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HOW TO UNDERSTAND THE WAR IN SYRIA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to explain backgrounds of the current destructive war in Syria. More specifically, the article tries to provide answers to two interrelated questions. First, why the protests and the war erupted? And second, why the war has been so protracted? In order to do that, the article analyses political, economic, and religious (sectarian) aspects of situation in Syria since the late Ottoman period, with emphasis on the rule of the Baath party. During the rule of Hafiz al-Assad Syria was stable country due to generous socio-economic policies of the regime, although limited latent sectarian tensions existed. Situation unravelled during the rule of Bashar al-Assad as his regime implemented neo-liberal measures which alienated traditional supporting bases of the Baath party and intensified tensions between the Sunnis and the Alawites. Consequently, during the »Arab spring« protests erupted. The regime responded with repression and incitement to sectarian violence, which led to militarization of the uprising. One needs to take into account the consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 since this had caused fierce struggle between Sunni and Shia regional players (Iran and Saudi Arabia) which eventually turned Syria into the battleground and provoked protracted war.

Keywords: Syria, war, socio-economic situation, sects, external interference

COME COMPRENDERE LA GUERRA IN SIRIA

SINTESI

L'articolo intende spiegare i retroscena dell'attuale guerra distruttiva in Siria. Più precisamente, cerca di rispondere a due questioni. La prima, perché sono scoppiate le proteste e la guerra? La seconda, perché la guerra si è così prolungata? L'articolo analizza gli aspetti politici, economici e religiosi (settari) in Siria, dal periodo ottomano in poi, concentrandosi sul periodo di potere del partito Baas. Al tempo del governo di Hafiz Al Asad, lo stato siriano, grazie ad una politica socioeconomica positiva – nonostante la persistenza di limitate tensioni settarie – fu caratterizzato dalla stabilità. La situazione peggiorò nel periodo governativo di Basar Al Asad, a causa degli interventi neoliberali che alienarono la base tradizionale del partito Baas, intensificando le tensioni tra sunniti e alaviti. Di conseguenza, durante la "primavera araba" scoppiarono le proteste. Il regime rispose con la repressione, sollecitando la violenza settaria, il che portò alla militarizzazione della rivolta. Bisogna anche prendere in considerazione le conseguenze dell'invasione dell'Iraq nel 2003 a guida dagli Stati Uniti che causò aspri conflitti tra attori regionali sunniti e sciiti (Iran e Arabia Saudita) che alla fine trasformò la Siria in un campo di battaglia e provocò una guerra di lunga durata.

Parole chiave: Siria, guerra, situazione socioeconomica, comunità religiose, interventi esterni

INTRODUCTION

Since 2011, there has been a violent civil war in Syria between Bashar al-Assad's Baathist regime and the rebels. The war can for certain be described as one of the most catastrophic conflicts in the world after the World War II. By 2016 alone, 470,000 people died and 1.9 million were wounded. More than 4.8 million people fled the country, while 6.6 million of the population resettled all over the country. As estimated by the United Nations' report, already by 2013 Syria had slipped 40 years backwards, according to human development criterion. A half of all Syrian hospitals was closed in 2015, only a half of Syrian children attended school, while 80 % of Syrians lived in poverty. As a result of the lack of vaccination, the country has been stricken anew by diseases such as typhus and measles, which had been eliminated long ago. The average lifespan of a Syrian decreased from 70 to 55 years of age between 2011 and 2015 (data from Phillips, 2016, 1). The United Nations' report assessed that 1.2 million houses had been demolished or damaged by 2013, which is one third of all houses in Syria (data from *International Crisis Group Report*) (Syria's Metastasising Conflicts, 2013, 1).

The extreme destructiveness and long duration of the conflict in Syria is not a coincidence but a logical consequence of two factors. Firstly, after 1971 Syria had been a stable state for nearly three decades, however, in the ten years preceding the outbreak of war internal conflicts and tensions were increasing as a result of the deterioration of economic, social, political, environmental and (inter)religious situations. Secondly, the destructiveness and long duration of the Syrian conflict is further incited by the external factor, namely, deep involvement of strong external players who support both the Sunni rebels and the Shiite-dominated regime. In this sense, it is possible to argue that the Syrian conflict is so destructive and long-lasting mainly because Syria is predominantly a battlefield for powerful external protagonists, whose aim is to reach a broader geopolitical and ideological goals through the indirect and reciprocal fight.

In the Syrian War, external protagonists support the two opposite sides in a rather balanced way. The regime is supported by Iran and other Shiite actors (Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, Afghan Shiites) and Russia, and the rebels are backed by Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, the United States, Great Britain and France.¹ According to some studies (Balch-Lindsay and Enterline, 2000), this kind of »balanced« support of external forces to the warring sides in civil wars causes the long duration of such conflicts.

The purpose of the present article is to illustrate the complex backgrounds of the war in Syria, both internal and external, covering historical, religious,

political and economic elements. The article focuses on two research questions: What prompted the revolt that finally led to the war? And Why is the war so fierce and long-lasting? The latter question focuses on external involvement. In the first part, we examine the situation in Syria from the late Ottoman period to the beginning of Bashar al-Assad's reign, including the late Ottoman period, the period of the French mandate and the period of the Baath party's rule – especially the presidency of Hafiz al-Assad. The emphasis is placed on the economic and social situation, on the distribution of wealth in Syrian society, considerable attention is also paid to the situation of religious communities, in particular the Alawites and the Sunnis. The second part defines the situation in Syria during the presidency of Bashar al-Assad, disclosing the elements that caused the rise of tension and led to protests in March 2011. In the third part, the article reviews the social structure of the protesters and the supporters of the regime, the dynamics of protests and the response of the regime, the militarization of the protests and the outbreak of the Civil War. Special attention is paid to the position of the Alawite community, including the process during which the regime, in order to retain power, abused the Alawites' historically conditioned fear. The fourth part is dedicated to the role which external Sunni and Shiite supporters, as well as Saudi Arabia and Iran, played in the Civil War and their impact on the aggravation and duration of the conflict. Also, the impact of events in Iraq on developments in Syria is examined. Less emphasized are some specific policies of Qatar and Turkey. The article does not include an analysis of the interference of Russia and the Western countries.

LATE OTTOMAN PERIOD, THE PERIOD OF FRENCH MANDATE AND THE PERIOD OF INDEPENDENCE UNTIL THE BAATHIST ASSUMPTION OF POWER

In the Ottoman Empire, the reforms, known as the Tanzimat (1839–1876), were carried out in the 19th century and were aimed at the complete reorganization of the state and the relations between the Sultan and his subjects. The reforms were an attempt to respond to the series of defeats the Empire experienced in the war with the Western powers and to the rise of nationalist movements in Europe. The two aims of the reform were to halt the collapse of the Empire and to better counter the external pressures in the form of Western military successes and an ever-increasing integration into the global capitalist economy. The reforms led to two main effects, which had a far-reaching impact on the socio-economic situation in Syria. The first impact was centralization of power, which deprived local Syrian leaders of considerable power, while the second was

¹ This kind of external support is described in the work of Phillips (2016) and in the *International Crisis Group Report* (Syria's Metastasising Conflicts, 2013, 1).



Image 1: Damascus, Syria: The Syrian society has always been a mosaic of ethnic groups and confessions. In the background is Saladin, the first sultan of Egypt and Syria and the founder of the Ayyubid dynasty (January 2011, photo: Lukas Wank, Shabka)

the introduction of private property and landownership (Abboud, 2016, 14–15).

