parties came to power in Syria, especially after the Baath party assumed power singlehandedly, the treatment of these national components differed according to their respective origins.

Groups that came to Syria from other places have more leeway and freedom of action. The Armenians and Circassians, for example, can write and print in their own languages, and a number of religious and cultural organisations belonging to minority groups can teach their national language, and provide services aimed at strengthening their cultural heritage. These organisations are even allowed to run their own schools although they are nationalised by the government, like most old established schools in the country are (those present in the country before Bashar Al-Assad).

At the opposite end of the scale, it is forbidden for indigenous minority groups in Syria to display their cultural and national characteristics in an institutional manner. One of the strangest examples is the official attitude vis-à-vis the Aramaic language; although successive Syrian authorities were always keen to showcase this language as a cultural asset likely to increase Christian religious tourism, it took them decades to decide on the establishment of an Aramaic language institute or publication of an Arabic-Aramaic dictionary.

Kurdish minorities suffer from more national repression than any other social group in Syria. Repressive measures against them range from depriving tens of thousands of them of the Syrian citizenship, to transporting Kurdish elements living on the border with Turkey to areas 10 to 15 kilometres inside Syrian territory, and replacing them with Syrian Arabs in what became known at the time as “the Arab belt.” They used systematic repression to thwart any attempt to revive the Kurdish culture, including banning the annual celebrations of the Kurdish New Year (Norouz) and Kurdish songs in public places.
All the above are examples of the same policy, namely the attempt to stifle any form of national expression by an indigenous national group.

It is entirely apt to wonder about the reasons behind the authorities’ treatment of Syrian minorities based on their origin. The only available answer is perhaps the fact that immigrant minorities do not pose a threat to the integrity of Syria’s territory, because their points of reference are outside the country. On the other hand, the political and cultural reference points of indigenous groups are within the country’s borders, and therefore, any independent national initiative can potentially develop into territorial demands, i.e., the eventuality of cutting away a piece of Syria’s national territory. This manner of dealing with national minorities exposes the authorities’ failure to build a state that belongs to all citizens, a state based on equality and citizenship rather than tyranny; it also reveals another facet of diversity’s mismanagement.

3. The Hidden Quota System

The Syrian authorities never lost sight of the Syrian mosaic issue, although they kept their interest in the subject hidden from view. They built a monolithic image of a stable national unity by relentlessly promoting the country’s supposedly relative secular image, inspired by the basic principles of the ruling Baath Party. The secular credentials of the Baath Party, which separates between state and religion, should have protected the state under its control from the pitfalls of the quota system, and all what it entails (at least from its sectarian aspect). Underneath the surface, the quota became an un-written law (a convention) that the authorities abide by when building the state’s institutions (except the institutions with real power). Not a single council of ministers, people’s assembly or municipal council was formed in Syria without the quota system being at its core. In every ministry, there necessarily is a set ratio for ministers from this or that sect, or this or that national identity. Some ministries even remained for quite a while the domain of a particular sect; for example, for a long time a Christian was the minister of tourism, a Alawite the minister of information and an Ismaili the minister of state.

The hidden quota system is a form of top-down intervention in the Syrian elite-formation mechanism, though some see in it a gentle and practical solution to the problem of ensuring the representation of different social elements in the country, whereas in fact it is a flagrant example of diversity mismanagement. The quota system is a process that sees society as a collection of disparate components that need to be placated, by granting them a share of the power structure commensurate with their size. In other words, a political sectarian system that distinguishes its citizens based on their sectarian and ethnic affiliations, rather than their citizenship rights. In fact, it is the exact opposite of citizenship.

Political sectarianism has negative repercussions on the peaceful coexistence among citizens and on citizenship, in general. The notion that the authorities are interested in sects and groups encourages citizens to reassert their real and symbolic values within their own communities, rather than in society, at large. Not only does this require them to operate within a particular sectarian framework, they also have to serve and strengthen this system since it is the only

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3 One must admit that this division was no longer noticeable in the past decade.
vehicle for their distinctiveness. This turns them into members of a religious community rather than a society. There is also the fact that their “arrival” at a status that makes them legitimate candidates for high office, in the eyes of the state, requires them to attend to their own sect first because they owe it much, and it is time to repay the debt. By resorting to political sectarianism or the quota system, not only do the authorities disregard citizenship’s legal and constitutional rights, they foster a climate of alienation in which the citizens do not see themselves as citizens, but as members of particular sect.

