**Title:**

**Decentring the Normative Empire Europe – Lessons from the European Union’s Engagement with Sectarianism in the Syrian Conflict**

**Abstract**

In 2011, the outbreak of large-scale protests in Syria, caused by the discontent towards the regime of President Assad, echoed the cries for freedom and liberty from Northern African countries. It marked the dawn of the ‘Arab Spring’. In the case of Syria, those grievances rapidly degenerated into a complex conflict, which has also seen the European Union (EU) engage actively to respond to what turned into a large-scale humanitarian emergency. As the conflict evolved, sectarian divisions among the intra-Syrian conflicting parties became increasingly central. Sectarianism has been defined in terms of an identity divide, of which religion is often considered the most essential dimension, but also resource-provision, territory, history and cultural ties can play a significant role.

Drawing on the understanding of instrumental sectarianism as a “politicised identity through which political entrepreneurs mobilise a community to keep/seek power for collective interests” (Hinnebusch & Valbjørn, 2019: 6), this paper researched the EU’s engagement with sectarian groups, imperfect polities and polities in the context of Syria. The key finding of this research is that the EU has, at the formal level, refused to recognise or engage with sects on the ground, and to some extent, such refusal has undermined its legitimacy in Syria. In addition, this research found that the aspirations of Syrian citizens regarding the future of their country do not correspond to the adoption of a sectarian governance structure. However, sectarian identity still represent a central identity marker, and therefore should be taken into account as existing cleavages when creating a new political and social pact for Syria after the war.

1. **Introduction**

In 2011, the outbreak of large-scale protests in Syria, caused by the discontent towards the regime of President Assad, echoed the cries for freedom and liberty from Northern African countries. It marked the dawn of the ‘Arab Spring’. In the case of Syria, those grievances rapidly degenerated into a complex conflict, which has also seen the European Union (EU) engage actively to respond to what turned into a large-scale humanitarian emergency. As the conflict evolved, sectarian divisions among the intra-Syrian conflicting parties became increasingly central. In the wider Middle Eastern region, countries like Iraq and Lebanon represent different examples of how the sectarian discourse unfolded. In a context partially similar to the Syrian one, sectarian divisions were exacerbated by the invasion of Iraq by the United States and by the end of the Sunni rule, which had characterised the political game for half a century. However, the post-war model of consociational Iraq has not escaped criticism and seems to have hardly prevented emerging sectarian tensions. Criticism has also been addressed towards the model of “historical sectarianism” and the sectarian constitutional pact in Lebanon. Therefore, the new awakening of protests in the past few months has highlighted that the sectarian discourse has been challenged also in Lebanon, an historical model for the peaceful coexistence of sectarian identities. Hence sectarianism, in its positive and negative connotation and with the limits such concept bears, is a keyword to understand not only national but also transnational and cross-border identity and political dynamics in the Middle East.

Sectarianism has been defined in terms of an identity divide, of which religion is often considered the most essential dimension. However, to this date, researchers have to understand whether a significant correlation exists between sectarianism and the breakout of armed conflict. Some scholars argue that there is no significant evidence on religious-based identities being more prone to conflict than linguistic and ethnic-based ones (Rørbæk, 2019)**.**

Drawing and expanding on the understanding of instrumental sectarianism as a “politicised identity through which political entrepreneurs mobilise a community to keep/seek power for collective interests” (Hinnebusch & Valbj*ø*rn, 2019, p. 6),this research engages in a two-step analysis: after briefly examining the nature, significance and impact of sectarian divides in Syria both before and after the breakout of the war, it will analyse the EU’s understanding and engagement with the concept of sectarianism. Secondly, it will try to elucidate to what extent the specific understanding of sectarianism displayed by the EU could downplay the Syrian perspective on the conflict, and therefore jeopardise its efforts to put an end to the conflict and promote human rights and democracy, once a political transition has been set in motion in Syria. In this sense, the paper also looks at de-centred ways of considering democratic accountability and political structures which would overcome the secular model currently promoted by the EU, both externally and internally, through focusing on a broad understanding of sectarianism as a non-extremist and non-violent form of religious, politicised identity. This paper focuses on an issue never explored before in the academic literature on European Union’s foreign policy, integrating an understanding of polities and different forms and layers of authority, identity and recognition first than Western-centred concepts and elements such as the state or the nation, critiquing the EU’s adherence and understanding of post-Westphalian structures and democracy.

