Department of Political Science
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The Mimetic Arena

Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Civil War

Imitation, revenge, and the chain of violence in escalating internal conflicts

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To my parents, Ivano and Roberta

who are my *foundations*.

To my sister, Giulia

who is *beyond* words.

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INTRODUCTION

Imagine embarking on a journey akin to Dante's descent into the Purgatory, where the soul navigates a liminal realm of purification, surrounded by an arena of desires that mirror and magnify one another. This work, *Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Civil War—Imitation, Revenge, and the Chain of Violence in Escalating Internal Conflicts,* embarks on a rigorous exploration of the Syrian Civil War (2011–2024), not as a mere chronicle of human behavior, but as a profound inquiry into the sociological and anthropological mechanisms that ignite and sustain such political chaos. Anchored in René Girard's Mimetic Theory and Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory, this study dissects the war's crucible of rivalries and transitional instability, unveiling how imitative desires and societal thresholds weave an intricate web of violence.

The choice to delve into the Syrian Civil War through the lens of this work stems from a firm conviction that comprehending political conflicts necessitates stepping back to examine the sociological and anthropological mechanisms that ignite them. The Syrian Civil War, spanning 2011 to 2024, emerges as an exemplary case for research when approached through a theoretical framework grounded in René Girard's Mimetic Theory and Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory. Girard's framework elucidates human conflicts as outcomes of unfulfilled mimetic desire, highlighting key elements such as the creation of a scapegoat—selected by the community to resolve institutional and social crises—the role of the sacred and religion, which leverage desire itself, and a paradox observable in numerous political conflicts, including Syria's since 2011. Conversely, van Gennep's Liminal Theory describes the ambiguous interlude between stages of any social or personal rite, with war epitomizing the liminal period articulated by both Turner and van Gennep. This dual theoretical approach offers a profound avenue to decode the intricate human dynamics underpinning the Syrian conflict, moving beyond mere geopolitical or economic analyses.

This study is guided by two central research questions: Do modern civil wars and insurgencies follow dynamics of mimetic rivalry? How does the desire for power and the construction of the enemy intertwine in the perpetuation of conflict? These inquiries shift the focus from external catalysts to the internal human impulses that sustain strife, providing a framework to test the applicability of Girard's and van Gennep's theories in a contemporary context. Based on the thesis' findings, I argue that the Syrian Civil War exemplifies a mimetic and liminal process, where imitative desires and the construction of enemies—amplified by liminal instability—perpetuate an enduring cycle of violence. The fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 has ushered in a new phase of uncertainty, where

sectarian divisions and power struggles continue to shape Syria's fate, reinforcing the need to address these anthropological roots for conflict resolution.

The methodological framework of this work employs a multifaceted approach to investigate the dynamics of mimetic rivalry and liminal instability within the Syrian Civil War (2011-2025). The study addresses the central question: How do mimetic rivalry and enemy construction intertwine to sustain conflict in modern civil wars? The research approach is a comprehensive, theory-guided content analysis of available reports and news sources. This strategy aims to provide a clear understanding of the conflict's evolution, from its inception amid the 2011 protests to the post-Assad power vacuum of December 2024-March 2025, while testing the applicability of René Girard's *Mimetic Theory* and Arnold van Gennep's *Liminal Theory* in a contemporary context. The study begins with a qualitative historical analysis, drawing on primary sources such as Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War* (1910) and Plato's *Republic* (1997) to establish foundational definitions of civil war as an internal armed conflict marked by sustained violence and effective resistance within a sovereign entity. These classical perspectives are complemented by modern scholarship, including Small and Singer's *Resort to Arms* (1982), Sambanis' conceptual refinements in the *Journal of Conflict Resolution* (2004), and Kalyvas' *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (2006), which introduce quantitative thresholds—such as a minimum of 1,000 deaths—to operationalize the term. This interdisciplinary foundation allows for a nuanced delineation of civil war dynamics, distinguishing them from interstate conflicts and peasant rebellions through criteria like territorial division and the absence of state monopoly on violence.

Empirical analysis is conducted through detailed case studies, focusing on key episodes such as the sectarian violence in Homs and Aleppo, and the post-2024 governance crisis following Bashar al-Assad's fall. These cases are informed by real-time data from the S*yrian Observatory for Human Rights* (2025) and scholarly works by Hinnebusch (2012) and Balanche (2018), which provide demographic and geopolitical insights into Syria's religious and territorial fragmentation. The research adopts a comparative approach, juxtaposing the Syrian experience with historical precedents like the Peloponnesian War and contemporary conflicts to identify patterns of mimetic escalation and liminal instability. This method facilitates a cross-contextual evaluation of how imitation and transitional phases amplify conflict, offering a robust test of Girard's and van Gennep's theories. A significant component of the methodology involves documentary research, leveraging a wide array of secondary sources to enrich the analysis. This includes social media posts on platforms like X, official government reports, international organization statements (e.g., United Nations Security Council resolutions), and journalistic accounts from outlets such as *The Guardian* and *Al-Monitor.*

These sources provide diverse perspectives on the conflict's progression, from the 2011 uprising to the 2024 regime collapse, capturing both public narratives and policy responses. The inclusion of digital and media content allows for an examination of how propaganda and enemy construction—key elements of mimetic rivalry—shape public perception and sectarian divides, aligning with the thesis' anthropological focus. Theoretically, the study is grounded in Girard's *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), which articulates mimetic desire and the scapegoat mechanism, and van Gennep's *Rites of Passage* (1960), which frames war as a liminal threshold state. These frameworks are applied through a qualitative lens to interpret the Syrian conflict's social and psychological dimensions, while quantitative data—such as displacement figures (over 12 million) and death tolls—validate the empirical scope. The interplay of these methods ensures a balanced exploration, bridging abstract theory with concrete evidence to address the research questions holistically.

To further enrich the analysis, the thesis incorporates primary qualitative data from two semi-structured interviews conducted during its drafting period, between March and April 2025. These interviews are not used for the research analysis but were conducted to give to the reader a professional perspective on the research's issue. The interviews were held with an Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) official and a Senior Official of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union Diplomatic Service. Due to the sensitive nature of their professional roles, both individuals have requested anonymity, and their identities are withheld to protect their confidentiality. The interviews, which are at the end of the thesis, offer insider perspectives on the European Union's diplomatic engagement with Syria's post-2024 transition, providing critical insights into the role of external actors in mitigating mimetic rivalries and liminal crises. This addition enhances the study's empirical depth, complementing the documentary and theoretical analyses with firsthand accounts of international policy dynamics.

This research is structured across seven chapters, each weaving together theoretical frameworks and empirical analysis to explore the mimetic and liminal dynamics of the Syrian Civil War. Chapter I, The Imitation Game, introduces civil war through classical and modern definitions, applying Girard's Mimetic Theory to analyze rivalry and violence escalation in Syria. Chapter II, Betwixt & Between, examines war as a liminal phase of transition, using van Gennep's Liminal Theory to highlight instability during the Syrian conflict. Chapter III, The Syrian Civil War, traces the conflict's evolution from 2011 to 2024, detailing geopolitical and social dynamics. Chapter IV, Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Mimetic Chaos, directly applies Liminal Theory to analyze Syria's liminal state and its chaotic elements. Chapter V, The Purgatory of Mimesis - Part I: Syrian Scapegoating, explores the creation of scapegoats by various actors in the conflict. Chapter VI, The

Purgatory of Mimesis - Part II: Mimetic Desire and Rivalry, investigates how liminal uncertainty influences mimetic desire and rivalries. Chapter VII, The Purgatory of Mimesis - Part III: Violence and the Sacred, examines the paradox of religion's role in political violence. The Conclusion, The Last Liminal Phase: Inside the Hall of Mirrors, synthesizes these dynamics, assessing prospects for conflict prevention post-Assad. The inclusion of interviews with a Senior Official of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and a Senior Official of the European External Action Service lends credibility and prominence, offering professional insights that enrich the research's depth and authenticity.

CHAPTER I
The Imitation Game

"ὁ πόλεμος διδάσκει βίαια. ὁ εμφύλιος πόλεμος βίαιος έστιν."

«*War is a violent teacher. Civil war is violent.* »

Thucydides, *Xyngraphe*, cap. 82

1.1 Defining Civil War: The Dichotomy of *Pòlemos* and *Stasis*

In Ancient Greece, war and peace used to have an ambiguous relationship. The "normal state" was known as *pòlemos* (βίαιος διδάσκαλος) in which peace was the exception, and war was considered normality. A clear description of *pòlemos* has been given by the philosopher Jacqueline De Romilly:

> *Polèmos* allowed cities to gain power by weakening other cities but followed a strict codification, only happening during a certain part of the year. *Polèmos* was not a war of conquest or of subjugation because no city had the power to destroy the other cities. Warriors had to respect a certain code of honor by preventing themselves from enslaving opponents or sacking sanctuaries.[1]

This distinct dichotomy between war and peace lasted until the start of the Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC). This latter, indeed, completely redefined the equilibrium between period of conflict and period of harmony. From the Peloponnesian War, the term *pòlemos* was substituted by a new concept: *stasis*. In this context, the distinction between *pòlemos* and *stasis* will be explicated by the philosophers Plato and Thucydides. As stated above, *pòlemos* is the Greek term used to describe the normal state of war as we know it, an armed conflict between states, in which peace is conceived as temporary.[2] On the contrary, in the book *The Peloponnesian War* by Thucydides (431 BC), written when the war between the Peloponnesians and the Athenian began, the philosopher defines the *stasis*, in English "*civil war,*" as a devastating phenomenon which radically shapes the society internally and deeply corrupts public morality.

The drastic change and the moral corruption generated from the internal conflict produce a worse form of violence than the one generated by *pòlemos*.[3] For the philosopher Plato, the *stasis* was the worst kind of war since citizens of the same *pólis* were fighting against each other for political or

[1]Mallet, J. A. (2017). *War and peace in Plato's political thought*. *Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence*, p. 88. https://doi.org/10.22618/TP.PJCV.20171.1.95008.
[2]Ibid., p. 90.
[3]Thucydides. (431–404 B.C./1910). *The Peloponnesian War* (R. Crawley, Trans.). MIT Classics.

economic reasons.[4] *Stasis* has two principal features: the break of the balance between distinct parts of the same city and violence.[5]Historically, the Peloponnesian war has been the most known first example of *stasis*. To use the words of the military historian Victor Davis Hanson, the Peloponnesian war has been "a war like no other"[6] which irremediably weakened Athens' strength by causing this new form of war fought directly *within* the city. For Bonandini, *stasis* is the "pathology par excellence of the polis."[7] Indeed, this new form of war was not concerned with showing military ethics of honor, but only on the annihilation of the enemy. The philosopher Plato explicated the main difference between *pòlemos* and *stasis* in the actors involved; indeed, he wrote in *The Republic*: "The name "civil war" applies to hostilities with one's own, while "war" applies to hostilities with strangers."[8]

Between 1982, the historian Melvin Small and the political scientist J. Singer wrote the book *Resort to Arms: International and Civil Wars, 1860-1980* in which they did a quantitative study of wars by examining patterns of conflicts and their causes. In their study, Small and Singer defined a civil war as, "any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the national government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides."[9] Therefore, a civil war differs from a normal war due to its *internal nature*. Indeed, a civil war can also be defined as an internal or interstate conflict and a "normal war" can be called an extra state conflict. Moreover, the Yale Professor of Political Science Sambanis added that another feature which distinguishes civil from normal war is the requirement that state violence should be "sustained and reciprocated and that the war exceeds a certain threshold of deaths."[10]Regarding the number of deaths, the political scientist from the *University of Alabama* Karl DeRouen Jr. wrote in his book *An Introduction to Civil Wars* (2014) that, to define a was as 'civil war' there must be a number of deaths of 1,000.[11]

Nevertheless, it is difficult to frame civil wars in a precise and operational definition since many factors must be considered when defining a typology of conflict. Two of the main factors/criteria are indeed the number of deaths, as descripted above, and the identity of the disputants.[12] As stated, there are various types of definitions of civil war; therefore, it is challenging

[4]Plato. *TheRepublic*. Translated by Benjamin Jowett, MIT Classics.
[5]Mallet, J.-A. (2017). *War and peace in Plato's political thought.* The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence, 1(1). Trivent Publishing.
[6]Hanson, V. D. (2005). *A war like no other: How the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian War*. London, UK: Random House.
[7]Bonandini, A., Fabbro, E., & Pontani, F. (Eds.). (2017). T*eatri di guerra: Da Omero agli ultimi giorni dell'umanità* (Classici Contro, No. 6). Mimesis Edizioni.
[8]Plato. (1997). *Republic* (470b-d). In J. M. Cooper & D. S. Hutchinson (Eds.), Complete works. Hackett Publishing.
[9]Small, M., & Singer, J. D. (1982). *Resort to arms: International and civil wars, 1816-1980*. Sage Publications.
[10]Sambanis, N. (2004). *What is civil war? Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition*. Journal of Conflict Resolution.
[11]DeRouen, K. Jr. (2014). *An Introduction to Civil Wars*. CQ Press, p. 4.
[12]Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*. Cambridge University Press.

to pick only one among all of them. Agamben, an Italian philosopher confirms the difficulty in finding a definition of civil war and states, "Today, there is both a 'polemology,' a theory of war, and an 'irenology,' a theory of peace, but there is no 'stasiology,' a theory of civil war." [13]However, even though there are several ways to define civil wars, what is certain is that they are a type of *armed conflict*. Common Article 2 of the *Geneva Conventions* of 1949 conceptualized International Armed Conflict (IAC) as, "All cases of declared war or of any other armed conflict which may arise between two or more of the High Contracting Parties, even if the state of war is not recognized by one of them."[14] According to Nicholas Sambanis defines a civil war as, "Armed combat within the boundaries of a recognized sovereign entity between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of the hostilities."[15] Civil wars are indeed armed conflict but a *non-international* armed conflict (NIAC) that happen within a territory of a specific state between actors fighting each other. 'Internal war' might be the most precise term to use, but 'civil war' is by far the most common one within the political and economic environment.

From the definition, the key concept is the violent physical separation of the sovereign entity in competing military factions. This entails a de facto *territorial division* which is not officially or legally recognized but exists *in practice* (de facto). In the civil wars' context, disputants have the same identity- since they are all part of the same territory- and, by fighting against internal military factions, they create a de facto territorial division. It is important to do not confuse civil wars with "peasant rebellions" which are not protracted long enough to challenge sovereign authority effectively. These latter are developed into civil wars when pushed and led by organizations.[16]In *extra state* conflicts, there is an undeniable monopoly of violence by the state. On the contrary, in civil wars there is the absence of such monopoly of violence by the state itself. Violence is the "deliberate infliction of harm on people."[17] In civil wars, violence lacks controversial military utility and it is not perpetrated on a battlefield. As Table 1.1 from the book *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* by Stathis Kalyvas shows, violence can be produced in two ways: unilaterally (by one actor which is usually the

[13]Peixoto, E. (2019*). Giorgio Agamben,* Stasis. La guerra civile come paradigma politico. Homo sacer II, 2 [Review of the book Homo sacer. Edizione integrale, by G. Agamben]. Universa. Recensioni di filosofia, pp. 7–10.
[14]United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). (n.d.). *Understanding disaster risk: Terminology*. Retrieved from https://www.undrr.org/understanding-disaster-risk/terminology/hips/so0001
[15]Sambanis, N. (2004). *What is civil war? Conceptual and empirical complexities of an operational definition*. The Journal of Conflict Resolution, 48(6), 814-858. https://www.jstor.org/stable/4149797.
[16]Kalyvas, S. N. (2006). *The logic of violence in civil war*. Cambridge University Press. https://rodrigomorenog.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/02/kalyvas-the-logic-of-violence-in-civil-war-cambridge-university-press-2006.pdf
[17]Ibid.

state) or bilaterally/multilaterally (by two or more competing actors). In the latter, the strategic interaction is more critical than the others.

Table 1.1 A Typology of Mass Political Violence

	Aims of Violence: Political Actor Intends to Govern the Population Targeted	
Production of Violence	**Yes**	**No**
Unilateral	State terror	Genocide and mass deportation
Bilateral (or multilateral)	Civil war violence	Reciprocal extermination

The Logic of Violence in Civil War by Kalyvas, 2006, p. 29.

Civil wars are a distinct type of wars: whereas in ancient times, war (*polèmos*) was considered as the norm, the Peloponnesian War in 431 BCE marked a pivotal turning point in the traditional dichotomy of war and peace, transitioning from *polèmos* to *stasis*- what we know call *civil war*. Capturing their essence within a single definition proves elusive, given their entanglement with complex social, psychological, economic, and political phenomena influenced by a web of interconnected factors. Ideological, religious, and ethnic divisions within a state tend to be the first-order drivers. But statistical and economic analysis also illuminates how income levels, growth trends, and structural inequalities can be secondary drivers of such conflict. In this regard, Donatella Della Porta offers a detailed analysis of the causal mechanisms behind the outbreak of civil wars and identifies three key stages: initial mechanisms (political destabilization, indiscriminate repression, social fragmentation), activation mechanisms (blurring of boundaries and deterioration of security), and reproduction mechanisms (mobilization of military networks, cycles of revenge, sectarian identification).[18] Unlike traditional wars, civil wars disintegrate the state *monopoly* on violence, spreading it among competing groups and rendering it an omnipresent, uncontrolled force. This fragmentation not only works to magnify the ferocity of war but also to lead into the broader consideration of human action under duress—where violence is mimicked as a mirror and multiplier of social fracture, a process that begins to cohere, a theme to resonate throughout the discussion of *mimesis* that follows.

[18]Della Porta, D. (2018). *Causal mechanisms in civil wars: A sensitizing map*. In D. Della Porta, T. H. Donker, B. Hall, E. Poljarevic, & D. P. Ritter (Eds.), *Social movements and civil war: When protests for democratization fail*. Routledge, pp. 23–42.

1.2 Theoretical Foundations: René Girard and The Shades of *Mimesis*

The etymology of the terms *imitation* and *mimesis* has evolved in various fields and has developed in different levels with different shades. In Greek, the term *mimeisthai* meant "leading to representation through dance." In Greek dance, rhythm, harmony, and *logos* intertwined in an inseparable bond, and their cathartic power reached its peak, especially when performed during the rituals of Dionysian cults. In these rites, *mimos* referred both to the actor and to the mask of the cultic drama: it was the visual representation of being other.[19] In the Greek Late Classical Period (380-323 BC), Athens was a majestic center of arts and craft. Plato (427-347 BC), in his work the *Republic* (360 B.C.E), first associated the notion of *mimesis* with the analogy of *techne* (the 'art of *know-how'*).[20]In the *Republic*, the concept of *mimesis* was referred to Greek dramatic and artistic representations; dramatic actors *imitated* as to mime, while musicians were called to *imitate* as to represent the passions on the scene. Indeed, in *Book III* of the *Republic*, the term *mimesis* is described as 'making oneself like another' referred as the action of *impersonating* a character.[21]Following Plato, Aristotle (384 BC) mentioned *mimesis* in his work *Poetics* (334-330 BC) not referring at the pure action of imitation but still connected to the representation in the artistic field. The artistic dimension is not a sterile reproduction of reality; rather, it is the creation of an alternative world that encompasses not only what is, but also what could be. Therefore, *mimesis* was a concept deeply linked to the artistic field in Ancient Greece. It is relevant here to present the multifaceted structure of *mimesis* by citing the philologist and scholar specialized in ancient Greek literature Jacques Bompaire who wrote ***L**ucien écrivain. Imitation et création* (1958). In his work, Bompaire identifies four exceptions of *mimesis*: (1) *mimesis* to refer to the copy or the imitation of someone or something; (2) *mimesis* in a philosophical sense which refers to artists and arts; (3) *mimesis* in literature and rhetorics, when the object of the writer's imitation is not reality, but the literary fact re-experienced; (4) *mimesis* as for 'reception' of the art from the audience.[22] Even though the meaning of *mimesis* started to evolve, the real pivotal maturation of the term happened only in 1979.

The year 1979 represents a turning point for the evolution of the term *mimesis*. From this year, the concept of *mimesis* was extended beyond the world of arts and dance. The meaning of *mimesis* now fluctuates between the imitative aspect and the representative aspect in a rather fluid and difficult-to-separate manner. Indeed, in 1979, Hellmut Flashar, a German classical philologist and

[19]Pangerc, D. (2009). *Brevi cenni per un'antropologia della* mimesis. Intersezioni, pp. 457-472. https://doi.org/10.1404/30702 .
[20]Plato. (n.d.). *The Republic* (B. Jowett, Trans.). MIT Classics. Retrieved from https://classics.mit.edu/Plato/republic.html.
[21]Philip, J. A. (1961). *Mimesis in the Sophistês of Plato*. Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association, pp. 453–468. https://doi.org/10.2307/283830.
[22]J. Bompaire, Lucien écrivain. *Imitation et création*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 1958.

scholar specialized in Plato's works, started by describing *mimeisthai* as the 'presentation on another level' of something not directly referred to arts or music.[23]Following Flashar's work, other scholars and philologists contributed to the extension of the meaning of *mimesis*. The philologist Erich Auerbach, translated in his work the term *mimesis* with the German word *darstellen* that means 'representation' and not 'imitation' (in German *nachahmung*).[24]These examples are only two of the multiple prototypes of evolution of *mimesis* which state that, after centuries, the hierarchy between the two differentiations of meaning is reversed in favor of *creative mimesis*. While for the fathers of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle, it was the *game* that transformed into imitation, for contemporary thinkers such as Flashar, Auerbach, and others it is *imitation* that becomes the game.[25]

The concept of mimesis cannot be simply translated with the term 'imitation' since it carries with itself something more. It is not only the *mimic* of something, but the *extension* of it. From the XXI century, the term *mimesis* has been associated by many philosophers and thinkers to the concept of rivalry, nemesis, and desire. This association is the result of the assumption that *mimesis* is not only reserved to the artistic field by far. Indeed, in 2006, the Italian philosopher Gianfranco Fornari wrote in his work *Filosofia di Piacere. Vittima e Storicità Radicale* that, "Human imitation needs a model, and the next step, which becomes inevitable unless some external factor intervenes, is the desire to possess what the model possesses."[26] Fornari underlines a cardinal concept of the French anthropologist René Girard's philosophy on Mimetic theory: the *mimetic desire*.

