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Islam in the Syrian War: Spotting the Various Dimensions of Religion in Conflict

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Abstract: Religion has been a determining factor in the recent Syrian war since its beginnings, as a prominent identity marker as well as a motivational aspect on the path of jihad. This paper seeks to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the conflict dynamics in Syria by adequately describing the role of religion in the war. Its comprehensive approach takes into account various ontological manifestations of religion: as an identity, a discourse, in its doctrinal aspect as a set of teachings, and in its significance for the individual believer. In doing so, the paper will focus on Sunni Islam as the focal point of the most crucial intersections of religion and conflict in Syria. Finally, religion will be described as a resource for reconciliation in Syria.

Keywords: religion and conflict; religious violence; religious peacebuilding; Islam in conflict; jihad

1. Introduction

In spring 2011, the first armed struggles between the Syrian regime and oppositional forces occurred. Early on, both Syrians and observers raised concerns that the conflict would eventually interfere with the country's complex religious diversity, if it were not resolved (ICG 2011; Popp 2012). Alleged chants by protesters like "Sunni blood is one" or accusations about increased torture of Sunni Muslims by Alawi intelligence officers were the first indicators that religious sentiment was rising. An arrested Syrian protester blamed the government for the escalation of the tensions: "They are pushing this country into a religious war that they will certainly get," he said (Chulov 2012).

Finally, the involvement of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf countries added to the simplified impression that a Shia-led coalition that included the country's minorities was fighting a Sunni opposition[1] (Phillips 2015a). However, a closer look reveals that the dividing lines cannot be drawn along religious affiliations. Many Sunni Muslims were also supporting the Assad regime, while various Alawites, Christians and Druze sympathized with the opposition and joined their ranks (ibid., pp. 360–61; Khaddour 2016). Thus, while religious identity is of a certain relevance for choosing a particular side, it is not an exhaustive criterion. Either way, religion became an important factor in the war.

Therefore, in order to comprehend the conflict dynamics in Syria, it is of the utmost importance to properly describe the role of religion. Yet, focusing on religion as a conflict factor bears the risk of overemphasizing religion's influence and thereby obscuring complementary and underlying causal dynamics, as Huntington (1998) does in his *Clash of Civilizations*. In the same vain, understating the influence of religion as a mere projection of underlying social factors ignores the complex and manifold factual reality of religion in society. After all, it has the potential to shape people's reality and

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[1] For respective media accounts see, e.g., Burke (2013) or Syrian Civil War Map (2018).

drive their actions. Thus, in Syria, religion is also of decisive importance as a motivational aspect for many armed actors.

Accordingly, the call for fighting the regime as a holy duty on the path of jihad has been present since the early phases of the armed struggle (ICG 2012, p. 2). It culminated in the promulgation of an Islamic caliphate in June 2014 by one of the most prominent Salafist jihadist militias: *Islamic State*. The areas that had been under firm control of those jihadist militias served as breeding grounds for various jihad ideologies and the realization of Salafist religious utopias.

This paper seeks to contribute to a more thorough understanding of the conflict dynamics in Syria by adequately describing the role of religion in the war. A significant amount of literature has been published on jihad (Jones 2013; Rich and Conduit 2015), sectarianism or further religious aspects in the Syrian war.[2] Apart from journalistic or essayistic accounts, however, there has not been a comprehensive attempt to draw those various manifestations of religion together in terms of their conflict relevance.[3] Ron Hassner suggests a *thick religion* approach towards a more comprehensive understanding of religion in social dynamics. He proposes an integration of various theoretical and geographic perspectives: methodological approaches from reflectivism to positivism on the one hand, and geographic contexts from the local to the international level, on the other hand (Hassner 2010, pp. 37–56). However, Hassner does not elaborate on how to integrate those perspectives into a single framework. That leaves a few questions about their causal interrelations unresolved.

In any case, religion concerns more than one perspective of social reality. Linda Woodhead relates the debates about an adequate definition of religion to the existence of various concepts of religion that refer to differing phenomena. Those concepts rely on different theoretical, historical, empirical, methodological or normative frameworks, which affect the ontological quality of the religious phenomena. Eventually, there is more than one dimension of religion that can be of relevance for a conflict, and thus various intersections of religion and conflict (Woodhead 2011, pp. 121–23). Owen Frazer and Richard Friedli adapted Woodhead's ideas for the field of conflict analysis and conflict transformation. They suggest five concepts of religion as relevant in conflict (Frazer and Friedli 2015).

In order to describe the role of religion in the Syrian war adequately, the paper proposes an additive elaboration on the various conflict-relevant dimensions of religion that are in play. Relating distinct phenomena of religion to their respective ontological and thereby theoretical framework will facilitate an appropriate association of a certain dimension of religion to respective complementary and underlying social dynamics. On the other hand, adding various dimensions of religion will conform to the complexity of religion and thereby prevent any underestimation of the influence of religion.

While a comprehensive analysis of the intersections of religion and conflict in Syria would require including all various religions and denominations, this paper will focus on Islam and specifically on Sunni Islam. The reason for this limitation is the length restrictions of an academic paper. On the other hand, Sunni Islam is the focal point of the crucial conflict-relevant dynamics in the recent war in Syria: Developments regarding Christianity, Alawite or Shiite Islam are crucially linked to dynamics originating from Sunni Islam.

The following sections describe four concepts of religion as relevant to the Syrian war: religion as community, as discourse, as a set of teachings, and as spirituality. Since each concept refers to a different social reality, the theoretical and methodological framework of each section differs accordingly. However, the analysis would not be comprehensive if it described religion only as a conflict-driving factor. Therefore, the article will also elaborate on religion in Syria as a resource for peace. Building on the conceptual heterogeneity of the various dimensions of religion as a conflict-sustaining factor in Syria, the paper will conclude with an elaboration on the role of religion for reconciliation.

