

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES VERSUS NATIONAL IDENTITY: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE VIEWS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN BRAZIL ABOUT NATIONAL IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS

*Identidades Religiosas versus Identidade Nacional: uma avaliação sa visão dos refugiados sírios no Brasil sobre a Consciência de Identidade Nacional*

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## ABSTRACT

Many analyses of the civil war in Syria see the religious divisions as one of the main aspects that explain its outbreak in 2011. According to this perspective, the conflict results from the dominance of subnational identities over national identity. This argument is now widely contested by civil war literature. This article endorses this contestation and seeks to evaluate the hypothesis that the incompatibility between social identities would weaken social cohesion in Syria. A questionnaire was distributed to Syrian volunteers in Brazil, addressing the importance and prominence of national and religious identities. The argument presented here is that a) there is not necessarily an incompatibility between religious identity and national identity; b) national identity is well established and widespread among Syrians; and c) despite not being the immediate cause of the conflict, the salience of religious identities makes them an important factor, among others, in social mobilization.

**Keywords:** National Identity, Syria, Religious Identity.

## RESUMO

Muitas análises sobre a guerra civil na Síria atribuem às clivagens religiosas um dos principais aspectos que explicam sua eclosão em 2011. Para essa perspectiva, o conflito seria resultado da primazia das identidades subnacionais sobre a identidade nacional. Esse argumento, contudo, é bastante contestado atualmente pela literatura em guerra civil. O artigo busca avaliar a hipótese de que a incompatibilidade entre identidades sociais seriam um fator de enfraquecimento da coesão social. Um questionário foi distribuído para voluntários sírios no Brasil abordando a importância e a saliência das identidades nacionais e religiosas. O argumento aqui defendido é que a) não há necessariamente uma incompatibilidade entre identidade religiosa e identidade nacional; b) a identidade nacional é bem estabelecida e difundida entre os sírios; e c) apesar de não ser a causa imediata do conflito, a saliência das identidades religiosas faz com que elas sejam um vetor importante, entre outros, na mobilização social.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade Nacional, Síria, Identidade Religiosa.

## INTRODUCTION

The Syrian conflict is one of the most enduring civil wars in recent decades, and it has become one of the main sources of instability in the Middle East. The relationship between the Syrian crisis and the international scenario is a two-way path: on the one hand, the effects of the Syrian crisis transcend national borders, influencing other sectarian conflicts in the region. On the other hand, regional rivalries, transnational movements, and global dynamics exacerbate the crisis (Zahreddine, 2013). As Neggaz and Majed argue, "the Syrian case is a demonstration of the complex nature of borders and boundaries, as well as their fluctuant and transient character" (Neggaz, Majed, 2020, p.vi). Therefore, the causes and effects of the Syrian conflict are not restricted to the domestic sphere.

The overlap of domestic and international dynamics is evidenced by the transnational character of some of the groups involved in the conflict, particularly those that advocate ideologies hostile to Syria's national values and ethos such as the Islamic State. Many authors argue that the sudden rise and the territorial expansion of such groups demonstrate that the borders idealized by France and England during the Mandate Period in the early twentieth century have become obsolete (Pierret, 2020, p.231).

In fact, the discussion about the incongruity between national political borders in Syria and revisionist or contesting ideologies is not recent. For many decades, historiography has been discussing the formation of the Syrian national identity and its relationship with the construction of the Syrian state. As Wedeen argues, one of the most pervasive Syrian problems since the creation of the state by France is the incongruity between the "felt membership" and the "state authority", that is, between "national identification" and the political entity (Wedeen, 1999, p.16). From the historical point of view, the construction process of the Syrian state was quite complex, involving the imposition of borders by a mandatory power external to the region, which sought to define the divisions between states based on geopolitical criteria that did not reflect the preferences of the largest part of Syria's political parties. This resulted in a problem of legitimacy of the established borders. Furthermore, the very conception of Syrian national identity was problematic due to the spread of innumerable nationalist ideologies defending quite different state projects. These questions about the formation of the Syrian state remained a relevant issue for the political debate on Syria throughout the 20th century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> (Zisser, 2006).

These two issues - the incompatibility between national identity and religious identity and the artificiality of the Syrian state - permeate countless analyses on the civil war. Some authors consider that the crisis reflects a contested and problematic national identity. However, this argument is often a consequence of a superficial comprehension of the meanings and the basic features of social identities – especially national and religious identities (Haddad, 2019; 2020). As Haddad (2019) argues, identities are not immutable and excluding collective attributes. In fact, societies are permeated by identities that generally overlap each other and whose significance depends on the social and political context. Therefore, it is crucial to understand the mechanisms that give salience to a given identity and its effects on society. To assess the prominence of social identities in any society, it is not enough to look at the ideologies of the main political parties. It is crucial to understand how individuals relate to such identities and what their role is for the different dimensions of social relations.