4. Instrumentalisation of Diversity

Diversity is instrumentalised when the authorities use it for domestic or foreign political ends, and the Syrian regime has been adept at using the diversity card as an instrument to brandish whenever it deems it politically convenient to do so. Sometimes it uses one social component to pressure and influence a certain regional political situation, and perhaps we ought to remind the reader of the many time that the Kurds were used as a card to put pressure on Turkey, by hosting revolutionary Kurdish in parties and allowing them to establish bases on Syrian soil. At others, it uses the issue of coexistence among the country’s different social elements to portray itself as a guarantor of the right to be different. Without fail, the agenda of every single high political or religious personality visiting Syria includes a meeting with different spiritual leaders, in their capacity as the representatives of this or that religious sect.

This means that, for the regime, the issue of diversity is a winning card to brandish at different occasions in the expectation of reaping good benefits. If sometimes, it pays special attention to this particular aspect, it is not because it sees it as a domestic issue that requires special attention or good management, but because it is a commodity with a symbolic significance in the marketplace of political speculations.

5. The Security Reference Point

The security services form the backbone of the Syrian regime. Based on this fact, all aspects of life in the country are linked in one way or another to these services, responsible even for the sun to shine and rain to fall. While some security centres specialise in sectarian matters, others specialise in issues related to the country’s different national minorities; their role is to monitor diversity and keep it in check. This includes monitoring places of worship, Friday sermons and Sunday homilies, the faithful as they pray, and special national public celebration like (Norouz), religious celebrations (Feast of the 4th, (an Alawi feast in Syria) Saint George Day and Christmas...) and all other cultural and religious public events. In this mandate’s shadow, social and legal dynamics that allow people to organise their diversity based on citizenship and national consciousness are stifled in favour of dictatorial security measures and practices, designed to keep all forms of expression strictly within the confines of the regime’s security logic.

In the past decade, Syria witnessed a series of social confrontations with clear sectarian and national implications, and these, despite their limited number, reflected the presence of sectarian and national tensions eroding the country’s social fabric, due to the mismanagement of diversity. Three of these confrontations are particularly significant, and these are:

a. The Sweida Confrontations of 2001:
They started when a disagreement between a group of shepherds from Daraa Governorate
and farmers from Sweida degenerated into a sectarian confrontation between the Sunni shepherds and Druze farmers. The incident, which lasted eleven days, cost the lives of forty people from Sweida, most of whom were killed by the police.

b. The Qamishli Confrontations of March 12, 2004: They began as an altercation in Qamishli between the fans of two football teams that soon ignited what has become known in Syria as the “Kurdish intifada.” The large angry demonstrations that ensued compelled the Syrian authorities to deploy the security forces, who used live ammunition to quell the demonstrations and stop the incidents from spreading to neighbouring towns. The intifada resulted in the death of around forty Kurds and the detention of thousands, and caused considerable damage. As a consequence, the Kurdish majority region was punished and targeted by a series of racist decrees, including stripping the Kurds of the right to transfer property ownership, and a reduction in the budget of Al-Hasaka Governorate.

In 2008, in an attempt to prevent the Kurds from celebrating Norouz, the security services fired on a Kurdish crowd killing sixteen. The incident repeated itself in 2009, costing the lives of another twenty-two Kurds.

c. The Misyaf Confrontation of March 2005: They began as an ordinary disagreement between two bus drivers on matters related to organising work on the route linking two towns. The disagreement soon degenerated into a sectarian confrontation between members of the Ismaili and Alawite communities.

In each of the above cases, the response was purely security-oriented, i.e., no one bothered either to look at the reasons underlying the incidents or resorted to the law to punish those responsible, not only for causing these incident but for instigating them, as well. The security services’ logic in dealing with these crises was constant and unwavering: the imperative of restoring control. Not only was the option of looking under the surface for the reasons that compel members of certain social group to rebel in this or that region never on the table, it was actually disapproved of. This shows that forbidding open displays of emotion and the airing of ideas, causes people to internalise them and increases social tensions, which is precisely what sparked the Al-Karamah (Dignity) Revolution.

