



## Transcript

# Syria: The Fate of a Nation

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### **Claire Spencer:**

Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome here this afternoon, this lunchtime. In a week which has been dominated, as we have seen, by events in Egypt, it's as well to remember that there is still business to attend to and things going on in Syria that we should reflect on. This session has been specifically designed, as you'll see from the title, 'The Fate of a Nation', to look obviously at what's happening in Syria at the moment, to examine the dynamics, but also to project ahead a bit. So we're delighted to have a panel mostly drawn, I should say, from our experts in Chatham House itself. I'm head of the Middle East and North Africa Programme, but two of our speakers here are associate fellows at Chatham House.

But we're perhaps even more delighted to welcome as our first speaker Lina Sinjab, who is Syria correspondent for the BBC World Service/BBC News, who has recently returned from the region and will be speaking about developments on the ground.

But before we start, I should say that this is on the record. It is also being live streamed, which means those with Twitter accounts apparently can send questions in which we will pick up on, or comments if you like, in 140 characters. That can be picked up on when we get to the question and answer session. So all this is on the record. It will be available afterwards on our website.

I think we will start first of all, straightaway, with our speakers, who will make some introductory comments. Also on the panel we have Lord Williams of Baglan, who is our distinguished visiting fellow and also acting head of the Asia Programme at Chatham House. I described you as an associate fellow, but we count you as also an honorary associate fellow of the Middle East and North Africa Programme. And Dr Christopher Phillips, who is also associate fellow and at Queen Mary, University of London. Over to you, Lina, to start with.

### **Lina Sinjab:**

Thank you very much for having me here. I've been covering the story in Syria throughout the last two years, since the start of the peaceful uprising in March 2011. What started as a peaceful uprising resulted today in almost 100,000 people killed, more than 4 million internally displaced, more than 7 million in need of help, and 1.5 million registered refugees. Two years on, the political opposition have failed to deliver any solution, have failed to unite, and we are seeing also rising extremist Islamism, connected to Al-Qaeda inside

Syria. That is a rising concern of the region, of the world, but mainly of Syrian people.

But one thing that is forgotten from the story in Syria is what's happening and what the people inside Syria are doing. There has been a great sense of solidarity amongst the Syrian people since the start of the conflict. People supported each other. Houses are open to each other to welcome the ones who have lost their homes. Salaries shared, food shared. This is inside a country that people are now in their second and third displacement and continuous displacement, not only one-term displacement.

One thing that is very important and is also forgotten from the world's attention is the civil movement that is still ongoing inside the country. There are many civil activists – non-political activists that are passionate and they want to change the situation in Syria. They are committed together and working together to make a civil democratic change. That's where, even in areas that are described as conservative Islamic areas such as Douma, such as Harasta, such as Dareya, there is a great sense of civil movement. Civil councils have been established where even the Free Syrian Army are working in collaboration and making the judgment for the civil councils. There has been more than 25 – or still ongoing, 25 – online magazines that are issued by different groups, from Zabadani to... Dareya, to different areas, just promoting civil change and democratic change. But this is all not seen.

The targets also by the regime, targeting all the time, are not actually the Islamic radicalists or the armed people – these are the ones who can go into prison and pay money and leave afterwards. But who are the ones who are staying inside prison? Peaceful political activists, mainly of secular background and mostly from the minority backgrounds. The last few weeks, more and more Alawites and Druze and Christian activists, or even writers who are criticizing the regime, have been tucked into prisons. That's what the regime's strategy is, to keep the situation developing in a worst-case scenario, to tell the world that 'either us or the Islamists', and to tell even the secular opposition to see that this is what you get – it's only Islamism around.

Today, after two years in Syria, people are so bitter that they are left alone in their struggle. They are left alone, not only not supporting them on a humanitarian level, not supporting them enough on a humanitarian level, but also not finding a solution for their crisis. Almost everyone would favour a political solution that would end the violence and end the shelling, but only if the Syria government's main ally, Russia, would also pressure and stop fuelling arms to the regime, and pressure the regime to stop the violence.

Otherwise many people fear that what's talked about in the world is a more divided and more fragmented Syria. Thank you.