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[2]　See, e.g., Phillips (2015b); Kerr and Larkin (2015); Aslam (2014); Salamandra (2013); Hokayem (2013).
[3]　see, e.g., Sedaca (2013).

2. Religion as Community

Describing religion as community focuses on religion in its role for group cohesion and societal fragmentation. In a conflict, this aspect is of relevance when sub-national identities become salient and conflicts emerge along religious dividing lines (ibid., p. 11). Edward Azar relates the process of societal fragmentation to the protraction of social conflicts. According to him, the existence of various communities with a colonial history and a history of rivalry is a precondition for protracted conflicts. The denial of basic human needs constitutes the foundation for escalation in Azar's model. Human needs include adequate economic and political access. However, the process of protraction only gains momentum when the deprived individuals recognize themselves as a deprived group. That leads to the politicization of those communities or identity groups. Finally, an unsatisfying government response to articulated group demands concludes the preconditions for escalation. Consequently, a process of mutual stereotyping is initiated that divides society along identity affiliations and fosters sectarianism[4] (Azar 1990, pp. 1–16).

Syria's demography is religiously heterogeneous. When the war started, more than half of the population was Sunni Arab, while Alawi Muslims and Christians each amounted to roughly 10 percent of the population. Among the country's other religions and denominations are Druze as well as non-Alawi Shiite communities, which are small but significant (Phillips 2015b, p. 358). Although the country's religious diversity did not cause the armed uprising, it is still of considerable relevance to the war. In order to elaborate on the relevance of Syria's religious diversity for the war and to explore the extent of the country's societal fragmentation, the following section will shed light on Syria's history of sectarian rivalry.

A sense of difference between the religious sects certainly existed for centuries prior to the eruption of the conflict. Yet, it was not until French rule, from 1920 onwards, that belonging to a religious sect became a political issue. In order to maintain their rule over the territory of Greater Syria, the French divided the area into the states of Aleppo and Damascus as well as a Christian (Lebanon), an Alawite, and a Druze state (ibid., pp. 363–65). Within those states, the French empowered the leaders of the Christian, Alawite, and Druze minorities in order to diminish the influence of the Sunni notables. While the Alawi community undoubtedly welcomed autonomy, their position towards French rule was most likely ambiguous.[5]

Due to various *coups d'états* between 1946 and 1963 in independent Syria, many Sunni officers in command eliminated each other and thereby cleared the way for Alawi officers. Following the military coup in 1963 that brought the Ba'ath party to power under the leadership of the Sunni Amin al-Hafiz, Alawi officers successfully flooded the upper ranks. When al-Hafiz became weary and tried to get rid of numerous officers with a minority background, a group of Alawite officers from within the party overthrew him in a bloody coup in 1966. To strengthen their rule, Alawite leaders purged many of their Druze and Ismaeli party comrades. Finally, Hafez al-Assad prevailed over his rival Salah Jadid and deposed him as president in 1970 (Pipes 1989, pp. 440–46).

Before Assad's coup, the political and economic elite mostly comprised of Sunni Muslims from Damascus and Aleppo. While the regime did not forcefully shift power towards the Alawi community, it gradually entrusted Alawites with key positions. Furthermore, it set up a coalition across various identity groups in the middle and lower ranks. Still, the regime removed many Sunnis from key

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[4]　While the term sect refers to politicized sub-national identity groups, the term sectarian can relate to the existence of a multiplicity of such politicized identity groups in a factual way. Yet, it also refers to social discordance among such identity groups. For the purpose of the article's argumentation, sectarian or sectarianism will refer to the latter understanding (Haddad 2011, p. 31).

[5]　Daniel Pipes indicates undivided gratitude with the French liberators from Sunni oppression among the Alawi community. He also interprets the revolt against the French as having actually targeted the Ismaili community (Pipes 1989, pp. 434–40). While Stefan Winter acknowledges considerable Alawite support for French rule, he suggests at least equal support for an independent Arab state at the same time (Winter 2016, pp. 260–61).

positions and replaced them with Alawites. Consequently, various members of the Sunni elite were disconcerted that they were forced to do business with Alawi parvenus on an equal basis.[6]

Nevertheless, a common national consciousness emerged, which also reflects the constitution of the Ba'ath party. It states that sectarian differences are of no relevance. However, due to the regime's sectarian staffing policy, the national consciousness maintained a sense of ambiguity (Salamandra 2013, pp. 305–6). Correspondingly, while the Assad regime put considerable effort into successfully developing and promoting a common Syrian Arab identity, it retained the French Personal Status Law that classified legal subjects according to their religious affiliations. Thereby, the law preserved a crucial foundation for sectarianism (Phillips 2015b, pp. 365–68). "The Hafez al-Assad years were therefore paradoxical. Sect was officially dismissed and inclusive, Syrian Arab nationalism encouraged, but politicized sect identities were simultaneously reproduced, either by the regime or by its internal and external enemies" (ibid., p. 366). It can be argued that the regime's efforts in maintaining competition between the religious groups correspond with Azar's elaborations on the preconditions for the protraction of social conflicts.

A severe drought from 2007 onwards increased the deprivation of basic human needs in cities and provinces that had already been economically marginalized. Finally, in 2011, the sense of public audacity that spread through the Arab world (the "Arab Spring") following the ousting of Tunisia's president Ben Ali reached Syria. When the regime responded with fierce violence to the public demand for more political and economic access, it completed Edward Azar's preconditions for conflict escalation along identity affiliations. While in the beginning many protesters framed their demands as inclusive and national, the process of mutual stereotyping as described by Azar activated sectarian patterns. Accordingly, the process of social fragmentation started (Azar 1990, pp. 1–16; Phillips 2015b, p. 359).