In the early 1960s, René Girard (1923-2015) presented for the first time the concept of Mimetic Theory in his work *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque* (1961, translated in English as *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*).[27] The concept of imitation and desire will be then extensively explained in *La Violence et le sacré* (1972, *Violence and the Sacred*)[28] and in *Des choses cachées depuis la fondation du monde* (1978, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*). In his works, Girard distinguished the generative role of imitation in human desire and argues that this latter is not independent but *mimetic*. This means that individuals desire not autonomously but in relation to what other individuals desire. This vicious circle leads to rivalry and conflict. Girard used the term *mediation* to explain the process in which someone (the *mediator*) influences someone else's (the

[23]H. Flashar (1979). *Die klassizistische Theorie der Mimesis*, in Le Classicisme à Rome aux Iers siècles avant et après J.C., Vandoeuvres-Genève, Fondation Hardt, Entretiens sur l'Antiquité Classique.
[24]Auerbach, E. (1946). *Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der abendländischen Literatur*. A. F. Ungar.
[25]Pangerc, D. (2009). *Brevi cenni per un'antropologia della* mimesis. Intersezioni, pp. 457-472. https://doi.org/10.1404/30702 .
[26]Fornari, G. (2006). *Filosofia di passione. Vittima e storicità radicale*. Transeuropa, p. 4
[27]Girard, R. (1961). *Mensonge romantique et vérité romanesque*. Grasset.
[28]Girard, R. (1972). *La violence et le sacré*. Grasset.

mediate) preferences and desires.[29] Imagine therefore mimetic desire as a triangle made of a subject that desires an object which its satisfaction is prevented by a mediator. The latter is not only a model but an obstacle, a model-obstacle. Girard defines mediation as a process where a person influences the desire and preferences of someone else. Therefore, when someone's desire is imitated by another person, the first becomes the mediator. The mediation can be internal or external. It is an external mediation when the mediator and the person mediated are on different planes. This type of mediation does not generate risk of rivalry between subjects since they belong to different worlds. External mediation is present in psychology of desire. An example is a child that looks up to elders and imitates them. On the contrary, internal mediation sees the mediator and the mediated as part of the same world. In this type of mediation, the two parts are rivals.[30]

Rivalry is the cardinal element of any type of conflict and mediation. The term '*rival'* is used to define "a person or group competing with others for the same thing or in the same area."[31] For Girard's theory, mimetic desire is the main source of aggressiveness and violence that characterized human beings and distinguishes them from animals. Girard formulated the concept of rivalry by taking inspiration from the concept of *resentment* of the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. For Nietzsche, indeed, *resentment* is the real peculiar spiritual disease of mankind. Different from Nietzsche, Girard asserts that resentment is not only a distinctive disease of society, but it is also rooted in mimetic desire and rivalry. [32]On the other hand, Girard himself also admits that mimetic desire can be good since it is the lever of love and the personal opening out.[33] To better explain the dual nature of mimetic desire, Girard stressed that, "Mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that far from being merely imitative in a small sense, it's the opening out of oneself."[34] In his work *Violence and Mimesis* (2004),[35] Girard introduced the concept of '*appropriative* mimicry,' this type of mimesis is the compulsive tendency of human beings to imitate what others desire. The adjective 'appropriative' indicates that the intrinsic value of the objects that we desire is not as relevant as the idea that the very same objects are desired by others. As presented above, the 'triangle of mimetic desire' is nothing more than a mean to understand and explain the

[29]Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (n.d.). *René Girard (1923—2015)*. Retrieved from https://iep.utm.edu/girard/#H1
[30]Kirwan, M. (n.d.). *René Girard (1923—2015)*. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. https://iep.utm.edu/girard/#SH2a
[31]Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.). *Rival*. In Cambridge English Dictionary. Retrieved from https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rival.
[32]Arienzo, A., & Ferronato, M. (2022). *Guerra, Stato, globalizzazione. René Girard "politico"*. Rivista di Studi Politici "Politics", 18(2), v-xxi. https://www.research.unipd.it/retrieve/287d361b-4774-4980-ae59-1c1570906196/00b_arienzo_ferronato_politics18.pdf.
[33]Gallese, V. (2018). *The two sides of imitation: The mimetic theory of mirror neurons and the neural basis of intersubjectivity*. Retrieved from https://hiw.kuleuven.be/hua/events/hom-seminar/suggested-reading/3-gallese-2sidesimitation.pdf .
[34]Girard, R. (2004). *Violence and mimesis*. Polity Press.
[35]Ibid.

processes of *social cognition,* such as the process of gathering, interpreting, and using information about others to evaluate judgments, understand social behaviors and relationships. Indeed, as the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese asserts, "To desire another's desire, to be the target of others' desire, means to gain social recognition."[36] Therefore, the multifaceted aspect of mimetic desire of mankind is deeply intertwined with the processes of social identification and recognition. This is one of the main reasons why this research will base its examination of civil wars and violence in Syria from 2011 on the Mimetic Theory and the mimetic desire of Renè Girard. Conflicts and violence are two of the main results of mimetic desire for Girard. Furthermore, the two results are themselves two processes of exasperate social identification and recognition.

1.3 Mimetic Theory: The Scapegoat

Men are not unrelated atoms but live through a constitutive relationship with their fellow beings. Girard underlines that mimetic desire does not always have a negative outcome, but this latter is more likely to happen. As Girard explicates, "The neighbor has no intention of giving up the asset he possesses and will not let it be taken away wit out a fight."[37] For the author of the Mimetic theory, human desire projects and diffuses itself as a plague, like an epidemic. The Mimetic theory has two main principles: mimetic desire and the need of a scapegoat. The first principle – the mimetic desire- has been explained in the first paragraph. While the second principle – the need and creation of the scapegoat- is the *result* of mimetic desire. The two principles are different but interconnected. Girard affirms that the violence of the community, unleashed by the mimetic spiral, "polarizes onto around a single victim, chosen by arbitrary reasons: through their killing, social order is restored."[38] The scapegoat- the victim- is created from the new *internal cohesion* of the community and it is used as a shield against the conflicting forces activated by the mimetic desire. Girard underlines that, "Having a scapegoat means not knowing that you have one." In his work *Violence and The Sacred* (1997), Girard writes in the introduction of the book:

> My hypothesis is mimetic: it is because of their tendency to imitate one another to a greater extent than animals do that humans had to find a remedy for a contagious similarity that could lead to the complete and simple disappearance of their society. The mechanism

[36]Gallese, V. (2018). *The two sides of imitation: The mimetic theory of mirror neurons and the neural basis of intersubjectivity*, p. 90. Retrieved from https://hiw.kuleuven.be/hua/events/hom-seminar/suggested-reading/3-gallese-2sidesimitation.pdf
[37]Girard, R. (2001). *I see Satan fall like lightning*. Orbis Books, p. 42.
[38]Girard, R., & Vattimo, G. (2015). *Verità o fede debole? Dialogo su cristianesimo e relativismo* (P. Antonello, Ed.). Feltrinelli, p. 22.

> capable of reintroducing a difference, where everyone began to resemble the other more and more, is sacrificed.[39]

Through the study of ancient myths, Girard discovers the '*salvific'* function of the scapegoat, through whose sacrifice (or expulsion from the society) the (proto)communities regain order and peace, lost due to the mimetic crisis. As Girard notes:

> The community perceives itself as entirely passive in the face of its victim, who, on the other hand, appears as the sole responsible agent in the situation. It is enough to understand that the inversion of the real relationship between the victim and the community is perpetuated in the resolution of the crisis to grasp why this victim is considered sacred. The victim is seen as responsible for both the return to calm and the disorder that precedes it. In fact, the victim is even seen as the agent of their own death.[40]

This salvific vision of principle is what pushed Girard toward religion and the analysis of Cristian and Jewish sacred texts.[41] Girard underlines that Christianity sheds light on what had to remain hidden for ritual religion to be 'produced.' This can be better understood by considering that, in Girard's perspective, the sacred 'contains' violence: in the sense that it *restrains* it but also *encompasses* it. However, Girard also reiterates that this dichotomy of sacred and violence is not totally valid for Christianity. Indeed, Christianity *reveals* the innocence and the divinity of the victim; but this happens only within the "small dissent minority and not within the persecuting majority"[42] This is the reason why Girard admits that:

> Jesus is a scapegoat that fails […]. With Christianity, the scapegoat's system fails since it creates an open world where anything can happen because the sacrificial forms of protection no longer exist.[43]

The *co-dependence* of violence and the sacred- in Girard's standpoint- is what makes the scapegoat the salvific element in the Mimetic theory. Nonetheless, when it comes to war and conflicts, the sacrificial element is remodeled and altered.

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[39]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the sacred*. Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 47.
[40]Girard, R. (1983). *Delle cose nascoste sin dalla fondazione del mondo* (R. Damiani, Trans.). Adelphi, p. 39.
[41]Ibid.
[42]Girard, R., Benvenuto, S., & Meloni, M. (2004). *Una teoria mimetica del desiderio*. Lettera Internazionale: Rivista Trimestrale Europea.
[43]Benvenuto, S. (2003). *Differenza, identità, violenza. Conversazione con René Girard*. Dialegesthai: Rivista telematica di filosofia, p. 5. https://mondodomani.org/dialegesthai/articoli/sergio-benvenuto-02.

1.4 Conflicts and Mimetic Theory: From Centrifugal to Centripetal Violence

The mimetic appropriation inevitably leads to conflict. It is curious- but not unbelievable- that one of the greatest theorists of violence as a social phenomenon - Girard indeed- has confronted only very late in his work life with the most important and destructive aspect of violence: *war*. Even though there have been many themes linked to violence in his works, war appears blurred until his last very, and most relevant, work *Taking Clausewitz to the Extreme: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* (2007). Girard himself notes that this peculiarity in his career carried out a certain weirdness and underlines:

> In my books, I often happen to talk about war, particularly in Violence and the Sacred, but from a strictly anthropological perspective. I was not able to approach this topic on a theoretical level.[44]

For him, war presents a serious theoretical problem because its structure, as a phenomenon of violence, follows a completely different pattern from sacrificial violence. Sacrifice is the preventive resolution of a mimetic crisis. A conflict that is inherently irreconcilable, which would lead to the mutual destruction of the opponents and could spread in concentric circles to the entire social group and is overcame through a shift in the direction of violence from *centrifugal* to *centripetal*. The issue of war as a theoretical challenge was resolved with Girard's discovery of the greatest theorist of war, Carl von Clausewitz (1780-1831). Clausewitz was a Prussian general and military theories; his best work *On War* (*Vom Kriege*) deals with military strategy and warfare. Clausewitz believed that war was "merely the continuation of politics by other means."[45] With Clausewitz's perspective, Girard finds a precise link with his mimetic theory: viewing war as a *duel* which opens the possibility to associate it with the mimetic conflict. This is how Girard cites Clausewitz in his work *Taking Clausewitz to the Extreme: Conversation with Benoît Chantre* talking about war:

> We will not provide a strict scientific definition of war; instead, we will adhere to its elementary form: the single combat, the *duel*. War is nothing but a duel on a large scale. The multitude of individual duels that compose it, when considered as a whole, can be represented by the action of two *wrestlers*. Each of them seeks, through physical force, to *compel* the opponent to *submit* to their will; their immediate goal is to *bring them down* and,

[44]Girard, R., & Chantre, B. (2007). *Taking Clausewitz to the Extreme: Conversation with Benoît Chantre*. Carnets Nord, p. 26.
[45]Clausewitz, C. von. (2008). *On war* (M. Howard & P. Paret, Eds. & Trans.). Princeton University Press, p.29.

> in doing so, make any further resistance impossible. War, therefore, is an act of force intended to *compel the enemy to submit to our will*.[46]

Girard also admits that Clausewitz feels what he calls mimetic principle and named it as *'reciprocal action.'* Both theorists assert that this reciprocal action/mimetic principle gets worse the more *visible* it becomes. Girard admits that these *reciprocities* (as Clausewitz calls) are the sum of non-reciprocal moments. It fascinates me the term that Girard used to define war opponents: simple *doubles.*[47] What makes war challenging for Girard's approach is the lack of the third party- the scapegoat- which resolve the mimetic conflict. The role of the chosen victim in the mimetic conflict is a distractionist one. Now when the rivals have lost all difference, distance, and protective separation, and in the effort, so to speak, to simultaneously occupy the same space, they are about to destroy each other, the sudden manifestation of a visible and insurmountable difference, that of the victim, *diverts* the violence and unites the doubles in exercising it together against a third. Nevertheless, the lack of the 'third' in war creates a structural crisis of though for Girard. War is violence without sacrifice, therefore violence that tends in a unilinear way towards total destructiveness. Girard in 2007 interprets Clausewitz's perspective as follow:

> War is an act of force, the use of which knows no limits: the belligerents impose law upon each other mutually; this results in a reciprocal action that logically must lead to the extreme.[48]

However, immediately after this passage, Clausewitz clarifies that this is true only in the abstract. There are no limits to the mobilization of men and resources, the action of war requires time and obstacles, the actors cannot avoid doubts and hesitations, and prudence imposes to do not waste the whole force in one shot. The *extreme*, therefore, is brought back to the *limit*. And what Clausewitz means by *extreme*, after all, is not the annihilation of the adversary, but the maximum concentration and speed in the use of force.

Besides these theoretical and conceptual definitions of war, it is now peremptory to define *war* in a more concrete and specific way. In the international legal framework, the term "war" has been prohibited in Common Article 2 (CA2) and Common Article 3 (CA3) of the Geneva Conventions of 1949. The articles replace the term "war" with the term "armed conflict" (*jus in bello*).

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[46]Girard, R., & Chantre, B. (2007). *Taking Clausewitz to the Extreme: Conversation with Benoît Chantre*. Carnets Nord, p. 18.
[47]Ibid., p. 22.
[48]Ibid., p. 25.

The term "war" is an ancient one. In the past, war was the "struggle of one warlike people to dominate all the rest, and consequently rights of nations were little respected."[49] To paraphrase it, war was a *mean*- a very efficient mean- of gaining land, strengthening the state and the rulers' authority and collecting taxes. The turning point in which the international community started to modify the war's vision from a justification of it to a regulation of it happened in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. The latter is a series of treaties signed in 1648 that ended the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), in the holy Roman Empire, and the Eighty Years' War (1568-1648) between Spain and the Dutch Republic. In history, *war* as a term went through various definitions and realities. The Dutch philosopher and scholar Hugo Grotius cites in his work *On the Rights of War and Peace* (*De Jure Belli ac Pacis*) the great Marcus Tullius Cicero and his definition of war as a "a contest or contestation carried on by force. But usage applies the term, not to an action, but to a state or condition: and thus, we may say, war is the state of persons contending by force, as such."[50] Lassa F. L. Oppenheim, a British jurist and influential figure in international law, added a normative element to the definition of war and explain it as "a contention between two or more States through their armed forces, for the purpose of overpowering each other and imposing such conditions of peace as the victor please."[51] The Israeli scholar and expert in international law Yoram Dinstein, suggested to define war as an:

> Hostile *interaction* between two or more States, either in a technical or in a material sense. War in the *technical sense* is a formal status produced by a declaration of war. War in the *material sense* is generated by actual use of armed force, which must be comprehensive on the part of at least one party to the conflict.[52]

This last definition admits that was is a dynamic phenomenon difficult to capture in a precise and static definition. It indeed distinguishes between war in a technical and a material sense and leaves more margin of appreciation. These above definitions of war contain main elements and intrinsic mechanisms that make war a specific act with specific components. However, when it comes to civil war, the definition and the elements differ in both the technical and material sense of the concept. As explained in the first paragraph of Chapter 1, civil war- or *internal* war- is a non-international armed conflict (NIAC) that happens within a territory of a specific state between actors fighting each other. Even though some elements differ from armed conflicts and civil wars, the framework that actors

[49]John W. (1909). Foster, *Evolution of International Law*, 18 YALE L.J.
[50]Grotius, H. (2009). *On the rights of war and peace*, Book I 1-2. W. Whewell, Ed.
[51]Oppenheim, L. F. L. (1952). *Disputes, war and neutrality* (H. Lauterpacht, Ed.; 7th ed.). Longmans, Green & Co.
[52]Dinstein, Y. (2005). *War, aggression, and self-defence* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press, p. 3

experience during the warlike period is the same and is what the ethnographer Arnold Van Gennep called a *liminal phase*. A period characterized by uncertainty, instability, and chaos: an *in-between.*

CHAPTER II
Betwixt & Between

"Life itself means to separate and to be reunited,
to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn.
It is to act and to cease, to wait and rest, and
then to begin acting again, but in a different way.
And there are always new thresholds to cross."
- Arnold van Gennep, *Les Rites de Passage* (1909).

2.1 Thresholds to Cross: Separation and Reunion of Liminal Theory

The English concepts "*transition"* and "*change*" are two glosses of the French "*passage*." With the expression "*rites of passage*" the French anthropologist and folklorist Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957) referred to rituals which involved the *transfer* of individuals/groups between social statuses. The most used examples of the category of status changes are *rituals* concerned with the human life cycle, such as birth, initiation into adulthood, marriage, and death.[1] Chapter 2 of this work is indeed dedicated to the Liminal Theory of Arnold van Gennep based on the conceptualization of *liminality* that describes a transitional phase in the so-known *rites of passage*. The choice of using this theory as a theoretical framework for the Syrian Civil War aims at explaining the delicacy and vulnerability that characterize warlike periods. Indeed, warlike periods, are perfect examples of *liminal* periods. The word "*liminality*" comes from the Latin "*limen*" which means "*threshold*." The concept refers to the state of in-betweenness in which an individual/group is when the passage from one status to another is not completed yet. This middle phase of rites of passage is delicate, ambiguous, uncertain, and extremely transformative. In this chapter, Liminal Theory is presented as a dynamic *method of narration*. Narration of conflicts, of lives, of actors. Narration is nothing more than *extrapolation* of signs. Life, events, conflicts, relationships, and rites are mediated by signs- from the beginning to the end- and by moments which are always proceeded and precede. Narrating something means extrapolate the relevant signs that grant a status of existence to the experience through its action of *discretization*.[2] The latter allows for differentiation between a *before* and an *after*, a *here* and a *there*.

[1]Forth, G. (2018). *Rites of passage*. In H. Callan (Ed.), *The International Encyclopedia of Anthropology*. Wiley, pp. 1-7. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/327462542_Rites_of_Passage.
[2]De Luca Picione, R. (n.d.). *La funzione dei confini e della liminalità nei processi narrativi. Una discussione semiotico-dinamica*. Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II. Retrieved from https://scispace.com/pdf/la-funzione-dei-confini-e-della-liminalita-nei-processi-20patzk3o7.pdf.

2.2 Rites of Passage: A Conceptual Classification of Rites

In 1909, Arnold van Gennep wrote the book *Rites of Passage* where he proposed a conceptual classification of rites. The essence of the book was also spread thanks to the Scottish anthropologist Victor Turner (1920-1983). Turner deepened van Gennep's work on liminality and liminal theory emphasizing that middle stage of transition: the *liminal period*. Van Gennep distinguished between rites that mark the *transition of social status* (e.g. marriage and funerals) and rites that mark the *passage of time* (e.g. harvest and new year).[3] Turner defined a rite as, "a stereotyped sequence of activities [...] performed in a sequestered place, and designed to influence preternatural entities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests."[4] The term "stereotyped" refers to an high codified consequence made by symbols. Turner stressed the role of the rite in compensating to some extend "for the limited range of effective political control and for the instability on kinship and affinal ties to which political value is attached."[5] Indeed, the rite works as a "social glue" with different functions: a) Renewal of the bond between the human and the divine; b) Outlet for social conflict; c) Creation of meaning and direction. Stanley J. Tambiah also recognizes the *cohesive* function of ritual, stating that it creates an organic union between originally separate social parts [6]and, at the same time, contributes—where society already exists—to establishing, reinforcing, and legitimizing social hierarchies. According to the Sri Lankan scholar, rituals are "systems of culturally constituted symbolic communication [...] whose cultural contents are rooted in specific cosmological or ideological constructs"[7] and hold meaning solely and exclusively within that specific context. From the classification of rites, van Gennep singled out rites of passage as a special category made by three sub-categories: rites of *separation*, *transition* rites, and rites of *incorporation*. The first separation phase is made by symbolic behavior which are attached to the detachment of the individual/group from a set of cultural condition (a "*state*") or from a previous fixed point in the social structure. The second phase- the liminal period- is ambiguous since the state of the ritual subject (the "*passenger*") is extremely uncertain. In the last state, the transition is completed; indeed, in this state, the ritual subject is now in a clearly defined and structural type of state.[8]

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[3]Thomassen, B., & Szakolczai, A. (2019). Arnold van Gennep. In *From anthropology to social theory: Rethinking the social sciences* (pp. 23–43). Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108529426.002.
[4]V.W. Turner, *Symbols in African Ritua*l, Science, American Association for the advancement of science, 1972, vol. 179, p 29.
[5]Ibid, p. 32.
[6]Lévi-Strauss, C. (1964). *The Sauvage Thought*. Presses Pocket.
[7]Tambiah, S. J. (1979). *A performative approach to ritual*. Proceedings of the British Academy, pp. 113–169.
[8]Mahdi, L. C., Foster, S., & Little, M. (Eds.). (1987). *Betwixt & between: Patterns of masculine and feminine initiation*. Open Court Publishing.

For van Gennep, individuals' life consists of a series of transitions made by structures; the anthropologist remarks that, in life, there are always new threshold to cross and patterns that repeat. Indeed, the underlying arrangement in *Rites of Passage* is always the same, in this regard, van Gennep states that, "Beneath a multiplicity of forms, either consciously expressed or merely implied, a typical pattern always recurs: the pattern of the rite of passage" and "'the rites of preliminary or permanent separation, transition, and incorporation are placed in relation to one another for a specific purpose."[9] Nonetheless, van Gennep also acknowledges that not every ceremony follow this pattern. There are indeed some variations of significate over time and across culture. But the search of holistic passage patterns offers a framework for comprehend how these processes change. These are the structural foundations that pushed van Gennep to make the classification of rites and to highlights the transition that happens from one passage to the other. In van Gennep's words:

> The idea is that a person is lifted. Rites may be used to show that at a moment of transition the individual does not belong to the profane nor to the sacred. Or if he does belong to one of the two that he intends to move to the other, and he is therefore isolated and maintained in an intermediate position, held between heaven and earth (…).The various rites of appropriation, which include the imposition and lifting of taboos, and so forth, and whose purpose is to remove a person from the common domain in order to incorporate him into a special domain, also include essential elements of the pattern.[10]

That intermediate position, between "heaven and earth" as descripted by the author is what he calls the 'liminal space.'

2.3 The Un-structure of Liminality: Turner's *Social Structure* and *Communitas*

Fifty years after the book *Rites of Passage* of Arnold van Gennep, the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner revisited the concept of the rites of passage. Peculiar interest was in the ambiguous stage of transition ('*liminality'*) and its structure or, to be more precise, its *un-structure*. Turner *agrees* with van Gennep in admitting that the liminal period is the central phase of every transition. The liminal period is descripted as a threshold situation and a real of ambiguity and uncertainty since "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are *betwixt* and *between* the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."[11] However, the liminal period is also a vital moment of

[9]Salet, W. (2018). *Sifting through transition: Revisiting 'rites of passage'*. Transactions of the Association of European Schools of Planning, pp. 1–8. https://doi.org/10.24306/TrAESOP.2018.01.001.
[10]Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). University of Chicago Press, p. 33.
[11]V.W. Turner, *Symbols in African Ritua*l, Science, American Association for the advancement of science, 1972, vol. 179, p. 21.

creativity. Here, the *transformative* feature of the rite itself is exponentially high. In the liminal period, the individual/group experiences an intense *fluidity of identity*. *Liminality* refers to moments or periods of transition in which the normal limits to imagination, self-understanding, and believes are relaxed. In the liminal situation of rites of passage, novelty and imagination replace rationality and social constructions. This involves a potentially unlimited freedom form any kind of structure which sparks creativity and innovation but generates ambiguity too. Louise Carus Mahdi, psychologist and author of the book *Betwixt & Between: Pattern of Masculine and Feminine Initiation* (1987) describes the subject of passage ritual as structurally invisible calling them a "*liminal persona*." Mhadi underlines that the structural "invisibility" of liminal personae has a dual character by stating that, "They are at one no longer classified and not yet classified since they are literally in the *middle* of the social/personal change."[12] This duality of character is strictly referred to the ambiguity of the liminal period itself.