By the mid-19th century, the Syrian provinces of the Ottoman Empire had been integrated into the global capitalist system, leading to a growing European economic impact which was reflected in the transformation of Syria into a predominantly agricultural economy that exported to European markets. In this context, the introduction of private landownership, through the process of concentration of the land, ultimately led to the creation of an extremely wealthy and influential social class of landowners which, on the basis of the Law of the Provinces adopted by the Ottoman Empire in 1864 incorporating landowners into the political system, became the dominant socio-economic protagonist in Syria. The emergence of the social class of landowners consolidated the class structure in Syria and clearly outlined the divisions and conflicts between landowners and peasants (Abboud, 2016, 15–16).

During the French mandate (1920–1946), the French colonial rulers further fostered the private ownership of the country, when previously public land was awarded to the landowners' elite and tribal leaders, in

exchange for their political submission and support of French policies. In addition, the French set up a parliament in which, during their mandate, landowners had the biggest influence. The result was the exceptional socio-economic polarization of Syrian society, where most influence and power was exercised by 3,000 landowners and their families that formed less than one per cent of the population, but owned more than half of all private land. The landowners elites also controlled all important political, professional and administrative positions. Ninety per cent of all Syrian inhabitants who worked the land, either as share-croppers or as landless peasants, were at the bottom of the socio-economic scale (Abboud, 2016, 16–18).

After Syria gained independence in 1946, enormous inequality and polarization of Syrian society caused great political instability. Tensions grew between the elites that dominated the country and the political interests, demands and ideological orientation of the majority of society. Tensions led to various forms of political protests, such as street demonstrations and frequent coup attempts. During this time, two important political forces, the army and the bureaucracy who were not

under the control of the landownership elite, emerged. In accordance with the general post-colonial trend, the army was extremely powerful and politicized, and saw the fastest way to its power through coups. After 1954, officers who were the Baath party members began to dominate (Abboud, 2016, 21–22; Phillips, 2015, 364).²

BAATHIST ASSUMPTION OF POWER AND HAFIZ AL-ASSAD'S REIGN

A group of three officers from Syrian army (Muhammad Umrān, Salah Jadid and Hafiz al-Assad), who came from the minority religious community of the Alawites and were the members of the Baath Party, launched a coup without spilling any blood on 8th March 1963 and, thus, overthrew the rule of landowners' elite.³ The emergence to power of three Alawite officers was no coincidence as the Alawites were represented in the Syrian army above average and this was the consequence of two factors.⁴ Firstly, during their mandate, the French mainly included those belonging to Syrian minorities (mainly the Alawites and the Druze) in the military formations they established, as they were less susceptible to the nationalist tendencies of the Sunni majority and were even ready to fight against them. And secondly, the Alawites, who throughout the history of Syria were the socially and economically marginalized community, were willing to enter the French-established military units because they believed this was the only way to improve their social position. On the other hand, the Sunnis were not willing to engage in the army because they opposed the French (Christian) rule, and, in addition,

the Sunni landowners and families dealing with trade greatly underestimated the military profession. In addition, during the time of independent Syria, the poor and uneducated Alawites enrolled massively in the Syrian military academies because this was for them the only possible channel for vertical mobility. This led to the fact that the Alawites were in above-average numbers among the officers in the Syrian armed forces.⁵ It should be added that the Alawites (and the members of other religious minorities) were also more willing to be included in the Baath Party because its program was secular. In addition, due to its socialist ideology, the party itself successfully recruited membership in rural areas, where the members of religious minorities traditionally lived (Bou-Nacklie, 1993, 649–652, 657; Goldsmith, 2015, 68–69; Khoury, 1987, 80–81, 525; Seale, 1988/1990, 26–27, 34, 60–63, 76–80).

The three Alawite officers first increased the dominance of the Alawites in the Syrian army through more purges, thus consolidating their position of power. After 1966, the Baathist regime, in which Salah Jadid took the lead, carried out radical socialist, economic and social reforms – a revolution from above.⁶ Several land reforms were carried out, which granted peasants and agricultural workers the land that had previously belonged to the landowners' elite. Such measures were not a surprise, given the fact that the Alawites had traditionally belonged to the vast social class of peasants who had worked the land owned by the Sunni landowners. In addition, nationalization of industry and finance was carried out, public planning, as the main distribution mechanism, replaced the market, and the public sector became the main engine

2 Two intellectuals educated in France, Michel Aflaq and Salah al-Din al-Bitar, established an intellectual circle in Damascus – the Movement of the Arab Revival (Baath). In 1947, they formally established the Baath party in Damascus. The Party identified its objectives as follows: 1. unity and freedom of the Arab nation (merging of the existing, artificially created Arab countries into a major Arab political entity); 2. liberation from any external influence and hegemony; and 3. socialism in the form of land reform and public ownership of natural resources and large industry (Ahmad, 1984/1991, 198; Hiro, 1996, 6, 18, 41; Seale, 1988/1990, 30–31, 33–34, 47).

3 The original Muslim community split into the Sunni and the Shia branches after the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 due to disagreement regarding the question who could be a legitimate successor to the Prophet. The proto-Sunnis claimed that any devout Muslim elected by the Muslim community can be the successor, and the proto-Shiites argued that Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib (Ali) could be the only legitimate heir. The crystallization of the split into the Sunnis and the Shiites occurred after the Battle of Karbala in 680, in which the Sunni military units killed Ali's younger son Hussein and his escort. As for the doctrine, the most important difference between the Sunnis and the Shiites is in relation to the Imamate (Imams). While the Shiites attribute a cardinal role to the Imamate, the Sunnis place no real importance to this institution. The Sunnis were socio-politically privileged through the predominant part of the history of the Muslim world. Today, out of 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, 85 to 90 % are the Sunnis and 10 to 15 % the Shiites (Donner, 1999, 18; Halm, 1987/1991, 1, 17; Keddie and Cole, 1986, 1–2; Nasr, 2006, 34; Sachedina, 1981, 19; Šterbenc, 2005). The Shiites are further divided into more (sub)groups: the Twelvers, the Zaydis, the Ismailis (the Nizaris and the Mustaliens), the Druze and the Alawites. The Sunnis can be divided on the basis of the four legal schools (the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafii, Hanbali) (Šterbenc, 2005, 115–254). In Syria, the Sunnis are the majority religious community (65 % of population), while minority religious communities are the Alawites (12 %), the Christians (8 %), the Druze (3 %), the Ismailis – the Nizaris (1 %) and the Twelvers (1 %) (Daftary, 1990/1992, 533–534; Phillips, 2016, 47, 52). The Sunni Kurds form 10 % of the population (however, their primary identity is ethnic).

4 The Alawites are a group of the so-called extreme Shiites, characterized by the fact that they attribute to Ali and the remaining eleven Imams, recognized and respected by the Shiites-Twelvers, a status close to divine (their perception of the divine is rather abstract). As a result, they are regarded as extremists by the Twelvers, and as heretics by the orthodox Sunnis. The Alawite religious beliefs are highly syncretistic, since they contain elements of Christianity (celebrating Christmas and Easter) and paganism, as well as the belief in the posthumous transmigration of the soul. The Alawite rules for everyday life are somewhat liberal because they allow drinking alcohol and they do not require that women be veiled in public. In addition, the Alawites do not pray in mosques and they honour the shrines of the Alawite „saints“ and holy men (Goldsmith, 2015, 7–8, 217; Mazzaoui, 1987/1993, 176).

5 In 1963, 65 % of the Syrian army officers were the Alawites and even higher was the percentage among the privates (Goldsmith, 2015, 74).