As a consequence, the fear of imminent sectarian violence was present since the first protests against the regime. Soon, various incidents occurred that followed sectarian patterns.[7] However, since group cohesion is never complete, as Rogers Brubaker cautions, the dividing lines in Syrian society do not necessarily correspond with the religious affiliations (Brubaker 2002, pp. 163–66). In identity conflict theory, an individual's readiness to engage in a conflict against another identity group relates to its preference for in-group goals over personal goals. In-group goals are those that an identity group shares with its members. In turn, if a person's well-being does not relate to the identity group and its articulated interests, the person is less likely to identify with that group's identity. Rather, it will identify with a transcending identity, e.g., a regional or national one. Thus, if someone's well-being is connected with a nation-wide or transnational economy or with a state bureaucracy, personal and national identities will dominate over subnational ones (Korostelina 2007, vol. 71, p. 134)[8].

Accordingly, a crucial line dividing the Syrian population runs along economic characteristics: Sunni tribes that had been favored by the regime like the Baggara continued their support; so did the urban Sunni middle class, which often comprised merchant families and bureaucrats. Therefore, the war did not divide, e.g., Aleppo along sectarian affiliations, but along economic lines. Not surprisingly, the wealthier Western half of the city became a stronghold of the regime. In those areas, sub-national religious and ethnic identities were not salient and therefore less important than a transcending Arab and Syrian identity.[9]

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[6] Salamandra (2013, pp. 304–5) describes this shift as a quick and unpleasant shock for the Sunni community. Raymond Hinnebush (2015, p. 115).

[7] To mention only a few incidents: On the regime side against Sunni Arabs in Telkalakh (27 April 2011), Kfar Oweid (December 2011), Bab Driad and Karm al Zhoutan in Homs (March 2012), Taftanaz (April 2012), Houla (May 2012), al-Qubayr (June 2012), Darayya in Damascus (8 August 2012); on the opposition side, mostly against Christians and Alawites, in Karmallouz in Homs (April 2012), and in Aqrab (October 2013). (Phillips 2015b, pp. 359–61).

[8] This also relates to the pioneer work of Henri Tajfel, which describes the need for a positive identity as a crucial human desire (Tajfel 1974, pp. 65–93).

[9] See Phillips (2015b, p. 359). On the competition between the Sunni tribes to win the favor of the regime and the consequences for their allegiance after 2011, see Khaddour (2016).

Eventually, religious identity seems to be of relevance for the Syrian war even if only as it relates to the denial of human needs: Individuals, groups and areas that depended on the regime felt a stronger allegiance to the Syrian nation than to their religious identity group. On the other hand, those that had been economically and politically alienated were receptive to sectarian thinking. Conflict dynamics subsequently divided the Syrian population between those who support the regime regardless of their religious affiliation and those who perceive it as a war between the country's religious communities.

Thus, foreign influence, e.g., from Gulf countries, was of more relevance in regions where the war was fought along religious dividing lines.[10] Besides financial support for sectarian jihad, ideological influence by renowned figures like Yusuf al-Qaradawi's increased Sunni sentiments towards religious minorities.[11] Azar describes these kinds of international entanglements as the final element that concludes the protraction of social conflicts (Azar 1990, pp. 11–12). That also includes EU and U.S. support for alleged opposition groups (Fisk 2015).

3. Religion as a Discourse

Viewing religion as a discourse sheds light on its narrative dimension and its ability to shape human perception. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann describe discourses as distinct systems of words, practices, and meanings that are created, shaped, and maintained.[12] Those systems constantly interact with everyday human life and frame the perception of the embedded individuals (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 1–46). As such, they are crucial for the legitimization of any institutional order. "The legitimation of the institutional order is [. . .] faced with the ongoing necessity of keeping chaos at bay. All social reality is precarious" (ibid., p. 103). Each symbolic system is self-maintaining until it becomes problematic, as Berger and Luckmann put it. Thus, legitimization through symbolic systems is never complete; revolution always remains an option (ibid., pp. 92–106).

Since its coup, the Ba'ath party sustains the discourse of the common Syrian Arab nation to legitimize its claim to power, which emphasizes the unity of the Syrian nation and its Arab character. Thereby, the regime seeks to transcend sectarian sentiments and to legitimize itself on a broader basis (Zisser 2006, pp. 179–98; Talhami 2001, pp. 110–27). The prominent reemergence of the Salafist jihadist discourse in 2011, which opposes the regime's allegedly secular and multi-religious character, unveils the underlying problems of the regime's discourse. The jihadist discourse has multiple functions: It legitimizes and drives many militias in their fight against the regime while also shaping their daily lives, perceptions, and motivations. It contains two decisive sub-discourses: the takfir and the apocalyptic discourse.

3.1. Jihadist Takfir Discourse

The jihadist takfir discourse represents a deviant symbolic system and threatens the Ba'ath regime's institutional order, which is maintained by the discourse of the Syrian nation. Its firm and indigenous roots in Syria[13] date back to the 14th century and were crucially restored in more recent times by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's (Arab. ikhwan) anti-regime discourse from 1963 onwards (Teitelbaum 2011, pp. 213–225).

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[10] Vali Nasr is one among many who claim that the political rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran is to be blamed for rising sectarianism in the Middle East (Nasr 2007). Thomas Pierret, on the other hand, claims that Syria's internal sectarian dynamics reconfigured international alliances along sectarian affiliations (Pierret 2013a). See also Phillips (2015a, pp. 41–45). For a more balanced account about both the national foundations of sectarianism and their regional exacerbation by Iran and Saudi Arabia, see, e.g., Mabon (2015).

[11] See, e.g., Al-Qaradawi (2013).

[12] While Berger and Luckmann did not use the term "discourse" themselves, their elaborations on symbolic systems as normative, epistemic, or cognitive foundations of reality relate to Foucault's understanding of discourse. Nevertheless, Berger and Luckmann's paradigm is better suited to political developments than Foucault's as it does not absorb the subject like the Foucauldian discourse. See, e.g., Foucault (1993).

[13] For a different perspective, see McCants, who describes Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's personal character as the origin of sectarian jihad in Iraq and Syria (McCants 2015, pp. 7–15).