The paper is structured as follows: the first part will outline the literature review on the concepts of decentring and Normative Empire Europe. Then, the paper will outline the methodological framework, both to clarify the concepts used to conduct the analysis of the EU’s engagement with sectarianism and the data collected for this purpose. Secondly, the paper will present the background research conducted on the concept of sectarianism and on the EU’s identity in foreign policy. Then, the paper will apply the conceptualisation of sectarianism to the Syrian case, explaining the relationship between sectarian identities and political mobilisation. The last part will then move on to analyse the European Union’s approach to sectarianism in Syria, its conceptualisation and to what extent it engaged with existing sectarian groups and polities on the ground throughout the conflict. Finally, the perspective of the Syrian people will be analysed in light of the findings about the EU’s approach to sectarianism. The paper will then move on to the conclusion, presenting a summary of the main findings.

1. **Literature review**
   1. **Sectarianism in the Middle East: existing conceptualizations and narratives**

According to Valbjørn and Hinnebusch, sectarianism is a “politicised identity through which political entrepreneurs mobilise a community to keep/seek power for collective interests” (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 6). This research takes this definition as the starting point for further analysing sectarianism as a religious identity-based cleavage. Other authors further expand on the definition as outlined above. Of particular interest is the one provided by Rørbæk, who holds that the current sectarian surge in the Middle East, and its often trans-boundary character is mostly a struggle over power and privileges alongside the line of pre-existing identity-based divides (Rørbæk, 2019).

If we assume that sectarianism is therefore identified as an identity-based, religious cleavage, it is important to take a step back and briefly reflect upon what is the broader meaning of religion in conflict. Even though this research will not delve into this issue extensively, a limited reflection is still central in understanding the meaning of sectarianism, and most importantly, how sectarianism as a social and as an identity cleavage interacts with the political level. For future research, it would be interesting to delve deeper on this point, and therefore and reflect on how the results obtained from statistical data interact with the existing definitions of sectarianism and how could they help improve it. However, such extensive analysis is beyond the scope of this paper. The statistical relationship between religion and the likelihood of conflict is briefly touched upon to provide a critical reflection on this issue.

How does then religion matter in light of our definition of sectarianism? In existing literature, there are encompassing approaches to ethnicity which tend to subsume under this conceptual category religion, language, caste and race (Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017, p. 744). Some other scholars, on the contrary, have identified religion as a more conflict-prone marker (see Gorski and Türkmen- Dervişoğlu, 2013). As an example, the Islamic State is also associated to this empirical claim, therefore supporting the understanding of religion as a violent identity marker. In particular, the conceptual justification supporting this claim is that religious groups are less likely to compromise, as they are concerned with their immaterial, spiritual identity and deriving norms. In addition, Islam has often been categorised as the most conflictual religion (Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017, p. 745). However, there is no statistical foundation supporting this statement: in fact, there is no indication whatsoever in the existing data set (Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017) that Muslim identities are represented more in these conflict statistics. Even if religion is a relevant identity marker, the mobilisation of existing groups is linked to existing inequalities, generating grievances (see Cederman, Gleditsch & Buhaug, 2013). However, it is interesting to note that “grievances are not necessarily expressed in religious terms even when religious differences exist” (Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017, p. 747). However, religious groups are often advantaged as they use their existing organisational networks and resources to mobilise politically after the breakout of conflict (see Stewart, 2009, as cited in Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017, 748). Nevertheless, as already explained above, there is no (statistical) indication pointing to the fact that religion is a more prominent marker associated with the likelihood of emergence of violent confrontation and conflict. The conflict-proneness of religion needs to be in fact analysed between existing religious groups, in a specific context (i.e. national, regional, but also temporal). Therefore, to obtain an understanding of sectarian identities in Syria and their relevance in the fuelling of the conflict, it is fundamental to analyse the intersection between different groups (and polities) both at the national and regional level, as it will be further illustrated in the following chapter.

Within the literature on sectarianism, we can therefore find a clear split between the so called primordialist and the rationalists scholars (Darwich and Fakhoury, 2016, 5). The latter consider sectarian identities as rooted in culture and identity, and therefore consider them as the primary determinants of conflict. Therefore, they read the domination of the Sunni-Shiite conflict and identities to explain the current political dynamics. In contrast, the rationalists look at the power distribution, identities and instruments manipulated to legitimise the interest of certain specific actors (Darwhich and Fakhoury, 2016, 6). In the case of Syria, the power distribution element is clearly present, as the Alawi sect represents only 10% of the population, but it has been dominating both the military and the security sector since the coming into power of Hafez Al-Assad, up until the breakout of the conflict (Wimmen, 2014, p. 21).