**Christopher Phillips:**

Thanks very much, Lina, that was a very interesting and colourful insight. One of the greatest difficulties for people outside Syria trying to cover this conflict is how difficult it is getting the actual information of what's actually going on on the ground, in terms of everyday life. Actually, one of the things that's very frustrating is that a lot of the aspects of the media have been portraying this very much as a binary conflict: regime, bad; opposition, good. Areas that are regime-held: life is terrible. Areas held by the opposition, until recently: liberated. But now this new dialogue, this new discourse, of Islamic fundamentalists emerging, which is colouring the picture. By and large what's getting lost in all that is, in my opinion anyway, the day-to-day, everyday life of Syrians, which is very important for us to continue to bear in mind when we look at this conflict.

What I want to do in my little slot now is to talk about one particular element of the Syria crisis which I've been studying and focusing upon, which is the issue of sectarianism. That is an aspect of this conflict which unfortunately is being used to characterize the conflict overall. People, along with the simplified and binary approach to this conflict, are characterizing it now as simply a sectarian fight, part of this wider Sunni–Shia divide that we're seeing across the Middle East. What I want to talk about today is why that isn't really a very accurate reflection of what's going on, and indeed the dangers of policy-makers in particular beginning to think through that mindset, because that will have a very negative impact on how this conflict goes forward and if we are to find a solution for it.

I'm very concerned that what's happening at the moment is by seeing things as purely sectarian, a few policymakers I've spoken to are beginning to think that what you've got in Syria is at best a repetition of the Lebanese civil war, and therefore the only solution is a kind of confessionalization of Syria, whereby, as you saw in Lebanon, each of the different sects in Syria get different numbers of seats in government and parliament – or, a worst-case scenario, this is a second Balkans conflict and the only possible solution is to divide Syria up along ethnic and sectarian lines. For various reasons, this is not the best way to see Syria.

This conflict did not begin as a sectarian fight. It was primarily a political and an economic conflict. It was political – people who opposed the regime of

Bashar Assad – and it was economic because the people who tended to oppose the regime tended to be those who had suffered most economically from the situation. Now, it became implicitly sectarian because it just so happened that the majority of those who had suffered economically from the situation in Syria were people from Sunni Muslim, or Sunni Arab Muslim, backgrounds. However, there were a few incidents of explicit sectarianism early on – we shouldn't pretend there wasn't – particularly, people making a chant that was heard repeatedly in areas of Homs: 'We want a leader who fears God.' That is a particularly anti-Alawite slogan, because the notion is that Alawites aren't real Muslims and therefore they don't fear God in the way the Sunnis do.

But other than a few incidents of that, in a few areas – particularly in Homs, where ethnic tension was high – the majority of the opposition tried very hard to be inclusive. They talked about – a lot of slogans were 'all the Syrians are one'. Indeed, they adopted deliberately national symbols. If you looked at the flag they adopted, it's a national flag – it's the flag from the pre-Ba'ath era. They formed groups like the Syrian National Council. It was all framed within the idea of Syria being an inclusive nation-state.

So it's also important when we look at Syria to realize that Syria is not and has not been a sectarian state in the past. The comparisons with Iraq and Lebanon are quite crude. Lebanon was established as a confessional state, first by the French, and then it continued as a confessional state after independence. Iraq was not established as a confessional state but after the Gulf War in 1991 the state was hollowed out because of sanctions and because of Saddam Hussein's policies, and as a consequence alternative identities, particularly those of sect, emerged and became stronger as a substitute for a state.

That has not occurred in Syria. Sectarian identity has existed but it's been at a lower level. People are aware of what sect they are but they're also very aware of their Syrian national identity. While there have been, as I said, implicit signs of sectarianism, there is a perception, even though it's not actually that accurate, that Alawites are a more privileged group, that Sunnis are underprivileged. It's very much been under the surface and not a politicized identity. Therefore, it's very worrying to start projecting from the outside this politicization of these identities that you find elsewhere.

The question then is: why is it that people are talking about sectarianism? Why has sectarianism emerged as a problem in Syria now, if there wasn't this

strong politicization of identity prior to the conflict? There are two main reasons for this.