The fatwa by the Sunni reformist scholar Ibn Taymiyyah (died 1328) against the Nusayris is a prominent early indication of sectarian sentiments against the young Alawi community. It denounces them as "more disbelieving than the Jews and the Christians" and declares jihad against the Nusayris a good deed (Farouk-Alli 2015, p. 32). In the late 1970s, members of the Muslim Brotherhood like Said Hawwa openly called for the implementation of Ibn Taymiyyah's infamous fatwa (Lefèvre 2015, p. 130).

The sectarian and anti-Alawite dimension of the ikhwan's jihad and its reactivation after 2011 feeds from the religiously, socially, economically, and politically inferior position that the Alawite community has been historically associated with. While its religious roots lie within Twelver Shia Islam, it shares many elements with Christian belief and further regional Neoplatonic cults. While the Alawi faith relates to Islamic tradition, it is at the same time different. Both the similarities and dissimilarities to Islam contribute to the image of the Alawi community as infidels and heretics. This is reflected in the derogatory term "Nusayri," which emphasizes the profane dimension by linking it to its founder Ibn Nusayr rather than to the Shiite tradition he belonged to. The term "Alawi," on the other hand, refers to Ali and the community's roots within Islamic orthodoxy (Farouk-Alli 2015, pp. 28–44).

The Muslim Brotherhood's anti-regime discourse dates back to challenging the dominating status of the Sunni urban elite by the Alawi-controlled Ba'ath party in 1963. For once, it sought to delegitimize the Ba'ath party's claim to state power by attacking its atheist character, while also criticizing the regime's considerable Alawite background. Among the defied urban elite were many members of the ikhwan. Driven by their sudden political marginalization by a group of parvenus, they engaged in opposition activities against the new regime. At the same time, many younger members of the Muslim Brotherhood were followers of the ideas of Sayyid (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 82–101). Besides agreeing to Qutb's idea about the responsibility of a Muslim ruler to uphold the truly Islamic character of a Muslim society, they considered the regime of the socialist Ba'ath party as heretic (Arab. takfir). (Qutb 2007). The riots peaked in 1973, when the regime declared its intentions to drop the constitutional clause of Islam as the religion of the president and the source of jurisprudence (Porat 2010).

The takfir discourse emerged as soon as the Ba'ath party gained power in 1963. Berger and Luckmann's theory of symbolic systems legitimizing institutional order provides an explanation for the sudden radicalization.[14] Accordingly, the ikhwan's fierce takfir discourse emerged as a means to challenge the Ba'ath regime and its attempts to solidify their political and economic power. Since the institutional legitimization by a symbolic order is never complete, as Berger and Luckmann elaborate, a certain space for deviant symbolic orders resp. discourses always remains. That allowed the Muslim Brotherhood to tackle the regime's secular and sectarian pillars. They opposed the Ba'ath regime's claim to power through a discourse that built on multiple cognitive and normative layers. Berger and Luckmann describe those counter-discourses as consisting of three layers. A fundamental layer comprises the legends and myths of the desolate Alawi living in remote rural areas and acts of unusual worship. Theories like Sayyid Qutb's are an already more sophisticated and general source that the discourse draws from. Finally, the ikhwan processed all the evidence in order to foster its takfir discourse as a symbolic counter-system that opposes the regime's nationalist discourse in its claim to power. This process renders the discourse as a symbolic cosmos of meaning and subsequently as a reference for one's subjective reality (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 93–104).

14　The Syrian ikhwan had always been considered more moderate than its Egyptian branch. It was relatively autonomous in its activities and only loosely connected to Cairo. While the ideologies of reviving Islam in all its facets and installing sharia in all aspects of life did not differ, their relation to the ulema did.
　　Whereas the Egyptian ikhwan opposed the ulema and its central institutions, like the al-Azhar, as puppets of an abhorrent regime, the Syrian Brotherhood had been part of the religious and political system and therefore did not oppose it (Teitelbaum 2011).

Consequently, when the leader of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, Abu al-Nasr al-Bayanuni, called for jihad of holy warriors against the heretical regime in 1980, the response was substantial. He established the *Islamic Front* as a means to engage in this armed struggle. The manifesto of this group described a division between believers and heretics in order to legitimize its armed resistance. In addition to that, the document highlighted the sectarian nature of the regime and stated that a minority should not rule over a majority (Porat 2010, pp. 4–5; Lefèvre 2013, p. 20).

Every dominating discourse is self-maintaining until it becomes problematic, according to Berger and Luckmann. It becomes problematic if an alternative discourse emerges that is shared by a societal group. In the end, which discourse prevails is a question of power rather than reason (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 104–8). Consequently, after the regime cracked down on its armed opposition in 1982, the majority of the Muslim Brothers gave up the radical path of jihad. Especially with Bashar al-Assad in power, a climate of détente[15] between the ikhwan and the regime arose (Teitelbaum 2011, p. 233; Porat 2010, p. 3). Eventually, by violently crushing the Muslim Brotherhood, the Ba'ath regime not only successfully banned the deviant takfir discourse but also solidified their nationalist discourse as the uncontested legitimate symbolic system. Still, dominant symbolic systems cannot prevent deviant discourses from emerging. Thus, experts have to maintain the discourse, as Berger and Luckmann (1966, pp. 116–28) put it. Such experts operate instruments like the regime publication *Tithttitishrin* to preserve the regime's discourse. Accordingly, it describes Bashar al-Assad as "the clearest and most explicit national voice today, articulating the goals of the Arab nation and its values and principles with vigor and courage but also with logic, wisdom and discretion. He represents not only Syria, which in itself constitutes an Arab and a regional force of importance, but the aspirations of the [Arab] nation wherever it is, from the [Atlantic] Ocean to the [Arabian] Gulf, its hopes and its fears" (Zisser 2006, p. 180).