6 In December 1964, al-Assad and Jadid degraded Muhammad Umrān in politics (Seale, 1988/1990, 95–96).



Image 2: Tadmur/Palmyra, central Syria: Bashar al-Assad on the left, his father Hafez on the right (February 2010, photo: Lukas Wank, Shabka)

of economic development. Private entrepreneurship was severely limited and economic cooperation with the West was reduced (Abboud, 2016, 28–29; Goldsmith, 2015, 9, 80; Khoury, 1987, 520; van Dam, 1978, 42–44).

Hafiz al-Assad deposed Jadid in November 1970, and in March 1971 he became the President of Syria. He started a partial de-radicalization of economic and social policy, led by the belief that Jadid's politics had been too radical, which in the short term benefited the Alawites and the members of other minority religious communities, but it had dangerously alienated a considerable part of the Sunni population. He partially liberalized economic policy, thus creating certain opportunities for the private sector (among others, for the Sunni merchants). Al-Assad leaned against the four pillars of power. The first was the Baath party, which implemented the state policies. The second pillar was corporatism, which comprised various social forces (such as the students and farmers) that were subordinated and incorporated in the regime. The third pillar was the state bureaucracy, which increased due to the state's socialist policies, so that it employed almost 25 % of Syrians in the 1980s. In the public sector, the regime massively employed the Alawites, who were moving considerably from their tra-

ditional settlements in the mountains of the northwest of the country (Jabal al-Sahiliyah) to the cities. The fourth pillar was the enlarged army and the security services, which employed primarily the Alawites in order to ensure the regime's security. The socio-economic position of the Alawites (education, employment, infrastructure) generally improved (Abboud, 2016, 29–31; Goldsmith, 2015, 80, 84–85, 108–109; Ziadeh, 2011/2013, 17–26).

During the Baathist rule in the 1960s and 1970s, the redistributive policies greatly improved the economic life of peasants and the poor. The policies of nationalization and the distribution system which put forward rural development and fostered agricultural production improved rural life. The expansion of the public sector created a massive social base of the regime and created jobs for the middle class. Thus, public servants, urban workers and rural peasants (including the Sunnis), along with the members of minority religious communities, became a strong supportive social base for the regime. However, Hafiz al-Assad realized that, in order to preserve his authority, he could rely solely on the Alawite community from which he descended. On the other hand, the Alawites felt that they needed al-Assad's regime so that they would not fall into the inferior social

status where they had been subordinated to the Sunnis (Abboud, 2016, 29, 37; Goldsmith, 2015, 82–83).

BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S REIGN

When Hafiz al-Assad died on June 10, 2000, due to a heart attack, his son Bashar quickly replaced him as the President; such a smooth transfer of power was only possible as the older Assad, during his last years of life, had removed from power all the influential members of the regime who could compete with his son in assuming the leadership of the state (Goldsmith, 2015, 126–127, 129; Ziadeh, 2011/2013, 37, 45). As the President, Bashar al-Assad faced major socio-economic problems in the country, and with his own policies, the situation worsened considerably, thus creating fertile ground for the outburst of dissatisfaction of the substantial part of the Syrian population, which broke out in March 2011.

INCREASING SOCIO-ECONOMIC TENSIONS, PRESERVING POLITICAL DICTATORSHIP AND ENVIRONMENTAL DISASTER

Already in the mid-1980s, the regime of Hafiz al-Assad faced economic (fiscal) problems, largely due to the rapid decline in oil prices and, thus, the reduction of income from the (modest) Syrian oil exports and the aid that Syria was receiving from the Arabian Gulf States. In addition, the Syrian state-run economic model was devoted primarily to inclusiveness, stability and dependence on the state, but failed to provide economic development. The model was eventually exhausted because it pursued spending on the cost of accumulation. This led to a series of moderate economic reforms in the late 1980s and 1990s, which did not stop the deterioration of the situation. Consequently, after assuming the leadership of the state, Bashar al-Assad was confronted with a whole range of complex economic and social problems. The economic development of the country was averted by the lack of investment, rigid market regulation, retrograde bureaucracy, ideological opposition to economic liberalization, expensive food and fuel subsidies, rigid currency controls, high-level corruption, and the private sector that was too fragmented to be able to lead capital accumulation. Of particular concern was the fact that the state was no longer able to create a sufficient number of jobs in the public sector; a high birth rate (in 2010, 55 % of the population was under the age of 24) and rising unemployment required the creation of as many as 300,000 new jobs per year (Abboud, 2016, 32–34; Hokayem, 2013, 25–26; Lesch, 2012/2013, 8; Ziadeh, 2011/2013, 37).

Bashar al-Assad therefore decided to implement more radical socio-economic reforms, directed towards liberalization. The reforms were motivated by a neo-

liberal economic approach, and their red thread were privatization and marketization. In this sense, the state was increasingly losing its leading role in the society, while dismantling the institutions that had connected the state and the society (including the public sector and trade unions), and the fiscal mechanisms that supported this connection (including the tax system). The public sector monopolies were slowly eliminated, while the private sector's investment in banking, insurance, education system and other areas increased. The broad government subsidy system and the system of government fixing of the highest prices for basic foodstuffs and housing were abolished (Abboud, 2016, 34–36).

However, al-Assad's policies have further distorted the economy and increased corruption and nepotism. Marketization did not extend the foundations of the accumulation, what is more, only those close to the regime benefited from the privatization. Although al-Assad claimed that they aim for a „social market economy“, he did not satisfy many of the social demands of the Syrians. In 2000–2010, the standard of living deteriorated, while the possibility of social mobility was reduced. Unemployment rates continued to raise, wages lagged behind the rising cost of living, and price rising caused the economic uncertainty of millions of Syrians. The inequality greatly increased, while 30 % of the population lived below the poverty line (11 % below the survival line). Since the regime, on the basis of a market logic, was eliminating the privileges of the agricultural sector and redirected the funds to the cities, the countryside was severely neglected (mostly the Sunni peasants), with which the Baath Party alienated its most important social support base.⁷ Consequently, there were mass migrations of peasants from rural areas to the peripheries of cities, they mostly settled in the slums. One needs to add that during this time, the socio-economic situation of the greater part of the Alawite community deteriorated, both in rural and urban areas. Nevertheless, the Alawites did not stop supporting the regime because they continued to believe that Bashar al-Assad alone could provide them with security against social degradation and the potential revenge of the Sunnis (Abboud, 2016, 36–38; Goldsmith, 2015, 159–161, 165; Hokayem, 2013, 28–29; Lesch, 2012/2013, 7–8, 107–108; Phillips, 2015, 367; Phillips, 2016, 46–47).

During the reign of Hafiz al-Assad, there was an unwritten „social contract“ between the regime and the population, on the basis of which the former secured the economic security through subsidies, jobs in the public sector and free education and healthcare system, while in return, the Syrians renounced their political freedom. During the reign of Bashar al-Assad, the regime ceased to adhere to the agreement, nevertheless, it did not allow political freedom but responded to the ever increasing political demands with severe repression, which was car-

⁷ Pursuing its policies, the regime alienated also the second part of its traditional support base – the workers (Hokayem, 2013, 28).

ried out by 50,000 to 70,000 members of the intelligence and security services (*Mukhabarat*), which were increasingly prominent in the Syrian society (Goldsmith, 2015, 182–183; Perthes, 2004, 17–19; Phillips, 2016, 44–45).