This article explores some of the facets in the relationship between national and religious identities in the Syrian crisis. This is an exploratory study that is part of a wider research on social cohesion in Syria in the years leading up to the 2011 crisis<sup>3</sup>. Understanding the patterns of interaction between different identities in the years leading up to the war is fundamental to

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<sup>3</sup> The focus of the broader research is the Syrians' own perception of various phenomena, such as trust and social inequalities, which inform the interactions between different confessional groups over the past 20 years.

understanding the current situation and efforts to find a lasting solution to the conflict. To this end, the article analyzes the relationship between national and confessional identities based on the responses obtained from a questionnaire distributed to Syrian refugees in Brazil<sup>4</sup>. The article presents the overall results and their tendencies and analyses the answers according to the religious cleavages.

The article begins by briefly discussing sectarianism problem in Syria. Next, the paper introduces the theoretical foundations that guided the questionnaire formulation, and then discusses the questionnaire application. After that, the answers are presented, accompanied by some comments regarding the overall results. The results are then compared with the empirical literature on intergroup relations in Syria. It is important to note that the answers obtained are part of an exploratory study, aiming to point out directions to be followed in future studies.

### THE SECTARIAN PROBLEM IN SYRIA

In March 2011, protesters took to the streets of Syria protesting against the arrest and torture of teenagers boys who had painted on the school wall [some] phrases against the regime. In a short time, protests spread to all Syrian territory and, in the face of the harsh response of the government of Bashar al-Assad, the clash between government forces and opponents became violent. The Syrian crisis surprised many analysts and researchers. Until 2011, there was no expectation among those who followed Syrian politics for a generalized revolt. In power for more than forty years, the Baath party regime was considered a politically stable authoritarian regime (Hinnebusch, 2012; Ziadeh, 2011). In the Assad-family Syria, the opposition was systematically repressed, and there was no room for civil organizations outside the regime's control. In addition, since the 1980s, Syria has not experienced episodes of collective violence, in stark contrast to its neighboring country, Lebanon, which experienced a civil war between 1975 and 1990.

At the beginning of the crisis, analysts and witnesses pointed out the national character of the demonstrations. As Neggaz and Majed (2020) note, the exaltation of Syrian unity in opposition to the regime was present in the protesters' speech. However, in a short time, the "ecumenical" character of the protests gave way to a brutal civil war of sectarian contours, opposing mostly Sunni insurgent groups and the Syrian regime, whose political core is dominated by Alawites. With the deepening of the conflict, Syrian borders became even more porous, and foreign groups, generally having ideologies supported by a religious discourse, started to act in the civil war.

The crisis in Syria is often described as sectarian, although its meaning is quite ambiguous and imprecise. Some narratives, guided by a primordialist view of culture, consider religious division as the explanation of the conflict (Phillips, 2015). According to Phillips, the primordialist narrative, the fragility of the Syrian State has resulted from the absence of a shared national identity. According to this perspective, Syria is an artificial state created by the mandatory powers

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<sup>4</sup> Due to the profile of refugees in Brazil, the survey did not include important communities in Syrian society, such as the Kurds. This article is aware of this factor, but, due to the profile of the interviewees, we seek to limit ourselves to assess attitudes towards the nationhood of non-Kurdish Syrians.

at the end of the First World War, encompassing in its territory a heterogeneous population composed of diverse religious and ethnic groups (Phillips, 2015). The artificial character of the country meant that society was composed of several groups with a strong link with religious and ethnic identity, but which had little in common. According to this perspective, Syrian society lack a shared national conscience, making it more vulnerable to crises. Under these conditions, political stability would only be possible by a strong and repressive state.

The essentialist perspective depicts the war in Syria (and in other countries of the Middle East) as a consequence of the state's failure to establish national identity among its inhabitants, who identify primarily with the religious groups. In this sense, the apparent political stability achieved during the Hafez al-Assad period concealed deeper trends of intense dissent between segments of society. Although, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st, Syria distinguished itself from neighboring countries by the absence of violent conflicts, "Taking a historical long view, Syria has been from the beginning a tenuous political construct (...)" (Reilly, 2018, p.251). This perspective understands that the fragility of Syrian nationalism was the product of a historical trajectory marked by disruptive tendencies arising from irredentist ideologies that transcended political boundaries and ties of subnational and local solidarity.

Some authors argue that the hegemony in the first half of the 20th century of pan-Arabism and its subsequent decline, created fragile political entities lacking a more consolidated national feeling. In this perspective, Syria would only be a provisional political entity towards a state that would encompass the entire Arab population in the Middle East. For Reilly, for example, with the failure of the Arab nationalist project, Syrian society was exposed to a weak state, dependent on local identities for its existence, and besieged by a broader "Islamic nationalism", which compromised previous efforts towards the creation of a secular national identity (Reilly, 2018, p.253).

Other authors are categorical when stating that "there is no such thing as a Syrian nation" (Pipes, 1990, p.9). For Pipes, for example, the primacy of communal identities has caused a large part of Syrian society to reject affiliation with the Syrian state. In addition, he argues that an irredentist vocation stemming from the pan-Syrianist ideology created an aggressive and revisionist state (Pipes, 1990, p.9).