Turner generalized the ambiguity of liminality by presenting two modalities of social relationships: *social structure* and *communitas* (as to refer to social *community).*[13] The difference underlined by Turner between these two terms was linked to the spatio-temporal sense. The anthropologist identified *social structure* as 'durable' social relationships, and *communitas* as 'temporal and situational' relationship in-between stages of transition. These two categorizations of groups highlight the transcendent and the societal change that an individual experiences in a rite of passage. Victor Turned defined *communitas* as:

> Not the pleasurable and effortless comradeship that can arise between friends, co-workers or professional colleagues any day. [It is a] transformative experience that goes to the root of each person's being and finds in that root something profoundly communal and shared.[14]

Therefore, *communitas* refers to a connection which is more than that experienced in mundane life. This is a terminology that will recur in the next chapters of this work since they resemble the 'groups' that are established in the middle of conflicts, the rivalry between communitas, and the final stage of the conflict itself (when it is possible to analyze it). The term *communitas* was developed in analyzing the ritual processes of Ndembu of Zambia where Turner was conducting his anthropological studies in 1957. This temporary transformative experience- *communitas*- is inherently linked to anti-

[12]Mahdi, L. C., Foster, S., & Little, M. (Eds.). (1987). *Betwixt & between: Patterns of masculine and feminine initiation*. Open Court Publishing, p. 34.
[13]Turner, V. (1977). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.
[14]Turner, E. (2012). *Communitas: The anthropology of collective joy*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 120.

structure, as defined by Turner, "a bond uniting […] people over and above any formal social bonds."[15] As the anthropologist S. Haggar presents, *communitas* is characterized by four main elements: 1) Emotional affect, which affects individual emotionally in a collective form. 2) Experience, the manifested transcendental *experience of connection* that everyone feels as something extremely communal and shared. 3)Anti-structural context, communitas calls the collapse of structure to emerge. 4) Ephemerality, the anti-structural space required involves a "temporal suspension of time that is *necessarily transient*."[16]

Based on these four features, *communitas* is an effective ideal type. However, Turner's definitions about *communitas* were continually revisited and modified. Therefore, it is challenging to really describe *communitas* with a certain definition and a set of precise elements. As also pointed out by Haggar, referring to Turner:

> Over his career, he continued to state that communitas is experiential, a dimension in which individuals confront each other as 'human totals, integral beings who recognisantly share the same humanity' without merging their identities.[17] This idea endures, of communitas as a 'mutual confrontation' between people stripped of status.[18] He later moved to describe it with Edith Turner as relational, combining 'the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity and comradeship […] an essential and generic human bond.[19]

The evolutive path that *communitas'* definitions have experienced lead to the evolution of existential into normative *communitas*. At the basic ground of this evolutive shift there is the inability for *communitas* to be maintained in *structure*. This inability- to be framed and to remain into 'borders'- is closely connected to the ambiguity of the liminal phase in rites of passage. Indeed, just like liminality, *communitas* is "a phase, a moment, not a permanent condition."[20]

As presented at the end of paragraph 2.2, Turner stressed the deep tension of any society between *structure* and *communitas*. Contrary to the latter, Turner defined social *structure* as "more or less distinctive arrangement of mutually dependent institutions and the institutional organization of

[15]Turner, V. W. (1974). *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press, p 62.
[16]Haggar, S. (2024). *Communitas revisited: Victor Turner and the transformation of a concept*. Sociology. https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996241282143.
[17]Turner, V. W. (1973). *Symbols in African ritual. Science*. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.179.4078.1100
[18]Turner, V. W. (1977). F*rame, flow, and reflection: Ritual and drama as public liminality*. Japanese Journal of Religious Studies.
[19]Haggar, S. (2024). *Communitas revisited: Victor Turner and the transformation of a concept*. Sociology, p. 22. https://doi.org/10.1177/14634996241282143.
[20]Turner, V. W. (1991). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. Cornell University Press.

social position and/or actors which they imply."[21] This latter assign to every person in the society a specific role and identity (e.g. father, teacher, daughter, president etc.). As described in paragraph 2.3, *communitas*, is the temporary abandonment of roles and identities present in the social *structure* since it resembles the confrontation between individuals and not teachers and students for example, but human beings. The highlighted tension between social *structure* and *communitas* is complex and is experienced *and* transcended *within* the ritual itself and not avoided via this latter. Therefore, the ritual/rite expands the tension between communitas and social structure. This *tension* will be analyzed in the next paragraph as one of the hidden levers behind the origin of civil conflicts within the same territory.

2.4 Liminality and Cvil Wars: Theoretical Application

Liminal theory becomes an advanced explanatory framework to crack the complexity of civil wars, reimagining them as processes of social transformation that transcends the single level of violent destruction to reveal transformation processes, ambivalences and productive potentials. B. Thomassen (2014) redefines liminality as a *threshold*, an in-between state in which civil conflicts are conceptualized as instances of *structural crisis* and creative possibility, marked by a vulnerability that, while destabilizing, allows for the remaking of identity and politics.[22] This is something that finds an echo in Zygmunt Bauman's "liquid modernity" (2000), where he interprets the disintegration of social organization in war zones as a shift towards an ontological fluidity, in which constituted norms and hierarchies disintegrate, allowing for both fragmentations and new emergences of agency.[23] Charles Tilly and Sidney Tarrow (2008), in their explanation of contentious politics, highlight the manner in which civil conflicts are processes of rupture and mobilization that are essential,[24] where suspension of the present order drives a dialectic between chaos and social reconstruction, an explanation that is compatible with Michel Dobry's (2009) concept of political fluidity as a feature of systemic crises.[25] Meanwhile, James C. Scott (1985) explains the practice of ordinary resistances of subaltern groups, thriving in the marginal interstices of conflicts and turning vulnerability into a political acting ground. John Gledhill (2000), parallelly to Scott, emphasizes how the *power*, in its disguise and disguises, is renegotiated under such circumstances of transition, with attendant crime customarily duplicating the structural and moral ambivalence of the moment,

[21]Turner, V. W. (1974). *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press, p. 15.
[22]Thomassen, B. (2014). *Liminality and the modern: Living through the in-between*. Ashgate Publishing.
[23]Bauman, Z. (2000). *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press.
[24]Tilly, C., & Tarrow, S. (2008). *Contentious politics*. Paradigm Publishers.
[25]Dobry, M. (2009). *Critical processes and political fluidity: A theoretical appraisal.* International Political Anthropology, pp. 75–90.

something which heightens their liminality.[26] This theoretical entwining not only deepens the understanding of civil wars as multifaceted phenomena, caught between annihilation and rebirth, but also provides a strong conceptual framework to investigate their historical and cultural particularities in the subsequent chapters. By doing so, liminal theory positions itself as an interdisciplinary frame that is in need, a frame which can discern *tensions* and *potentials* within the instances of crisis and provide a unique input into the ongoing anthropological, sociological and political science research.

[26]Gledhill, J. (2000). *Power and its disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press.

CHAPTER III
The Syrian Civil War

"A hallmark of the collapse of political order but, at the same time,
also, its most radical source – as well as the mirror in which,
even once established, it is doomed to reflect itself."
- A. Colombo, *Guerra Civile e Ordine Politico*, 2021.

The dichotomic nature of destruction-creation is typical of civil wars. Indeed, in his book *Guerra Civile e Ordine Politico*, the scholar A. Colombo cites Schmitt's *Glossario* and remarks that a civil war is *civil* in that it presupposes the existence of a political community; but, it is the *product* of the disintegration of that community and the emergence of "partial" identities stronger than the common one, where ideological affiliations threaten to create a bond among their followers that is stronger than the ones they had with their fellow citizens. Therefore, civil war is not only a disintegration of the political order, but a *creative force* of an order that is never truly definitive, as it is part of a constant process where the "destruction of the form through the form" takes place.[1] Therefore, civil war becomes the ideal condition for overturning the *status quo* and forming a new form of governance. Recently, the linked narrative to the political and military groups that "destroy the form with the form" in non-conventional wars started analyzing the various forms of the so-called *rebel governance*. The term "rebel" refers to any armed group participating in the conflict in opposition to the legitimately recognized state over a territory, while "governance" refers to the administration of the occupied territory with the condition that it has been secured.[2] Rosenau defines governance as a system of rules that depends as much on intersubjective meanings as on constitutions and laws.[3] While, in its rebellious component, governance can be defined as a set of actions undertaken by non-state actors to regulate the social, political, and economic life of a population during a civil war.[4] The effects of this latter often transcend the borders of the conflict and influence the international context. As for the Syrian civil war, it can be said that it is a particularly effective case- in its dramatic nature - regarding the political nature of civil wars in which forms of rebel governance emerge. At the end of 2011, after a year of protests and clashes within what has been called the Arab Spring by Western media, numerous factions and armed groups participated in the conflict that broke out in Syria, with

[1]Gledhill, J. (2000). *Power and its disguises: Anthropological perspectives on politics* (2nd ed.). Pluto Press.
[2]Arjona, A., Kasfir, N., & Mampilly, Z. (2015). Introduction. In *Rebel governance in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-6.
[3]Rosenau, J. N. (1992). Governance, order, and change in world politics. In J. Rosenau & E. Czempiel (Eds.), *Governance without government: Order and change in world politics*. Cambridge University Press, p. 4.
[4]Arjona, A., Kasfir, N., & Mampilly, Z. (2015). Introduction. In *Rebel governance in civil war*. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-6.

government forces deciding to withdraw from vast areas of their territory, choosing instead to defend others[5]. In the Syrian context, the formation of multiple internal actors and the presence of external factors have contributed to destabilization. However, this destabilization did not result in a power vacuum in all areas, but rather in new orders.[6] Thus, the collapse of the previous political order saw the emergence of different and partial political orders.

3.1 The Syrian Civil War: The Geopolitical Scapegoat

The Syrian Civil War is perhaps one of the most complex subjects in contemporary historical analysis, an ongoing war that has no set of fixed circumstances. Since the mid-1960, Syria has been governed from the Ba'ath party. The Ba'ath Party was a highly centralized and authoritarian Pan-Arabist political party which advocates the formation of a single Arab socialist nation. The adjective 'Pan-Arabist' refers to the nationalist term of cultural and political unity among Arab countries.[7] Form the *coup d'état* of 1970, Hāfez al-Assad (1930-2000) came to power and inherited the economic structures instituted by the Ba'ath party. Since Assad came to power, he has attempted to broaden the government's base of support while instituting a centralized government with power in his hands rather than in the Ba'ath's ones. Indeed, he has:

> Promoted a National Progressive Front including four other political parties. Representatives of the Arab Socialist Union (Nasserist, urban-based petty bourgeois), the Communist Party of Syria (Moscow-allied, with some support among workers and peasants), the Arab Socialist Party (rural based, populist) and the Socialist Union Movement (a splinter from the Baaih) were given ministerial posts and appointments in the People's Assembly. These parties were legalized and allowed to run candidates on the local and national level.[8]

Prior to the onset of protests in 2011, Syria was fully in the control of the Bashar al-Assad government. Between March 2011 and 2012, the rise of anti-Assad forces—some armed and backed by foreign powers—constituted a watershed moment, wresting about half of the country from Assad's control within less than a year. In 2013, a power vacuum in the northeast had completely transformed the map: Kurdish forces established authority in the north, while hardline jihadist forces, infiltrating

[5]Lund, A. (2013). *The non-state militant landscape in Syri*a. CTC Sentinel, Special issue, 6(8), pp. 23-28.
[6]Molteni, D. (2023). *Governance ribelle: califfato e confederalismo democratico nella guerra civile siriana*. NAD - Nuova Antropologia delle Disuguaglianze. https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/NAD/article/view/22172
[7]Enciclopedia Britannica. (n.d.). *Pan-Arabism*. In *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. Retrieved April 2, 2025, from https://www.britannica.com/topic/Pan-Arabism.
[8]Galvani, J. (1974). *Syria and the Baath Party.* MERIP Reports, pp. 3-16. https://doi.org/10.2307/3011567.

from surrounding Iraq and further afield, made gains on the east. The nadir of Assad's regime was reached in October 2015, when a third of Syria excluding the capital and coastal western districts fell into the hands of the Islamic Caliphate, while the Kurds solidified their northern strongholds. From 2016, with Russian intervention, Western support to the Kurds, and air attacks from carriers based in the Mediterranean, the Islamic State increasingly abandoned its conquered territory. This new era, from 2017 to the present, witnessed a strategic about-face for Assad's regime, which, with ongoing Russian assistance, recovered much of the ground lost, consolidating its authority along the western banks of the Euphrates River.

Today, Syria is carved up into four distinct zones: (1) the Assad-held government zone; (2) the Kurdish-held northeast of the Euphrates, Rojava; (3) the Idlib zone, controlled by the opposition's "Syrian Salvation Government"; and (4) the northwest and a central strip, de facto controlled by Turkey since President Recep Tayyip Erdogan deployed soldiers in 2016. In addition, a small enclave in the southeastern desert, the Al-Tanf military base, is occupied by some 200 U.S. soldiers. The Golan Heights, Syria's lawfully owned land, should also be mentioned, as they have been de facto annexed by Israel since the 1980s. Over eleven years of war have shaped two adversarial geopolitical blocs: (1) a coalition of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Turkey, Israel, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia, all against Assad and, by extension, Iran; and (2) an Iran/Hezbollah Lebanon/Russia bloc, which has all given weapons, funds, and military assets to Assad's regime. This global convergence has transformed Syria into a grand laboratory stage, evoking René Girard's *Mimetic Theory* concept of the scapegoat—a nation transformed into a foreign powers' test laboratory for their guerrilla warfare and weapons for future conflicts. The human cost is immense: independent estimates of at least 400,000 killed Syrians, together with nearly 5 million refugees outside the country and roughly 7 million displaced persons within it, from an estimated pre-war population of some 22 million in 2011. The United Nations estimates find that by 2013 Syria's human development had reverted by a minimum of four decades, with life expectancy averaging a drop from 70 to 55 years.[9] The cultural price is also profound, with hundreds of locations—six UNESCO World Heritage sites, the temples of Bel and Baal Shamin, that were blown up by jihadists in 2015—ruined or harmed.

3.2 Syria: A Young Nation in an Ancient Land

Syria's issues are greater than ethnic or sectarian, though, and rather founded upon its position as a young nation thrust upon an ancient land. Homeland to Aleppo and Damascus, two of human history's

[9]United Nations Development Programme. (2025). *Syria socio-economic impact assessment (SEIA)*. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2025-02/undp-sy-seia-final-24022025.pdf.

longest continuously occupied cities, the Arab Republic of Syria did not become its present independent state until 1946, following French colonization. Following World War I, the Middle East was partitioned by France and Britain under the *Sykes-Picot Agreement* and was assigned to the French to rule. The Sykes-Picot Agreement was a secret agreement signed in 1916 between UK and France. Its goal was the division, in case of the Allies' victory, of the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire which was weak at that time. Like all other nations with colonial boundaries, Syria was formed as an ethnic-religious mosaic but with a secular bent in the course of time, unlike nations like Saudi Arabia. Predominantly Sunni (over 70%), Syria is governed by an Alawite Shia-based minority of approximately three million. Other such ethno-religious minorities include roughly one million Druze, two million Orthodox Christians, and the northern Sunni Kurds. The potential for exploiting ethnic divisions was first recognized not by the French but by the United States in the immediate post-World War II era. As *Time* magazine has documented, foreign interference in Syria began shortly after its independence with a Washington-orchestrated coup to oust Shukri al-Quwwatli's government. This resulted in a succession of confessional military regimes through to the 1960s, when the Baath Socialist Party—later dominant in Saddam Hussein's Iraq—seized power by coup. Hafez al-Assad took over in 1971.[10] The Assad dynasty, members of Saudi Arabia's Alawite minority, have dominated Syrian politics, though, as *The Guardian* reports, the fruits of their rule accrue primarily to an elite confessional clique and not to the broader Alawite base.[11] Under Hafez, Syria was an autocracy governed by a one-party regime, and the Baath Party was one of the world's worst human rights abusers, according to *Human Rights Watch*. Baathist propaganda over decades planted a single narrative that depicted the Assads as "Protectors of the Nation" and suppressed opposition by the Mukhabarat secret police, torturing critics in remote prisons such as Tadmor in the Palmyra desert.[12]

Hafez's political acumen was also evident in his governance: he promoted relatives and supporters in senior positions but, wary of the Sunni majority (70% of the population), formed a mutual agreement with urban merchants and artisans. This mutually assured stability with Sunnis, Christians, and Druze in the top spots—such as Vice President, Foreign Minister, and Defense Minister—backing a broad coalition beyond religious affiliations. Notably, though, this exposure did not extend to Syria's Kurdish and Turkmen minorities, who remained victim to their chronic

[10]Waxman, O. B. (2017). *The U.S. intervened in Syria in 1949. Here's what happened*. TIME. https://time.com/4735438/america-syria-war-coup-history/.
[11]Black, I. (2013). *Syrian death tolls tell us a lot – but not everything*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/15/syrian-death-tolls-tell-us.
[12]Human Rights Watch. (2013). *Syria: Brigade fighting in Homs implicated in atrocities.* https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/05/13/syria-brigade-fighting-homs-implicated-atrocities.

marginalization and persecution. As in Syria in the 1980s, poverty and corruption were endemic nevertheless, the most substantial threat came from Sunni radical ideologies, promoted by Islamist forces eager to dismantle Baathist secularism. Mirroring Saddam Hussein's violence against Iraq's Kurds, Hafez employed harsh violence against opposition, as in the 1982 massacre at Hama, when Muslim Brothers' rebellion was brutally suppressed by government troops.

3.3 The Role of the Media: Contested Narratives in the Civil War

The massacre of Hama initially suggests initial discrepancies in the Syrian narrative. Al Jazeera, presumably universally regarded as an instrument of Qatari propaganda, was one of the sources that estimated the deaths in the range of 10,000 to 40,000—a figure also echoed by Western commentators in majority. Conversely, a U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency report, published three months later, estimated casualties at 2,000, with up to 400 blamed on the Muslim Brotherhood.[13] The extreme divergence points to an inherent vagueness, suggesting either the Pentagon or the media reported inaccurate reports. Hafez' s pro-Soviet alignment infuriated the West. By the 1980s, Syria was already aligned with the new Islamic Republic of Iran and backing the Hezbollah against Israel in Lebanon, which led the 1983 CIA memorandum to suggest increasing pressure on Damascus, labeling Assad "a hammer on American interests in Lebanon and the Gulf" and suggesting a "credible military threat."[14] But Hafez adeptly repelled foreign invasions. With the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, he changed his allegiance to a partner with the U.S.-led coalition opposing the Iraqi conquest of Kuwait that seemed contrary to Arab nationalism. This foreign foray disadvantaged arch-enemy Saddam and gained him economic aid from Kuwait and Saudi Arabia during a declining socialist Syrian economy.

3.4 Bashar al-Assad: From the *Axis of Evil* to the *Axis of Resistance*

Hafez's death in 2000 from a heart attack shifted power to his son Bashar, an ophthalmologist trained in London, after the intended heir, Bassel, died in a 1994 car accident. Initially, Western media hailed Bashar as a potential reformer poised to transition Syria from autocracy to democracy. This optimism proved misplaced, as the Alawite elite resisted change, fearing a Sunni majority takeover. In 2006, Bashar initiated limited economic reforms in the form of a Five-Year Plan, and market liberalization hopes were revived. Damascus and Aleppo saw modern developments—shopping malls, hotels, and

[13]Abu Jaber, M. (2025). *40 years on, Hama survivors recall horror of Assad-era massacre*. Al-Monitor. https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2025/01/40-years-hama-survivors-recall-horror-assad-era-massacre.
[14]Central Intelligence Agency. (1983). *Bringing Real Muscle to Bear Against Syria*. https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP88B00443R001404090133-0.pdf.

restaurants—earning Syria the moniker "Rose of the Middle Eastern desert" in some media, a world away from the mayhem of Iraq. Behind this veneer, rural poverty worsened as subsidies fell, driving farmers into Salafism during a crippling 2006–2011 drought. 30% of Syrians had dropped beneath the poverty level, 11% into object subsistence, by 2010, as wealth disparities moved to the area's extremes. Regime-affiliated families took advantage of the reforms, locking in a clientelist semi-capitalist economy started by Hafez.[15] Iraq's 2003 U.S. invasion weakened Syria further, an invasion that Bashar would not endorse. U.S. Undersecretary John Bolton retaliated by including Syria in Bush's "Axis of Evil." General Wesley Clark later confirmed Pentagon planning between 2001 and toppled seven governments, starting with Iraq. Frightened by a pro-Western Iraq, Bashar dispatched extremists there to upset American plans, causing sanctions pronouncing Syria a terror sponsor.[16] A 2006 WikiLeaks cable from the U.S. ambassador, nonetheless, hinted at Bashar's entrenched position, with weak vulnerabilities waiting to be cracked. Bush publicly associated Iraq's success in 2007 with challenging Iran and Syria, inspiring Saudi Israeli cooperation against Damascus. This isolation backfired, consolidating Syria's alliance with Iran, which Bashar framed as an "Axis of Resistance" to U.S.-Israeli hegemony, pronouncing new multipolarity arriving with global changes since 2003.[17]

3.5 Year 2011: New Chains, Same Prison

The 2011 Arab Spring continued to dismantle unipolarity. Western reports naively characterized such rebellions as anti-dictatorship demonstrations, without heeding conservative and Islamist goals for the creation of sharia-oriented rule. *Time*'s title "Is a Revolution Brewing in Syria?" best illustrated such misreading, to the benefit of extremists.[18] Protests began in Daraa after the arrest of boys for graffiti protesting Assad, with lethal government reprisals fueling protests nationwide. Anwar Raslan - a former Syrian intelligence officer - among men, who were later convicted in Germany for torturing 4,000 in Damascus, symbolized regime brutality.[19] But the opposition, like the Free Syrian Army—initially defectors, but later Al-Nusra and Islamic State sympathizers—were no less implicated. By 2013, it was being referred to as a "criminal enterprise" by *Business Insider*, its commanders

[15]Mugarbal, A., Al-Terkawi, K., & Masry, M. S. (2024). *The Economy of the Syrian Regime: Approaches and Policies 1970-2024*. Jusoor Center for Studies. https://www.jusoor.co/public/en/details/the-economy-of-the-syrian-regime-approaches-and-policies-1970-2024.
[16] Cumings, B., Abrahamian, E., & Ma'oz, M. (2006). *Inventing the axis of evil: The truth about North Korea, Iran, and Syria*. The New Press.
[17]Sadiki, L. (2024). *Why did Iran allow Assad's downfall?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/middle-east/diwan/2024/12/why-did-iran-allow-assads-downfall?lang=en.
[18]Walsh, D. (2011). *Arab Spring: Is a revolution starting up in Syria?* TIME. https://time.com/archive/6956894/arab-spring-is-a-revolution-starting-up-in-syria/
[19]Chulov, M. (2022). *German court jails former Syrian intelligence officer Anwar Raslan for life*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/13/german-court-jails-former-syrian-intelligence-officer-anwar-raslan-for-life

upholstered in riches because of prolonged conflicts.[20] Foreign money, especially Qatar's $3 billion,[21] fueled this war by proxy, Western and Gulf states arming insurgents via Turkey's "rat line," a secret supply route.[22] Biden later confirmed Saudi and Turkish support for Salafists, including Al-Qaeda, with Sheikh Adnan Aroor urging jihad against Alawites.[23] Mainstream media euphemisms like "moderate rebels" hid their extremism, undermining 2015 Assad-jihadist gas deals and Shia militias supported by Iran (80,000 to Israel's UN envoy). The U.S.'s $1 billion Timber Sycamore initiative, halted in 2017 following an inability to recruit fighters, depicted this morass. Casualty numbers—Clinton's 250,000 and the Syrian Observatory's 160,000—were used to fuel propaganda, with *The Guardian* lamenting their deployment for "humanitarian" justifications.[24] Obama's 2011 sanctions cut Syria's oil income in half but did not remove Assad from power, as he still had strong support.[25] Interestingly, the sole survey taken since the war began, by *British ORB International*, reported that in 2011, 47% of Syrians polled supported Assad's regime, while 26% supported the rebel coalition. These had fallen to roughly 40% and 15%, respectively, by 2018, although this was based on a sample size of only 1,000 respondents.[26] Western estimates of Assad's imminent fall, including Hillary Clinton's 2011 assertion of waning legitimacy, have not come to fruition yet, as diplomats like US Ambassador Robert Ford, France's Eric Chevallier, and Britain's Simon Collis all put his level of support at 30–40% in mid-2011.[27]

3.6 Actors in the Syrian War: United States

Each of the actors in the Syrian war had their own motivation for joining a war already in full swing. Moving step by step, starting with the United States-led alliance, for which three main strategic advantages can be enumerated. For starters, the conflict was an opportunity to eliminate the last bastion of Baathism and Arab nationalism in the Middle East. With the fall of Saddam Hussein's Iraq and South Yemen reuniting with North Yemen, Syria – along with Iran – was one of the only Middle

[20]Sherlock, R. (2013). *How the Free Syrian Army became a largely criminal enterprise*. Business Insider. https://www.businessinsider.com/how-the-free-syrian-army-became-a-largely-criminal-enterprise-2013-11
[21]Khalaf, R., & Fielding Smith, A. (2013). *How Qatar seized control of the Syrian revolution*. Financial Times. https://www.ft.com/content/f2d9bbc8-bdbc-11e2-890a-00144feab7de
[22]Hersh, S. M. (2014). *The red line and the rat line*. London Review of Books, 36(8). https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n08/seymour-m.-hersh/the-red-line-and-the-rat-line
[23] Idib.
[24]Narwani, S. (2013*) What the Syrian death tolls really tell us*. The Guardian. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/15/syrian-death-tolls-tell-us
[25]Obama, B. (2011). *Executive Order 13573—Blocking property of senior officials of the government of Syria*. The White House. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/18/executive-order-13573-blocking-property-senior-officials-government-syri
[26]ORB International. (2018). *Syria public opinion snapshot 2018*. https://orb-international.com/syria-public-opinion-snapshot-2018/
[27]BBC. (2011). *Syria's Assad 'has lost legitimacy' – Hillary Clinton*. BBC News. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14115762

Eastern nations that had not been brought under the Western sphere of influence. Secondly, and this was believed to be the principal motivation, there was a need to quarantine Iran and dismantle Hezbollah, both viewed as threat to Israel's and the Gulf States' interests, which were the principal Western regional allies. Demilitarization of Syria could have broken the above explained "Axis of Resistance" without the need for direct military engagement. The third advantage was geopolitically motivated: keeping other international powers that were regarded as threats at bay, China and Russia, by encouraging the emergence of regimes aligned with Western strategic interests. The officially promoted case for the Obama administration to intervene on behalf of the overthrow of Bashar al-Assad's regime – i.e., that it was to rescue the Syrian people from suffering and atrocities inflicted by the regime – appears scarcely credible.[28] This narrative seems to be grounded in a dependence on international actors' good faith or more broadly on human nature, and the facts render this dependence unjustified. In the past few years, there has been a fourth rationale advanced by some commentators, which proved to be a false and misleading theory: the conflict was allegedly driven by transit interest issues regarding Iranian natural gas to Europe, a sort of "pipeline war" to ensure that Qatari gas reached European markets via Syria, reducing the energy dependence of Europe on Russia. This research was supported by others, including Robert Francis Kennedy Jr., nephew of John F. Kennedy, in a piece written for *Politico*. Obama opted to remove Assad in 2009, said Kennedy, after the Syrian ruler spurned a Qatari pipeline proposal.[29] This denial supposedly prompted Assad to agree to another deal with Iran, designed to make the latter, and not Qatar, the dominant Middle Eastern exporter of natural gas to the European energy market.