From 2006 to 2010, Syria was also struck by a severe drought, when between two and three million people were plunged into extreme poverty and the Syrian agricultural sector was devastated. The rural population of all religious communities, including the Alawites, had to fight for survival, while tens of thousands of Syrians were forced to flee to the cities, so that 160 villages in northern Syria were completely emptied (the worst affected region was the north-eastern region of the governorates of Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor, Hasakah, Idlib and Raqqah). The regime did not take any measures to alleviate the suffering of the rural population, but even exacerbated the situation (for example by demolishing the temporary residences of migrants in cities). Drought, together with market reform measures, led to a real humanitarian disaster for the majority of population. The particularly affected and, consequently angry were the Sunni peasants who had been the core pillar of support of the Baath Party for decades (Goldsmith, 2015, 183–184; Phillips, 2015, 367; Phillips, 2016, 46).

TENSIONS IN THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SUNNIS AND THE ALAWITES

Since Syria gained independence, there was a certain tension between the Sunnis and the Alawites. In independent Syria, the Sunnis felt threatened by the members of minority religious communities, since these were supposed to be a centrifugal force. After the Baathist assumption of power, the tensions between the greater part of the Sunnis and the Alawites increased. Hafiz al-Assad tried to prove that he was the President of all the Syrians and the „true“ Muslim,⁸ however, a part of the Sunnis thought his regime was an „Alawite regime“, for he appointed the Alawites to important posts in the administration and army, and in addition, his were the actions of nepotism. The Alawites were perceived as threatening soldiers or intelligence due to their control of the security services, and the autochthonous Sunnis in Damascus and Aleppo were unhappy with the arrival of the „inferior“ Alawites to their proud „Islamic“ cities. An important indicator of latent tension were the events of January 1973, when mass protests

took place in Aleppo, Homs and Hama because the new constitution did not stipulate that the president of the state must be a Muslim.⁹ It showed how important religion still is and that many Sunnis find problems with the religious roots of al-Assad. On the other hand, these events were ground-breaking for the Alawites because their historically conditioned fear of the Sunnis' domination and their persecution was awakened (Goldsmith, 2015, 83, 85, 88; Ziadeh, 2011/2013, 140).

The Sunni anti-Alawite sentiment escalated in the years between 1976 and 1982 when the rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood against the regime was supported by many Sunnis. At that time, the Alawite community supported the brutal use of force by which Hafiz al-Assad finally defeated the resistance of Islamists in Hama in February 1982 (the Muslim brothers showed that they had an antagonistic attitude to the „heretical“ Alawites). During the reign of Bashar al-Assad, a large part of the Sunnis associated the Alawite community with the regime and accused it (mainly because of the individual Alawites who were close to the regime and made their fortunes for that) of usurping both money and power, despite the deteriorating socio-economic situation of the Alawites.¹⁰ Most of the Sunnis still regarded the Alawites as the „false“ Muslims (Goldsmith, 2015, 93–106, 163, 185–186, 261; Phillips, 2016, 47).

OUTBREAK OF THE SYRIAN WAR

After the „Arab spring“ arose in the Arab world at the end of 2010, the process reached Syria in March 2011. This was no coincidence, given the dissatisfaction that had accumulated during the reign of Bashar al-Assad. However, internal structural factors, the regime's response to the protests, the militarization of the uprising and external interference ultimately led to the outbreak of a long-lasting war.

PROTESTS AGAINST THE REGIME (THE UPRISING)

On 17th December 2010, in Tunisia, Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire due to humiliation he had been subjected to by the authorities. On the same day, in his birthplace, Sidi Bouzid, protests erupted and later extended to the capital of Tunis, and on 14 January 2011 they led to the dismissal of the autocratic President Ben Ali. This triggered a wave of protests against

8 He promoted inclusive Syrian nationalism, and appointed some Sunnis (Mustafa Tlass, Abdul Halim Khaddam) to important civilian positions in the government. He prioritised the Sunni culture, so that the Islam which was taught in schools was Sunni Islam. In his birthplace, Qardaha, he actualized two architectural projects with an Islamic note. In memory of his late mother, he built a luxurious mosque, and in memory of his deceased son Basil, a large cemetery complex which emphasized the Islamic character of Basil with its engraved notes from the Koran (Lawrence, 1998, 71; Phillips, 2015, 365–366).

9 Al-Assad later ordered the Syrian Assembly to amend the Constitution with the provision that „President's religion is Islam“ (Ziadeh, 2011/2013, 140). The question was whether the Alawites are Muslims. The Alawites were supported by a prominent member of the Lebanese Shiite-Twelve clergy, Musa al-Sadr, who proclaimed that the Alawites are a part of the Twelver Shiism according to doctrine (Ajami, 1986, 174; Goldsmith, 2015, 89–90).

10 Bashar removed certain experienced Sunnis from prominent government offices (Tlass and Khaddam), and appointed the members of his extended family. Consequently, the Alawites dominated in the ruling elite even more (Phillips, 2015, 366).

dictatorships in the Arab world and was referred to as the „Arab Spring“, which spread to the majority of Arab countries. Syria was no exception. Under the influence of the general regional trend, a group of teenagers in early March 2011 wrote on the wall of their school in the south Syrian city of Deraa: „*Doctor, your turn next*“ (this referred to al-Assad) and „*Down with the regime*.“ The teenagers were taken to Damascus by the Syrian security authorities and tortured. After authorities refused all their parents' requests for their release, the parents, along with hundreds of other Syrians, began protesting in front of the main mosque in Deraa on 15th March. The security forces responded by shooting and killing four protesters. The following day, after the funeral of the killed revolvers, around 20,000 other protesters, shouting anti-regime slogans and smashing the regime symbols came to the streets. After the protests continued, the security forces surrounded the city on 23rd March and attacked the demonstrators, but it was already too late. On the news of the demonstrators killed in Deraa, protests had already extended to several other parts of Syria (Lesch, 2012/2013, 56–57; Phillips, 2016, 40–41, 49–50).

Structurally, the outbreak of protests in the city of Deraa, located in the southern province of Houran, was no coincidence. Houran was in fact affected by virtually all the negative elements that occurred during the reign of Bashar al-Assad. Similarly to other peripheral regions in Syria, Houran had once prospered due to favourable agricultural and administrative policies of the regime; since the 1980s, the Syrian authorities increasingly reduced public investment in infrastructure and services in most rural areas due to economic problems, which affected the lives of millions of the Syrians. Houran was also struck by a severe drought and, in addition, Deraa was, in a religious sense, homogeneously Sunni, while the commander of the security forces was an Alawite who imposed brutal measures (Hokayem, 2013, 42–43; Phillips, 2016, 49–50).

A mixture of factors that brought the city of Deraa to revolt was also present in other parts of Syria that joined the uprising against the regime early on: the north-western province of Idlib was affected by the regime's neglect and high unemployment; the city of Hama, which was a homogeneous, conservative Sunni city, still resented the Alawite-dominated regime its brutal repression of the rebellion of the Muslim Brotherhood in 1982; the religiously mixed city of Homs received a lot of regime funds, however, the Sunni residents there believed that the city's Alawite areas were privileged both in infrastructure and employment, and therefore, opposed the regime, while the Alawites remained loyal. In Damascus, the structural (economic and sectarian) backgrounds of the insurrection were well visible.¹¹ The regime was

opposed by predominantly Sunni neighbourhoods of Darayya and Eastern Ghouta (notably Douma), which were affected by poverty and underemployment, and, besides, they absorbed rural migrants. The conservative, middle-class neighbourhoods of Barzeh and Midan, and the poor Sunni sector of Qaaboun also revolted. On the other hand, the Alawite inhabitants of the Damascus municipality of Mezze 86 attended the pro-regime gatherings organized in mid-year of 2011. These gatherings were also attended by the inhabitants of Damascus from the middle and upper classes who materially benefited from the regime policy of economic liberalization (Glass, 2015, 121–122; Hokayem, 2013, 43–46).