Some Syrian jihadis around Marwan Hadid fled the country in 1982 and joined Abdullah Azzam in Peshawar to prepare for jihad against the Soviet Union. Among them was the young Abu Musab al-Suri, who merged Azzam's ideas with those of Sayyid Qutb. His ideas of sectarian and apocalyptic jihad provided the backbone of al-Qaeda. Finally, in 2011, the takfir discourse found its way back to Syria, from where it had emerged in the late 1970s (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 138–54).

In addition to that, the openly sectarian ideology and practices of various Gulf-funded jihadist salafist groups like Jaish al-Islam, Islamic State, and Jabhat al-Nusra added to the domestic sectarian jihadist discourse (Phillips 2015a, pp. 45–51). Eventually, the international support for anti-regime militia provided an ideological and financial source for the maintenance of the anti-regime jihadist takfir discourse.

3.2. Apocalyptic Jihadist Discourse

A jihadi calling himself Abu Omar told a Reuters journalist in Aleppo early in 2014:

"If you think all these mujahideen came from across the world to fight Assad, you're mistaken [. . .]. They are all here as promised by the Prophet. This is the war he promised—it is the Grand Battle [. . .]." (Karouny 2014)

Similar to the takfir discourse, the apocalyptic jihadist discourse opposes the regime and its profane nationalist discourse. However, the apocalyptic discourse transcends the worldly political dimension of the takfir discourse by tapping into the divine domain of prophecy. It challenges the Ba'ath party's claim to power by propagating its immediate destruction through divine violence.

Since apocalyptic notions in Islam are not as important as they are in Judaism and Christianity, there are only a limited number of Quranic references to apocalypse. Due to the political developments

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[15] That, of course, could not prevent the Muslim Brotherhood from siding with the opposition in 2011 (Talhamy 2012, pp. 36–40).

following 9/11 and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, however, the publications of apocalyptic literature significantly increased in North Africa and the Middle East (Cook 2005, p. 217). Eventually, the apocalyptic traces within Quran and the Hadith merged with obscure ideas from science fiction and pop culture (Filiu 2011, pp. 92–98).

According to a survey from 2012, 83 percent of people interviewed in Afghanistan were convinced that the Mahdi would return in their lifetime, closely followed by 72 percent of Iraqis (Pew Research Center 2012). For many Muslims, the unrest in various countries following the Arab Spring was an indication of the immediate end of days. As Syria holds an important position in the apocalyptic references in Hadith literature, the armed uprising against the Ba'ath regime was of high symbolic relevance. In addition, the presence of the Islamic State militia's black banner evokes apocalyptic sentiments through its resemblance to the Abbasid caliphate's banner and its apocalyptic self-understanding (McCants 2015, pp. 99–119).

Berger and Luckmann describe a subject as a domain of permanent interaction. Each subject's internalized discourses define the image of itself and the world permanently. Every subject longs for a positive affirmation of his/her self-image by the outside world. If outside individuals do not affirm or reject a subject's self-image, the subject will seek to overcome this asymmetry. That can happen through choosing another outside world or the internalization of another main discourse (Berger and Luckmann 1966, pp. 138–79). Rich and Conduit explain the unexpected rise of jihadist Salafism and apocalyptic sentiments in Chechnya through the people's desire to make sense of their everyday life in a post-war wasteland. Given the lack of hope that the situation will improve, many people tuned to a jihadist apocalyptic discourse. The authors predict that similar developments will emerge in Syria (Rich and Conduit 2015, pp. 113–31).

Accordingly, many jihadist fighters in Syria believe in the imminent apocalypse. They are convinced that their actions will contribute to its advent by realizing certain signs that are mentioned in Islamic tradition: Muslim groups fighting each other, atrocities committed against Muslims, the spread of disbelief and apostasy, the increase of extramarital sex, the reintroduction of slavery, and many more. Thus, indirectly, believing in the apocalypse legitimizes various practices like savagery against Muslims or sex slavery, which are commonly considered sins in Islam. Together, these signs shall usher in the appearance of the Mahdi, the redeemer of Islam, who will lead the Muslim armies into the great final battle against the Romans (e.g., Europeans or Americans). The Syrian city of Dabiq is mentioned as one of two sites for the confrontation. Unsurprisingly, the Islamic State militia's conquest of the city in August 2014 was of high priority. In the course of their actions, they put a lot of effort into adjusting the outside world to the apocalyptic discourse in order to support its internalization. This outside affirmation of the self-image as an apocalyptic fighter serves as an exceptional source of motivation for jihadis[16] (Stern and Berger 2015, pp. 3–29).

While both discourses originate as counter-narratives to the regime's secular claim to power, they also represent sources to motivate people to fight until the end. After all, they make sense not only in semantic, but also existential ways.

4. Religion as a Set of Teachings

Studying religion as a set of teachings relates to early modern analysis of religion, which acknowledges each cult's intrinsic value. Accordingly, every form of religion provides a consistent model of how the world is and ought to be.[17] This dimension highlights the important aspect

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[16] Mark Juergensmeyer describes ISIS as an assemblage of various movements. While many fighters are indeed driven by their belief in the immediate rise of the Mahdi, others would consider it a global jihad movement that welcomes anyone. Finally, various Syrians and Iraqis consider ISIS a movement for Sunni empowerment against Shiite dominance (Juergensmeyer 2016, pp. 53–63).

[17] In this regard, Edward B. Taylor's research on so-called primitive religions as the foundation for every religion that is in itself consistent is of historic relevance (Taylor 2000).

of religion in its normative claim to the background of a divine revelation. While this approach represents a limited understanding of religion as a whole, it can nevertheless become a source of conflict. Namely, if religious teachings are invoked to criticize a current state of affairs, they can divide a population (Frazer and Friedli 2015, pp. 11–12). After all, this dimension of religion constitutes the dominant understanding of religion among various Islamist activists, who have often raised Islamic concepts of statehood as a counter-model that opposes secular autocratic regimes (Cesari 2013, p. xii). Accordingly, this section focuses on instrumentalist conflict dynamics. In doing so, it is less interested in explaining the reasons for different and conflicting teachings, rather in introducing differing normative conceptions of religion and politics in their role for conflict dynamics in the current Syrian war.