Obama's strategy, however, is an explanation with several discrepancies. First, as noted earlier, the United States had been weighing destabilizing the Syrian regime since at least the 1980s, long before 2009. Secondly, in 2009, there was no Qatari offer for Syria to reject: it was not until October of that year that Qatar had initiated early-stage discussions with Turkey to establish a working party on the pipeline project. Another obstacle was posed by Saudi Arabia, through whose territory the Qatari gas would have had to pass before reaching Syria. The then-prevalent tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, already palpable in 2010, undermined the enterprise: as Middle East geopolitical expert Felix Imonti surmises, in 2012 Qatar was *forced* to abandon the pipe project in toto, precisely due to Saudi opposition.[30] Further debunking the "pipeline war" hypothesis, the

[28]The White House. (2013). *Government assessment of the Syrian government's use of chemical weapons on August 21*. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/08/30/government-assessment-syrian-government-s-use-chemical-weapons-august-21

[29]Kennedy, R. F. Jr. (2016). *Why the Arabs don't trust us.* Politico Magazine. https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/02/rfk-jr-why-arabs-dont-trust-america-213601

[30]Imonti, F. (2012). *Qatar: Rich and dangerous*. Oilprice.com. https://oilprice.com/Energy/Crude-Oil/Qatar-Rich-and-Dangerous.html

WikiLeaks cables cited by Kennedy – as cited by the *Washington Post*[31] – refer to none of this issue. Quite to the contrary, they reveal that, since 2006, the U.S. State Department had spent six million dollars to fund Barada TV, a London satellite channel used to fund propaganda campaigns and secret operations in Syria.[32] Syrian opposition groups' funding, as *WikiLeaks* has shown, began during the Bush administration well before Assad's alleged snub of Obama.[33] Therefore, if, as understandable from the data and information here mentioned, the Syrian war cannot be reduced to a "pipeline war," what were the real reasons for U.S. intervention? They were based on a primary *strategic interest*: to continue an *ongoing state of war* in the Middle East to cement regional alliances. The four Sunni allies – Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Turkey – give American access to strategic military facilities, the straits of the Arabian Peninsula, and Middle Eastern trade routes. The Pentagon, CIA, State Department, and White House all shared a common stake in keeping this array of alliances, which enables American Middle Eastern dominance, far more than any possible Qatari pipeline to Europe.

3.7 Russia's Intervention and Rationale

We now turn our attention to Russia, which officially justified its military intervention, launched in 2015, as a "defense of Syrian sovereignty." Moscow has consistently maintained that it intervened at the behest of a “legitimate, internationally recognized government,” Assad's. Over 60,000 Russian soldiers, contractors, and mercenaries were stationed during the war. Five elementary reasons justify this action. First, since 1971, Russia has maintained a naval base in Tartus on the Syrian coast, a strategic outpost Moscow does not wish to relinquish, though it is now utilized in limited form. Second, the war served as a testing ground for new weapons – including fighter jets, cruise missiles, and long-range bombers – to try out ahead of future conflicts, such as that in Ukraine. Thirdly, Syria is a traditional *ally* of Russia, to whom Moscow has consistently provided weapons and ammunition at favorable prices. Fourthly, the intervention assisted the Kremlin in *reclaiming* influence in the Middle East, sending a clear message to Washington: Russia will do everything it takes to defend its strategic interests in the region, having observed regime change in Libya and Iraq behind the scenes. Rhetorically, Moscow posed as a "defender of national sovereignties," a trick card played well in international politics, though its invasion of Georgia in 2008 and of Ukraine in 2022 show a selective application of that principle. Finally, one of the central goals was to *halt* the spread of Islamic

[31]Whitlock, C. (2011). U*.S. secretly backed Syrian opposition groups, cables released by WikiLeaks show.* The Washington Post. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/us-secretly-backed-syrian-opposition-groups-cables-released-by-wikileaks-show/2011/04/14/AF1p9hwD_story.html
[32]WikiLeaks. (2006). *US diplomatic cables*. https://wikileaks.org/
[33]Ibid.

extremism from the Middle East into Russian borders, drawing on historical experience in Chechnya. Nonetheless, Russian intervention has not been uncontentious. *Human Rights Watch* reported that, in the siege of Aleppo (lasting more than four years and concluding with Assad's forces victorious), Russia gave determinative aid, bombing populated cities with cluster bombs – prohibited under the UN Convention – and phosphorus bombs and incendiary weapons. These missions were not only to Aleppo but also hit Ghouta and Idlib.[34] The Kremlin has long justified the operations with arguments no different from those of America: the bombing was necessary to strike "terrorist warehouses and hideouts." There is proof, like the videos released by the Russians themselves, which demonstrate that civilian hospitals and schools were bombed repeatedly.

3.8 Turkey's Role and Objectives

The third major mover in the war is Turkey, which Syria, ever since 2011, has been increasingly significantly threatening across a border that is over 900 kilometers in length. Turkey's three military campaigns – "Euphrates Shield," "Olive Branch," and "Peace Spring" – were driven by several objectives.[35] First and foremost, *nationalism* and Erdogan's need to assert Turkish influence in the Arab world: Syria, an old Ottoman province, is perceived as part of Ankara's zone of influence. Second, the *refugee governance*: some four million Syrians who moved over posed a political challenge for Erdogan, who wanted to establish a "security zone" at the border to resettle them and de-populate the effect on his internal voter. Third, the Kurdish question, ever a source of irritation for Turkey: having defeated jihadists in north Syria, the Syrian Kurds, under the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) banner, proclaimed autonomy in the Rojava region. For Ankara, Turkey's capital city, this prospect is an existential threat, as in southeastern Turkey is located the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party), a listed terrorist organization for Turkey, the United States, and the European Union. Erdogan fears that the potential coming together of Syrian and Turkish Kurds could make it more difficult to hold on to internal separatist groups. A significant contradiction should be noted, too: when the West weaponized and helped the Syrian Kurds, who played a central part in combating ISIS, NATO member Turkey bombed them again and again. In 2017, when President Trump approved the pullout of U.S. troops from northern Syria, leaving the Kurds to fend for themselves, Erdogan seized the opportunity to attack in the Afrin region.[36] Afrin remains under Turkish occupation, along with

[34]Human Rights Watch. (2016). *Russia/Siria: crimini di guerra nel mese di bombardamenti su Aleppo*. https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/01/russia/syria-war-crimes-month-bombing-aleppo
[35]European Parliamentary Research Service. (2019). *Turkey's military operation in Syria and its impact on relations with the EU*. https://www.europarl.europa.eu/EPRS/EPRS-Briefing-642284-Turkeys-military-operation-Syria-FINAL.pdf
[36]Schneider, T., & Lütkefend, T. (2019). *Nowhere to hide: The logic of chemical weapons use in Syria*. Global Public Policy Institute. https://gppi.net/assets/GPPi_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf

antigovernment Syrian forces, following bombardments that included the use of unconventional weapons.

3.9 The Use of Chemical Weapons in Syria

One of the controversial aspects of the war is the use of chemical weapons, a topic that needs a dedicated scrutiny. Prior to the war, the Syrian regime had developed a vast chemical weapons program, including nerve gas, sarin, chlorine, and mustard gas. In 2013, under international pressure, Damascus formally admitted to possessing such arsenals – estimated at 1,300 tons – and joined the Chemical Weapons Convention, committing to eliminate them.[37] However, there were still rumors that part of the stockpile was concealed, and these have been increased by events like the 2018 Douma chemical attack. According to the *Global Public Policy Institute*, a minimum of 2,000 people has been murdered by chemical attacks, 98% of which were committed by Assad's regime and only 2% by jihadist troops. The institute's 2019 report reveals that chlorine attacks accounted for over 91% of the incidents attributed to the Syrian regime, as part of a strategy to indiscriminately target enemy territory, repelling civilians and opponents to the point of surrender.[38]

3.10 From 2017 to 2024: The Conflict

The Syrian conflict, far from being a civil war, is a struggle of international interests, fueled by propaganda, disinformation, and recriminations against each other. No side – whether it is using English, Russian, Persian, or Arabic – can claim to be innocent. Absolutist or demonizing accounts are not the result of critical reflection: truth, or at least a reasonable approximation thereof, presupposes skepticism and critical scrutiny of the actors involved, well removed from ideological simplism or partisanship. The April 4, 2017, chemical bombing of Khan Shaykhun, described as the most controversial episode in international relations, provides a premise from which to discuss what happened in the Syrian civil war thereafter. Since 2011, but even in recent times, Syria has been the land of militarization, external intervention, territorial consolidations and many humanitarian emergencies. A real convergence of local militias and international geopolitical agendas. The Khan Shaykhun attack, for which the Syrian government was held responsible for the use of sarin by the Organization for the *Prohibition of Chemical Weapons* (OPCW)[39] in 2017, called for an immediate

[37]Sanger, D. E., & Rudoren, J. (2013). *Syria and Activists Trade Charges on Chemical Weapons*. The New York Times. https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/11/world/middleeast/Syria-Chemical-Arms.htm
[38]Schneider, T., & Lütkefend, T. (2019). *Nowhere to Hide: The Logic of Chemical Weapons Use in Syria*. Global Public Policy Institute. https://gppi.net/assets/GPPi_Schneider_Luetkefend_2019_Nowhere_to_Hide_Web.pdf
[39]United Nations. (2017). *Seventh report of the Joint Investigative Mechanism of the OPCW-United Nations*. United Nations Security Council. https://docs.un.org/en/S/2017/904

response of USA. In the same year, 59 Tomahawk missiles were launched at the Shayrat airbase. The U.S. State Department justified the action as retribution for the use of chemical weapons (introduced in the paragraph above). Nonetheless, this intervention had no positive consequences; indeed, Syrian government troops, backed by Russian air power and Iranian and Hezbollah militia, kept advancing. Between 2017 and 2019, the regime regained strategic ground (i.e. Eastern Ghouta area and Daraa in 2018). The International crisis Group estimates that by the end of the decade, the regime had taken control of about 60% of the terrain.[40]At the same time, the U.S. led international coalition focused efforts on combating the Islamic State (ISIS). The fall of Raqqa, the "caliphate's" capital city, in October 2017, and of Baghuz, ISIS's last territorial stronghold, in March 2019, ended the group's state-like existence, albeit with the continuation of pockets of jihadist resistance in the eastern desert. In the north, Turkey increased its military operations against the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) controlled by the Kurdish YPG, who were perceived as a threat to national security due to their links with the PKK.

3.11 Stalemate and Territorial Disintegration (2020-2023)

In 2020, the war continued in a state of military stalemate when Syrian land was divided unmistakably. The Assad regime controlled the central and western territories and capital cities, with Iranian and Russian support; Turkey and its rebel friends, including the Syrian National Army (SNA), controlled the northwest, particularly Idlib, where a Russia-Turkey-brokered March 2020 ceasefire (following intense reported fighting by the UN in S/2020/216)[41] halted large-scale conflict; the SDF, with U.S. logistical support, controlled the oil-producing northeast; finally, the eastern desert was an unstable region with occasional ISIS activity. By 2023, more than 13 million Syrians were refugees or internally displaced, with 90% of the population living under the poverty line, a situation worsened by economic collapse and international sanctions.[42]By the most recent update (March 2023), the Syrian conflict had come to a stalemate, with irregular fighting in Idlib and the northeast but no significant change of territory. Authoritative sources, such as UN reports (e.g., *S/2023/120*)[43] and

[40]International Crisis Group. (2020). *Syria's Stalemate Has Only Benefitted Assad and His Backers*. https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/syrias-stalemate-has-only-benefitted-assad-and-his-backers

[41]United Nations Security Council. (2020). *Report of the Secretary-General on the implementation of Security Council resolutions on Syria* (S/2020/216). https://undocs.org/S/2020/216

[42]United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. (2022). *Humanitarian Update Syrian Arab Republic - Issue 7 | 2022*. https://www.unocha.org/publications/report/syrian-arab-republic/humanitarian-update-syrian-arab-republic-issue-7-december-2022

[43]United Nations Security Council. (2023). *Report of the Secretary-General on the situation in Syria* (S/2023/120). https://undocs.org/S/2023/120

ICG reports (*The Stalemate in Syria*, 2023),[44] spoke of a "frozen conflict" phase where there was no apparent possibility of either side defeating the other by a knockout blow. The trajectory of the Syrian conflict from Khan Shaykhun to date reflects a transition from waged war to a stance of territorial stagnation and extended humanitarian emergency. Great powers—Russia, the US, and Turkey—have determined the direction of events, defending their interests of strategy (bases, stemming the opponents, defending the borders) without uniting in a single combined solution.

3.12 Conclusion

From this chapter, it is evident that the Syrian civil war has several elements of both the liminal theory and the mimetic theory. The two theories gave theoretical lenses to highlight the complexity and the transcendental internal dimension of the conflict itself. From the next chapter, the Syrian civil war will become a geopolitical laboratory, where all the theoretical elements only introduced in chapter 3 are going to be extrapolated from the case study and singularly dissected. The chapter will start from the liminal period itself, initiated with the Arab Spring's protests of 2011 which determined the disintegration of the Baathist political order. It will follow the analysis of the establishment of the various groups within the Syrian society itself, such as the *Syrian Salvation Government* in Idlib or the Kurdish autonomy in Rojava, all based on Turner's definition of temporary *communitas*. Chapter 4 will also focus on elements of Mimetic theory like the figure of Girard's scapegoat, the rivalry between international actors, and the mimetic desire that has fed the conflicts between factions and groups for all those years. All the elements will be analyzed considering the uncertainty of the liminal period of the war itself. Indeed, the uncertainty itself will be one of the main examined elements of the chapter since it is responsible for the crystallization of the conflict in a perpetual conflict from 2011. To conclude, chapter 4 will be a real analytic path that will collect the keys to uncover the profound roots of the Syrian conflict from 2011 to 2024 which still reflects its complexity into the present Syrian scenario.

[44]International Crisis Group. (2023). *The Stalemate in Syria* (Briefing No. 89). https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/b089-stalemate-syria

CHAPTER IV

Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Mimetic Chaos

"Revolution is impossible until it is inevitable."

-Lenon Trotsky.

Chapter 4 is an analytical deep dive into the Syrian civil war captured through the lenses of Mimetic and Liminal theory. In this chapter, the case study of the Syrian civil war is treated as a geopolitical laboratory where political *substances* and social *materials* are combined, analyzed, and dissected with the tentative to reconstruct the evolution of the perpetual conflict that is the Syrian civil war and the different political, sociological, and anthropological drivers that interplayed from 2011 to today. The structurer of Chapter 4 follows a chronological order starting with the analysis of the beginning of the *liminal period* with the Arab Spring and its consequences. Then, Chapter 4 moves onto the examination of the formation of localized governance structures based on the definition of Victor Turner of *Temporary Communitas* in liminal periods. Chapter 4 leaves then the floor to Chapter 5, a focused inquiry of the Mimetic theory's pillars applied to the case study. It then becomes essential to highlight in this chapter the role of *uncertainty* as the central driver of the perpetuation of the conflict. The five paragraphs of Chapter 4 rely on majorly on primary sources, such as the Syrian Local coordination Committees (LCC) statements, the Bashar al-Assad's speeches translated by BBC Monitoring, and early UN General Assembly reports. The final goal of Chapter 4 is to reveal the Syrian civil war's structural and ideological roots using the theoretical framework of Liminal theory.

4.1 The Arab Spring's Liminal Rapture: The Disintegration of the Baathist Order

The scholars M. Haas and D. Lesch, authors of the book *The Arab Spring: The Hope and Reality of the Uprising* (2017), point out that the very name 'Arab Spring' is a controversial one. They define the term as 'misnomer.' To explain the reason why, Haas and Lesch stated:

> Ask the Syrian protesters in Syria fighting against a brutal crackdown ordered by a repressive regime in the spring of 2011 or 2012 if they feel that they are in an "Arab Spring." You will likely get laughed at or punched in the mouth.[1]

[1]Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (Eds.). (2016). *The Arab Spring: The hope and reality of the uprisings* (2nd ed.). Westview Press, p. 43.

Nevertheless, the term 'Arab Spring' is still used for a matter of academic labeling. Indeed, what is called 'Arab Spring' happened in late 2010 and early 2011 in several Arab countries against long-standing entrenched regimes. The Arab Spring was at first characterized by huge and largely peaceful popular protests which began in Tunisia, where a young man, borne of frustration and disillusionment over the socioeconomic malaise and political repression in his country, set himself on fire as an act of defiance against the government. This was the first spark that ignited the Arab Spring's fire. Indeed, the protests began in Egypt, Yemen, and elsewhere in the Arab world from the Persian Gulf to North Africa, where they lead to the death of the Libyan President Muammar al-Gaddafi due to a campaign of armed popular resistance military supported by NATO and the Arab League. This latter is officially known as the League of Arab States founded in 1945 with the aim to promote political, cultural, and social cooperation among member states (22 states) and safeguarding their independence and sovereignty.[2] Syria began to encounter mass protests in the same year – 2011- against the oppressive regime of Assad which was extremely repressive and dictatorial. Indeed, analysts consistently ranked the Arab states as the least free in the world (Tabel 1.2).[3]

Table 1.2 Freedom Score in Middle East, 2011-2023

Freedom Scores in the Middle East, 2011–23

Country	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
Algeria	36	35	35	34	34	35	35	35	34	34	32	32	32
Bahrain	30	20	18	16	15	14	12	12	12	11	12	12	12
Egypt	25	35	41	31	26	27	26	26	22	21	18	18	18
Iran	17	16	16	17	17	17	17	18	18	17	16	14	12
Iraq	25	25	24	25	24	27	27	31	32	31	29	29	29
Israel	83	81	81	81	80	80	80	79	78	76	76	76	77
Jordan	34	35	34	35	36	36	37	37	37	37	34	33	33
Kuwait	44	44	41	39	37	36	36	36	36	36	37	37	37
Lebanon	52	50	49	48	44	43	44	43	45	44	43	42	43
Libya	8	17	43	41	23	20	13	9	9	9	9	9	10
Morocco	42	43	43	42	42	41	41	39	39	37	37	37	37
Oman	27	27	26	26	26	25	25	23	23	23	23	24	24
Qatar	28	28	28	28	28	27	26	24	25	25	25	25	25
Saudi Arabia	12	10	10	10	10	10	10	7	7	7	7	7	8
Syria	9	6	5	1	-1	-1	-1	-1	0	0	1	1	1
Tunisia	23	58	59	63	79	79	78	70	69	70	71	64	56
Turkey	63	63	61	60	55	53	38	32	31	32	32	32	32
United Arab Emirates	27	24	22	21	21	20	20	17	17	17	17	17	18
West Bank/ Gaza	31/18	31/19	30/19	31/15	31/15	30/12	28/12	28/12	25/11	25/11	25/11	23/11	22/11
Yemen	29	23	25	26	25	17	14	13	11	11	11	9	9
Average Score	32	33	34	33	32	31	29	28	28	27	27	26	26

Source: Freedom House's annual *Freedom in the World* reports

[2]League of Arab States. (n.d.). *Historical overview*. League of Arab States. Retrieved from http://www.leagueofarabstates.net/en/aboutlas/Pages/HistoricalOverView.aspx.

[3]Jablonski, C. (2023). *Political rights and civil liberties in the Middle East: Trends in Freedom House data since 2010*. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/political-rights-and-civil-liberties-middle-east-trends-freedom-house-data-2010

Going back to the political violence typical of the Arab Spring period, demography affirms that the Arab Spring's protests have also been influenced by the fact that States in the Middle East and Nort Africa have more *Youth Bulges* than other region in the world. The phenomenon of the Youth Bulge postulates the hypothesis that there is a large proportion of young adults in the adult population. Related to this, the demographer Cincotta stated that where there are more young adults (16-30), there is also the higher possibility that political and social violence will happen.[4] As a matter of fact, throughout the entire Middle East and North Africa, one of every three people is between the ages of then and twenty-four. In 2010, one year before the start of the Arab Spring, 57% of the population was under twenty-five years in Syria. This number was more than the 42% in Tunisia, the 48 % in Libya, and the 51% in Egypt.[5] In addition to this theory, Haas and Lesch added that, "The more divided a society is, the more governmental power must be exerted to prevent these division from developing into violence".[6] It is no coincidence that many of the countries involved in the Arab Spring were ethically (e.g., Kurds versus Arabs), religiously (e.g., Sunni versus Shia Muslims), and ideologically (e.g., different types of Islamists, liberals, and secular authoritarians) divided. Moreover, the more violent disputes become, the more is unlike that they will result in a democracy. Indeed, the Arab Spring's path has demonstrated the precision of what political scientists name as 'tyranny-anarchy loop.' This concept refers to the tendency of some societies to oscillate between the opposing political outcomes of tyranny and anarchy while having troubles in exiting the cycle and establish durable democracies.[7] The loop is caused by the overwhelming governmental power necessary to maintain order between opposing societal groups after the overthrow of dictatorial regimes. The Syria situation after 2011 is the perfect scenario of the tyranny-anarchy loop. The weakening of Assad's regime has been the justification of the explosion of sectarian and ideological animosities in Syria. Many scholars, indeed, define the Syrian civil war as a struggle both between Syria's Sunni Muslims majority and the minority Alawite Muslim sect than a mere regimental struggle. As a matter of fact, these two groups, together with extremist Islamists, moderate Islamists, and secular groups part of the opposition, are a section of the cause of this perpetual conflict that is very far from achieving a democratic end.

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[4]Cincotta, R., & Weber, H. (2021). *Youthful age structures and the risks of revolutionary and separatist conflicts*. In A. Goerres & P. Vanhuysse (Eds.), *Global political demography: The politics of population change*. Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 57–92.
[5]United Nations, *World Population Prospects: The 2010 Revision*. New York: United Nations Population Division. http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/unpp/panel_indicators.htm
[6]Haas, M. L., & Lesch, D. W. (2016). *The Arab Spring: The hope and reality of the uprisings* (2nd ed.). Westview Press.
[7]Ibid., p. 10.