The first one, and perhaps the most important one, is that the regime itself has deliberately played on sectarian fears. It's done this in two ways. On the one hand, it has, right from the word go, characterized the opposition as an Islamist Sunni movement. It has tried very hard to appeal to non-Sunnis – Alawites and Christians (Alawites make up about 12 per cent of the population, Christians about 8 per cent of the population) – and secular Sunnis that if the opposition win, not only will they be Islamists and create a sharia-law-type state, but also they will not tolerate the minorities. By doing so, they have convinced a lot of people that they must stay with the regime or else face obliteration as a group.

The other thing they have done – highly cynical – was deliberately release in various amnesties early on radical Islamist people who had been in their prisons. Effectively, they released them in one of the amnesties they had in 2011, with the intention, knowing full well they will go on to form radical groups. Surprise, surprise, a lot of these groups have been formed, groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, who are radical jihadists, who in forming have actually seemed to confirm the fears of a lot of the minorities that back the regime. Now the minorities that back the regime look at the opposition and see these active groups that are using violence and radical Islamism to oppose the regime, and they fear the alternative. They fear what will come next. So the regime has played a major part in sectarianizing this conflict.

The second group really responsible for sectarianizing the Syria conflict are external powers, in particular powers from the Gulf – Saudi Arabia and Qatar, in particular. Ever since the 2003 Iraq war, which effectively empowered Iran and increased Iran's position in the region, Saudi Arabia and, latterly, Qatar have been very worried about the rise of Iran. They have attempted to push a form of Sunni nationalism to oppose Iran. They have characterized Iran as a dangerous Shia external threat that the Sunnis must rally together to oppose. Now actually, for the majority of the 2000s, most people in the Sunni street across the Arab world did not buy that line. Remember when King Abdullah of Jordan talked about the Shia crescent emerging across Syria and Iraq and Iran – the average person in the street didn't seem to respond to that.

The Syrian civil war has changed that, because it's been much easier for people to recognize, with Iran playing an active role in Syria, this actual Iranian threat to the Sunnis on the ground. I think that's very important, that this external factor as well has served to radicalize some elements of the

Syrian Sunni population as well. Not all of them, but there are elements that are there. But again, a lot of it has come from the outside. We have seen that also in terms of the groups that they've been backing. They've actually been backing a lot of the more – Qatar and Saudi Arabia have been backing Salafist groups, they've been backing some jihadi groups like Jabhat al-Nusra, albeit through third parties and not directly.

So we're in a situation where there is a lot of sectarianism emerging and we're seeing it spread across the region as well. We're seeing on Qatar's Al Jazeera television network, one of the clerics, Qaradawi, who's sort of like the big spokesperson, recently declared a jihad on the Shia on behalf of the Sunnis. Similarly, I was really shocked to discover that last week there was a poll on Al Jazeera and the question was: who is more to blame for the Syrian civil war, the Sunnis or the Shia? Not surprisingly, the people that voted, 95 per cent blamed the Shia. But from the outside of Syria, they are projecting onto it sectarianism.

It's important to note that in spite of all this, Syria is not yet at this point where its conflict has become explicitly sectarian. And thankfully, the majority of the population on both sides, I would argue, are actually resisting the sectarian language. I think that what you've seen more broadly, there are non-Sunnis who are supporting the opposition and there's a lot of Sunnis who are actually supporting the regime still, for various reasons.

Also very importantly – Lina and I were talking about this earlier – there haven't been that many sectarian massacres, thankfully. This is not the Balkans. We have not yet seen whole villages wiped out because of their ethnic identity. People might characterize it as sectarian from the outside but it's not necessarily seen like that at the moment.

The danger is, of course, that these identities that are being encouraged from the outside become solidified, and the longer the conflict goes on, the more people actually begin to ascribe and identify with those identities. We saw this certainly in Iraq. Once they become solidified, it's hard to take them away. So the priority really, when looking at this conflict, is trying to find a situation whereby these sectarian identities will not become solidified so that you have to Balkanize and chop Syria up.

Why does it matter, I suppose would be the important question. Of course, Syria, I would argue, is too big to fail. It's not just a country on its own, it has its roots and its origins as a state spread all across the region. A lot of the features you see in Syria are characterized in other parts of the region as

well. We've already seen sectarianism boil over into Lebanon recently. We've seen a resurgence of sectarianism in Iraq as well.