This brief review did not seek to map all trends in the literature on Syrian nationalism, but rather to point to some contested themes. The focus of this article is on the issue of the incompatibility between national identity and religious identity, which is so recurrent in the analysis of contemporary crises in the Middle East (Haddad, 2019). For this, we chose to assess national identification as a complex phenomenon that presents considerable variation depending on social groups and individuals.

## **THEORY AND OPERATIONALIZATION**

This article seeks to assess the phenomenon of national identity by adopting a "bottom-up" view that states that day-to-day interactions form the basis for the formation and

reproduction of national communities (Van Ginderachter, Beyen, 2012). This perspective understands that the socialization of individuals in national ideals are based on experiences and memories constituted intersubjectively (Moreno-Almendral, 2018, p.4). Furthermore, as Fox and Van Ginderachter (2018) argue, people do not passively receive categories produced by political actors and cultural agents. Individuals have an active role in creating and reproducing representations about the nation. They are able to appropriate and manipulate categories and discourses in order to create particular views about the nation.

In this sense, it is important to understand nationalism not only as a phenomenon promoted by the elite (political or ideological), but as something that is experienced by "ordinary people". This issue has been discussed in the literature on nationalism, despite the predominant approach being one that focuses on a top-down perspective centered on the State (Fox, Van Ginderachter, 2018). The approaches that seek to assess the phenomenon from below seek to understand how symbolic constructions are experienced and gain meaning by people on the most different occasions of daily life involving social interactions (Knott, 2015). Community.

In addition, it is important to observe how national identities can be apparently invisible categories on certain occasions. Nevertheless, on other occasions, they may gain prominence. In this sense, it is necessary to evaluate the social and political mechanisms and conditions that result in a greater salience of national identities and the effects of this on the relations between groups. On this matter, it is important to understand how identities influence certain social phenomena, it is essential to look at how individuals and groups conceive their identities, how they frame reality, and how the historical context affects identities and their relationship with each other. For, as Haddad (2019) argues, the relationship between religious identity and national identity can occur in several ways in addition to inherently opposed identities.

Therefore, it is more useful to abandon simplistic assessments in favor of analytical frames that assess how identities gain social and political significance. In the Syrian case, there is significant literature on the formation of the nation and the mobilization of the national framework by political actors, but there is less attention directed to nationalism seen from below, with some important exceptions (Phillips, 2013). This article seeks to complete part of this gap with an exploratory survey on the perception of Syrians from different religious backgrounds about their national identity.

To assess the issues presented above, a survey was conducted with Syrians in Brazil. A questionnaire based on the literature on social identity was elaborated. According to this approach, social identity is the result of the process of dividing and organizing social reality into social categories. In the categorization process, individuals tend to organize reality into social groups, including those to which they belong. It is, therefore, the process of division between them and us. Social identity, unlike individual identities, concerns the self-image of people that originates from the awareness that they are members of a particular social group (Tajfel, Turner, 1986, p.283). This perspective argues that the individuals' awareness of belonging to a social group

and the emotional attachment resulting from it have implications for individuals' behavior and for the interaction between individuals from different groups (Hogg et al., 2016).

Departing from the assumption that people are generally members of more than one social group but do not ascribe the same importance to all of them, a questionnaire was developed to assess the significance of national and religious identity for Syrians. Based on Social Identity literature, we proposed the following questions:

**Table 1:** Survey questions

How important is the Syrian national identity to you?	a) Extremely important; b) Important; c) Average; d) Slightly important; e) Irrelevant
How important is religious identity to you?	a) Extremely important; b) Important; c) Average; d) Slightly important; e) Irrelevant
Which of the following statements best describes how you see yourself in terms of nationality?	a) Syrian; b) Equally Arab and Syrian; c) Arab
In your opinion, what is the importance of the Arab cause for Syrian national identity?	a) Extremely important; b) Important; c) Average; d) Slightly important; e) Irrelevant
How proud are you of Syrian culture?	a) Very; b) Considerably; c) Indifferent; d) Little; e) Nothing
In your opinion, how were the relations between the different religious groups in Syria in the period between 1990 and 2000?	a) Very good; b) Good; c) Normal; d) Bad; e) Very Bad
From 2000 on, how was the relationship between religious groups?	a) Much better; b) Better; c) The same situation; d) Worse; e) Much worse

Source: Own Elaboration (2019)

Before properly analyzing the responses obtained, it is necessary to make some observations about the questionnaire here. First, we decided to seek volunteers in more than one city to cover a more heterogeneous assembly of individuals. With this in mind, we applied the questionnaire to Syrian refugees living in Belo Horizonte, São Paulo, and Curitiba. The process of formulating the questionnaire involved the translation into Arabic and a previous application with volunteers in order to correct errors and adjust the questions.

It is important to note that, due to the experience of conflict and the government's prohibition of public discussions on sectarianism, there are not many surveys about Syrians' opinions about the subject. The present research is aware of its limitations and does not seek to make generalizations. Our purpose is to present some tendencies to be explored in the future.