The Syrian's uprising started in Daraa even though this latter was an unlikely candidate for the start of revolts since Daraa was largely loyal to the Baath regime. Indeed, farmers in the agricultural province of Daraa extensively benefited from the Baath's land reforms and some of its citizens obtain high-ranking positions in the regime. Moreover, the common urban perception of Daraa viewed this latter as backward, marginal, conservative, and isolated.[8] Yet, in February and March 2011, due to the threat and exercise of regime violence and repression, the protest movement began. Consequently, security forces (*shabiha*) responded with violence even in front of small protests. The combination of repression and unsatisfaction culminated in mass protests on 18 March 2011. From the escalation of mass protests, the answer of security forces was directly proportional. Indeed, there were established different forms of repression, such as "mass arrests, torture, the use of live rounds against crowds and targeted individuals suggesting a 'shoot-to-kill' policy, the deployment of snipers on rooftops, and the prevention of medical treatment for the injured."[9] At the end of April 2011, the *Human Rights Watch* registered a number of detainees as large as barely containable in Daraa municipal stadium.[10] Indeed, all these moments decreed the beginning of the first stage of Liminality- the stage of *Separation*. The Separation stage is described as the symbolic or physical detachment from a previous social status or environment. In this case, the citizens of Daraa started detaching from the regime and the social condition of loyalty to it. In political science, scholars refer to this *detachment* with the SMT (Social Movement Theory) interdisciplinary framework. The SMT expresses the 'overall process of change' examines the emergence, development, and outcomes of collective actions and social movements, such as protests, revolutions, and uprisings.[11] SMT scholars have argued that excessive force and repression can be a lever for people to act collectively and mobilize against their adversaries.[12]

4.2 Communitas of Passage: The Birth of Localized Governance Structures

The Separation stage - or social collectively mobilization – is the first step toward the *passage* that is going to be completely surpassed in the last stage of liminality (*Reaggregation/Integration* stage).

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[8]Al-Attar, Z. (2012). *Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264273473_Popular_Mobilization_in_Syria_Opportunity_and_Threat_and_the_Social_Networks_of_the_Early_Risers

[9]Ibid., p. 12.

[10]Human Rights Watch. (2011). *Saudi Arabia: Stop stifling peaceful dissent*. Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/news/2011/03/08/saudi-arabia-stop-stifling-peaceful-dissent

[11]Huntington, S. P. (1968). *Social mobilization and political development*. American Political Science Review, 62(3), pp. 630–646. https://doi.org/10.2307/1953336

[12]Al-Attar, Z. (2012). *Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264273473_Popular_Mobilization_in_Syria_Opportunity_and_Threat_and_the_Social_Networks_of_the_Early_Risers

Right after the start of the mass protests in Daraa, the Syrian regime focused its energy on the so called 'instigators' and 'conspirators' accused of the escalation of the revolts. Two main figures became the targets of the regime attention in this matter: Sheikh Ahmad al-Sayyasna, the imam of the 'Umari Mosque in Daraa, and Daraa's mufti Sheikh Rizq Abd al-Rahim Abuzeid.[13] Both of them were charged with "obtaining financial resources and weapons from Sudi-based Salafists security forces." Right after the regime's violence on the 18th of March 2011, was founded the first 'committee' (*lajneh*). This latter was made of 82 men from 24 to 48 years who came from most of Daraa's main clans. They started by negotiation with security forces of the regime and, in failing this first attempt, they started providing intelligence and protection to the protestors. Within a matter of weeks, villages and towns had their own 'committee' which started communicated with the other committees and help each other out. These committee can be presented as *communitas* in the liminal world. Victor Turner emphasizes this 'spreading mechanism' of communitas by stating in the preface of his book *Communitas*, "When communitas emerges, one feels it: it is a fact of everyone's experience."[14] Turner also stressed the impossibility of really framing *communitas* in a strict definition. He underlines communitas' unpredictability of appearance founded on the necessity of people to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structures. In relation to this statement, Turner writes that *communitas* is:

> A group's pleasure in sharing common experiences with one's fellows […]. In *communitas* there is a loss of ego. One's pride in oneself becomes irrelevant. In the group, all are in unity. […] *Communitas* is thus a gift from liminality, the state of being betwixt and between. […] *Communitas* is togetherness itself. [15]

Whitin summer 2011, many armed groups were formed. Most of the members of these groups were deserters of the Syrian military and some of them were civilians. These groups represent Turner's *communitas* in the liminal scenario of the Syrian civil war. United by an anti-Assad identity, they were bonded by a sense of equality and purpose, at least in the first period of the war.

[13] Al-Attar, Z. (2012). *Popular Mobilization in Syria: Opportunity and Threat, and the Social Networks of the Early Risers*. Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/264273473_Popular_Mobilization_in_Syria_Opportunity_and_Threat_and_the_Social_Networks_of_the_Early_Risers

[14] Turner, V. (2012). *Communitas: The anthropology of collective joy*. Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1.

[15] Ibid., pp. 2- 5.

4.3 Main *Communitas* Groups: The Initial Period of Syrian Liminality

In the first two years of the Syrian civil war (2011-2012), five main groups of *communitas* were formed against the regime of Assad. Between March and April 2011, the Local Coordination Committees (LCC)[16] made by civil activists, students, intellectuals, and other non-armed members was formed.[17]The main goal of the LCC was the organization of pacific protests for the violation of human rights from the Assad regime.[18] The LCC is the example of a non-violent and inclusive *communitas* with a fluid and instable identity which made the LCC group overall vulnerable.[19] Indeed, the LCC's modus operandi was to organize protests by using social media as coordination and diffusion mean, a real example of grassroots mobilization in the liminal context.[20] Following the LCC, in the summer of 2011, the colonel Riad al-Asaad officially announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The FSA was made of disserts of the Syrian military, most of them Sunnite, and civilian volunteers from various ethnicities. At first, the FSA had a non-centralized structure with local autonomous brigades.[21] The main FSA's goals were activists' protection, the overcoming of Assad's regime, and the establishment of a democratic government.[22] In the first period of Syrian liminality, the FSA has been a paradigmatic *communitas* which refused the hierarchical order of the regime which established a common and shared sense of solidarity anti-Assad. Between 2011 and 2012, the FSA organized various attacks (Homs, Idlib, and Daraa). The FSA is a suitable example of Turner's togetherness of *communitas* due to the FSA's cohesion of multiple ethnicities and local factions even though its leadership was weak and, with time, some internal rivalries will be established.[23]

After a month from the creation of the FSA, in august 2011, in Istanbul was founded the Syrian National Council (SNC). The SNC was a political coalition dominated by Sunni but also Kurdish intellectual, Muslims, Assyrian, and Alawite representatives.[24] The SNC goals were pretty like the

[16]SyriaUntold. (2013). *Local Coordination Committees of Syria*. https://syriauntold.com/2013/06/24/local-coordination-committees-of-syria/
[17]Lister, C. R. (2015). *The Syrian jihad: Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State and the evolution of an insurgency*. London: Hurst & Company.
[18]Human Rights Watch. (2011). *"We've never seen such horror": Crimes against humanity by Syrian security forces*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/06/01/weve-never-seen-such-horror/crimes-against-humanity-syrian-security-forces
[19]Yassin-Kassab, R., & Al-Shami, L. (2016). *Burning Country: Syrians in revolution and war.* Pluto Press. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/333009273_Robin_Yassin-Kassab_and_Leila_Al-Shami_Burning_Country_Syrians_in_Revolution_and_War_London_Pluto_Press_2016
[20]Amnesty International. (2011). *The state of the world's human rights*. Amnesty International. https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol10/001/2011/en/
[21]Lund, A. (2012). *Syria's maturing insurgency*. Institute for the Study of War. https://www.understandingwar.org/report/syrias-maturing-insurgency
[22]Lister, C. (2015). *The Syrian Jihad*. Oxford University Press, p. 55.
[23]Hokayem, E. (2013). *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*. London: Routledge.
[24]Abboud, S. N. (2016). *Syria*. Polity Press.

ones of the FSA, they were against the Assad regime and wanted a democratic transition after it. In this case, the SNC was a political *communitas* which unified more than one ethnicity and religion brought together by the solidarity (at least on paper). Nevertheless, it was precisely those internal ethnic divisions that led to its failure. Indeed, the SNC joined the Syrian National Coalition in 2012. At the end of 2011, was founded the Kurdish militias (YPG – People's Protection Units and YPJ – Women's Protection Units) affiliated to the PYD in Rojava. These militias were mainly Kurdish with some other minorities with female unities included. [25] They were not always against the Assad regime but always against jihadist groups. In Turner's perspective, both the YPG and the YPJ are ethic/ ideologic *communitas*. Lastly, in 2012, Abu Mohammed al-Jolani announced the creation of the Jabhat al-Nusra. This latter was made of Sunni combatants, including local jihadists and members from Liban and Iraq. The organization was based on a Salafist-Jihadist ideology.[26] Indeed, the goal was to destroy the Assad-regime and establishing an Islamic state based on sharia. The Jabhat al-Nusra represents a sectarian *communitas* based on religious fraternity and rigid tactics (even suicides attacks) which make it less inclusive than FSA. Al-Nusra used the chaoticity of liminality to attract more combatants from FSA. All these groups used the fragility of the liminal period of the conflict in their favor. Nevertheless, liminality is complicated by fragmentation, radicalization, and external interference (like international actors, such as Turkey, Quatar, and Sudi Arabia).[27] Still, they are the perfect example of Turner's definition of *communitas*: at least in the first moment, people from different ethnicities, religions, and cultures were brought together while sharing a common sense of purpose. Here, the liminality's uncertainty plays a crucial role since it allowed the closeness between members of all groups.

4.4 Main Communitas Groups: The Recent Period of Syrian Liminality

Post 2020, Syria went through a second period of liminality due to the ceasefire mediated by Russia and Turkey in Idlib in March 2020. Indeed, in this context, the Syrian civil war enters a stalemate phase which did not involve the regime's repression. This latter, together with humanitarian crisis and regional instability, are the perfect environment for the establishment of other 'rebels' *communitas*. The stalemate phase will then be broken by the offensive guided by groups like Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) between November and December 2024 which will result in the Damascus fall and the formation of a transitional government. The groups that this paragraph presents and analyzes

[25]Allsopp, H. (2023). *The Kurds of Syria: Political Parties and Identity in the Middle East*. ResearchGate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/385181983_The_Kurds_of_Syria_Political_Parties_and_Identity_in_the_Middle_East
[26]Lister, C. (2015). *The Syrian Jihad*. Oxford University Press, pp. 85-88.
[27]Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2015). *Home*. https://www.syriahr.com/en/

under turner's perspective are anti-Assad communities often influenced by external and international actors, such as Turkey, Unites States, Russia, and Iran.

Founded in 2017, but only fully dominant after the ceasefire of 2020, is the Hayat Tahir al-Sham (HTS) group made by Sunnite combatants, local and foreign jihadists, and Syrian militiamen. The HTS's leader is Abu Mohammed al-Jolan who diriges almost 20.000 combatants.[28] The HTS's goals were establishing a moderate Islamic government, protecting Idlib's communities, and consolidating their control over the territory. The HTS has experienced through various natures of *communitas*; indeed, in 2017 they present themselves as a sectarian and pragmatic *communitas*, after 2020 they 'evolve' into a pollical force with a constructed moderate face to attract consensus, then, in 2024 they incarnate a revolutionary *communitas* based on the consolidation of power. As a matter of fact, in November 2024, the HTS managed the operation 'Deterrence of Aggression' and conquered Aleppo, Hama, and then Damascus in December. Then, at the beginning of 2025, the HTS dissolves and integrates itself into the statal institution of the transitional government guided by Ahmed al-Sharaa (ex al-Jolani).[29] Following the HTS, in the same year (2017) was founded the Syrian National Army (SNA) which also participated to the offensive in 2024.[30] The SNA is an heterogeneous *communitas* against Assad and the Kurdish autonomy. In 2024, the SNA is the perfect pragmatic *communitas* when it participated to the HTS's offensive on Aleppo and Hama. Nevertheless, sine the SNA deeply depended on the Turkish control; they are also a fragmented *communitas* whose cohesion depends on Turkish support. During the rebel offensive of 2024, the SNA achieved its peak of relevance. The SNA represents a revolutionary and ideological communitas which aims at establishing a democratic and multiethnic auto government. Between 2023 and 2024, the Suwayda Military Council (SMC) emerges. This latter is a group of Druze militants in Suwayda, a coalition of local armed groups whose goal is to protect the region and maintain security.[31] Under the Turnerian perspective, the SMC is an ethic-religious *communitas* with a strong sense of identity. Lastly, at the end of 2024, after the Assad's fall, the Syrian Popular Resistance (SPR) was born. The SPR IS A pro-

[28]Middle East Institute. (2025). *The Middle East Journal*. https://www.mei.edu/education/middle-east-journal
[29]Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (2024). *HTS Advances in Aleppo and Hama*. Available on: https://www.syriahr.com/en/
[30]Kemal, L. (2024). *From rebel factions to an army: Efforts to tame the Syrian National Army*. Atlantic Council. https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syrian-national-army-turkey-reform/
[31]Sharawi, A. (2025). *Suwayda Military Council: A new Druze coalition emerges in Syria*. The Long War Journal. https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2025/02/suwayda-military-council-a-new-druze-coalition-emerges-in-syria.php

Assad neo-Baathist militia made by ex-members of Syrian armed forces.[32] The SPR represents a nostalgic resistance communitas who is projected to the past instead to the future.

4.5 The Liminal Theater of War: A Curtain that Never Closes

Liminality is a position of social and structural ambiguity in which subjects are removed from the familiar space, the routine, and the moral obligations' structures. In the middle stage of van Gennep's theory, there are no social ties nor norms to follow. A moment in which the transgression of rules and ties becomes possible. Liminality is indeed the perfect stage for the theater of war; it leaves space for improvisation and leave the curtain wide open. But the liminal stage is both ambiguous and precarious since it draws the margins of the final picture at the end of the Liminal period. After the first phase- Separation- the pre-existed political order has been challenged and weakened. Here, the liminal transition began (before 2011- beginning of 2011). From the start of revolts, the establishment of groups and coalitions, and the erosion of collective identities of the past, Syria and its people had been transported right in the middle of the transition: the liminal phase. In this stage, the old order is suspended but the new one is not stabilized. Even after various (failed) reintegrative attempts, such as international mediation interventions like the ones in Ginevra (2012),[33]Astana (from 2017),[34] and Sochi (2018),[35] the Syrian state continues to exist but as a symbolic and fragmented entity. This perpetuation of limbo is also reinforced by the permanent presence of international actors, such as Russia, Turkey, and USA. Therefore, even though there have been many attempts to end the political liminality in Syria, this latter remains in a transitional phase in which political inclusivity has not been reached yet. This is the reason why Syria civil war is a prolonged liminality, an 'undone ritual.' The Syrian people dwell in a delicate realm of endless precarity. In this Syrian suspended liminality, the political motion seems frozen and the waiting stretches are like a breath that has been held for too long. This constant liminality combined with mimetic mechanisms can help predicting the evolution of the Syrian civil war. *Will this rite ever conclude*

[32]Mumayiz, S., & Malik, H. (2025). *Uli al-Baas (Part 1): A New Islamic Resistance Front in Syria?* The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uli-al-baas-part-1-new-islamic-resistance-front-syria

[33]Lund, A. (2017). *Geneva peace talks won't solve Syria*. The Century Foundation. https://tcf.org/content/report/geneva-peace-talks-wont-solve-syria/

[34]Khaddour, K. (2023). *The Astana Process Six Years On: Peace or Deadlock in Syria?* Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2023/08/the-astana-process-six-years-on-peace-or-deadlock-in-syria?lang=en

[35]Baytna. (2017). *Russia-Syria Talks: An Assessment of the Latest Round of Peace Negotiations*. Baytna. Retrieved from https://www.baytna.org/news-all/blog-post-russia-syria-talks

CHAPTER V

The Purgatory of Mimesis

Part I: Syrian Scapegoating

" A goat was sent into the wilderness,
bearing the sins of an entire people.
No one followed, but everyone felt relieved."
- Leviticus, 16:10, CEI Bible.[1]

The Purgatory of Mimesis resembles Charon, the Ferryman of Dante's Hell, and is the chapter that brings the reader from one point to another: from the start of the research to the end of it. This latter is divided into three parts that explore the three main pillars of Mimetic Theory of Girard (scapegoating, mimetic desire and rivalry, and the sacred). Part I, Chapter 5, is an analytical chapter which dissects the Syrian civil war under the lenses of Mimetic Scapegoating. Indeed, Chapter 5 focuses on the first main element of Mimetic theory by Renee Girard: the creation of the scapegoat. The chapter applies the scapegoating's features to the Syrian civil war from 2011 to today. The liminal mimetic period is the perfect environment for the application of Mimetic scapegoating since liminality itself resembles Dante's purgatory, a *limbo* between two places. The *ambivalence* of liminality is reflected onto the mimetic features performed by the people involved in the conflict. Indeed, liminal phases and mimetic features influence each other and both contributed to the transformation of the Syrian conflict into a *persistent* war. The goal of Chapter 5 is drawing an as detailed as possible picture of the Syrian civil war's mechanisms of scapegoating to collect as many information as possible to understand the roots of this conflict at the end of the research. There is indeed a strong correlation between the escalation of violence in conflicts and the mimetic desire that Girard presents in his books and theory. Indeed, the psychological, anthropological, and sociological spheres must be taken in consideration when dealing with political conflicts and actors since they directly (and indirectly) influence conflicts' outcomes. To achieve its goal, Chapter 5 is divided into different paragraphs that explore various elements of Mimetic Scapegoating and applies these elements to the crucial groups and phases of the conflict from 2011 to 2024. To avoid repetitions of information already presented in previous chapters, Chapter 5 starts by only establishing the

[1]Leviticus 16:10, *Bibbia CEI – Conferenza Episcopale Italiana* (2008 Edition).

theoretical foundation by linking Girard's Mimetic Theory with Liminality just to frame the chapter but then goes straight to the first mimetic element: the *scapegoating mechanism*.

5.1 The Scapegoating Crisis: The Eclipse of Culture

For Girard, people desire what others desire. This *imitative* mechanism generates a mimetic *loop*: the desire leads to potential rivalry which can create conflict that eventually produces violence. The creation of the scapegoat is presented by Girard as the *savior* of this loop. Indeed, Girard admits that to stop violence and its escalation, people/groups/societies unconsciously create a scapegoat. This latter can be an individual or a group of individuals blamed for the violence happening. Applying this mimetic concept to the Syrian civil war sheds light on many different scapegoats created by divergent narratives and groups of the conflict. Scapegoating has a dual role; it *unifies* factions while *alienating* a part of society. In his work *The Scapegoat*, Girard distinguishes between collective *persecution* and those with collective *resonances*. To use Girard's words:

> By collective persecutions, I mean acts of violence committed directly by murderous crowds, such as the massacre of Jews during the Black Death. By persecutions with collective resonances, I refer to acts of violence like the witch hunts, which were legal in form but generally fueled by an overexcited public opinion.[2]

Even though Girard himself admits that the distinction is not crucial, it is still relevant to be aware of its existence since it opens the discussion on scapegoating with a precise theoretical approach. Girard continues by explaining the period in which the mimetic loop and the creation of the scapegoat are more likely to happen. In relation to this, the anthropologist underlines the common denominator between mimetic periods: a prolonged moment of *crisis*. The causes of the crisis are not relevant, what matters- underlines Girard- is the social perception of the total disruption of the *society* itself. This latter- society- is used as to describe the set of *rules* and *differences* which define the cultural orders. The disruption of these orders leads to the break of institutions which deletes hierarchical and functional differences in the social environment. Times of crisis- describes Girard- are made of pressuring temporal moments and rapid reciprocity which pushes negative behaviors, such as insults, revenge attacks, neurotic symptoms.[3] These are all negative results of the *eclipse* of culture and in this regard, Girard explains the consequences of this eclipse:

[2]Girard, R. (2003). *Il capro espiatorio*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, p. 28.
[3]Ibid., p. 32.

> Faced with the eclipse of culture, men feel helpless […]. But, instead of blaming themselves, individuals inevitably tend to shift the blame either onto society, which leads to their dereliction of responsibility, or onto other individuals who have been particularly harmful, for reasons that are not difficult to discover. The suspects are in fact accused of a particular type of crime.[4]

Consequently, there is the creation of *crowds* that take the place of the whole society. The crowd varies from the society since it is not structural nor well distributed, but chaotic and unpredictable. Indeed, being in the middle of a crowd is often used as a synonym to describe a sense of claustrophobia and general chaos. The crowd is most of the time upset, it is angry for something or to someone. In relation to this negative feeling of the crowd, Girard affirms that:

> The crowd always tends toward persecution because the natural causes of what upsets it, of what transforms it into a mob, cannot interest it. The crowd, by definition, seeks action, but cannot act on natural causes. It therefore seeks an accessible cause that satisfies its desire for violence. The members of the crowd are always potential persecutors, since they dream of purging the community of the impure elements that corrupt it, of the traitors who threaten it.[5]

Persecution of traitors is therefore a consequence of the crowd which is a consequence of the eclipse of culture generated by a crisis where institution have fallen. This is like the mimetic loop first addressed in the beginning of the chapter. Girard indeed describes the persecution as a natural action of the upset crowd in which its members are always persecutors in search of impure traitors. The elimination/expulsion of traitors is the solution of the crisis instability. As Girard states:

> Mimetic desire spreads around in diverse ways until it gets all people fighting. The only way to solve this type of conflict is through a single victim. And a single victim is possible because, at that point, everybody is doing the same thing.[6]

This scapegoating mechanism is present in the Syrian civil war, a complex crisis scenario with many different actors (*crowds*), such as the Assad Regime, the rebels' factions, the jihadists groups (ISIS etc.), and international ones. As presented by Girard, the scapegoating mechanism can be reinforced with propaganda and, in modern times, with media. Indeed, this is what happened- and still happens-

[4]Girard, R. (2003). *Il capro espiatorio*. Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, p. 35.
[5]Ibid, p. 40.
[6]Girard, R., Haven, C. (2020). *Conversations with René Girard* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Academic, p. 22. https://www.perlego.com/book/1387420

in Syria during the crisis. Moreover, with the use of state propagandistic media (*SANA*), rebels channel, and ISIS's magazines (*Dabiq*) the persecution mechanism and the creation of many scapegoats have been helped and reinforced. This is due to the intrinsic crowd desire for violence.

5.2 Terrorism: The De-personalization of the Scapegoat

Terrorism, if stripped by its historical background, appears for what truly is: not a phenomenon but a *method*. More precisely, terrorism is an *efficient method* of persecution of political, ideological, geopolitical interests based on fear and terror. A cynical and diffused strategy to achieve cynical and diffuse goals. The strategy of fear is the multiplicator of power. The Italian magistrate Rosario Aitala defines the power of terror as the *ability* to manipulate, influence, and coerce a great portion of the audience that would have been more challenging to achieve without the element of terror.[7] Terrorism takes advantage of human gracility and awareness of transience since it exploits humanity by proclaiming itself as an *abuser* of it. Antonio Cassese, a famous jurist advocate for dignity and human rights, served as President of the European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and was the first President of the Hague Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia, which investigated and prosecuted acts of genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed during the 1990s conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia (known internationally as the ICTY, *International Criminal Tribunal* for the former Yugoslavia).[8] Cassese conducted various studies on international terrorism and highlighted the distinctive feature of it: the *de-personalization* of the victim.[9] Terrorists target not a specific person due to what they say or own, but they act blindly and see a victim as a *mean* to spread a message. Therefore, terrorists de-personalize victims since their *individuality* is irrelevant for their scope. A terrorist pretends to *substitute* God and start deciding who lives and who dies; this is indeed what generates terror, panic, and fear. But why is terrorism so popular? What is the reason why people decide terrorism over other strategies? The strategy of terror is strictly *functional* to the ideological, political, and geopolitical power. Through terror, the strengths of an individual exponentially increase since it follows a specific methodology. In this matter, Aitala presents:

> What is common to all forms of terrorism is the divergence between the immediate object of the action (the victims), the target audience (the public to whom the message is addressed), and the goal of the action (the cause). The terrorist does not resort to violence out of sheer malice, but rather out of calculation: he cynically views the harm

[7]Aitala, R. (2018). *Il metodo della paura: Terrorismi e terroristi*. Gius. Laterza & Figli.
[8]Ibid., p. 70.
[9]Cassese, A. (2003). *International criminal law*. Oxford University Press.

> he is about to inflict as a necessary tool to pursue his own interest—a higher political, ideological, or geopolitical objective.[10]

Calculation is indeed the key aspect of a terroristic act, terrorists calculate the message to spread, the audience to attack, and the type of emotions that they mire to generate in crowds. Calculation is also present in Girard's creation of the scapegoat in times of crisis. As a matter of fact, an *indirect* and *intrinsic* calculation of the enemy is what is created while applying the scapegoating mechanism.