It can be summarized that the uprising featured the following: it started as predominantly Sunni, it was conducted in the Syrian geographical periphery and included lower-classes of the society; when deciding whether to join the revolt or stay loyal to the regime, local circumstances and possible resentments were important; among the initial reasons for the revolt there were no clearly perceptible Islamist motivations; sectarian slogans were present in the regions where more than one religious community lived, but they did not appear in many other regions. Despite the fact that the revolt started as predominantly Sunni in character, all the Sunnis did not join, nor was it a primarily sectarian revolt. Many Sunnis continued to support the al-Assad's regime for various reasons: to some, the regime provided jobs in the public sector and the military, others cooperated with the authorities economically; some were the members of the Baath Party, while others still remembered the instability before the arrival of Hafiz al-Assad; some feared having an Islamist government, others were satisfied with al-Assad's foreign policy which was defying Israel and the West (Glass, 2015, 94; Hokayem, 2013, 49–50).

Within a few weeks, the protests developed into a movement that was more organized and already had a national dimension, but it was not centrally coordinated. The protesters started to express common demands, primarily requiring a regime change through the dismissal of the repressive bodies, the resignation of the President al-Assad, and the exclusion of political, security and economic elites from political life. In addition, they demanded political reforms that would include the abolition of the laws on the state of emergency, establishment of independent courts, adoption of a new constitution, and introduction of more representative political institutions that would not be subject to authoritarian control. The protest movement (the uprising) was becoming more and more organized and this was mainly due to the spontaneous establishment of the so-called Local Coordination Committees whose members were local activists who joined broader networks (Abboud, 2016, 57–58, 66–67).

11 Fanar Haddad (in Phillips, 2015, 359) defines „sectarianism“ and „sectarian“ as „discrimination, hate or tension“, based on differences between sects. In the context of this article, the term „sect“ has the same meaning as the term „religious community.“

12 However, the regime could definitely rely on the Alawites, the Twelvers and most of the Christians; at the beginning of the uprising, the Druze tried to maintain a neutral status while a large part of the Ismailis-Nizaris joined the protest. Later, the Druze and the Ismaili-Niz

THE RESPONSE OF THE REGIME, THE MILITARIZATION OF THE OPPOSITION AND THE OUTBREAK OF THE CIVIL WAR

After the start of the protests (the uprising), the regime could rely on several social groups, which, due to its (previous or current) policies, remained faithful: the Sunni merchants from Damascus and Aleppo, benefiting from infrastructure projects, increased trade and opening of private schools and universities for their children; public officials whose salaries were increased at the start of the protests; some tribes in the east of the country which cooperated with the regime; the members of religious minorities who were satisfied with secular arrangement and feared the revenge of the Sunni authorities;¹² many of the Sunnis saw the regime as a rampart protecting from the Islamism and Jihadism; the older Syrians feared re-slipping into instability as it existed before 1971, and the younger ones feared the possibility of a similar chaos that existed in Iraq after 2003 (Phillips, 2016, 51–52).

Despite the fact that many of the Alawites participated in the early peaceful protests in Homs and Damascus, the majority of the Alawite community members continued to support the regime for three reasons: there was a collective memory of the long history of Sunni domination of the Alawite community and people were afraid of returning to the second-class status; the Alawites were disproportionately employed in the public sector (the military, the intelligence services, the bureaucracy) and, therefore, did not want to oppose the regime that paid them;¹³ and many Alawites suspected that it was a rebellion of Islamists and consequently feared the Sunni sectarian violence. It is important to point out that the most elite divisions of the Syrian army (the Republican Guard, the Third Corps and the Fourth Armoured Division) were almost entirely composed of the regime-faithful Alawites (Goldsmith, 2015, 196–197; Phillips, 2016, 52; Syria's Mutating Conflict, 2012, 24–25, 27).

The regime responded to the protest with a dual policy. On the one hand, it started with a series of embellishing political reforms aimed at meeting certain demands of the protesters (the abolition of the State of Emergency Act which had been in force since 1963, the release of 200 political prisoners, the appointment of a

new Prime Minister) and, on the other hand, it exercised increasingly brutal repression (arrests, torture, kidnapping, murders, firing at demonstrators), which caused more and more deaths (Abboud, 2016, 58–60).

The regime also employed some subtle but far-reaching measures. In order to maintain in force, sectarian feelings were promoted in the Alawite community in order to set the grounds for the acceptance and implementation of violence against the members of the Sunni community. This was extremely important because the Alawite-dominated security services used violence against the protesters. In this sense, it can be estimated that the regime implemented the policies envisaged by the constructivist interpretation of the influence of religion on the outbreak of a violent conflict. The constructivist explanation is that the political „entrepreneurs“, in order to gain or retain authority (power), encourage the members of their own religious community to accept and implement violence against the members of other religious communities. However, constructivism emphasizes that political entrepreneurs are successful in doing so only if they can rely on some already existing intersubjective religious (social) frameworks, such as religious traditions, for example, a religiously-based collective historical memory. Members of a community can be mobilized appropriately if there is a long history of antagonistic relations between two communities.¹⁴

At the time of the first protests, the regime revived the old „fears of sectarianism.“ In the state media, the protesters were labelled as the sectarian Islamists. The Alawite community was targeted for manipulation as the gangs organized by the regime (the *Shabiha*) brought sandbags to the Alawite villages, claiming that the neighbouring Sunnis were attacking the Alawites. Soon after the outbreak of protests, when the sectarian confrontation did not yet begin at all, as a result of the regime manipulation in the Alawite community, rumors were circulated about what the „terrorists“ were doing to Alawite corpses. The regime could take advantage of the intersubjective basis formed by the Alawite collective memory of the long history of Sunni domination and the repression against the Alawites.¹⁵ Consequently, the Alawites began to accept the violence of the regime and also decisively participated in its implementation,

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12 However, the regime could definitely rely on the Alawites, the Twelvers and most of the Christians; at the beginning of the uprising, the Druze tried to maintain a neutral status while a large part of the Ismailis-Nizaris joined the protest. Later, the Druze and the Ismaili-Nizarite groups split into the supporters of the regime and the supporters of the opposition, but both groups generally did not get involved in the conflict. The regime managed to organize a Druze pro-regime militia (Hokayem, 2013, 47–48; Phillips, 2015, 369; Syria's Mutating Conflict, 2012, 27).

13 It was important that the regime could rely on the loyalty of the high officers in the armed forces, as more than 90 % of the generals were the Alawites at the time when Bashar al-Assad came to power (Goldsmith, 2015, 131).

14 The constructivist explanation can be found, for example, in Hasenclever and Rittberger (2000, 647–657) and Šterbenc (2011, 248–254).