Of the 20 participants, 16 are men and 4 are women. Their ages vary from 25 years to 35 years<sup>5</sup>. It is important to emphasize that the number of respondents to each question varies, reflecting the approach adopted in the application of the questionnaire to give the volunteer complete freedom about which questions to answer or not. Thus, in certain questions the number of responses is less than the total number of completed questionnaires. For example, 19 participants chose to indicate religion, whereas one volunteer did not answer this question. In addition, it is also important to emphasize that the questions presented in this article are part of a more extensive questionnaire that addressed other issues, such as the perceptions of volunteers about social and political inequalities between groups.

**Table 2 – Participants' religion**

	Total=19	Percentage
Catholic	3	15,79%
Orthodox Christian	8	42.11%
Suni Muslim	6	31,58%
Ismaelite	1	5,26%
Other	1	5.88%

Source: Own elaboration (2019)

**Table 3 – Participants' ethnicity**

	Total=19	Percentage
Arab	16	84,21%
Assyrian	1	5,26%
Other/ prefer not to say	2	10,53%

Source: Own elaboration (2019)

Regarding the participants' religious group, there is a predominance of Christians, but there is a significant percentage of Sunni Muslims. As for ethnic identification, there is a predominance of those who consider themselves Arab, but two participants did not identify with any category, and one participant identified himself as Assyrian. Besides, a volunteer did not answer the question. Finally, it is important to mention that some ethnic groups, such as the Kurds or Armenians, were not covered by the survey.

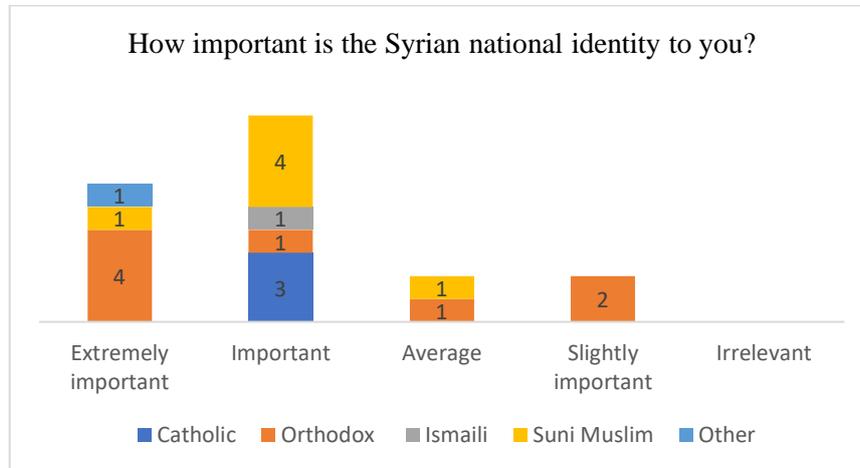
### **ANALYSIS OF QUESTIONNAIRE ANSWERS**

The first question asked the participant to indicate the importance of social categories to which he belongs for his identity. The question, anchored in the theory of social identity, assumes that belonging to certain groups can make a person see this belonging as an essential component of their self-image. This can create emotional bonds with the group. In this sense, it is not enough

<sup>5</sup> The research did not cover different social classes. But this was already expected, as the act of refuge in Brazil itself constitutes a first filter that distinguishes the Syrian community in Brazilian lands.

to identify the group to which the person belongs, but it is necessary to assess the significance of belonging for the person.

**Graph 1**

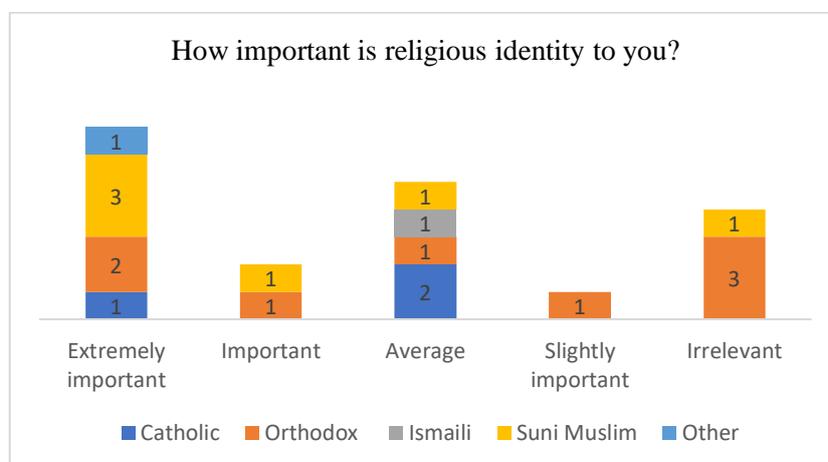


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

As can be seen, in general, national identity is important for participants. But there is a significant portion that gives medium or little importance. It is important to note that the religious cleavage does not represent an explanatory cleavage of national identity preference.

Then, the questionnaire asked the participants to indicate the importance of the religion category for personal identity.