Based on the Islamic belief that God revealed his will to Muhammad about how to arrange human life as a whole, Muslim intellectuals and activists elaborated on the implications of Islamic prerogatives for the concept of statehood.[18] With rising indignation about the inability of many secular and autocratic Arab regimes to foster and maintain functioning state services, Islamic paradigms for state and politics became more influential (Kepel 2003, pp. 43–105) As a consequence, revolutionary movements emerged throughout the Muslim world and divided societies between supporters of Arab nationalism and those who claimed that Islam had to be of political relevance (Cesari 2013, pp. 49–59).

Although, with the exception of Iran, Islamists failed to establish Islamic states[19], their ideas have been influential ever since. In secular socialist regimes like Syria, the claim to a religious state has always been a way to raise opposition against an autocratic government (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 183–85). In any case, the proclamation of an Islamic caliphate in Syria and Iraq in 2014 by the Islamic State militia exceeded any previous expectation of a true Islamic state.[20] Many Syrians fled this alleged Islamic state.[21] Also in Idlib, where various anti-regime factions were forced to go in 2017, the desire for a democratic political system, which was held by a considerable number of citizens, collided with Hayat Tahrir as-Sham's[22] Salafist ideals about an Islamic state (Hourani and Edelman 2017).

However, the dividing line in this regard does not run along those who support an Islamic state and those who reject it. Like other Muslim-majority countries, Syria also relates to the phenomenon of Post-Islamism as outlined by Olivier Roy[23] and Asef Bayat[24][25]. Post-Islamism refers to a significant decoupling of religion from its traditional institutions. In opposition to Islamism, Post-Islamism is less interested in shaping day-to-day politics than in private piety. As Peter Mandaville describes, "Muslims may be more religious, but they are increasingly disinterested in Islamizing society via politicized Islam" (Mandaville 2014).

Unsurprisingly, there are various opinions about Islam's role in politics. Accordingly, when demonstrations against the Syrian regime began, many protesters framed their concerns in religious terms. Nevertheless, they had no interest in the Islamic reconstruction of the state. However, various protesters also called for the introduction of the civil state, *dawla madaniyyah*. This concept gained prominence following the Arab Spring in 2011 and has remained in the Arab world's political discourse.[26] It is about religion and politics acknowledging their basic demands: Religion respects democratic prerogatives, whereas politics accepts the legitimate role of Islam as a public religion. Thus,

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[18] See, e.g., Al-Afghani (2003, pp. 97–99), Abduh (1966), or Osman (2003).

[19] Partly, governments in Pakistan, Malaysia, or Egypt tried to counter the revolutionary force of Islamism by making legal concessions, e.g., adding Sharia as the source of legislation (Nasr 2003, pp. 67–72).

[20] See, e.g., Sayyid Qutb's notion of a truly Islamic life that can only take place in a truly Islamic community (Qutb 2007; Cottee 2017).

[21] In some areas under IS control, accounts suggest a cruel regime that despised the majority of the population. See, e.g., Kangarlou (2017).

[22] Hayat Tahrir as-Sham was constituted under the leadership of al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al-Nusra in 2017. Among others, it comprises Ahrar as-Sham and Jaysh al-Islam (Osman 2018).

[23] See Roy's first major work on this phenomenon (Roy 2001).

[24] See two more recent examples for Bayat's elaborations on Post-Islamism: Bayat (2007) and (2017).

[25] Influential movements and intellectual groups that are popular in Syria underline its post-Islamist background (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 194–200; Pierret 2013b, pp. 322–26).

[26] However, it remains unclear where the denotation originated (Poli 2014, p. 97).

the civil state provides a concept that fulfills the central demand of the secular state (autonomous sphere of politics)[27] while not rejecting the primal and fundamental role of Islam (Feder 2014).

Whereas the concept of the civil state represents a compromise between two opposing claims, many Islamists outwardly reject it. Accordingly, many protesters who called for the civil state at the beginning of the uprising in Syria were confronted by protesters waving black flags and chanting "no to the civil state" (ibid., p. 4). This antagonism is also present in opposition movements and organizations. While many Islamist militias like the Islamic State and Hayat Tahrir as-Sham reject any concept of state that is not genuinely Islamic, others accepted the concept of the civil state as a compromise. The commitment to the civil state was made obligatory for admission to the *Syrian National Council* (ibid., pp. 3–4).

Given their estimated influence throughout Syria, the Muslim Brotherhood is of great relevance to the debate about the religious nature of the state (Lefèvre 2013, pp. 194–96). Having been part of the political establishment since the independence of Syria, the Syrian ikhwan officially supported core elements of modern democratic states such as the rule of law, the protection of human rights, the separation of powers, and the accountability of the executive authority vis-à-vis the parliament. Thus, their declaration "The Political Project for Future Syria" by the London-based exile headquarters in 2004 does not crucially differ from their 1980's "Manifesto and Program of the Islamic Revolution" regarding the nature of a state. In this regard, the ikhwan was always close to Post-Islamist principles: Politics might still be of interest for Post-Islamists. Yet, due to individual obligations nurtured by religious concerns for justice, it is not perceived as a genuine Islamic project (Bayat 2007; Roy 2001). Consequently, concerns emerge about defining the autonomy of the political sphere and the involvement of religion. In this regard, the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood resembles old-fashioned Islamists. Not least when they call for a "gradual Islamization of law" (Pierret 2013b, pp. 321–26) and declare that non-Islamist parties may participate in the political process as long as they do not oppose what "has been clearly established by the shari'a" (ibid., p. 323).