5.3 Who are the Terrorists?

The term *terrorist* has been used in history in various ways. In Syria it has been reserved to the *enemy*, a vulgarization process of the term used to discredit and morally condemn every political opposition of the Assad regime. Indeed, for the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, everyone who was against his regime was considered a terrorist. In a 2017 interview, he stated that "it is possible to use every means to defend the people," as the fight against terrorism is "a constitutional and legal duty." Therefore, if following his presentation, for such a 'noble' purpose, even chemical weapons become acceptable.[11] Bashar al-Assad, the son of Hafiz al-Assad, maintained the multi-layered identity-building implemented by his father and used nationalist *ideology* to increase his popularity since many identities were living in Syria, such as Sunni Arab Muslims, Alawites, Christians, Druze, and Kurds. All these communities had spatial locations and varied features. They were largely identifiable with their religious or ethnic community. At the start of the French mandate, the Sunni majority dominated, just as they had done during Ottoman times. The French attempted to diminish the superiority of Sunnis by encouraging minority groups such as the Alawites, which they granted semi-autonomous status. This helped Alawites improve their position in society and enabled a minority to achieve political success. In the case of the Druze, they are a sectarian group that is mostly located in Jabal al-Druze and comprise approximately 3 percent of Syria's population. They exerted more influence than their population size and territorial boundaries. The Druze supported the regime because they saw the Alawites as a buffer for their economic and personal security.[12] They were mostly disengaged from the Syrian Uprising at first. But when the war turned into a sectarian struggle between Alawites and Sunnis, they embraced Alawite domination.[13] The other Syrian minority is the Kurds, who are predominantly Sunni Muslims and constitute a non-Arab population, some 9 percent of the total. Their relations with the Syrian state have been strained due to the evolution of Arab nationalism,

[10]Cassese, A. (2003). *International criminal law*. Oxford University Press, p. 4.
[11]Ibid., p. 8.
[12]Zisser, E. (2007). *Commanding Syria: Bashar Al-Asad and the first years in power*. I.B. Tauris.
[13]Rabinovich, I., & Valensi, C. (2021). *Syrian requiem: The civil war and its aftermath*. Princeton University Press.

which fostered intolerance of minorities. The Kurds were seen as undermining the state's efforts to foster an Arab identity that was pan-Arab in character. Ba'ath Party policies were discriminatory towards them, treating them unfairly. During the Uprising, the Kurdish community was not supportive of protesters, with them being more observers. This strategy worked, as Bashar al-Assad granted them some rights that they had never had before.[14] To convince the audience, Bashar al-Assad help himself with speech acts with the aim to achieve a *securitization* of the opposition by associating it with terrorists from al-Qaeda. Below some extrapolated parts of Bashar al-Assad speeches registered by SANA:

> Terrorists are concerned neither with reform nor with dialogue. They are criminals who have set themselves a task [...] They will never stop unless we stop them (2012)[15] […] we cannot discuss, for example, al-Qaeda and its offshoots and organizations that are affiliated to Al Qaeda, for example, terrorists [...] we have to focus on getting rid of the terrorists, their terrorism and their ideology (2013).[16] […] Opposition means national, it means working for the interests of the Syrian people […] But you have to separate the national and the puppets […] some of the groups are puppets, as I said, of other countries […] the majority are al Qaeda, which is ISIS and al-Nusra, with other similar factions that belong to al Qaeda but are smaller (2025).[17]

From these speeches, it is clear the beginning of the scapegoating. And it goes on, in other speeches, in which the President scapegoats the opposition by levering on religious identities:

> […] What is happening on the street has three components […] The third and more dangerous component, despite its small size, consists of those who have extremist and takfiri ideology […] The ideology we see today is no different from that we saw decades ago. It is exactly the same. What has changed, however, is the methods and the persons. This kind of ideology lurks in dark corners in order to emerge when an opportunity presents itself or when it finds a handy mask to put on (SANA, 2011).[18] […] In fact, the terrorists have not attacked minorities. They attack everybody in Syria, and the

[14]Dümen, H. (2023). *Securitization and identity: The speech acts of Bashar al-Assad*. Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.
[15]Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). (2013). *President al-Assad: We focus today on getting rid of terrorists and their ideology*. http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=3712
[16]SANA. (2013). *President al-Assad: We focus today on getting rid of terrorists and their ideology.* SANA. http://www.sana.sy/en/?p=3712
[17]SANA. (2015). *Interview of President Bashar al-Assad to* Foreign Affairs Magazine. https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=26278
[18]Al-Bab. (2011). *Speech by President Bashar al-Assad at Damascus University*. https://albab.com/albaborig/albab/arab/docs/syria/bashar_assad_speech_110620.htm

> minorities have not been singled out in themselves, but this language has been necessary for them to create divisions within Syrian society (SANA, 2015).[19]

The elements present in these speeches are part of the scapegoating mechanism used to create the enemy, the 'other.' The President here tried to present the enemy as not true believers, as someone who was trying to penetrate Syria and put all minorities in danger. The minorities to which he was referring were Alawites, Druzes, Christians and Kurdish Syrians who supported regime because they feared from Sunni-led government and what might follow afterwards.[20] This process of de-personalization, as Cassese names it, of a specific target allows the justification of crackdowns and violent acts. Moreover, scapegoating also deepened sectarian divides. The Syrian uprising, once a wide-based alliance of secular and Islamist elements, rapidly dissolved along sectarian and ideological lines. Early rebel Sunni-majorities scapegoated minorities (e.g., Alawites, Christians, Druze) as regime agents, fomenting sectarianism.[21] For example, the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and others blamed Alawite populations for assisting regime crimes, even encouraging Alawite village raids in 2012–2013.[22] This scapegoating united various rebel groups against a common enemy, but also raised retaliatory violence, rendering communal mistrust even more profound.

5.4 Post-Assad: HTS and ISIS's Scapegoating

In the post-Assad period (2024–2025), actors like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), which dominated Idlib, shifted scapegoating to consolidate power. HTS scapegoated Kurds for separatism and collaboration with foreign players (e.g., America-backed Syrian Democratic Forces) and ex-regime elements, labeled as revolution traitors.[23] HTS Telegram channels disseminate discourses portraying these groups as obstacles to a unified Sunni Islamist state, legitimizing purges and territorial control.[24] This scapegoating illustrates the malleability of the liminal condition, whereby parties exploit transitional ambiguity to reinvent enemies and legitimize authority. Another example of scapegoating is the one introduced by ISIS in 2014. Indeed, ISIS established a specific scapegoating paradigm bed out in apocalyptic ideology. The group scapegoated religious and ethnic minorities—particularly Yazidis, Shia, and Christians—as infidels at risk of its caliphate. Propaganda, for instance, *Dabiq* magazine, portrayed these groups as existential threats, promoting atrocities like the Yazidi genocide

[19]SANA. (2015). *Interview of President Bashar al-Assad to Russian media*. https://www.sana.sy/en/?p=33642
[20]Dümen, H. (2023). *Securitization and identity: The speech acts of Bashar al-Assad*. Turkish Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.
[21]Lund, A. (2013). *The Fragmentation of the Syrian Opposition.* The Middle East Journal, pp. 587–605.
[22]Human Rights Watch. (2013). *Syria: Sectarian Attacks by Opposition Groups*. New York: HRW.
[23]International Crisis Group (ICG). (2024). *Syria After Assad: Navigating the Power Vacuum*. Brussels: ICG.
[24]Stanford University. (2024). *Mapping Militant Organizations: HTS Propaganda in Post-Assad Syria*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

in Sinjar (2014).[25] For instance, Dabiq's articles described Shia as "Rafida" (*rejectionists*) and Yazidis as devil-worshippers, to justify enslavement and mass murder.[26] ISIS's scapegoating united its fighters by creating a stark division between the "true" Muslim populace and the enemies, cementing internal solidarity.[27] Scapegoating videos that circulated on channels like Telegram were made to appeal to this narrative, casting violence as divine intention. While ISIS's loss of territory up to 2018 diminished its influence, it left behind a legacy of scapegoating that influenced post-Assad movements that adopted the same rhetoric against minorities to develop superiority.[28] The collapse of Assad in 2024 initiated an ambivalent state of power vacuum and competing factional claims to legitimacy. Foreign-sponsored factions (e.g., Turkish or U.S.-aligned factions) and former regime collaborators were some of the new scapegoats, accused of undermining Syria's sovereignty or revolutionary ideals.[29] For example, HTS and other Islamist groups held the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) responsible as Western proxies, justifying military intervention against Kurdish territory.[30] Similarly, former regime figures were scapegoated by secular groups as obstacles to democratic transformation to rally political backing.[31] Scapegoating in this phase illustrates the *volatility* of the liminal situation, in which groups utilize *ambiguity* to redefine enemies and consolidate power.[32] The absence of a unified government heightened the role of propaganda, as groups battled to manage narratives in a fragmented media landscape.

5.5 The Role of Propaganda: Shaping Narratives and Justifying Violence

Propaganda fueled scapegoating at every stage, scripting the narrative and sanctioning violence. The Syrian government's *SANA* and TV were created a singular image of the opposition as terrorists through constant deployment of images of destruction aimed at dehumanizing rebels (2011–2024). Rebel movements, lacking any unified media, utilized social media like *Telegram* and *X* (at the time *Twitter*) to broadcast scapegoating rhetoric. For instance, HTS's *Telegram* channels in 2024–2025 constructed Kurds and regime allies as threats to Syria's Islamic identity, mobilizing fighters and sympathizers.[33] Propaganda has been the pillar of scapegoating throughout the Syrian conflict (2011–

[25]UN Human Rights Council. (2016). *They Came to Destroy: ISIS Crimes Against the Yazidis*. Geneva: UNHRC.
[26]Dabiq. (2014). *Issue 4: The Failed Crusade.* Al-Hayat Media Center.
[27]McCants, W. (2015). *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
[28]International Crisis Group (ICG). (2024). *Syria After Assad: Navigating the Power Vacuum*. Brussels: ICG.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Stanford University. (2024). *Mapping Militant Organizations: HTS Propaganda in Post-Assad Syria*. Stanford University Press.
[31]Chatham House. (2025). *Syria's Post-Assad Transition: Factional Dynamics and Power Vacuums*. London: Chatham House.
[32]Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
[33]Stanford University. (2024). *Mapping Militant Organizations: HTS Propaganda in Post-Assad Syria.* Stanford University Press.

2025), employed as a successful means of building narratives, demonizing populations to be targeted, and giving rationale to violence. Through the conflict, groups like the Assad regime, opposition forces, ISIS, and post-Assad actors utilized diverse media platforms to build scapegoating messages that resonated with their constituencies and provided rationale to their action. Decentralization of propaganda—via competitor *Telegram* channels and local radio—during the post-Assad period replicated the fragmentation of the liminal environment, as each group designed personalized scapegoating narratives to legitimize its power.[34]

5.6 The Assad Regime: *#SyriaFightsTerror*

The Assad regime's disinformation, disseminated primarily by the *Syrian Arab News Agency* (SANA) and state television, was instrumental in depicting the opposition as a unified terrorist threat. Since 2011, *SANA* dispatches consistently used the terms "armed gangs" or "foreign-backed terrorists" to describe protesters and rebels, using repetitive images of damaged infrastructure to equate opposition with chaos.[35] For example, a 2012 *SANA* report described the Homs uprising as the work of "terrorist groups backed by Qatar and Turkey," demonizing insurgents and legitimating violent sieges.[36] State television underpinned this narrative with montages of brutality, often edited to maximize rebel horrors while downplaying regime abuses.[37] This regime propaganda united regime loyalists, particularly Alawites, by portraying the conflict as an existential fight against foreign plots. The regime also utilized *Twitter* to extend its reach, and Twitter accounts like @SANA_English posted often to give regular updates depicting the opposition as terrorists. In its 2016 post, @SANA_English wrote, "Syrian Army annihilates terrorist cells in Aleppo," to validate the regime's narrative of counterterror.[38] Regime-biased bots completed these activities by amplifying such hashtags as *#SyriaFightsTerror t*o flood public discourse.[39] This calculated placement of social media illustrates how the regime used traditional propaganda to cyber space, amplifying its scapegoating campaign.

[34]Chatham House. (2025). *Syria's Post-Assad Transition: Factional Dynamics and Power Vacuums*. London: Chatham House.
[35]Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). (2011–2024). *Archives of Conflict Reporting*. Damascus: SANA.
[36]Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA). (2012). *Homs Under Attack by Terrorist Gangs*. Damascus: SANA.
[37]Hinnebusch, R. (2012). *Syria: From Authoritarian Upgrading to Revolution?* International Affairs, 88(1), pp. 95–113
[38]SANA English. (2016). Twitter post, October 15.
[39]Jones, M. O. (2019). *Propaganda, Fake News, and Bots: The Syrian Conflict in the Digital Age.* Journal of Middle East Politics and Policy, 7(2), pp. 45–60.

5.7 Rebel Factions and Decentralized Social Media

Contrary to the centralized media of the regime, rebel groups relied on decentralized social media platforms like Twitter and Telegram for spreading scapegoating discourses. Not later, groups like the Free Syrian Army (FSA) used Twitter to scapegoat Alawite populations and make them the responsible of the regime violence, and therefore, sectarian assaults erupted. For instance, a 2013 tweet by an FSA-affiliated account (@FSA_News) called Alawites "Assad's loyalists," justifying attacks on the villages of their people.[40] This united Sunni rebels but exacerbated communal rivalries. In the post-Assad period (2024–2025), Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) was a dominant force in Idlib, blaming Kurds and former regime collaborators through *Telegram* channels. Channels like "Idlib Voice" framed Kurds as "separatist agents of the U.S., blaming them for weakening Syria's Islamic identity."[41] A 2024 *Telegram* message from an HTS-aligned channel declared, "Kurds and regime traitors threaten our revolution," mobilizing militants for territorial control.[42] Telegram's encryption allowed HTS to escape censorship, and it became a necessary platform for faster, more targeted propaganda. The efforts reflect the decentralization of the liminal context, where decentralized media enabled groups to construct tailored scapegoating narratives.[43]

5.8 ISIS's Propaganda Methods

ISIS's propaganda, specifically its *Dabiq* magazine and murder videos, was highly advanced since it combined religious justifications with brutal violence to vilify religious and ethnic minorities. *Dabiq*, published online between 2014–2016, featured communities like Yazidis and Shia as the caliphate's existential threats. An example is *Issue 4 of Dabiq* which rationalized Yazidi genocide by calling them "devil-worshippers," rationalizing enslavement and mass killings of them.[44] Execution videos, disseminated via *Telegram* and dark-web platforms, depicted violence as a divine mandate, uniting ISIS's constituency and attracting foreign fighters.[45] The use of *X* by ISIS was calculated as well, with handles like @AlHayatMedia (closed in 2015) posting glossy videos and infographics to idealize its caliphate and demonize enemies. A 2014 post from an ISIS-linked account read, "Shia apostates will face Allah's wrath," reifying scapegoating discourses.[46] In the use of encrypted sites and viral content,

[40]Human Rights Watch. (2013). *Syria: Sectarian Attacks by Opposition Groups*. New York: HRW.
[41]Stanford University. (2024). *Mapping Militant Organizations: HTS Propaganda in Post-Assad Syria*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, p. 76.
[42]Ibid, p. 82.
[43]Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.
[44]Dabiq. (2014). *Issue 4: The Failed Crusad*e. Al-Hayat Media Center.
[45]McCants, W. (2015). *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
[46]Weiss, M., & Hassan, H. (2015). *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror.* New York: Regan Arts.

ISIS trans-nationalized its propaganda, making scapegoating a transnational recruitment and unity mechanism.

5.9 Post-Assad Propaganda: Vacuum of Liminal Power

The post-Assad period (2024–2025) saw an increase in decentralized propaganda, mirroring the vacuum of power of the liminal environment. Competing *Telegram* channels, local radios, and *X* accounts became spaces for factional narratives. Secular factions, for instance, used *X* to accuse former regime allies, with accounts like @SyriaTransition2024 accusing them of "betraying the revolution."[47] Simultaneously, Islamist groups such as HTS aimed at foreign-sponsored groups, such as the U.S.-sponsored Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), through Telegram messages asserting, "SDF serves Western imperialism."[48] Local rebel-held radio stations, including Idlib's "Voice of the Revolution," also disseminated such messages, labeling Kurds and secularists as a threat to Syria's future.[49] This decentralization underscored propaganda's adaptability within liminal situations, where societies employ media splintering for the establishment of legitimacy. Its absence raised scapegoating intensity since each grouping came up with their own objectives to galvanize support as well as condone violence.[50] Propaganda served as the pivot around which scapegoating in Syria revolved and shifted from state media employed by the Assad government to rebel organization's decentralized use of social media and ISIS's sophisticated international campaign. Platforms like *SANA*, *X*, *Telegram*, and *Dabiq* built narratives of dehumanized adversaries, factions' unification, and violence promotion. Propaganda fragmentation via opposing channels and local media within the post-Assad liminal setting reflects Syria's fractured socio-political setting, with the enduring impact of scapegoating in conflict dynamics.

5.10 Conclusion

Scapegoating dynamics in the Syrian conflict both mobilized groups and perpetuated violence. By positioning specific groups as threats to survival, groups diverted domestic dissent, mobilized support, and legitimized violence. The liminal time, especially in transitional periods like 2011–2012 and 2024–2025, intensified scapegoating's power, as groups were suspended between instability and

[47]Chatham House. (2025). *Syria's Post-Assad Transition: Factional Dynamics and Power Vacuums*. London: Chatham House.
[48]Stanford University. (2024). *Mapping Militant Organizations: HTS Propaganda in Post-Assad Syria.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
[49]International Crisis Group (ICG). (2024). *Syria After Assad: Navigating the Power Vacuum*. Brussels: ICG.
[50]Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

needed legitimacy.[51] Propaganda was crucial, building abstract enemies into concrete targets by dehumanizing them. Scapegoating follows the changing socio-political context of Syria. The general "terrorist" label of the Assad regime gave way to more precise sectarian scapegoating in post-Assad Syria, and the rebel forces and ISIS adapted to make new targets for their ideological and territorial agenda. Such flexibility reaffirms flexibility of malleability of scapegoating as a tool for power consolidation in liminal contexts. In conclusion, scapegoating was a feature shared by the Syrian war, unifying groups and spurring violence across the course of the war. From dehumanization by the Assad regime to ISIS's genocidal propaganda and post-Assad stampede to legitimacy, scapegoating adopted Syria's *liminalizing* frames, using instability to rebrand enemies and justify violence. Propaganda, whether in state media, social media, or extremist journals, played a significant role in authoring these narratives. As Syria navigates its post-Assad period, coming to an understanding of scapegoating provides significant insights into conflict dynamics as well as reconciliation difficulties.

[51]Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Chicago: Aldine Publishing.

CHAPTER VI
The Purgatory of Mimesis
Part II
Mimetic Desire and Rivalry

"Here we encounter shadows who imitate the virtuous."
- Dante. Purgatory, Canto III

Part II of the Purgatory of Mimesis, Chapter 6, is an analysis of the second pillar of Mimetic Theory: mimetic *desire* and *rivalry*. This chapter examines how mimetic desire leads to mimetic rivalry between factions and international actors fragmented the opposition and contributed to the prolongation of the conflict. René Girard's theory of mimesis presents human desire as imitative by nature; this willingness to imitate creates rivalries that escalate into war and violence as people or groups compete for the same things or status due to a model they wish to copy.[1] In the Syrian Civil War (2011-present), mimetic rivalries have played a key role in destabilizing the opposition, prolonging the conflict, and shaping post-Assad politics. This chapter aims to link the previous discussion of mechanisms of *scapegoating*, which explained how groups were targeted so that internal tensions could be projected, and the subsequent analysis of the *sacred* in stabilizing or destabilizing societies. By integrating Victor Turner's liminality, this chapter argues that the liminal position of the Syrian conflict increases mimetic rivalries and instigated a zero-sum mindset among local groups and global players. The imitative competition for legitimacy, land, and influence in the rivalries polarized the opposition and cemented proxy wars, with significant implications for post-Assad Syria.

6.1 The Origins of Rivalry: The Making of the Enemy

The *friend-enemy relationship* has been first theorized by the jurist Carl Schmitt who considered as the constitutive trait of the *tout court* politics (the politics as it is, in absolute sense). Schmitt strongly underlines the inherent ineradicable dimension of conflict in politics, "The specific political distinction to which political actions and motives can be reduced is that between friend and enemy."[2] For Schmitt, the enemy is 'the other' in the most absolute sense and resembles the essence of politics

[1]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the Sacred*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
[2]Carl Schmitt. (2007). *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab, Expanded ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p. 26.

which is not based on moral and economic principles but rather on the possibility of existential conflict. The Iranian philosopher–poet Zarathustra (600–583 BC) described *conflict* as a continuous struggle between the "powers of Light" and the "powers of Darkness" around and within each human individual.[3] As a consequence of conflict, *violence* is what often emerges from the collision of opponents. Is the previous presented loop which starts from a divergence and ends in violence. Greek political philosophers and poets were among the first to address the institutional impact of wars. Plato handled *war* as a constituent element of politics and attempted to assign roles to primary players like the guardians and a mechanism of managing them.[4] Aristotle advocated for war as a way of establishing governmental systems upon people.[5] Machiavelli, in an era of crumbling empires, silenced nations, and cyclical war, reasserted the position of Aristotle, seeing war as a means for the Prince to maintain sovereign control.[6] Hobbes considered that general war compelled humans to make agreements with kings in order to be free from violence and in order to have order, and that such agreements only held good as long as kings were willing to keep everyone at peace.[7] Karl Marx, building upon the shoulders of Hegel's dialectics, recognized human history as a "class struggle" towards communism.[8] By the nineteenth century, laissez-faire liberal economists inspired by Adam Smith's work espoused economic competition, a peaceful veneer of strife, as the optimum way to promote peace and most prosperity for the most people.[9] Phenomena like economic competition and class struggle are made of two components: a part and an opposite part. This *opposition* is what generates rivalry. For Renè Girard, rivalry is a collateral damage of the mimetic crisis generated by the contamination of mimetic desire. In Girard's words:

> If you have two people who desire the same thing, you will soon have three, when you have three, they contaminate the rest of the community faster and faster. The differences that separate them collapse. And therefore, you go toward what I call a mimetic crisis, the moment when everybody at the same time is fighting over something. Even if that

[3]ScienceDirect. (2018). *Political conflict – an overview*. In *ScienceDirect Topics*. Elsevier. Retrieved from https://www.sciencedirect.com/topics/social-sciences/political-conflict
[4]Plato. (2008). *The Republic*, trans. by R. Radice. Milan: BUR Rizzoli, Book V, 470c–471c.
[5]Aristotle. (1998). *Politics*, tr. R. Laurenti. Bari: Laterza, Book VII, 1333a–1334a.
[6]Machiavelli, N. (2006). *The Prince,* ed. by G. Inglese. Turin: Einaudi, Chapter XIV.
[7]Hobbes, T. (1994). *Leviathan*, trans. by A. Pacchi. Milan: FrancoAngeli, Chapter XVII.
[8]Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2008). *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, ed. by E. Sbardella. Rome: Newton Compton, Introduction.
[9]Smith, A. (1976). *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, ed. by E. Cannan. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, Book IV, Chapter II.

> object disappears, they will go on fighting, because they will become obsessed with each other. And as that conflict grows, it threatens to destroy the whole community.[10]

Mimetic contagion is the spreading mechanism of mimetic desire which leads to rivalry and violence. Girard underlines that societies tend to go wrong when you have more and more mimetic rivalry; this is the reason why all rules in societies are an effort to prevent mimetic rivalry. An example of this prevention of rivalry is given by primitive communities:

> If you look at primitive communities, for instance, why do they have such complicated marriage rules? In order to prevent men who would fight over the same women from gathering on these women and desiring them together. Brother incest is always forbidden because it would lead to a battle between these brothers.[11]

Girard goes on and explains how the measured and ritualized acts of violence save the collective from cannibalizing itself.[12] Mimet rivalry is nothing more than competition between actors who fight for the same desired object or superiority (mimetic desire). Liminality intensified these competitions. The collapse of state control in areas held by rebels created a power vacuum, a classic liminal situation in which social structures and actors compete to create new orders.[13] Resource scarcity, a lack of arms and funding most of all, created a zero-sum mentality, with groups seeing others' gains as losses. For instance, Turkey's support for the Syrian National Army (SNA), a reorganized FSA branch, clashed with Qatar's backing of HTS, triggering Idlib clashes by 2017.[14] Assad's government took advantage of this disintegration, releasing Islamist prisoners to radicalize the opposition and present itself as a bulwark against jihadism.[15] By 2024, these internal competitions had debilitated the opposition, and Assad was able to cling to power not with considerable territorial losses.