**Graph 2**



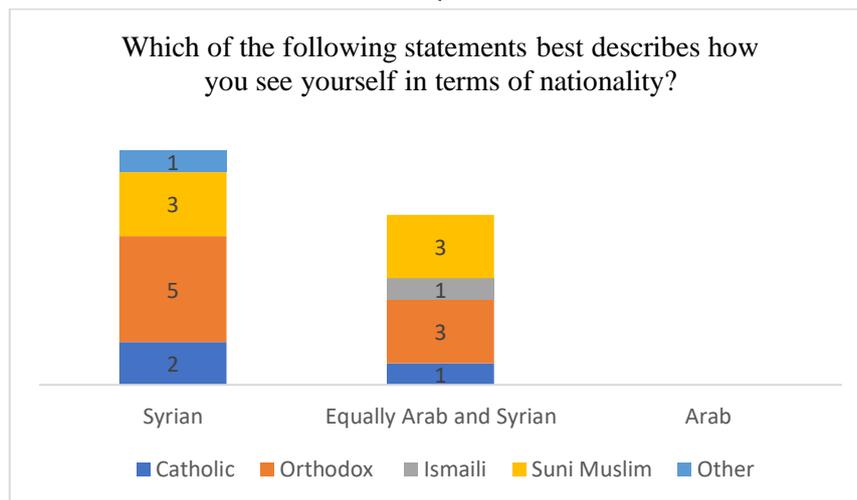
Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The picture of the responses obtained differs from the picture obtained in the previous question on national identity. It is possible to observe that the two extreme options are quite significant. It is important to note that religious identity prominence is not an attribute of a particular religious group. Sunni participants showed a greater proportion than other groups in

giving greater prominence to religious identity. However, there was one participant who gave a no-importance response and another one who gave a medium-importance response.

The next question assesses how the respondent see themselves from the criterion of nationality. In the past, Syrian national identity could refer to different communities and territories. The question specifically addresses whether there is a relationship of opposition or complementarity between the Syrian identity and the Arab identity.

**Graph 3**

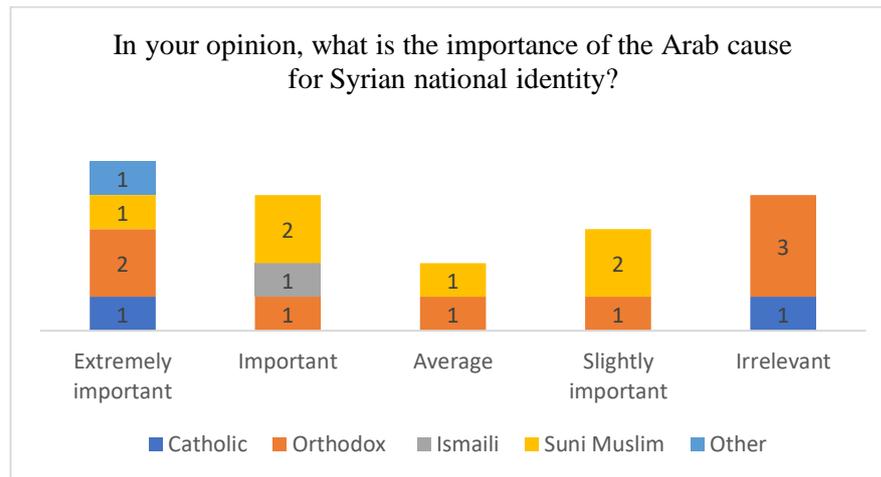


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses obtained indicate a clear consolidation of the Syrian national identity among the volunteers. Even though Syria has been central to Arab nationalism and the Baath regime has openly favored an Arab identity, it is possible to observe that the Syrian national identity is well established for all the participants. However, the understanding of what constitutes Syrian national identity is not a consensus. The answers indicate that some attach greater importance to the Arab identity, while others downplay the Arab factor. On the other hand, it is important to point out that the responses are distributed similarly among confessional groups, which means that religious identity does not induce an answer pattern.

The next question covers the participants' opinion on the importance of the Arab cause for Syrian national identity. Historically, official speeches in Syria linked the country's destiny to the Arab cause in the region. The answers are well dispersed in all options, indicating heterogeneity of opinions on the topic.

**Graph 4**

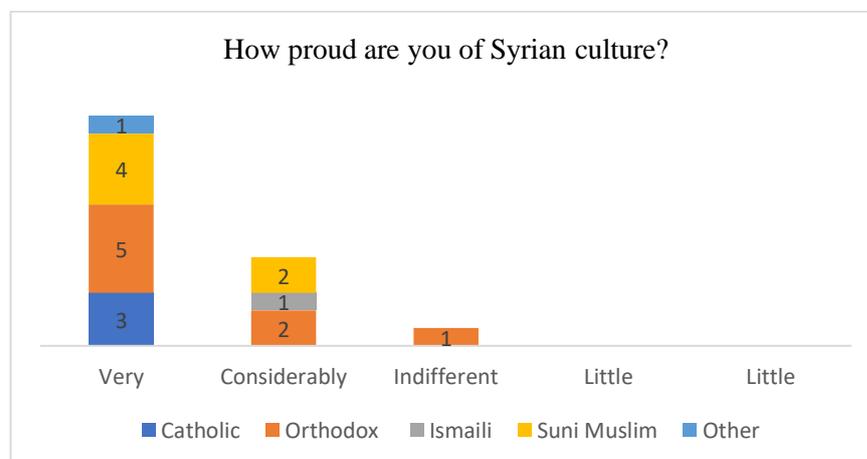


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

Assessing the responses, it is possible to observe that they are relatively well distributed among the options, but with a greater emphasis on those that indicate some degree of importance of the Arab cause for the Syrian national identity. The responses from the confessional cleavage, in turn, demonstrate that there is no greater tendency for a particular group to choose a particular option.