There's the potential for sectarianism to take place in Turkey: 20-odd per cent of the Turkish population are Alevi, which is a relative of the Alawite sect. Prime Minister Erdoğan has actually, rather like Qatar and the Saudis, started using quite irresponsible language. When a bomb went off in the border town of Reyhanli recently, he started talking about how Sunni lives have been lost – not Turkish lives, Sunni lives. That really aggravated the non-Sunni community within Turkey. Thankfully, the majority of the Turkish public don't seem to be biting to this bait, but the potential is there.

Likewise, we've seen in Egypt recently – although I think they've got bigger problems at the moment, but there has been some fighting with the small number of Shias being targeted. And of course, if we start setting into motion the notion that ethnic identity and sectarian identity should form the basis of states in the Middle East, all the other multiethnic states could face collapse. Jordan, with its Christian community. Egypt, with its Christian community. The multinational communities of Lebanon and, of course, Syria. So it's very dangerous to start thinking in terms of sectarianism.

So just to conclude my point really, on the one hand, it's important to understand the complexities of this conflict, but on the other hand, it's important to realize that the sectarian threat is there – and as we speak, as this conflict goes on, sectarianization is happening. But rather than see it as an isolated problem, you've got to see this as a problem for the whole region. So rather than wading into a conflict on one side or the other because you want to topple a bad regime, you've got to look at the wider picture of how this is going to impact across the region as a whole.

In the short term, I would prescribe, it's very important for Western diplomats to put pressure on their Gulf allies to de-escalate the sectarian language. It's really, really important. In the long term, I think whenever we reach a point where hopefully we can come to a conclusion, some sort of a settlement in this conflict, policy-makers have really got to steer away from any attempt to place the Balkans or the Taif accord from Lebanon onto Syria. This is not how Syrians see their political identity, and if you end up imposing it upon them, all you will do is entrench these identities for good. That could have a massive destabilizing effect, not just in Syria but across the whole region. Thank you.



**Claire Spencer:**

Thank you very much, Chris. A very clear line of argument there. Over to you, Michael.

**Lord Williams:**

I'm going to use the lectern. In the House of Lords, one of the greatest sins is that you cannot speak from a sedentary position. I don't want to get confused in my mind; it's easier to stand always.

First of all, as international trustee of the BBC, I'd like to thank Lina Sinjab for her extraordinary work in reporting from Damascus these past two, two and a half years, which has been vital for our coverage internationally and also to inform the British people about the terrible events unfolding in Syria.

I want to speak about a few things. I'm going to start with reference to Egypt and the extraordinary events that have taken place there in the last several days, which have highlighted obviously a different sort of polarization – not that between Sunni and Shia, but that between Islamists, between the Brotherhood on one side, and between minorities and the state, if you like, more secular Muslims, on the other. What is the relevance of events in Cairo to Syria? It's actually a very real connection. It's mentioned in today's *Financial Times* and I think also reported elsewhere, that the turning point apparently for the army that persuaded them of intervention was Morsi's attendance at a rally in support of the Syrian opposition on 15 June. At that rally, Morsi himself called for an armed intervention against the Syrian regime, and other clerics present called for a jihad and denounced supporters of Assad – but also opponents of Morsi – as infidels. This was, I think, a national security red line for the army, and especially the overt call for Egyptian Islamists to fight in Syria.

Perhaps it's no surprise that one of the first to welcome the coup is the regime of Bashar al-Assad, which has issued a statement in the last few hours welcoming the military takeover in Egypt. I think on another level President Assad will also welcome the events in Egypt because he will welcome it as a distraction from the ongoing civil war in his own country, and as another dramatic illustration that the influence of Europe and the United States is declining in the region and is unable to confront the manifold problems that sweep the region from the Maghreb to the Gulf. He will also, I believe, draw the conclusion that any thought – which has been remote for a long time – of a Western intervention in Syria, even under UN auspices and a UN mandate, becomes even more remote as a result of what has happened in Cairo.