6.2 Regional Powers Rivalries: Iran and Saudi Arabia

At the regional level, Iran and Saudi Arabia have experienced a sectarian-inflected mimetic rivalry, each trying to gain leadership over the Shia and Sunni blocs, respectively. Iran has supported the Assad regime with direct military assistance and proxy forces, such as Hezbollah, a Lebanese Shia

[10]Girard, R., Haven, C. (2020). *Conversations with René Girard* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Academic, p. 100. https://www.perlego.com/book/1387420
[11]Ibid., p. 113.
[12]Ibid., p. 115.
[13]Turner, V. (1969). *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. Aldine Publishing.
[14]Chatham House. (2017). *Why Ahrar al-Sham Couldn't Stand Up to HTS's Attack in Idlib*.
[15]Council on Foreign Relations. (2024). *Syria's War and the Descent into Horror.*

militia, to secure its "Shia crescent" of influence from Iran to Lebanon.[16] This strategy's goal was to counter Sunni-led powers and secure Iran's regional dominance. Saudi Arabia, in response, has backed Sunni opposition groups, including elements of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the Syrian National Army (SNA), to challenge Assad and curb Iran's influence.[17] A study by the *Brookings Institution* (2021) underlines how Saudi Arabia's financial and military support for these groups has escalated sectarian tensions, aligning with Girard's theory as both nations imitate each other's desire for regional leadership.[18] The presence of proxies like Hezbollah and the FSA/SNA has aggravated the conflict's sectarian dimension, transforming local grievances into a wider regional power struggle

6.3 International Rivalry: Mimetic Escalation

Syrian Civil War also served as a stage for global and regional great powers' international mimetic rivalries, with the former aiming to secure strategic influence through proxy support. Girard's theory accounts for how mediators (i.e., foreign powers) create desires and trigger rivalries when actors imitate the same goals.[19] Girard's theory accounts for how these competitions are not just strategic but by nature mimetic, as every power's conduct is driven by the perceived desires of its opponents. The U.S. and Russia, as an instance, mirror each other's interventions, with U.S. support for the SDF provoking Russian escalation to secure Assad, and vice versa.[20] Similarly, Iran and Saudi Arabia's proxy war illustrates a mimetic cycle whereby each nation's support of opposing sides escalates the other's involvement in the conflict.[21] This has prolonged the Syrian Civil War because outside powers' pursuit of mimetic goals (strategic control, ideological leadership, and regional projection) has entrenched divisions and eroded attempts at resolution. The Syrian Civil War offers a classic instance of how international mimetic competition, as characterized by Girard, fuels local controversies onto international and regional battlefields. The U.S. and Russia, on one hand, and Iran and Saudi Arabia, on the other, pursued reflected objectives, using proxy forces to extend influence and contain their rivals. These forces not only exacerbated the conflict but complicated peace processes further, as external powers prefer strategic gains to resolution. Valuing these contests with a mimetic gaze

[16]Atlantic Council. (2023). *The Evolving Iranian Strategy in Syria: A Looming Conflict with Israel*. Retrieved from https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/The_Evolving_Iranian_Strategy_in_Syria.pdf
[17]Middle East Institute. (2022). *Saudi Arabia and the Syrian Opposition: A Regional Power's Strategy*. Retrieved from https://mei.edu/
[18]Brookings Institution. (2021). *Saudi Arabia's Role in the Syrian Civil War.* Retrieved from https://www.brookings.edu/articles/saudi-arabia-and-the-civil-war-within-yemens-civil-war/
[19]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the Sacred*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
[20]Congressional Research Service. (2023). U*.S. Policy in Syria: Balancing Counterterrorism and Geopolitical Goals*. Retrieved from https://www.congress.gov/crs-products
[21]Institute for the Study of War. (2022). *Iran and Saudi Arabia's Proxy War in Syria*. Retrieved from https://understandingwar.org./

underscores the necessity of diplomatic efforts to both address grievances on the local level and to contain intervening powers' wider ambitions.

6.4 Post-Assad Rivalries

The fall of Assad's regime on December 8, 2024, produced a tipping point, but one that did not resolve mimetic competitions, instead speeding them up in a different liminal process. With Assad's flight to Moscow and the establishment of a Syrian caretaker regime by March of 2025, like HTS, the SDF, and fragmented FSA/SNA factions competed for territory and control.[22] These rivalries illustrate Girard's theory of mimetic desire, in that each faction tried to copy the other's claims to legitimacy and authority. HTS, led by Ahmed al-Sharaa (previously Abu Mohammad al-Jolani), became the prevailing force, holding Damascus, Aleppo, Homs, and Idlib. Its model proto state in Idlib, the Syrian Salvation Government, was one that HTS attempted to implement across the country, prioritizing Sunni Islamist rule while ensuring minority protections.[23] Concurrently, the SDF, a Kurdish-led US-backed coalition, dominated northeastern Syria (Rojava), promoting a secular, federalist system.[24] The Turkey-backed SNA aimed to establish a nationalist-Islamist system within northern Syria, pitting it against both HTS and the SDF.[25] Both emulated one another's models of governance—e.g., establishing local councils and security units—while competing for international legitimacy. Liminal uncertainty, as presented before, amplified these competitions. The post-Assad power vacuum, along with Syria's devastated infrastructure and displaced citizens (over 12 million displaced)[26] created a zero-sum environment where groups perceived the control of land and resources as a matter of survival. For example, clashes between the SNA and SDF in Manbij in December 2024 underscored Turkey's efforts to constrain Kurdish independence, mirroring HTS's own anti-Kurd position to cement Sunni dominance. Foreign assistance also escalated competition, with HTS seeking Turkish and Qatari backing and the SDF having U.S. backing, each accusing the other of foreign reliance.[27] This imitative competition frustrated efforts at grouping consolidation by the Syrian caretaker regime, suspending reconstruction, and risking new war.

[22]PBS News. (2024). *Analysis: What Syria's Reignited Civil War Means for the Middle East.*
[23]DW. (2024). *Key Players Shaping Post-Assad Syria.*
[24]Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2025). *Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, Opportunities, and the US Role in Shaping its Future.*
[25]Geopolitical Monitor. (2024). *The Fall of Assad: Syria's Turning Point and the Path Ahead*
[26]ShelterBox. (2025). *The Syrian Conflict Explained.*
[27]Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2025). *Post-Assad Syria: Challenges, Opportunities, and the US Role in Shaping its Future.*

6.5 Conclusion: Mimesis, Rivalry, and Liminality

Violence and divisions across local, regional, and international speres of the Syrian civil war reveal the deep-seated mechanisms that perpetuated the conflict and allowed the escalation of violence and rivalry during these years. The analysis of mimetic rivalry influenced by Girard's mimetic desire demonstrates how Syrian civil war is not only a geopolitical struggle but an intricate interplay of oppositions and imitative competitions that have influenced the trajectory of the conflict itself. Conflict's cyclical nature has been uncovered in the first part of this chapter, from its terminological origins and conceptual roots, there is a pattern of rivalry which is also present in the Syrian civil war. It all starts with mimetic desire, the attraction of humans for what other humans tend to desire and it then evolves into rivalry and competition which allows for violence as a mean to obtain that desired object. The Schmitt's conceptualization of the political as rooted in the friend-enemy dichotomy provides a crucial foundational framework for the analysis of the Syrian conflict. Indeed, Syrian factions, such as the Assad Regime, the FSA, the HTS, and the SDF, constructed their identities in opposition to one another. This is not a mere strategic dynamic, but existential since each faction has a perception of the other as a threat to is survival. Therefore, due to the race for dominance in a liminal space and the presence of mimetic violence, there has been a visible collapse of state authority and resource scarcity. This type of rivalry resembles the precise definition of origin of rivalry by Girard: rivalry emerges from imitation of desires and not for inherent differences. Indeed, in Syria, factions like HTS and the SDF emulated each other's goals and objects which lead to the so-called mimetic crisis.

The mimetic crisis is then exemplified by the post-Assad vacuum in which the clash between the SNA and SDF highlighted the absence of a centralized control which aggravated violence and mimetic rivalries. Furthermore, from the Syrian conflict it is possible to understand that mimetic dynamics, regionally speaking, transcend local boundaries (as showed by the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia). This *sectarian-inflected* competition, which is used to express the type of mimetic rivalry not only driven by personal or political reasons but *inflected* by deep-rooted sectarian identities, has not only prolonged the Syrian conflict but also shaped the local grievances into a wider struggle of power.[28] Moreover, another cause of the perpetration of the conflict has been resembled by the external international intervention (U.S. and Russia) which exacerbated rivalries by spurring desires that reestablished mimetic competition which perpetuated the conflict. A critical juncture has been marked by the fall of Assad (December 8, 2024), in which the rivalries in a new liminal phase

[28]Riedel, B. (2021). *Iran and Saudi Arabia: Sectarian Rivalry in Syria*. Brookings Institution.

have been intensified. Due to the emergence of a caretaker regime and the fragmentation of factions like HTS, the SDF, and the SNA, each group imitated the others for legitimacy and competition for the control over Syria's landscape. Outside assistance, from Turkish patronage of the SNA to US backing of the SDF, keeps this competition going, with each accusing the other of foreign dependence, repeating Girard's prophecy of mimetic contagion threatening communal stability.[29] As Girard suggests, societies must have institutions to prevent mimetic rivalry, just like the rules of marriage among primitive societies.[30] In Syria, a possible solution could be power-sharing arrangements and disarmament initiatives to stabilize the post-Assad landscape. By observing the Syrian war through a mimetic lens, we recognize the necessity of transforming rival desires into cooperative endeavors towards peace.

[29]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the Sacred.* Johns Hopkins University Press.
[30]Ibid., p. 122.

Chapter VII
The Purgatory of Mimesis
Part III
Violence and the Sacred

"*Religion* in its broadest sense, then, must be another term for that obscurity that surrounds man's efforts to defend himself by curative or preventative means against his own violence."
- R. Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 1977.

Part III of the Purgatory of Mimesis, Chapter VII, discovers the mimetic relation between the *violence* and the *sacred* and uses these two measures to decode more precisely the Syrian civil war. Like guilt, joy, shame, and fear, violence provides a perspective on human response which connects norms with behavior, prescription with description. This is the so known 'moral notions' where literature has its roots and proposes ethicists invaluable dives in human dynamics. By connecting violence with sacrifice practices and desires, Girard has showed the deep connections between sacred rituals and political orders. In his studies, Girard reveals the paradox of religion and the sacred originally born to contain mimetic violence but often part of the causes of it. Indeed, in the Syrian civil war, religious divisions contributed to the escalation of violence and rivalry which transformed the sacred into a mimetic arena of rivalry. Religion is a universal cultural phenomenon with a specific evolutionary nature. Obviously, there is a myriad of theses regarding the role and nature of religion in human culture. For some anthropologists and scholars, such as Sigmund Freud,[1] religion is nothing more than a product of human unhappiness. Meanwhile, for scholars like Mircea Eliade[2] and Clifford Geertz,[3] religion is an essential part of the process of humanization and evolution of human culture. Chapter VII is going to present the two sides of religion's coin by exploring the various opinions on religion and the different aspects that characterize human tendency toward the creation of the sacred. It then proceeds to present the role of religion and the sacred in the Syrian civil war and its consequences in the delineation of the conflict itself. Combined with mimetic elements and liminal

[1]Freud, S. (1961). *The future of an illusion* (J. Strachey, Trans.). W.W. Norton & Company.
[2]Eliade, M. (1987). *The sacred and the profane: The nature of religion.* Harcourt.
[3]Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*. Basic Books.

phases, Chapter VII is the conclusive analytical part of this work and like Dante's Charon it will try to escort the reader toward the conclusion of this research.

7.1 The Paradox of the Sacred: A Catalyst for Conflict

When the distinction between victim and perpetrator is blurred, society brings sacrifice at the center of the crisis scene and disguises it as *divine justice*. The paradox of the sacred is presented as soon as there is a politicization of religion. From the *Old Testament* to contemporary *jihad*, religious narratives have not only given meaning to life, but also justification to war. In the name of God, any adversary can be *sacrificed*. The role of the sacred is strictly connected to the mimetic scapegoating mechanism presented by Girard in his theory. This link is strong since scapegoating is then justified by religion and therefore used as a solution for the initial social crisis. Furthermore, religion is often one of the main causes of rivalry and conflict. The reason why religion is often used as an excuse for violence is that religions are fundamentally different from each other and differences creates conflict. Indeed, religion lays at the core argument of S. P. Huntington's concept of "clash of civilizations" which occurs at two levels. One level underlines the divisions of civilization between countries and regions; the other level refers to the 'fault lines between civilizations' within countries or territories. Huntington concludes that "countries with similar cultures are coming together" and "countries with different cultures are coming apart."[4] Therefore, it is predictable that countries with a wide and complex religion and ethnic composition, like Syria, are more likely to establish conflicts. Syria, or the Syrian Arab Republic as it is officially known, is a country in the Levant area of West Asia historically renowned for its cultural and religious diversity. That diversity, since the onset of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, has also been both the source of power and the war's cause because political loyalties and social bonds were conditioned by ethnic and religious identifications.[5] The war, alongside the topple of the Assad regime in December 2024, has significantly altered the religious and demographic makeup, with an impact on sectarian coexistence and tensions.

7.2 Diversity in Syria: The Sunni Muslim Majority

Sunni Muslims constitute the largest religious group in Syria, comprising approximately 74% of the population in 2011, predominantly ethnic Arabs, with smaller numbers of Kurds, Turkmens, and Circassians.[6] Sunnis follow the Shafi'i and Hanafi schools of Islamic law, emphasizing analogical

[4]Samuel P. Huntington. (1993). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, p. 64. https://msuweb.montclair.edu/~lebelp/1993SamuelPHuntingtonTheClashOfCivilizationsAndTheRemakingofWorldOrder.pdf.
[5]International Crisis Group. (2012). *Syria's Mutating Conflict*. Brussels: ICG.
[6]Beckouche, P. (2017). *Syria: A Geographical and Political Analysis.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

deduction and legal precedent over strict literalism. Geographically, Sunnis are distributed across most of Syria, forming majorities in all but three governorates: Al-Suwayda (Druze-dominated), Latakia, and Tartus (both Alawite-majority).[7] The Sunni majority has been central to the Syrian Civil War, with 2011 protests initiating in reaction to political and economic grievances emanating primarily from Sunni society. The war exacerbated sectarian divisions, with Sunni opposition groups, including the Free Syrian Army and later the jihadist factions like Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), confronting the Alawite-dominated regime of Bashar al-Assad.[8] Post-2024, after the collapse of Assad, groups dominated by Sunnis, particularly HTS led by Ahmad al-Sharaa, ascended to power, and concerns of potential minority exclusion arose.[9] Despite having the numbers, the Sunnis are not a homogeneous entity; intramural conflicts between moderates and extremists and ethnic cleavages make them unable to achieve a coherent scheme for Syria's future.

7.3 Diversity in Syria: The Alawite Minority

The Alawites, an ethnoreligious Arab religious group following a syncretic tradition of Shia Islam, are approximately 11-12% of Syria's population, living in the coastal governorates of Tartus and Latakia.[10] Alawite theology, rooted in ninth-century *ghulat* practice, holds Ali ibn Abi Talib to be divine incarnate and takes on elements of Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, and Christianity, such as belief in a divine Trinity and celebration of Christmas. It has caused them to feel "heretical" to some Sunni and Shia orthodox scholars and provoked historical marginalization. Under the Assad regime, particularly since Hafez al-Assad's ascension to power in 1970, Alawis gained disproportionate political and military influence, dominating key state institutions. This dominance bred resentment among the Sunni majority, culminating in the 2011 revolution. During the conflict, Alawites were targeted for violence by Sunni extremist groups like ISIS and HTS, who viewed them as apostates.[11] The fall of the Assad regime in 2024 had consolidated Alawite weaknesses as allegations of massacres of Latakia and Tartus in March 2025 were reported, where over 1,500 Alawite civilians were killed by Sunni militia. Despite all these ills, Alawite communities have sought integration with some embracing Sunni customs like hijab and Ramadan fasting to minimize sectarian divisions.

[7]Beckouche, P. (2017). *Syria: A Geographical and Political Analysis.* Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
[8]Landis, J. (2025). *Sunnis vs. Alawites in Syria*. L'Opinione.
[9]Haski, P. (2025). *Religious Violence Threatens Syria's Transition*. Internazionale.
[10]Negri, A. (2017). *The Wandering Muslim: History of the Alawites*. Pandora Rivista.
[11]Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). *Reports on Sectarian Violence in Latakia and Tartus*. London: SOHR.

7.4 Diversity in Syria: The Christian Minority

Christians, totaling about 10% of Syria's population as of 2011, consist of numerous denominations like Greek Orthodox, Melkite Catholic, Syriac Orthodox, and Armenian Apostolic. Christians predominantly reside in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, and Homs.[12] Christians enjoyed relative tolerance under the Ba'athist regime, with their religious practices being protected. Christian communities were greatly impacted by the civil war, with strategic areas like Homs becoming front lines and resulting in mass displacement. By 2018, some of the Christians had migrated abroad or to safer regions of Syria, reducing their number.[13] Extremist groups like ISIS and al-Nusra also targeted Christians, destroying churches and abducting religious figures, like the still-missing Archbishops Yohanna Ibrahim and Paul Yazigi. Christian figures like Patriarchs John X, Mor Ignatius Aphrem II, and Youssef Absi, in 2025, condemned ongoing sectarian violence and demanded living together. Though fewer in number, Christians continue to speak out against insisting on a pluralist Syria, with figures like Archbishop Jacques Mourad stressing the need for human rights and democratic change.

7.5 Diversity in Syria: The Druze Minority

The 3% monotheistic ethnoreligious Druze are concentrated primarily in southern Syrian governorate Al-Suwayda. Their religion, which is a variant of Ismaili Shia Islam, is a synthesis of Islam, Judaism, Christianity, and Greek philosophy, and is not proselytize.[14] Traditionally, the Druze were scrupulously nonpartisan in Syrian politics, making sure to keep channels open with both the Assad regime and opposition forces. The Druze were subject to regime force and extremist group pressures during the civil war. ISIS attacked Druze villages, and the regime forced Druze young men into the military. The Druze community was subjected to heightened violence in 2025, including attacks in April resulting from a divisive recording allegedly by a Druze leader, for which charges of blasphemy were brought. Israel's battles in the southern part of Syria, in a supposed effort to protect the Druze, further solidified their stance, energizing fears of regional intervention. Druze leaders such as Sheikh Hikmat al-Hajiri have called for international protection, referring to their exposed position during the transitional phase.

[12]United Nations Human Rights Council. (2017). *Report on Religious Minorities in Syria*. Geneva: UNHRC.
[13]Camera dei Deputati, Servizio Studi. (2016). *La questione curda*. XVI Legislatura. https://leg16.camera.it/temiap/temi16/PI0035Not.pdf.
[14] OSMED. (2020). *The Druze: A Community with Deep Roots*. *https://www.osmed.it/tag/druzes/*

7.6 The Syrian Conflict and the Role of Religious Diversity: Scholarly Perspectives

As extensively presented in this research, the Syrian civil conflict has been one of the most complex and devastating conflicts of the 21st century. While the protests started with calls for political reform, the conflict soon deteriorated into a sectarian battle, egged on by regional and international interventions. Raymond Hinnebusch, a prominent scholar of Syrian politics, places the Syrian conflict at the confluence of domestic sectarianism and geopolitical rivalries. In his article, *Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution?* he argues that the Assad regime, dominated by the Alawite minority (approx. 12% of the Syrian population), strategically portrayed itself as a protector of religious minorities: Alawites, Christians (10%), and Druze (3%) against the Sunni majority (74%).[15] This rhetoric, rooted in the regime's secular Ba'athist ideology, was less about pluralism and more about consolidation of power through a patronage system to loyalist communities.[16] Hinnebusch's case study of the 2011 protests illustrates how the regime's violent repression transformed a secular uprising into a sectarian conflict. The emergence of Sunni jihadist forces, such as Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State (ISIS), further polarized the conflict, as these forces attacked minorities, especially Christians and Yazidis, with atrocities reported in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zo. Hinnebusch also draws attention to the role of external actors in stoking sectarian tensions. Iran, a Shia power, assisted the Assad regime and Hezbollah, while Sunni countries like Saudi Arabia and Turkey helped rebel groups, thus rendering Syria a proxy battleground. His account of the Homs massacres (2012–2014), where Alawite and Sunni neighborhoods were rendered into battlefields, brings out the way sectarian violence was both a product and a producer of territorial fragmentation.[17] By 2024, Hinnebusch notes, the regime's reliance on minority support had solidified a de facto partition, with Alawites concentrated in coastal strongholds like Latakia.

Fabrice Balanche, a geographer specializing in the Middle East, provides a spatial analysis of Syria's religious diversity in his seminal work, Sectarianism in Syria's Civil War.[18] Using detailed demographic maps, Balanche illustrates the pre-war distribution of religious communities: Alawites in the coastal regions, Sunnis in central urban and rural areas, Kurds (mostly Sunni) in the northeast, and Christians in Aleppo and Damascus. His case study of Aleppo (2012–2016) demonstrates how the city's religious mosaic—Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish neighborhoods—became a microcosm of the broader conflict, with each group aligning with factions offering protection. Balanche argues that

[15]Hinnebusch, R. (2012). *Syria: From 'authoritarian upgrading' to revolution?* International Affairs, 88(1), pp. 95–113. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x
[16]Ibid., p 118.
[17]Ibid., p. 123.
[18]Balanche, F. (2018). *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war

the war induced a "sectarian sorting," with over 25% of Syria's population becoming internally displaced into religiously homogeneous enclaves. For instance, Christians fled to regime-held areas or abroad, reducing their population share to 2–3% by 2024. Balanche's analysis of the 2024 rebel offensive, led by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), highlights a shift in sectarian rhetoric. HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani sought to reassure minorities, particularly Christians in Aleppo, by ordering the protection of churches and properties, a pragmatic move to legitimize rebel governance. However, Balanche warns that lingering Alawite fears of retribution, rooted in memories of sectarian massacres like those in Hama (2013), could destabilize post-Assad reconciliation efforts. His work underscores the interplay between geography, religion, and power, with foreign interventions—Russia and Iran supporting the regime, Turkey backing Sunni rebels—further entrenching sectarian divides.[19] The Italian geopolitical analyst Daniele Scalea offers a nuanced perspective portraying Syria as a "polyhedron" of religious, ethnic, and territorial tensions. Scalea's case study of the Kurdish Rojava region illustrates how religious identity intersected with ethnic aspirations. Although Kurds are predominantly Sunni (95%), their secular, autonomist agenda led them to oppose both ISIS and Sunni rebel groups, carving out a semi-autonomous zone in northeastern Syria.[20] Scalea argues that the conflict's sectarian framing Sunnis versus Alawites/Christians oversimplifies its complexity. The 2011 protests, he notes, initially united diverse groups, including Sunni moderates and Christians, against Assad's corruption and repression.