The following question assesses the attitudes of participants about Syrian culture. One way to apprehend the salience of identity for individuals is to assess whether they have a positive image of the group to which they belong. The responses indicate significant pride for most volunteers, indicating a well-established national identity.

**Graph 5**



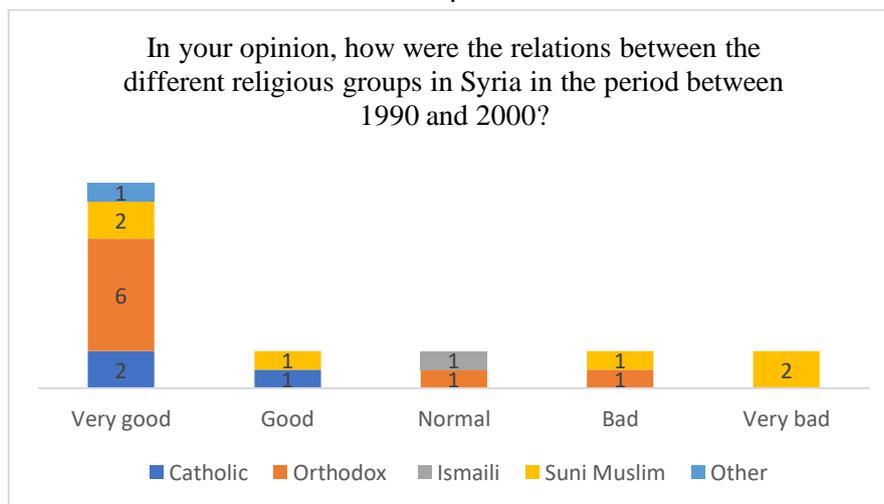
Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate that participants generally place a positive value on Syrian identity. In other words, the participation of people in the social group is accompanied by a positive view

of the group. Among the participants, there is no minimization of identification or a negative view of Syrian nationality. While other social identities may be just as, or more important, participants place a positive value on being Syrian. Only one volunteer showed to be indifferent, which is an indicator of low association with the community. Furthermore, it is possible that all confessional groups are, by and large, proud of Syrian culture. Therefore, the positive value attributed to the Syrian national identity permeates the groups addressed by this research.

The next question moves forward on the issue of relations between identity groups in Syria. The question asks the participant to describe the relations between religious groups in Syria between the years 1990 and 2000. The question seeks to assess Syrians' perceptions about the quality of relations between religious communities in a temporal dimension.

**Graph 6**

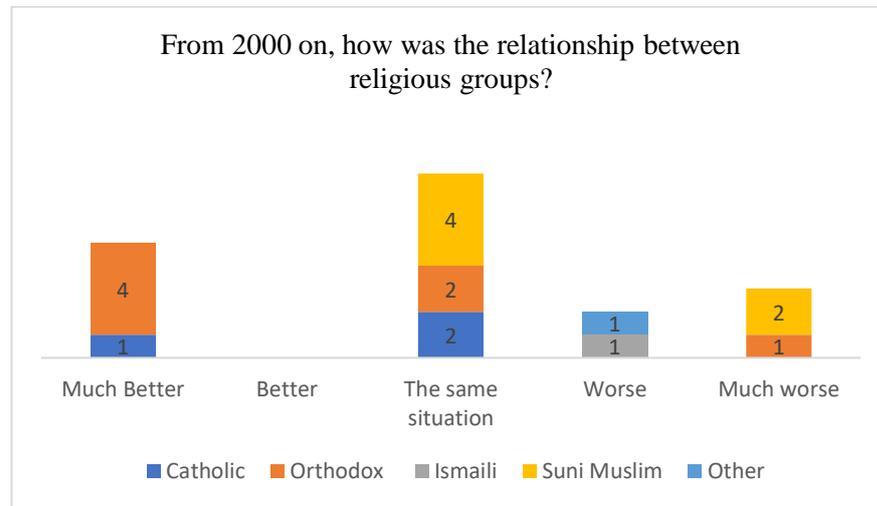


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate a very positive picture concerning the quality of relations between faith groups in Syria during the period in question. Overall, Syria was not a deeply divided society, according to the participants' perception. Even going through a very delicate and critical period in the early 1980s, the responses point to a positive picture for Syrian society in the 1990s. However, it is important to note that those who opted for the most negative responses are mostly Sunnis, with the exception of a Christian. On the other hand, most Christians opted for a very positive picture. Although there is no exact polarization between Christians and Sunnis, it is possible to perceive an imbalance in the distribution of responses.