While the elaborations on religion as community and as a discourse were more interested in the structural foundations of conflict, this and the following part also raise the issue of agency. This section introduced a variety of opinions about the role of Islam in politics, which as a repertoire of diverging opinions maintain a potential for conflict. Referring to paradigms for the progression of conflict by John Paul Lederach and Adam Curie, the existence of diverging and conflicting opinions in a society introduces the dimension of the political. A political authority that suppresses such conflicts will maintain a static but not sustainable societal situation that might lead to violent conflict one day. Instead, in order to progress towards a sustainable, balanced, and peaceful society, the governing authority has to maintain the preconditions for such a diversity to exist: Opinions that are allowed to be reflected on and discussed do not foster social cleavages (Lederach 1999, pp. 63–66). While Post-Islamism provides the cultural preconditions for the coexistence of a diversity of opinions, the concept of the civil state can serve as the political and legal foundation for it.

5. Religion as Spirituality

The previous dimensions focused on religion as a dependent variable that causally relates to political, social, cultural, or historical dynamics. By describing religion as a dependent variable, the above elaborations sought not to overstate religion as a conflict factor, as they related to respective underlying social dynamics. However, religion also constitutes an immediate reality for the subject. As such, it is irreducible to other phenomena and therefore claims to be an independent variable. Including it in an elaboration on the influence of religion on the conflict in Syria, we make sure not to

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[27]	If we apply a very basic definition of a secular state in line with John Locke. In his *Letter Concerning Toleration* he writes that it is important "to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of religion and [. . .] settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other" (Locke 1983, p. 26).

understate its relevance as a shallow projection of societal dynamics. In doing so, this section explicitly deals with the issue of religious agency in conflict.

R. Scott Appleby describes this approach towards religion in its irreducibility to other phenomena as strong religion in opposition to weak religion (Appleby 2015, pp. 34–36)[28]. He refers to Rudolf Otto, who introduces the *sacred* or the *numinous* as the core of every religious experience. It becomes manifest as the ultimate experience. The sacred is beyond categories of good and evil. He describes it as "mysterium tremendum et fascinans," which renders it infinitely appalling and attractive at the same time—full of wonder and terror. Thus, the experience of the sacred becomes an end in itself beyond any other aspect of everyday life and can be pursued by any possible means of asceticism (Otto 2014, pp. 1–55).

As elaborated above, jihad in its discursive dimension provides a counter-discourse to delegitimize the Syrian regime's claim to power. However, for a certain subject, jihad can also constitute a purely spiritual dimension beyond any political, social, and sectarian reference. After all, jihad is a spiritual duty for the devout. Any act on the path of jihad may also represent an act of dedication to the sacred and thereby constitute a spiritual act. However, that does not indicate a moral valuation. Referring to Otto, Appleby highlights the sacred dimension of acts that are committed in the name of God, even if they involve mass killings and other atrocities (Appleby 2000, pp. 25–30).

Giving an account of a divine experience is only possible to a certain extent. Hagiographies represent a traditional approach to comprehend the depth of an individual's relationship to the divine as a source of its exceptional actions. In fact, various kinds of hagiographies have been written for jihadis that died in Syria. They try to emphasize the jihadis' devotion to God and their altruism, as in the text about Abu Saad, which was posted in summer 2015 after he was killed in battle:

> "When the infighting started in Syria he quickly chose a group which was away from spilling the blood [o]f [M]uslims and joined them. [. . .] He used to make his brothers always laugh and joke[d] around when the bros [weren't] in battle. But as soon as you see him watching a serious [I]slamic clip or leaving off for battle you could see how he suddenly became a different person. [. . .] He would cover his mouth with his turban and constantly involve himself in zikr of Allah swt. You could realise this when he at times would be so involved in the remembrance of Allah that he [wouldn't] even reply to the brothers except through nodding [. . .]." (Biography of a dear friend 2015)

Other accounts highlight the martyrs' close relation to the divine through the unusual physical features of the martyrs' dead bodies, e.g., they do not decay or display joy:

> "He fell in early May 2013 [. . .] when the army of Bashar sent a convoy to conquer [. . .] a strategic location (near Aleppo). He fought like a lion and was shot just below his heart. Alhamdulilaah [. . .] the Mujahideen stopped [this convoy] and [inflicted] the enemy [. . .] heavy losses. Many brothers were allowed to witness the smile on his face when he died as a martyr. And as someone said when he saw him as Shaheed on the ground: 'It looks like he is enjoying the sunshine.'" (Miracle Stories 2016)

A comprehensive account of Islam in the Syrian war has to reflect religion in its irreducible, subjective spiritual dimension. While religion as an identity, as a discourse, and as a set of beliefs can be taken into account to a certain extent, the spiritual dimension is beyond inter-subjective rationality. Other accounts are of even more obscure character, like the stories of angels that redirect bullets against outnumbered jihadis and miraculously save them (ibid.). Yet, those stories are not obscure for the devout jihadi. Instead, the inner logic of those groups does not disclose itself to people outside the group. As an autonomous, inner-subjective phenomenon, religion in its spiritual dimension is much

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28 Mark Juergensmeyer's (2000) approach towards religion is another example of *strong religion*.

more unpredictable than religion as a factor in its other dimensions, where it relates to inter-subjective aspects (ibid., pp. 33–37).

Appleby underlines this barely comprehensible aspect by saying that deadly violence "against the impure, the heretic, and the infidel, [. . .] is an authentic, if not necessarily legitimate, response to the encounter with the sacred, the power of which is rendered, variously, as awesome, imposing, creative, destructive, fascinating, liberating, and commanding" (Appleby 2015, p. 36). Eventually, hagiographies are a non-profane means to causally influence a conflict. After all, they shall "inspire remembrance and imitation of their [the martyrs'] lives and deeds" (Sahas 1999, p. 507).