Historian Jean-Pierre Filiu challenges the Assad regime's self-proclaimed secularism in his article, *Mito della Laicità degli Assad*.[21] Filiu's case study of the regime's religious policies reveal a calculated manipulation of sectarian identities. The 1973 Syrian Constitution, mandating a Muslim president, and the regime's control over Sunni religious institutions—requiring imams to praise Assad in sermons—belie claims of *laicité*.[22] The French hisotiran argues that the regime co-opted minorities through patronage while marginalizing the Sunni majority, fueling resentment that erupted in 2011. His analysis of the Homs sieges (2012–2014) illustrates how the regime's targeting of Sunni neighborhoods deepened sectarian hatred, while its protection of Christian and Alawite enclaves reinforced minority loyalty. He also critiques the role of jihadist groups, whose attacks on minority shrines, such as the Sayyida Zaynab mosque, escalated Shiite-Sunni tensions. Filiu notes that Russia and Iran exploited these divisions to justify their support for Assad, framing it as a defense of sacred

[19]Balanche, F. (2018). *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war*. Washington Institute for Near East Policy. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war
[20]Scalea, D. (2017). Geografie del conflitto siriano. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/34567890/Geografie_del_conflitto_siriano
[21]Filiu, J.-P. (2016). *Mito della laicità degli Assad. Le Monde* (republished in Internazionale). https://www.internazionale.it/opinione/jean-pierre-filiu/2016/02/15/siria-assad-laicita
[22]Ibid.

sites. By 2024, Filiu observes, the regime's collapse exposed the fragility of its minority coalition, with Alawites facing uncertainty in a rebel-dominated landscape.[23] Lastly, Peter Harling, an analyst at the Carnegie Middle East Center, focuses on the experiences of Syria's religious minorities in his 2025 blog post for the Diwan Blog. His case study of Aleppo's Christian community, decimated by emigration, highlights their pragmatic support for Assad as a bulwark against salafist extremism. Harling cites ISIS's 2014–2015 massacres of Christians in Qaryatayn as a turning point, cementing minority fears of rebel rule. [24]However, he notes that HTS's 2024 governance efforts, including decrees protecting Christian properties, signal a strategic pivot to inclusivity, driven by the need for international legitimacy. Harling's analysis of Alawite communities in Latakia reveals their anxiety post-Assad, fearing reprisals for their association with the regime.[25] He argues that Syria's religious diversity, once a cultural asset, has been fractured by the war's sectarian logic, with communities retreating into defensive enclaves.

7.7 Conclusion

The works of Hinnebusch, Balanche, Scalea, Filiu, and Harling each individually explain the determining contribution of religious diversity to the Syrian Civil War. It is relevant to bring in the research official analysis of the role of religion in conflicts and violence escalation. From these scholarly perspectives, the Assad regime's manipulation of minority fears and the Sunni opposition parties' radicalization transformed a political uprising into a sectarian quagmire. Case studies in Aleppo, Homs, and Rojava illustrate how religious identity determined territorial control, displacement patterns, and alliance formations. Foreign interveners, Iran, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey, exacerbated these fault lines, turning Syria into a geopolitical chessboard. The 2024 rebel victory and subsequent constitutional deliberations underscore the long-standing challenge to harmonize Syria's multi-sectarian past with its fractured present. These writers point out that sustainable peace means addressing sectarian concerns through inclusive politics, or else Syria's religious tapestry remains a cause of division. In conflicts, Girard explains that religious or ideological differences often mask deeper mimetic rivalries used to bring groups together. These scholarly examinations intersect with Girard's mimetic theory and core concepts in several ways. Indeed, Hinnebusch, Filiu, and Harling describe how the Assad regime scapegoated Sunnis to unify minorities, while jihadist groups targeted minorities as scapegoats for their failures, aligning with Girard's theory of sacrificial violence. Balanche and Scalea highlight how religious communities

[23]Ibid.
[24]Harling, P. (2025). *Syria's minorities in a time of transition*. Diwan Blog, Carnegie Middle East Center. https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/2025/01/syrias-minorities-in-a-time-of-transition
[25]Ibid.

imitated each other's defensive strategies, leading to territorial segregation and escalating conflict, a hallmark of mimetic contagion. To conclude, all scholars note that religious identities (Sunni, Alawite, Christian) were exploited to mobilize support, masking deeper desires for power or survival, as Girard suggests in his analysis of religion's role in conflict.

Conclusion

The Last Liminal Phase: Inside the Hall of Mirrors

The study of modern civil wars and insurgencies reveals a complex interplay of violence, rivalry, and identity that goes beyond traditional geopolitical analyses. This work, titled *Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Civil War - Imitation, Revenge, and the Unbreakable Chain of Violence in Escalating Internal Conflicts*, has sought to unravel the underlying mechanisms that perpetuate such conflicts, with a particular focus on the Syrian Civil War (2011–2024). Grounded in the theoretical frameworks of René Girard's Mimetic Theory and Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory, this research addresses the central research questions: Do modern civil wars and insurgencies follow dynamics of mimetic rivalry? How does the desire for power and the construction of the enemy intertwine in the perpetuation of conflict? By examining these dynamics through a multidisciplinary lens, this study posits that mimetic rivalry, fueled by imitative desires and exacerbated by liminal instability, serves as a critical driver of conflict escalation, while the construction of the enemy amplifies these tensions through propaganda and sectarian divisions.

The methodological framework of this research combines qualitative historical analysis, case study research, and theoretical application to explore the Syrian Civil War as a paradigmatic example of mimetic and liminal dynamics. Drawing on primary sources such as the works of Thucydides (1910) and Plato (1997), alongside modern scholarship from Small and Singer (1982), Sambanis (2004), and Kalyvas (2006), the study defines civil war as an internal armed conflict involving sustained violence and effective resistance within a sovereign entity. The research employs Girard's Mimetic Theory—articulated in works like *Violence and the Sacred*[1]- to analyze how imitation and desire precipitate rivalry, and van Gennep's Liminal Theory—elaborated in *The Rites of Passage*[2]—to frame war as a transitional phase of uncertainty and transformation. Case studies, including the post-Assad power vacuum (December 2024–March 2025) and sectarian violence in Homs and Aleppo, are supported by data from the *Syrian Observatory for Human Rights* (2025) and analyses by scholars such as Hinnebusch (2012) and Balanche (2018). This triangulated approach ensures a robust examination of both theoretical constructs and empirical evidence, allowing for a nuanced understanding of the Syrian conflict's evolution.

[1]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the sacred.* Johns Hopkins University Press.
[2]Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.

The Syrian Civil War, initiated in 2011 as a response to political and economic grievances under Bashar al-Assad's regime, escalated into a multifaceted conflict involving local factions, regional powers, and international actors. The fall of Assad on December 8, 2024, marked a critical juncture, ushering in a new liminal phase characterized by fragmented governance among groups such as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), and the Syrian National Army (SNA).[3] With over 12 million displaced persons and a devastated infrastructure,[4] Syria exemplifies a state in transition, where the absence of centralized authority amplifies mimetic rivalries. The conflict's sectarian dimensions—Sunni, Alawite, Christian, and Druze communities—further illustrate how identity construction and power struggles intertwine, a theme explored through detailed demographic and geopolitical analyses.[5]

René Girard's Mimetic Theory posits that human desire is inherently imitative, leading to rivalry when individuals or groups covet the same objects or status.[6] This theory, enriched by the concept of the scapegoat as a mechanism to restore social order, is pivotal in understanding how factions in Syria—such as HTS emulating SDF's governance models—perpetuate conflict through reciprocal violence.[7] Complementing this, Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory frames war as a threshold state, marked by ambiguity and the breakdown of social structures.[8] Victor Turner's elaboration of communitas and anti-structure during liminality[9] further illuminates the chaotic post-Assad landscape, where competing factions navigate an "in-between" reality. Together, these theories provide a lens to decode the Syrian conflict's cyclical nature, where imitation and liminality fuel an *unbreakable chain of violence*.[10]

Through the exploration of the Syrian Civil War, this research weaves a cohesive narrative that illuminates the influence of mimetic rivalry and liminal instability across its multifaceted dimensions. The conflict's origins lie in the internal *stasis* described by Thucydides (1910), where the desire for power among factions' mirrors Girard's triangular dynamics, setting the stage for a rivalry that erodes societal norms and amplifies violence. As the Syrian state fragmented into a liminal phase, the collapse of centralized authority and the rise of warlordism created a fertile ground for mimetic escalation, echoing the fragility observed in historical precedents like the Peloponnesian

[3]Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2025). P*ost-Assad Syria: Challenges, opportunities, and the US role in shaping its future*. https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/post-assad-syria-challenges-opportunities-us-role
[4]ShelterBox. (2025). *The Syrian conflict explained*. https://www.shelterbox.org/news/the-syrian-conflict-explained
[5]Beckouche, P. (2017). *Syria: A geographical and political analysis*. Presses Universitaires de France.
[6]Girard, R. (1977). *Violence and the sacred.* Johns Hopkins University Press.
[7]Girard, R., & Chantre, B. (2007). *Taking Clausewitz to the extreme: Conversation with Benoit Chantre*. Carnets Nord.
[8]Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage*. University of Chicago Press.
[9]Turner, V. W. (1974). *Dramas, fields and metaphors: Symbolic action in human society*. Cornell University Press.
[10]Thucydides. (1910). *The Peloponnesian War* (R. Crawley, Trans.). MIT Classics.

War.[11] This instability fueled cycles of vengeance, as retaliatory massacres became a hallmark of the conflict, reflecting Girard's concept of appropriative mimicry[12] and sustaining an arena where imitation drives destruction. Simultaneously, propaganda emerged as a powerful tool, constructing enemies such as Alawites as scapegoats for Sunni extremists, a mechanism that unifies communities while perpetuating division.[13] The transition to post-conflict reconciliation reveals the enduring challenge of breaking these mimetic chains, with efforts in South Africa and Lebanon suggesting that addressing imitative desires through transitional justice is essential for achieving sustainable peace.[14] The involvement of external actors—Russia, Iran, and the U.S.—further intensified these rivalries post-Assad, transforming the 2024 power vacuum into a mirror hall of competing legitimacy claims, where liminal uncertainty exacerbates territorial and ideological struggles.[15] Finally, the role of religious diversity, particularly the sectarian tensions between Sunni and Alawite communities, underscores how sacred narratives serve as proxies for power, with the post-2024 violence in Latakia and Tartus[16] illustrating the dual nature of religion as both a unifying and divisive force, as analyzed by scholars like Hinnebusch (2012) and Filiu (2016). Together, these insights reveal a conflict propelled by an intricate dance of imitation, liminality, and enemy construction, where each escalation feeds into the next, creating a relentless cycle of violence.

While this research affirms the dominance of mimetic rivalry in the Syrian Civil War, alternative perspectives warrant consideration. Structuralist theories, such as those of Karl Marx, might argue that economic disparities and class struggles—rather than imitative desire—underlie conflict escalation.[17] For instance, the 2011 protests were initially driven by economic grievances, suggesting that material conditions, not mimetic dynamics, catalyzed the uprising.[18] Additionally, rational choice theorists like James Fearon (2004) contend that strategic calculations by actors—e.g., Assad's regime maximizing power through repression—overshadow mimetic impulses. These antitheses challenge the universality of Girard's framework, proposing that structural and rational factors may independently sustain conflict, necessitating a hybrid analytical approach. This work

[11]Hanson, V. D. (2005). *A war like no other: How the Athenians and Spartans fought the Peloponnesian* War. Random House.
[12]Girard, R., & Chantre, B. (2007). *Taking Clausewitz to the extreme: Conversation with Benoit Chantre*. Carnets Nord.
[13]Balanche, F. (2018). *Sectarianism in Syria's civil war. Washington Institute for Near East Policy*. https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/sectarianism-syrias-civil-war
[14]Della Porta, D. (2018). *Causal mechanisms in civil wars: A sensitizing map*. In D. della Porta, T. H. Donker, B. Hall, E. Poljarevic, & D. P. Ritter, *Social movements and civil war: When protests for democratization fail*. Routledge, pp. 23-42.
[15]Foreign Policy Research Institute. (2025). P*ost-Assad Syria: Challenges, opportunities, and the US role in shaping its future*. https://www.fpri.org/article/2025/01/post-assad-syria-challenges-opportunities-us-role
[16]Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. (2025). *Reports on sectarian violence in Latakia and Tartus*. London: SOHR.
[17]Marx, K., & Engels, F. (1848). *The Communist Manifesto*. (S. Moore, Trans.). Penguin Classics.
[18]Human Rights Watch. (2011). *We've never seen such horror: Crimes against humanity by Syrian security forces*. https://www.hrw.org/report/2011/06/01/weve-never-seen-such-horror/crimes-against-humanity-syrian-security-forces

argues that modern civil wars, exemplified by Syria, indeed follow dynamics of mimetic rivalry, where the desire for power and enemy construction intertwine to perpetuate conflict. The interplay of Girard's mimetic desire and van Gennep's liminality provides a compelling explanatory model, revealing how imitation fuels sectarian violence and liminal instability prolongs governance crises. However, the complexity of Syria's case—marked by external interventions and historical contingencies—suggests limitations in applying these theories universally. The reliance on qualitative case studies may overlook quantitative patterns, such as death toll thresholds,[19] which could refine the analysis. Future research should integrate econometric models to test mimetic hypotheses across multiple civil wars (e.g., Yemen, Ukraine), exploring whether economic incentives or ideological differences independently drive conflict. Moreover, investigating the role of digital propaganda in enemy construction—beyond traditional narratives—could enhance understanding of contemporary mimetic dynamics. As Girard (1977) envisioned, societies require robust institutions to mitigate rivalry; thus, studying post-conflict institution-building in Syria could offer practical insights into breaking the mimetic cycle (p. 152). In conclusion, this work underscores that the Syrian Civil War's trajectory reflects a mimetic and liminal process, where imitation and power struggles, amplified by enemy construction, perpetuate an enduring conflict. While antithetical views highlight structural and rational dimensions, the mimetic-liminal framework remains a powerful tool for decoding the human dimensions of war. As Syria navigates its post-Assad liminality, the challenge lies in transforming rival desires into *cooperative endeavors*, a task that demands both scholarly rigor and pragmatic policy innovation.

[19]DeRouen, K., Jr. (2014). *An introduction to civil wars*. CQ Press.

INTERVIEWS

This section is dedicated to the interviews made during the period of thesis research and aims to provide an in-depth and firsthand perspective on the dynamics of the Syrian conflict through the contributions of two prominent figures in the international diplomatic arena. The interviews, conducted with senior professionals, explore key aspects of the conflict, integrating field experiences and strategic analyses. Due to the sensitive nature of their professional roles, both interviewees have requested anonymity, and their identities are withheld to ensure confidentiality.

First Interview: Senior Official of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)

The first interview was conducted in person in Rome, at the residence of the interviewee, a Senior Official of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). The meeting provided a unique opportunity to delve into the interviewee's direct experience, having spent several years in Syria during the conflict. The conversation focused on their extensive knowledge of the country's social, political, and economic realities, gained through on-the-groundwork. The interviewee offered valuable insights into Syria's internal dynamics and the influence exerted by neighboring regional actors, such as Libya, providing a nuanced understanding of the geopolitical interactions that have shaped the conflict. There is no transcription of the interview since the conversation was informal and confidential. Nevertheless, the meeting gave me the chance to better understand the conflict in Syria from a professional point of view and suggested me valuable sources included in this research.

Second Interview: Senior Official of the European External Action Service (EEAS)

The second interview was conducted in videocall, with the interviewee, a Senior Official of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the European Union's diplomatic service, joining from Brussels, while the interviewer was in Rome. The discussion centered on crisis management from the European Union's perspective in relation to the Syrian conflict, addressing critical themes such as the role of religion, the dynamics of rivalry among international and regional actors, and the application of the concept of mimetic desire to the Syrian crisis from 2011 to the present. The interview provided a strategic and multilateral perspective, highlighting the EU's role in the context of a protracted and complex conflict. The interview has been paraphrased.

Interviewer: Drawing on your experience in the Crisis Response & Peace-building Unit and later in crisis management, how have you seen the absence or collapse of political institutions influence the dynamics of violence among factions in a civil war?

Interviewee: National institutions play a critical role, but their mere presence does not guarantee the prevention of a civil war. For instance, in Syria, unlike cases such as Egypt or Libya, where national institutions collapsed during crises, the government, military, police, and other state structures remained operational. However, this did not prevent the escalation of violence, as new structures can emerge that hold the monopoly on violence and fuel the conflict. A state's stability depends on the loyalty of its members toward national institutions. A critical moment in a civil war occurs when these institutions "switch sides," as observed in Moscow during its civil conflict, when a shift in allegiances marked a decisive turning point.

Interviewer: During your service in Turkey, how did you perceive Turkey's role in shaping the cohesion or fragmentation of Syrian insurgent groups, particularly given its proximity and strategic interests?

Interviewee: Turkey's role in the Syrian civil war was primarily driven by its national interests, as is often the case for states bordering a conflict. Turkey faced internal challenges, such as managing Kurdish groups to prevent excessive autonomy that could strengthen their identity and addressing the presence of Muslim groups within its borders. Additionally, it hosted a significant number of Syrian refugees. The complexity of Turkey's interests reflects a difficulty in clearly defining objectives, a theme that recalls the mimetic theory of desire, where actors desire what others desire without fully understanding the object of that desire. A cinematic example is the final scene of Lawrence of Arabia, which depicts the chaos of decision-making around a negotiation table. Interestingly, despite initial support for certain groups, today Muslim groups, which were not initially prioritized, control Turkey's areas of influence in Syria, highlighting the fluidity of regional dynamics.

Interviewer: From your perspective as a professional crisis manager in crisis zones like Gaza, how have prolonged conflict and displacement affected the strategies and resilience of insurgent groups?

Interviewee: It is essential to distinguish insurgent groups based on their objectives, as these determine their nature and behavior. In prolonged conflicts, groups may adapt their tactical and strategic approaches. For example, the Arab Peace Initiative transformed the nature of some groups, promoting a shift toward peacebuilding. New generations, often unwilling to live like their predecessors or be labeled similarly, contribute to an evolution in group dynamics. This change influences the tactics adopted, making groups more adaptable but also more complex to understand and address.

Interviewer: What is the role of propaganda in prolonging violence and rivalries?

Interviewee: The term "propaganda" requires a distinction between its positive connotation, as a *narrative*, and its negative one, as manipulation. Propaganda can rewrite history, define winners and losers and justify actions taken. In its negative form, it creates narratives that rationalize successes or failures, often distorting reality. The solution to this double-edged weapon lies in common sense and robust education that fosters an understanding of history and other cultures. The media play a crucial but delicate role, as propaganda can become an underlying justification for actions taken, deeply influencing perceptions and prolonging conflicts.

Interviewer: In your view, what was the scapegoat of the Syrian civil war?

Interviewee: The scapegoat is often a narrative construct used to justify actions and their methods, frequently with negative connotations. During my experience, for example, at the funeral of Assad's father and on a work trip to Jerusalem in the same year, I observed how the West was frequently portrayed as the scapegoat, a narrative that simplified complex responsibilities and fueled the conflict.

Interviewer: How was religion used during the Syrian civil war?

Interviewee: Religion was instrumentalized as a tool to gain power, control populations, and justify military actions, rather than being practiced privately. In Syria, which has always proclaimed itself multiethnic and tolerant toward various faiths (Sunnis, Christians, Orthodox, etc.), religion was exploited to identify who held power. My experience in Jerusalem has made me skeptical of the public use of religion, which often masks abuses of power. In the future, I hope for a more private practice of religion, free from instrumentalization.

Interviewer: The Assad regime proclaimed itself a protector of minorities. Do you agree with this statement?

Interviewee: The Assad regime was more secular, but this was facilitated by the fact that the Assads themselves belonged to a minority. Protecting minorities is easier when one is part of them, making their stance strategic rather than ideological.

Interviewer: Can you provide an indicative prediction for the future of Syria?

Interviewee: The future of Syria appears complex and unpromising. Recently, during a meeting with Italian journalists, I noted a significant incident: some Syrians refused to be interviewed by women, arguing that a man cannot be interviewed by a woman. This episode reflects a cultural and social regression that does not bode well for the near future.

Interviewer: Regarding the management of the Syrian crisis, what were, in your view, the European Union's mistakes or missed opportunities?

Interviewee: Managing a crisis like Syria's is extremely complex, with many dynamics not immediately visible. The European Union made significant mistakes. First, it adopted a rigid stance, inspired by Clinton's policy, declaring that Bashar al-Assad had to leave power, thus reducing its diplomatic maneuvering room. Second, the document that envisioned a transitional government with veto power for each side, strongly supported by Russia and Assad, limited progress. Additionally, a missed opportunity was the rejection by Muslim groups of the EU's proposal to expand a Saudi-led mediation operation, which would have increased mediators from 300 to 3,000. These errors compromised the EU's effectiveness in managing the crisis.

Interviewer: Thank you so much for your time and perspective on the topic. It has been an honor for me.

Interviewee: Thank you for the interesting questions. Anytime.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This work, *Beyond the Liminal Veil: The Syrian Civil War—Imitation, Revenge, and the Chain of Violence in Escalating Internal Conflicts*, examines the Syrian Civil War (2011–2025) through the anthropological and sociological frameworks of René Girard's Mimetic Theory and Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory. It posits that modern civil wars, exemplified by Syria's protracted conflict, are driven by mimetic rivalry—where imitative desires fuel enmity and perpetuate cycles of violence—amplified by liminal phases of societal instability. The study addresses the central question: How do mimetic rivalry and enemy construction intertwine to sustain conflict in modern civil wars? By analyzing the Syrian context, marked by sectarian divisions, foreign interventions, and the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024, the thesis uncovers the human dynamics underlying violence, moving beyond traditional geopolitical and economic explanations. Structured across six chapters, it explores the war's liminal instability, scapegoating mechanisms, mimetic desire, and the paradoxical role of religion in political violence. The findings suggest that breaking the cycle of violence requires addressing its anthropological roots, offering insights for conflict prevention and peacebuilding. This work contributes to International Relations and Political Science by providing a nuanced lens on the persistence of civil wars in the globalized era.

The case study's complexity, fueled by sectarian divisions, foreign interventions, and cycles of vengeance, underscores the need to *move beyond* traditional analyses of power struggles and economic disparities. This work posits that understanding these conflicts requires an anthropological and sociological lens, one that does not merely observe the acts of violence but *retraces* them to their origin: the mimetic desire articulated by Renè Girard. This imitative impulse—where individuals and groups desire what others desire—intertwines with the construction of enemies, perpetuating an unbreakable chain of violence. The choice to explore this problem stems from a conviction that conflicts are ultimately driven by human agency, and decoding the mechanisms behind these actions—rather than solely their political or material outcomes—offers a pathway to comprehension of the conflict.

The central research question guiding this study is: *Do modern civil wars and insurgencies follow dynamics of mimetic rivalry? How does the desire for power and the construction of the enemy intertwine in the perpetuation of conflict?* This inquiry shifts the focus from external catalysts to internal human dynamics, revealing how imitation and identity construction amplify strife. The Syrian context, marked by its post-2024 liminal phase and sectarian tensions, provides a fertile ground to test Girard's theory alongside Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory, which frames war as a

threshold state of uncertainty and transformation. By delving into these mechanisms, this research aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of why conflicts endure, offering insights that resonate with contemporary challenges in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

This work is structured across six chapters, each weaving together theoretical frameworks and empirical analysis to explore the mimetic and liminal dynamics of the Syrian Civil War (2011–2025). Chapter I, *The Imitation Game*, introduces civil war through classical and modern definitions, applying René Girard's Mimetic Theory and Arnold van Gennep's Liminal Theory to analyze rivalry and violence escalation in the Syrian context. Chapter II, *Betwixt & Between*, examines civil war as a liminal phase of transition and instability, using van Gennep's Liminal Theory to highlight state fragility and social transformation during the Syrian conflict. Chapter III, *The Syrian Civil War*, presents the political and social situation in Syria and guide the reader from the start of the civil war in 2011 until today. Chapter IV, *Beyond the Liminal Veil: the Syrian Mimetic Chaos*, applies Liminal Theory to the Syrian conflict and examines its elements under the microscope of liminality. Chapter V, VI, and VII are dedicated to the three principal Mimetic's pillars (scapegoating, mimetic desire and rivalry, and the sacred). Chapter V*, Part I: The Purgatory of Mimesis* focuses on the creation of the scapegoat and explores all the different scapegoats built during the Syrian conflicts by different actors. Chapter VI, *Part II: Mimetic Desire and Rivalry*, investigates the influence of liminality's uncertainty over mimetic desire and rivalries. Chapter VII, Part III: *Violence and the Sacred*, introduces the paradox of religion and its contribution to political violence. Lasty, the Conclusion, *Inside the Hall of Mirrors*, synthesizes the mimetic and liminal dynamics of the Syrian Civil War, examining the role of external actors, political polarization, and prospects for future conflict prevention. As we conclude this journey, the Syrian Civil War emerges as a mirror hall of imitative desires and liminal crises, where sectarian divisions and power struggles have forged an enduring cycle of violence. The fall of Assad in 2024 has ushered in a new phase of uncertainty, where the interplay of rivalry and enemy construction continues to shape Syria's fate. This study suggests that breaking this cycle requires addressing the *human roots* of conflict—mimetic desire and liminal instability—offering a provocative lens for scholars and policymakers alike. What lies beyond this veil of violence?

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