Finally, we asked participants to assess the relationship between religious groups in Syria in the period after 2000. It is important to observe that it is essential to choose a clear and meaningful event for a question that addresses the past. For this, we choose the year 2000 because it marked the change of government when Hafez al-Assad died and his son, Bashar, took over.

**Graph 7**



Source: Own elaboration (2019)

Most of the answers highlight that the situation remained the same after the year 2000. There is a certain symmetry between those who thought it improved and those who believed it worsened to some degree. Among the Sunnis, it is possible to observe a more conservative assessment of the past. The majority pointed to the continuance of the previous situation, and a minority indicated a significant worsening during the period in question.

In order to understand the answers obtained, it is important to search for clues in the historical literature about Syrians' thoughts on the national issue. Although most works deal primarily with the construction of national identity from above, it is possible to find important data on the attitude of Syrians towards national projects. The next sub-topic provides a brief discussion of the responses obtained in light of the evidence found in anthropological and historical studies on the subject.

### **NATIONAL IDENTITY**

The debate on nationalism has always occupied an important place in the political debate in Syria throughout the 20th century, being present in the speeches of the different parties and in popular mobilizations, even though each group conceived the nation in different ways (Talhami, 2001, p. 110). Since the beginning of the 20th century, the issue of self-determination and territorial limitations imposed by the French Mandate has raised an extensive debate in Syrian society about the nature of the Syrian state and the future of Syrian society as a national community (Talhami, 2001, p. 110).

One of the main ideologies that gained strength in the first half of the 20th century in Syria was Arab nationalism. Although it had several facets, Arabist nationalism, in general, was linked to a vague project to unite the Arab peoples. In its most extreme versions, Arab nationalism

disregarded any kind of restricted nationalism and defended the idea of unifying the states of the region/Middle East into a single state.

From the 1940s onwards, several movements began to associate Arab nationalism with social reforms, adopting a more critical position against "imperialism". Among these movements and parties, the most important was Ba'ath (Alvarez-Ossorio, 2009, p.49). The ideology of the Ba'ath endorsed the centrality of the Arabic language as a unifying factor for the Arab nation. It was through a common language that worldviews and values became shared. In the perspective of the Ba'athist ideology, the unification of the Arab nation should be led by the leadership and guidance of a vanguard party, which would form a revolutionary government.

Arab nationalism was not the only nationalist ideology in Syria. Also important, although less widespread among ideologues, was pan-Syrian nationalism, which had its greatest expression with the creation of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP). Pan-Syrianism moves away from Arab nationalism by refuting the importance of Arab culture for "Greater Syria", a historically cohesive region that precedes the penetration of Arab culture (Tibi, 1997, p.191-193).

Another important political movement in Syrian history is the Islamist Movement, especially the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the Islamist movement had little influence in the debate about the nature of national identity in Syria. In fact, a significant part of the religious leaders and the Islamist movements saw a complementarity between the religious community of the faithful (the *umma*) and the Arab national community (Pierret, 2020, p.222). Pierret argues that most Islamist movements in Syria in the first half of the twentieth century were committed to the Arab cause. Few were the movements that primarily defended the Islamic community's political unity project (PIERRET, 2020, p.222).

Some authors understand that these nationalist discourses are not necessarily exclusive currents. In fact, as Beshara argues (2011, p.5), the Syrian national consciousness is composed of the overlapping, in varying degrees, of Syrianism, Arabism, and Islam. This assertion is crucial to understand the answers obtained in the questionnaire. The responses suggest a complex picture in relation to the social identities and the conceptions of the nation present in Syrian society. The present research endorses the argument that it is impractical to think of simplistic arrangements regarding the predominant national sentiment in Syria. Nevertheless, it is possible to point out some trends in the responses.

The first is that the Syrian national identity is well established among the participants, which contradicts the hypothesis of a weak national identity among the Syrians. A second trend is the place of Arab identity among the participants. It occupies an important place for some participants, but it does not overlap the protrusion of Syrian national identity. Some participants understand that Arab culture is a fundamental part of Syrian nationality. Other participants, however, do not attach the same importance to Arab identity or the Arab cause for Syrian nationality. It is important to note here that the survey did not include a more diverse set of participants, leaving out, for example, Syrian Kurds, who could present another attitude about the question.

The above results contrast with the results obtained from a non-exhaustive interview conducted by Phillips (2013) on the Syrians' attitude towards the hierarchy of national, Arab, and religious identities. According to Phillips, the Arab option stood out slightly compared to the other options, with the national identity coming in second. Phillips concludes that the Arab identity "remains an important, if not the most important, layer of identity within contemporary Syrian Society" (Phillips, 2013, p.135).