6. The Counter-society

The Syrian regime did not come to power as the result of a natural political process, with all what this entails in terms of elections and competition between personalities and parties; Rather, it came as a result of a military coup that toppled the incumbent regime and took its place. This is why the regime, which is not the product of a social base, tried its best to create a new one for itself in line with its own political considerations. In other words, contrary to the normal situation where societies produce their own authorities, the Syrian society became, itself, the product of the authority. This original error in the configuration of authority, and all what it necessarily entails in terms of shifting towards totalitarianism and autocracy, produces two different configurations: the first is primarily political and manifests itself in various institutions of state, in particular those associated with despotism (the army and the security services); the second is social, and manifests itself in different social milieus, be they cultural (national or sectarian) or economic (the traditional or parasitic bourgeoisie).
These services and milieus together form the counter-society standing between the authorities and real society; it acts, on the one hand, as a bridge between them and, on the other, as a fortress protecting the authority against the real society. In this counter-society, both national services and civil institutions become the central authority’s protectors, as does the national army built on the guiding principle of protecting the nation from its enemies, or from the unions whose own guiding principle is protecting society against the excesses of authority.

This counter-society is in contradiction with the notion of citizenship; its formation does not respect its principles, its members do not share its values and its leaders do not respect its laws. The counter-society is, itself, a sect. It could be different from other sects in that while they were formed naturally, it was formed artificially; and while they are subaltern entities that existed prior to the creation of the state, counter-society is, itself, part of the state and rests on its institutions. However, it is similar to other sects in that it professes absolute loyalty to the leader; it relies on the shared interests of its members whereby defending the interests of one member is defending the sect as a whole, and considers the sect’s interests as essential and “sacred”. It also rests on a distorted political view that considers other parties as sects, acceptable to it only as enemies or followers that should be subdued and made to fall in line, and sees real society as a collection of rival sects.

By virtue of its nature, this sect/regime refuses to approach society from the citizenship perspective, because citizenship negates its very existence. This is why it tries to maintain social tensions, if not exacerbate them, under the cover of an emotional populist discourse revolving around “national unity,” and it does that by tightening the noose round civil society and the citizens’ necks.

The Syrian regime is a sectarian regime, in that it is based on a sectarian pattern rather than being a regime of a particular sect. This is why its management of diversity cannot be healthy at all, since it is incapable of building a citizenship-based relationship between the citizens and the state, and between the citizens themselves, or fostering a system of peaceful coexistence among the country’s different religious and national groups. In this sense, a sectarian regime strives for the exact opposite; it seeks to reinvent the differences and deepen the cracks because therein lies its survival; after all, like any other regime, if not more, it does not care about anything more than it does about staying alive.

**Diversity Management and the Revolution**

The Al-Karamah Revolution in Syria provides us with an exceptional framework to help us fathom the way the Syrian regime manages diversity. An alert observer of developments in Syria cannot but notice how the regime has tried, since the beginning of the revolution, to drag it into two situations it had categorically rejected earlier, and still does one year later, namely sectarianism and militarisation. In pursuit of this quest, the regime has carried out a systematic campaign of sectarian militarisation resting on three policy pillars:

a. An attempt to give the impression that there is a congruity between a specific religious group (the Alawite community) and the regime. The security services, and particularly the forces parallel to the regular services known as Shabbiha, took it upon themselves to implement this policy, which
relies on terrorising tactics and clear sectarian signals. Among the flagrant examples is forcing the detainees to utter, under torture, religious terms specific to that sect, or disparage their beliefs by forcing them to bow down to the President’s image.

b. Linking the continued presence of certain religious groups in the country (the Christians and Druze) to the survival of the regime, which portrays itself as the sole protector of minorities, with the official media relentlessly playing up its image as the guarantor of stability in the country. What helped this effort along was no doubt the position of different Christian religious leaders who declared their loyalty to the regime loud and clear for fear of the presumed alternative, i.e., the Islamist radical groups, and its potential fallout on their communities.