15 Historically, the Sunni dynasties of the Seljuks, Mamluks and Ottomans used repression against the Alawites. During its uprising against the regime (1976–1982), the Muslim Brotherhood also exercised brutal sectarian violence against the Alawites; among other brutalities, they were systematically killing the Alawite intelligentsia (Goldsmith, 2015, 21, 30–33, 37–38, 40–41; Seale 1988/1990, 316–317, 324–329).

believing that they were under threat of collective annihilation. Thus, even the educated Alawites in Damascus demanded the killing of all the Sunnis living in Homs, and the majority of the Alawite community defended the solutions based on „destruction,“ „eradication,“ and „purification“ (Phillips, 2015, 369; Syria's Mutating Conflict, 2012, 24–25).¹⁶

It should be stressed, however, that the regime was by no means the sole culprit for the intensification of the conflict and the transition to a destructive war. As Phillips points out, the Sunni-dominated countries have also promoted sectarianism on the anti-regime side, with Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey supporting Sunni anti-regime militias with pronounced sectarian (anti-Alawite) elements in order to overthrow the regime and extend their influence in Syria. Moreover, the Gulf States allowed the collection of financial resources for sectarian militia in Syria on their territories. The regime-controlled transnational media in Qatar and Saudi Arabia also intensively promoted anti-Alawite and anti-Shiite feelings in the wider region (Phillips, 2015, 370). Thus, the constructivist interpretation can also be applied to the operation of the Sunni-dominated countries, which, in terms of intersubjectivity, could rely on a strong anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite oriented Salafist and Wahhabi ideology and tradition that were present in the Gulf.¹⁷

In the summer of 2011, the process of militarization of the revolt began, due to the escalation of the violence of the regime, the protesters' need for self-defence and the inability of the protests to lead to a political transition process. The first armed rebel units were mostly the Sunni deserters (ordinary soldiers, privates) from the Syrian army, joined by some activists, and in July 2011, the Free Syrian Army was formed as the nominal umbrella organization under which various units were merged, soon joined by the escaped Syrian army officers. The rebels obtained weapons mostly from the seized regime's arsenals or they bought it in black market. Due to armed fighting and casualties both on the regime's and the rebels' sides, Syria slid into the Civil War some time between August 2011 and January 2012.¹⁸ However, peaceful protests against the regime, parallel to armed conflicts, continued long after the outbreak of the Civil War (Abboud, 2016, 87; Hokayem, 2013, 81–83, 86; Phillips, 2015, 358). It is possible to agree with Glass (2015, 20–21) that the external aid for the Sunni anti-regime fighters led to the final militarization of the Syrian uprising and the domination of the armed rebels over peaceful protesters. At the beginning of 2012, Qatar

and Saudi Arabia began sending armed rebels the arms, money and non-lethal military equipment, while Turkey assisted in logistics. These countries also supported the armed struggle against the regime in the following years (Phillips, 2016, 137–140). As a result, violence spread throughout Syria, and the conflict became more lethal and claimed thousands of victims each month.

Despite the fact that the first armed rebels linked to the Free Syrian Army were more secular, the sectarian domestic and foreign Sunni Islamist groups, with varying degrees of radicalism, soon became predominant in the armed rebellion. The reasons for this were mainly three. Firstly, in the catastrophic atmosphere of the war, religion provided a more solid identity and gave meaning to suffering and sacrifice. Secondly, religious groups were more organized and disciplined. Thirdly, the armed groups that needed weapons and other material resources for successful combat began to compete for the favour of foreign sectarian-driven donors (Saudi Arabia, Qatar), which required them to show the highest level of Islamism. Consequently, the war became dominantly sectarian, since the Islamist groups acted on the basis of a common idea of the struggle of the Sunnis against the Shiite regime, but at the same time it was increasingly radicalized (Hokayem, 2013, 95–98; Lister, 2015; Phillips, 2016, 129–130; Tentative Jihad, 2012).

EXTERNAL INTERFERENCE

The war in Syria would not have become so severe and would not be so long if it was not intensely interfered by external protagonists who wanted to achieve wider regional goals through the victory of their proxies in Syria. As a result, Syria has become a sort of battleground, where bigger and stronger external protagonists have been fighting. The war between Saudi Arabia and Iran needs to be highlighted, which, to a significant extent, overlaps with the fighting between the broader Sunni and Shiite sides. This confrontation cannot be understood without understanding the consequences of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003.

CONSEQUENCES OF THE INVASION OF IRAQ

During the reign of Saddam Hussein (1979–2003) and the Baath Party (1968–2003), the Arab Sunnis who constitute only a minority of the Iraqi population, dominated in the society and politics, while the Arab Shiite majority was clearly subordinated.¹⁹ The US-led invasion of Iraq in March and April 2003 and later the

16 Phillips (2015, 362–363, 368–369) provides the thesis on the regime manipulation with the Alawite community, emphasizing the importance of the existence of historical conflicts. However, in terms of theoretical basis, he does not refer to constructivism.

17 The work of the ultra-conservative Sunni theologian Ahmad ibn Taymiyya influenced greatly the founder of Wahhabism – Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab. Ibn Taymiyya was extremely hostile towards all the Shiites, and in 1305 he issued the fatwa in which the Alawites were proclaimed heretics and enemies of Islam (Goldsmith, 2015, 34–36; Mabon, 2013/2016, 85–86; Nasr, 2006, 94–96).

18 In accordance with the widely accepted political science definition, the civil war occurs when, in one year, the number of combat deaths on both sides reaches 1000 (Phillips, 2015, 358).

occupation changed the situation, as the Americans overthrew the Sunni ruler and by enabling democratic elections in January and December 2005 they paved the way for the majority of the Shiites to take power.²⁰ This was an epochal historical change, since the Iraqi Shiites came to power for the first time since 1638²¹ in a country that is extremely important for all the Shiites.²² Iraq, which is one of the three most important Arab countries, became the first country in the Arab world, in which, based on the democratic process, the Shiite majority started to dominate (Dawisha, 2009, 236–240; Nasr, 2006, 170, 186–202; Pelham, 2008, 180–185; Šterbenc, 2005, 360).

The Shiite takeover of power in Iraq did not merely alter the power relations in this country, but also caused decisive changes in the wider region. One can point out three respects.²³ Firstly, the (democratic) rise of the Iraqi Shiites to power inevitably inspired the Shiites in the Arab countries where, despite being in large numbers, they were still socially and politically marginalized (subordinated to the ruling Sunnis). Therefore, they began to express demands for the improvement of their position, mainly referring to democracy. This happened in Bahrain, Yemen, Lebanon and Saudi Arabia.²⁴ Secondly, in general, the impact of the Shiites in the wider area was strengthened, as there was a kind of revival of Shia, which was also based on material indicators. For example, the Shiites began to control the same amount of the world oil supplies as the Sunnis.²⁵ Thirdly, the regional (geopolitical) influence of the strongest Shia force, Iran,²⁶ was greatly increased, because the country had good relations with the new Shia rulers in Iraq.²⁷ Moreover, even before 2003, Tehran cooperated closely with the Alawite-dominated regimes of Hafiz and

Bashar al-Assad in Syria, as well as the Shia Twelvers' movement Hezbollah, which controls the south of Lebanon. Iran thus spread its influence all the way to the Mediterranean Sea (Goldsmith, 2015, 122–125; Nasr, 2006, 169–184, 211–226; Norton, 2007/2009, 34–36, 135–138; Ostovar, 2016, 114–116; Pelham, 2008, 204–206, 215).

The great increase in the influence of Shia and Iran in the region led to the collapse in the balance of power, which greatly irritated the Sunni-dominated states, especially the Gulf States (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar). Whereas during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988) their vast support of Saddam Hussein prevented the spread of Iran's influence on Iraq, this was now the fact. They started referring to the emerging „Shia crescent“, which was expected to stretch from Iran, through Iraq and Syria, to the south of Lebanon, while the Sunni influence was expected to decline ever more.²⁸ The countries came up with several measures to curb the spread of the Shia influence, and have been inclined to the Sunni groups in Iraq which brutally attacked the Shiites there. Namely, the strengthening of identity policies (sectarianism) further intensified the Sunni-Shia clashes in the region, which in Iraq in 2006 and 2007 led to a highly destructive Sunni-Shia Civil War in which the Shiites won (Barnes-Dacey and Levy, 2013, 7–8; Blagojević and Ščekić, 2017, 543; Cockburn, 2016, 129–159; Mabon, 2013/2016, 54; Nasr, 2006, 241–242; Pelham, 2008, 215–219; Phillips, 2016, 18, 20–21).