The answers obtained for this paper present a slightly different picture. Although the Arab identity is important, the national identity prevails among the participants. Obviously, it is impossible to generalize the results, but the answers obtained in this questionnaire point to consistency among the interviewees. For future research, it is important to structure questionnaires that are not limited to an exclusive view of social identities

The results obtained converge with what some historical studies point out about the Ba'ath period. For some authors, the history of Syria under the Ba'ath regime was one of a growing affirmation of Syrian nationalism, despite the official speech reiterating the principles of Arab nationalism (Klaz, Abdennabi 2020; Zisser, 2006). This result points to the need for more exhaustive studies on the attitude of the Syrians towards the national question, as the official speeches can be quite ambiguous. Furthermore, people are not merely recipients of the ideologies imposed from above. They are active parts in the elaboration and reproduction of social representations.

## RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

In addition to national identity, another recurring category in analyses of Syrian society and politics is religious identity. It is worth asking what the real importance of religious identities in Syria is and the relationship between religious identity and national identity.

It is important to note that, although confessional identity was not the most important factor, there is evidence in the literature that it gained prominence for certain groups in the years before the 2011 crisis (Pierret, 2013). Pinto (2017) argues that some degree of sectarianism was noticeable in the 2000s. The same is defended by For Salamandra (2013), who argues that the sectarian language was already present in society before the outbreak of the conflict. For Salamandra, it was a phenomenon that goes back to the 2000s, involving a gradual increase in the importance of religious cleavage in certain social spaces. (Salamandra, 2013, p.303-304).

Previously, Syria experienced sectarian tension, especially in the late 1970s and early 1980s, involving clash between the government and Islamist movements. Despite having won an unquestionable victory over the Islamists, after the massacre of Hama in 1982, the government of Hafez al-Assad gradually adopted some religious symbols. With this, the government sought to appease, along with other forms of cooptation, some more conservative sectors among the Sunni middle class. For many Sunnis at the time, especially those from traditional families, the regime was seen as sectarian and hostile to religion (Rabo, 2012, p.131).

According to Khatib, some analysts tended to consider that the Syrian regime successfully suppressed religious activism and the Islamic political opposition after being victorious. However, in the 2000s, it is possible to observe an increase in the salience of the religious divide in Syrian society. It is possible to observe a resurgence of Islamic symbolism in the public space and Islamic militancy in Syria (Khatib, 2011, p.1).

In the 2000s, signs of Islamization of public space were evident. Religion manifested itself in people's speeches and behavior, in the educational system, in entertainment activities, and in public festivals (Khatib, 2011, p.2). In addition, Islamization could also be seen in the political sphere itself, posing a challenge to the secular state apparatus (Khatib, 2011, p.3). Since Bashar al-Assad became Syrian president, public expressions of religiosity have also been present during religious festivals, many of which were organized by non-state agents. It was possible to observe religious banners on the streets along with these ceremonies, something unusual in previous decades (Khatib, 2011, p.117).

The increased visibility of religious symbols in public space was not restricted to Sunni symbols. On the contrary, there are indications in the literature of a greater presence of Shiite and Christian symbols in the Syrian public space (Pinto, 2017; Chiffoleau, 2006). Therefore, it is a trend that is not restricted to a single particular confessional group. On the other hand, the increasing importance of religious symbols and practices does not imply that all individuals reproduced an essentially religious worldview. Regarding this matter, the answers obtained point to some important observations.

The first point to be analyzed is the importance of religion as a social marker of the different groups. In this respect, it is possible to observe that, unlike national identity, the importance of religious identity varies significantly among the participants. In other words, it is not an element equally distributed among all classes, groups, and individuals. What makes the situation even more complex is the fact that it is, at the same time, a very important identity marker for some and an unimportant marker for others. In other words, at the same time, religion is a category much less important than the nation for some Syrians. For others, it has a similar importance. This means that religious identity is important, but it is not a condition that is uniformly distributed among participants. Furthermore, the salience of religious identity is not an attribute of a particular religious group. In addition, another trend is that religious and national identity are not mutually exclusive. The salience of religious identity is not necessarily accompanied by a more negative attitude towards national identity.

## CONCLUSION

The responses obtained from the questionnaire allow us to make some observations about national identity in Syria. First, the evidence points out that the Syrian national identity seems well established for most Syrians. Second, the salience of religious identity does not seem to imply a decrease in the importance of national identity. Identities are not mutually exclusive. The answers to the questionnaire applied to Syrian volunteers indicate that they identify themselves with the

Syrian nation. This goes against the analyses that consider the absence of a strong national identity as the cause of the Syrian conflict in 2011. Also, the research indicates that religious identity is a contentious factor. It can be extremely important or irrelevant for the participants. The results point to two aspects to be deepened. The first is to understand how Syrians deal with cultural diversity. The second aspect to be explored in the future is the role of religion for social mobilization. This study aimed to identify future possibilities for research on social identities in Syria and the relationship between them.

This article endorses the argument that the salience of identities can change over time and can change according to the context in which social relationships occur. In this sense, the fluidity of identities can be better captured by an approach that encompasses historical processes and social and political phenomena that induce the increase in the importance of certain identities (Dodge, 2019; Haddad, 2019). With this in mind, this paper argues that although identities are not the causes of tensions or conflicts, they played a role in the process of political mobilization and contestation. The increasing significance of religious identities has made them an important factor for social mobilization, channeling diffused dissatisfaction (Pierret, 2013).

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