c. Painting the Revolution with a sectarian brush by associating it with fundamentalist groups within the Sunni community (the Salafis, Al-Qaeda...); they did this while, at the same time, playing up various religious leaders’ support for the regime by highlighting the sheikhs’ loyalist positions in the media and describing the revolution as “salafist” and “fundamentalist.” In fact, certain political and media groups in the Islamic world have helped this process along by using a radical sectarian language against all what falls under the Sunni mantle. Suffice it to point out, in this context, to the important role played by some satellite channels that focus on radical sheikhs with large public followings, whose populist discourse is rife with violent rhetoric.

Policies that have been the hallmark of the regime’s behaviour during the revolution confirm what we said above concerning its diversity management style; it has certainly encouraged, strengthened and deepened already existing cracks in society. It shifted various social differences from a state of latent tensions to one of open warfare, a shift the most dangerous aspect of which is its militarisation. Hardly a day goes by without hearing of armed sectarian incidents here and there, let alone the sectarian discourse widespread in the country today. The danger that stares at us in the face now is that of a widespread sectarian conflict that could eventually lead to the country’s destruction. The Syrians have no choice but to use their minds to come up with a solution that prevents such a conflict and such destruction from happening; they have no alternative but to break this festering sectarian boil open, a boil getting increasingly infected every day due to the decades of diversity mismanagement. I personally believe that this issue will be upper-most on the Syrian peoples’ agenda once the current crisis is over, regardless how it ends.

Visions

How could the Syrian people enjoy diversity based on the principles of equality, coexistence and acceptance of the other? It is not an easy feat; certain practices and behaviour patterns have become deeply entrenched during the past four decades, and tensions and hatreds have become so pervasive that no amount of good will and kind talk can dislodge them alone. What we need are joint efforts and tireless hard work in order to,

1. Dismantle the sectarian setup (as described above), a process that goes beyond the removal of the existing regime to the very nature of the regime that will follow. If another sectarian regime places it, the situation will not be different from what we
have today, except for a shift in the counter-
society’s focus from one social group to
another.

2. Foster the notion of citizenship in life’s
different aspects: legal, constitutional,
educational and social aspects, which
means, among other, the need to review all
educational curricula at the foundation of
our social fault lines. These curricula
consecrate ignorance of the other (the
religious curricula), women’s lower status
(theoretical curricula) and discrimination
based on one’s national identity (nationalist
socialism and history texts).

3. Establish democratic mechanisms to ensure
that all social elements in the country take
part in the decision-making processes that
affect their lives’ choices. This no doubt
requires a thorough review of the entire
election process to ensure, on the one hand,
that all social elements are represented in
different councils and, on the other, to avoid
falling into the sectarian or national quota’s
trap.

4. Re-examine the relationship between the
state and religion to ensure their separation
in manner that guarantees the state’s
independence from the religious authorities,
and prevents the political authority from
using religion for its own ends.

5. Re-examine the state’s “secucratic”4
structure, based currently on the security
services’ overarching control of state
institutions and society, and reconsider the
army’s structure with regard to duties and
responsibilities.

6. Start working, as of right now, on
formulating the appropriate systems that
best suit the nature of Syrian society, in
view of establishing a transitional justice
mechanism to assist the country in its
transition towards the new Syria, with the
minimum amount of damage to Syrian
society.

This particular stage in Syria’s history is, no
doubt, a key one and it would be quite true to
say that the diversity management system that
will emerge from this stage would largely
determine the shape of the future Syria. Syria
is rich in its cultural diversity and social
mosaic. However, this situation is in fact a
double-edged sword. On the one hand, it
could be a fertile ground on which democracy
and pluralism can grow and intellect,
spirituality and culture can prosper; on the
other, it could open the gates of hell to
conflicts that leave no survivors behind. The
former is the product of a good management
of diversity, and the latter the product of he
who uses diversity to remain the sole and
undisputed tyrant, even if atop a heap of
skeletons.

4 An expression coined by Sudanese Scholar Haidar
Ibrahim Ali (ARI)