What will be the effect in Egypt on the Brotherhood and on Salafists? Are they simply going to accept yesterday's events as a *fait accompli*? We need to remind ourselves, of course, that President Morsi, for all his shortcomings – which were manifold – was democratically elected. One can criticize the way the constitution was changed, but he was democratically elected. The risk is, I think, that Islamists and Salafists in Egypt might resort to violence. They might also increasingly get drawn to the conflict in Syria itself. There is a risk that the Islamists and Salafists within the opposition to the regime in Syria will see Egypt as a cardinal lesson, as a lesson that democratic politics will not work: we have to fight a jihad because that is the only way we will achieve victory, because the West and its allies – even if we were democratically elected – will subvert the will of the people. These are worrying thoughts and trends.

I would also to some extent take issue with Chris on the whole question of ethnicity and identity and so on. I actually served in the Balkans in the 1990s. One of the interesting things is if you look at the census in Yugoslavia of 1991, before the wars, there is very little indication of the horrors that were going to follow. Vast numbers of people identified themselves not as Serbs or as Croats or Slovenes, but as Yugoslavs – an identity now which is a historical phenomenon and not a reality, which it still was in 1991. So I think identity, sadly, under the pressure of violence and so on, can change.

Some words about diplomacy, although there's not enough of it in tackling the Syrian war. Sadly, although the prime minister put a brave face on the G8 summit, I think little real headway was made. The earlier talks between Lavarov and John Kerry did lead to a breakthrough, the idea of a Geneva conference again, but I see little momentum at the moment for calling Geneva back into a reality. I think the whole diplomatic process will, alas, not gather speed until the UN General Assembly meets in New York in the third week of September, which is some considerable way off.

Having said that, wars, at the end of the day, are only won in two ways: by the victory of one party over the other, or by a negotiated settlement. For Syria, for all the reasons I think we perhaps all accept, there has to be a negotiated settlement. Again, looking back to the Balkans, we of course negotiated with Milosevic – actually not once, but twice. Once over the Bosnian war and then a few years later over the Kosovo war. We also negotiated with the likes of Karadzic. In Cambodia in the early 1990s – again, somewhere else I served – we negotiated with the Khmer Rouge. They were part of the settlement. No one was going to take on a battle with them.

Some words about Lebanon, where I was based for several years until 2011. I'm increasingly concerned about the situation there. It is, as Chris alluded, a deeply divided country at the best of times. The memory of the appalling civil war of the 1970s and 1980s is still very much alive. Things have undoubtedly got far worse since the overt involvement of Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict. So now Lebanon itself is part of the geography of the civil war.

This I think, Chris, is also another factor which comes into play in terms of ethnicity and identity. Hezbollah, by far the strongest non-state actor, in terms of its armament, in the Middle East – if not elsewhere – is a key fighting force in Syria. As a political and military force which is obviously only Shia, that cannot but have sectarian repercussions in Syria and also in Lebanon. In fact, one of the worst incidents – there have been several, by the way – in the last year or two in Lebanon was the fighting the weekend before last in the city of Saida, where the army took on a sort of Salafist group, with some 35–40 deaths, including 18 soldiers. The army in Lebanon could stand up to Salafism, and sees it as a great enemy of the state, but of course the army could never stand up to Hezbollah. The proximity between Hezbollah's involvement in Syria and the Salafist violence in Saida is, I think, quite threatening.

I'll finish with a few words about the UN and perhaps a reminder that the UN still has a presence in Lebanon and Syria, one which I believe is under great pressure now from the ongoing civil war. There is the mission UNDOF, the UN Disengagement [Observer] Force in the Golan Heights, which has been there since 1973 – 40 years. An Israeli general once said to me that the Golan Heights made Syria and Israel like Switzerland and Austria. Well, that's no more. In fact, the Austrians of course have now pulled out of UNDOF – they were part of the UN force – and have left behind some Filipino troops and some Indians. With that presence greatly weakened, the risk of something happening in the Golan is that much greater.

Then there is UNIFIL in southern Lebanon, a mission which is still the UN's third-largest mission, and which has held the peace and held it well between Lebanon and Israel since the 2006 war. I think that's increasingly under pressure. Many of the European countries present, which in some ways are the backbone of the mission – France, Italy, Spain – are increasingly worried about having their troops in a region of great violence and one where at any moment there could be further deteriorations, within Syria and out-with Syria and its neighbouring countries. I'll stop there.