6. Religion as a Resource for Reconciliation

The above sections examined the relevance of Islam as a conflict-driving factor in Syria. However, a comprehensive account of religion in conflict would not be complete without an elaboration on religion as a resource for reconciliation. A crucial problem in dealing with conflicts with religious dimensions is that the traditional rules of politics and diplomacy might not apply (Toft 2007, p. 101). The so-called indivisibility problem distinguishes conflicts with religious elements from others (Fearon 1995; Toft 2006). It refers to the issue that debates and bargains related to a sacred cause do not adhere to common, pragmatic logic. Ron Hassner approaches the problem of indivisibility by declaring that a religious issue cannot be treated as an object of negotiation, but as an inherent value. Therefore, it cannot be divided without diminishing its value and it cannot be exchanged or substituted without eradicating its full value (Hassner 2009, pp. 41–43).

Nevertheless, while indivisible and divine truths cannot be altered, they can indeed be reinterpreted to facilitate reconciliation (ibid., p. 43). Referring to Otto, Appleby argues that the encounter with the sacred, full of wonder and terror, lays the groundwork for a certain ambiguity when it comes to interpreting it within finite categories. He relates the premoral experience of the sacred to either violent or peaceful responses. Appleby describes this state of mind as an ambivalent militancy, either towards peace or towards violence: The dedication of the believer relates to both the violent and the peaceful path. Consequently, in trying to resolve conflicts and transform societies, peacebuilding can make use of a conflict actor's relationship to the sacred and propagate violent-free and conciliatory ways of orthopraxy. Thereby, religion has the potential to facilitate forgiveness and reconciliation where there is no logical, pragmatic, or emotional reason to actually forgive what is barely forgivable (Appleby 2000, pp. 25–26).

In Syria, religion is currently not only present as a conflict-driving factor in the four dimensions introduced above, but is also of relevance as a means of reconciliation. Since each dimension of religion that drives the Syrian war constitutes a distinct ontological reality, the strategies for peace and reconciliation initiatives vary accordingly. Religion as an identity contributes to the Syrian conflict by derailing relationships between those that consider the war to be a struggle for Syrian unity and those that consider it a sectarian cause. Reconciliation workshops are an option for a peace initiative that targets this dimension. Those workshops seek to rebuild and establish functioning relationships between individuals, groups, and society. That shall foster social cohesion.[29] Since 2012, several such reconciliation initiatives have taken place in Syria.[30] Some of those reconciliation dialogues were also carried out in areas with high sectarian sentiments and include religious, ethnic, and tribal leaders from various levels of society.[31] Among others, Appleby, Marc Gopin, and Mohammad Abu-Nimer highlight the importance of religious leaders in conflict resolution.[32]

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[29] See, e.g., Salter (2015).
[30] See, e.g., the Belgium-funded NGO Relief and Reconciliation in Syria (http://www.reliefandreconciliation.org/) or events hosted by the regime. See Qaddour (2016).
[31] See, e.g., USIP (2015).
[32] See, e.g., Gopin (2002) or Abu-Nimer (2001, pp. 685–704).

Religion as a discourse relates to the jihad discourses in Syria that serve as a counter-narrative to the regime's claim to power. They motivate people to engage in armed violence. Peace initiatives in this regard have to provide counter-narratives in support of reconciliation. While the divine truth of the obligation of jihad cannot be altered, as Hassner explains, religious scholars and dignitaries can stress other interpretations that prevent violent orthopraxy. Accordingly, Syrian Sufi scholar Muhammad Al-Yaqoubi is a prominent voice against the dominant jihad practice. He has frequently denounced sectarian violence, the killing of civilians, and arbitrary executions in the name of jihad (Barber 2015).

Religion as a set of teachings is a conflict factor in Syria regarding the competing conceptions of the role of Islam in politics. This conflict dimension refers to divine truths in their normative social and political implications. Thus, reconciliation has to be a common effort of political leaders, religious scholars, and dignitaries. Hassner emphasizes the necessity to transcend the religious realm for the political one and vice versa. Religious experts have to be involved in the political negotiation processes as they can fully grasp the significance of the divine. They can reinterpret divine truths in ways that facilitate reconciliation. Political leaders can then prepare the political arrangements and frameworks upon which agreements for reconciliation of religious actors can be built (Hassner 2009, pp. 153–74). The commitment of the SNC to dawla madaniyya represents a formal compromise between conflicting religious and political factions.

The spiritual dimension of religion constitutes the most volatile and arbitrary conflict factor. Peace efforts in this regard have to be closely linked to mediators who can be considered spiritually legitimate in the eyes of the believer and therefore credible in their instructions. The Syrian Center for Anti-Extremist Ideology provides such a reconciliation initiatives. It tries to reintegrate former jihadis into the Syrian society (Al-Khateb 2017). Among others, the instructors at the center are Islamic scholars and imams. They appeal to former jihadis' spirituality and seek to foster a sense of what Appleby calls peaceful militancy by elaborating on Islamic history and Islamic demands for justice and coexistence (Child Soldiers of ISIS 2017). Another initiative that targets this dimension is the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood's spiritual support of its militia duru al-thawra (Shields of the Revolution). In order to prevent the militia from dropping their moderate centrist-Islamist ideology, the ikhwan's scholars and imams accompany the fighters into battle (Lefèvre 2015, pp. 135–36).

7. Conclusions

This account of religion's current relevance to reconciliation strategies concludes the paper's elaboration on the role of religion in the Syrian war. By considering four distinct ontological dimensions of religion and their relevance to the war, this paper has tried to elucidate the influence of religion on conflict dynamics without failing to evoke the complexity of religion. Describing religion as an identity, as a discourse, and as a set of teachings treats it as a dependent variable. That portrays religion as fundamentally linked to underlying societal dynamics. Furthermore, depicting religion as a dependent variable prevents us from overstating and essentializing it as a factor. In turn, religion in its spiritual dimension grasps the primordial aspect of religion. It adds the crucial subjective perspective of religion in its irreducible and factual relevance for the individual. Putting together those four dimensions allows us to include their respective features without intermingling and thereby obscuring them. In doing so, the paper not only seeks to contribute to a better understanding of religion in conflict in general, but also to a better understanding of the complexity of conflict dynamics in Syria.

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