The development of events particularly intensified the traditional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the leading Sunni and Shia forces,²⁹ and in this sense, a kind of a Saudi-Iranian regional cold war erupted.³⁰ Saudi Arabia was extremely negative about the great

19 In Iraq, the (Arab) Shiites account for 60 %, the (Arab) Sunnis for 20 %, and the Kurds for 17 % of the population; the rest are members of other ethnic and religious groups (Ethnoreligious Groups, http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/middle_east_and_asia/iraq_ethnoreligious_1992.jpg, 25. 5. 2005).

20 The Iraqi Shiites are the Twelvers. The Twelvers gained their title because they attach special importance to the twelve Imams who, in the years 656–874, led the main stream of Shiism (Momen, 1985, 23–45; Šterbenc, 2005, 115–137).

21 In 1638, the Sunni Ottomans ended the reign of the Iranian Shiite (Twelver) dynasty of the Safavids in Iraq (Šterbenc, 2005, 344, 360).

22 In Kufa, southern Iraq, the founder of Shiism Ali established his base, and in addition, there are four Shiite (Twelver) shrines (Najaf, Karbala, Kazimayn and Samarra) in Iraq. The vast majority of today's Shiites belongs to the Twelvers; the Twelvers are (mostly) also the Shiites living in Iran, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon (Šterbenc, 2005, 73, 116, 177–191).

23 Various authors highlight the decisive influence of the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Cockburn (2016, 10) argues that the US-led invasion of Iraq „was the earthquake whose aftershocks we still feel“. Phillips (2016, 18) emphasizes that the invasion of Iraq was an „important turning point“.

24 In Bahrain, the Twelvers make up 70 % of the population; in Yemen, the Zaydis make up 42 % of the population; in Lebanon and Saudi Arabia, the Twelvers make up 38 and 10 to 15 % of the population respectively.

25 In the countries with the Shiite governments (Iran, Iraq and Azerbaijan), there was the same amount of global oil reserves in comparison to the Sunni Arab countries (Pelham, 2008, 215).

26 In Iran, during the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), the Twelver Shiism was permanently established as a state religion for the first time. In addition, Iran is the culturally and intellectually most dynamic country in the Muslim world, and in Qom, Iran, there is the most important Shiite theological centre (Nasr, 2006, 213–215; Savory, 1980).

27 During the reign of Saddam Hussein, many Iraqi Shiite politicians fled to Iran. After 2003 they returned and won the elections (Phillips, 2016, 18–19).

28 In 1986, the US envoy Pearson was already warned by the leadership of the Sunni-dominated countries, in private talks, that Iran wants to defeat Iraq in order to establish the „Shia Crescent,“ ranging from Lebanon, through Iraq, to the Persian Gulf (Crist, 2012/2013, 171).

29 On the one hand, this rivalry is largely a classical secular struggle for the influence of the two regionally most influential states, and on the other hand, it overlaps with the wider regional Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. The authorities in Saudi Arabia and Iran (after the Islamic Revolution of 1979), in terms of identity and legitimization, rely on religion (Sunnism–Wahhabism and Shiism), and they compete

increase in both Iran's and Shia influence, mainly for two reasons. Firstly, it was feared that the Saudi Shiites living in the east of Saudi Arabia would secede, which would be a disaster for the monarchy as all of its oil fields and oil reserves are in this area. Riyadh had long been accusing Tehran of calling the Saudi Shiites for rebellion, and these accusations intensified after 2005, when the latter demanded more rights for themselves.³¹ As the Saudi Shiites protested strongly during the „Arab Spring“ in 2011, the concerns of the Saudi authorities were further strengthened.³² Secondly, because of the fact that Saudi Arabia and Iran compete in Islamic legitimacy, and the Saudi ruling house legitimizes its power with Islam, the Saudis saw severe undermining of their power in the great increase in Iranian influence in the region. Because of all these fears, Saudi Arabia played a major role in the brutal suppression of the Shiite demonstrations in Bahrain in March 2011 (Barnes-Dacey and Levy, 2013, 7–8; Hadžikadunić, 2013, 141, 147; Mabon, 2013/2016, 54, 70–72; Phillips, 2016, 19–20; Wehrey, 2013).

SYRIA AS THE BATTLEFIELD FOR EXTERNAL PROTAGONISTS

After the protests in Syria in March 2011, the Sunni-dominated Arab Gulf States and Turkey acted against the al-Assad's regime reconcilably and tried to resolve Syrian tensions through diplomatic channels for several months. The Saudis feared that the dismissal of al-Assad would further strengthen the revolutionary process in the region, which would jeopardize their rule, while Turkish President Erdogan and Qatari emir Hamad bin Khalifa al-Thani cooperated closely with the Syrian leader before the outbreak of protests. But as early as in July 2011, when al-Assad intensified the repression against protesters, the external Sunni protagonists drastically changed their attitude towards the Syrian regime and began to overthrow it (Hassan, 2013, 18–19; Phillips, 2016, 65, 68–69, 70–75).

The Gulf States, primarily Saudi Arabia and Qatar, saw the Syrian conflict as a decisive battle for the control of a key country in the geographical centre of the region. They believed that, from a geopolitical point of view, the replacement of the regime in Syria would bring a decisive change in the region, since Iran and its allies would be adversely affected. Namely, if the pro-Iranian regime was toppled in Syria, and instead, the Sunni regime was established, cooperating with the Gulf States, it would be possible to significantly and even decisively weaken the two pro-Iranian protagonists: the Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Shia regime in Iraq. The Iraqi Sunnis, who, after being defeated in the Civil War, have more or less adopted the idea of being in a subordinate position, would again be able to oppose the Shia rulers. In Lebanon, Hezbollah would lose its dominant role and be subordinate to the Sunnis. Consequently, an Iranian influence zone, extending to the Mediterranean, would be abolished. Saudi Arabia also wanted to demonstrate its commitment to the Sunni Islam and help the Syrian Sunnis in their struggle against the „heretical“ Alawite regime. In addition, Saudi Arabia was convinced that the collapse of the Syrian regime and, consequently, the weakening of Iran, would bring easier control over the persistent Saudi Shiites (Al-Rasheed, 2013, 36–37; Hassan, 2013, 17–18, 23).

Qatar, on the one hand, thought similarly as a part of the Sunni bloc, which wanted to deal the blows to Iran and the Shiites in the region, and, on the other hand, along with Turkey, Qatar had additional motivation to support Syrian rebels.³³ Doha and Ankara wanted to increase their influence in the region more distinctively, using as their instrument the Islamist Movement of Muslim Brotherhood that had its branches in different countries. The latter had already come to power in Tunisia and Egypt, and with the fall of the al-Assad's regime, this was expected to happen in Syria. Qatar also had an additional, geo-economic motive for the destruction of the Syrian regime, as al-Assad, in 2009, rejected the Qatari proposal to construct a gas pipeline that would

with each other in Islamic legitimacy, or, where a more authentic Islam is claimed. More on this can be found in, for example, Mabon (2013/2016, 43–44, 53, 85–91, 96–98).

30 The countries compete in the ideological and geopolitical field. The ideological competition is based on the ethnic (Arab-Persian) and religious-sectarian (Sunni-Shia) divisions. The sectarian dispute was particularly widespread following the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, when the new Iranian regime began calling for the overthrow of the Saudi ruling family. The geopolitical competition is based on several elements: a relationship with the United States' military presence in the region; relation to Palestine; the issue of potential possession of nuclear weapons; fighting through proxies in Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain; and petroleum policy (Mabon, 2013/2016, 42–77).

31 After the Islamic Revolution, the new Iranian authorities really began to call the Saudi Shiites to rebellion, and in November 1979 the revolt broke out. But the revolt was essentially a consequence of the socio-economic marginalization of the Shiites in the monarchy (Mabon, 2013/2016, 54; Wehrey, 2013, 6–7).

32 Since the Saudi authorities are not abolishing the marginalization of the Shiites, the latter have radicalized after 2009. In March 2009, an important member of the Saudi Shiite clergy, Nimr al-Nimr, in his Friday sermon warned the Saudi authorities that the Shiites only have one option more: to separate from the monarchy (Wehrey, 2013, 8–10). The marginalization of the Saudi Shiites is essentially due to the pressure of the influential Wahhabi clergy on the Saudi authorities, since Wahhabism, which is an official religion in Saudi Arabia, treats the Shia Twelvers as polytheists (*mushrikun*). The Wahhabi doctrine requires hostility towards polytheists (Goldberg, 1986, 231–232).

33 However, due to Turkey's support for Syrian rebels the Syrian regime withdrew from predominantly Kurdish areas in northern Syria. This caused significant problem for Erdogan as he feared that creation of Kurdish proto-state in Syria would encourage separatist ambitions of Turkish Kurds (Phillips, 2016, 111, 210–211). On attitude of Turkish authorities towards the Turkish Kurds see, for example, Abbas and Zalta, 2017.

bring the Qatari natural gas through Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Syria to Turkey and further in Europe (Cafiero and Wagner, 2015; Phillips, 2016, 38, 69, 74).

Consequently, in February 2012, Qatar and Saudi Arabia started providing arms, military equipment and money to Syrian rebels, while Turkey provided logistic support and supported the rebels with intelligence. The Sunni forces also persisted with this policy in the coming years. All three countries also supported the political organization of the Syrian anti-regime opposition (Phillips, 2016, 105–125).

Iran as well saw a decisive regional battleground in Syria, where they were to defend their most essential interests. They (increasingly) perceived Syria as a *zero sum game*, as the fall of the al-Assad's regime would lead to a major change and more hostilities toward Iran. Tehran was aware that the Syrian war represented a great opportunity for its regional Sunni rivals. If the Syrian regime was replaced by the Sunni and pro-Saudi authorities, Iran would lose its most important Arab ally. Furthermore, the „strategic bridge“ would be lost, the bridge through which Tehran was providing arms to the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon, and thus deter Israel from possible attacks against Iran. In Lebanon, the Syrian and the Lebanese Sunnis could jointly act against Hezbollah, and the Syrian and Iraqi Sunnis could put some pressure on the Shia authorities in Iraq; the fall of the latter would be the worst possible scenario for Iran. It is important to understand that even before the war in Syria, the Iranian regime had a paranoid feeling of encirclement, since the external protagonists (the United States, Israel, the Sunni-dominated countries) were supposed to plot a conspiracy or a great strategy for Iranian collapse. For this reason, Iran believed that Syria is the first line of defence against the combined efforts of their regional and non-regional enemies, not only to replace the al-Assad's regime, but also to isolate and demolish the Islamic Republic. In other words, the threat in Syria could be existential for Iran (Goodarzi, 2013, 25–28; Ostovar, 2016, 205–207).

For this reason, soon after the demonstrations erupted in Syria, Iran started to help the al-Assad's regime, and with the progress of the war, Iranian aid intensified. Tehran supported the regime financially, materially (including oil), with arms and in logistics. Other external Shia protagonists also helped the Syrian regime. Several thousands of the Lebanese Hezbollah fighters battled on the side of the Syrian regime only because the Lebanese Shiites were aware that the fall of al-Assad would cause their considerable attrition, which would be exploited by the Lebanese and Syrian Sunnis and Israel. The Iraqi Shia authorities were also aware that the collapse of al-Assad would have led to a

strong Sunni assault on the Iraqi Shiites, therefore, they helped the Syrian regime financially, and they also allowed Iranian planes to fly over their airspace. Between 2011 and 2014, Iraqi Shia militias were fighting in Syria, and further on, even the units of Afghan Shiites, organized by Iran. All this meant that the al-Assad's regime was supported by a broad transnational Shia alliance (Al-Khoei, 2013; Lebanon's Hezbollah Turns Eastward, 2014; Nasr, 2013, 157; Ostovar, 2016, 208–219; Phillips, 2016, 149–150, 159–165).

Given that the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia and the Shia camp led by Iran both see Syria as a decisive battlefield, which would ultimately determine their wider position in the region, it is no coincidence that both camps support the rebels and the regime so strongly and persistently. This situation, however, is causing aggravation of the conflict and long-lasting war. This is not a coincidence, since some studies (Regan, 2002; Skrede Gleditsch and Beardsley, 2004) establish that the involvement of external protagonists in civil wars, supporting one of the sides, increases brutality and longevity of these wars.

CONCLUSION

Being a unique sum of two extremely negative factors, an internal and an external one, the war in Syria is one of the worst clashes, if not even the worst one, since World War II. The internal sectarian tensions have been, to some extent, latently present since 1963 when the minority of the Alawites gained a dominant socio-political role in the country. However, these tensions were somewhat neutralized by the generous economic and social policies of Hafiz al-Assad which also met the needs of the predominant part of the majority – the Sunnis. As Bashar al-Assad started to eliminate such policies, sectarian conflicts were increasing along with the growing social tensions, which consequently led to protests and revolt due to the »encouraging« external circumstances (»the Arab spring«). The brutal and cynical response of the regime, together with external interference, led to the final outbreak of the Civil War.

Once the war in Syria started, the external factor became clearly evident. The Sunni – Shiite Pandora's box, opened by the US attack on Iraq, indirectly caused the extreme destructiveness and long duration of the Syrian conflict. The big question is when this conflict can be stopped, since many internal and external protagonists need to agree to do so. Thus, it can be concluded that Syria and its people are a great and tragic victim of the wider (geo)political, (geo)economic and ideological conflicts, which were, to a large extent, caused by the Western aggressive thrust aimed at the region.

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POVZETEK

Namen članka je razložiti ozadja obstoječe destruktivne vojne v Siriji. Natančneje, članek skuša odgovoriti na dve vprašanji. Prvič, zakaj so izbruhnili protesti in vojna? In drugič, zakaj je vojna tako dolgotrajna? Članek analizira politične, ekonomske in religijske (sektaške) vidike položaja v Siriji vse od poznega osmanskega obdobja, pri čemer je poudarek na vladavini stranke Baas. V času vladavine Hafiza Al Asada je bila Sirija zaradi darežljivih družbeno-ekonomskih politik režima stabilna država, čeprav so obstajale omejene latentne sektaške napetosti. Položaj se je poslabšal v času vladavine Bašarja Al Asada, ker je režim uveljavljal neoliberalne ukrepe, ki so odtujili tradicionalno podporno bazo stranke Baas in intenzivirali napetosti med suniti in alaviti. Posledično so med »arabsko pomladjo« izbruhnili protesti. Režim je odgovoril z represijo in razpihovanjem sektaštva, kar je vodilo v militarizacijo vstaje. Treba je upoštevati posledice ameriško vodenega napada na Irak leta 2003, ker je le-ta povzročil oster boj med regionalnimi sunitskimi in šiitskimi akterji (Iranom in Savdsko Arabijo), kar je nazadnje Sirijo spremenilo v bojišče in povzročilo dolgotrajno vojno.

Ključne besede: Sirija, vojna, družbenoekonomski položaj, religijske skupnosti, zunanje vmešavanje

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