Linked to the definition by Valbjørn & Hinnebusch as outlined above (2019), and therefore of particular relevance for this paper, is the analytical framework proposed by Saouli (2019) according to which sectarianism, in order to be studied, needs to be located in the specific socio-political context and it also needs to be located with respect to other factors such as war, class and ethnicity (Saouli, 2019, 68). In particular, the author is asking himself the question of to what extent politicised sectarianism has a political shaping potential, in relations to the formation and end of existing political regimes (Saouli, 2019, 68). This framework might be of interest in so far as it could help to understand the correlation between authoritarianism and the silencing of sectarian identities in times of peace, leading to politicisation and mobilisation of violence in those cases of state collapse (i.e. Iraq and most recently Syria, but also Lebanon in a historical perspective). In this context, also Rørbæk points out the correlation between the sectarian surge and exogenous impacts, identifying the Iraqi war of 2003 and the United States-led intervention as a cause of the Iraqi sectarian surge and the escalation of peaceful protests in Syria in 2011. (Rørbæk, 2019, 23). These exogenous events are mainly associated with war and partial state collapse. The link between the sectarian surge and war and state collapse is de facto underlined in so far as the moment of disaggregation leads to the emergence of different forms of ‘de facto states’ with visions on statehood and aspiration on forms of territorial control (Ahram, 2017, p. 352). In the case of Lebanon, sectarian identities are defined as historical because they became central in the narrative around political mobilisation, and the consociational model, shaped by the 20th century conflicts, has been increasingly put under strain (Salloukh et al., 2015).

When we talk about sectarianism, we should assume that such a phenomenon can be observed for multiple communities both within a state or region. This assumption is particularly relevant in so far as it highlights the regional dimension and allows us for transboundary comparison. The community is an identity group which shares common traits, be it religion, beliefs, traditions, memories and perceptions; however, these identities do not exist in a vacuum and can only arise in a relational context with one another (Saouli, 2019, 69). Secondly, actors pass on these common traits through different means, such as discourses, symbols and performances that perpetrate boundaries and reproduce separated identities, hence a social identity is always a mediation between the social context and the action of the human subjects within that relational context. If we adhere to this framework, sectarianism can be defined as “a social actor’s feeling of belonging devotion and allegiance to the sectarian community within a certain social context” (Saouli, 2019, 69). This definition is central for a twofold motivation: firstly, because it conceives sectarianism as an identity-based concept within which religion represents only one of the possible many common traits defining and demarking the boundaries of the group; secondly, it is particularly important and links back to the idea that that sectarianism, which is a relational identity based on common traits which are transmitted and reiterate the boundaries of that identity itself, can have a political function in a specific social context (also see Hinnebusch, 2019). In this sense, when sectarianism as an identity-based cleavage enters into a relation with the socio-political context the community can become both context and vehicle for political mobilisation. A similar conclusion is reached by Rørbæk (2019), in so far as he considers sectarianism as a politically salient identity, which is not necessarily strictly correlated with religion only, but also recognises the coexistence of other identity divides across ethnic, linguistic and territorial divides (Rørbæk, 2019, p. 23).

This translates into the understanding that the definition of sectarianism remains intrinsically linked to a religious identity, together with other identity-based narratives, but it gains political significance depending on the specific socio-political context and it is therefore open for ‘political manipulation’ (Saouli, 2019, p. 69). This definition has also interesting ramifications insofar as it recognises that sectarian communities do not exist nor act in a vacuum but are influenced and motivated by cross-cutting factors such as class, ideology, ethnicity rendering the concept more complex and multifaceted.

According to Hinnebusch (2019), the degree of political saliency attached to sectarianism, and therefore its connection to violent and exclusionary practices, is linked to the form that such religious-based identity cleavage takes in a specific historical and socio-economic context. The author distinguishes between three forms of sectarianism. First, banal sectarianism relates to the individual identity claim deriving from being born and socialised into a specific sect (Hinnebusch, 2019, p. 43). Such form is not politically salient, and it is compatible with an overarching, broader state identity. In this context, he provides the example of Lebanon. Secondly, sectarianism can assume an instrumental form, whereby a group competes for scarce political resources but does not implement violent, exclusionary practices. Finally, militant sectarianism is not only a politicised form, but it is also assuming exclusionary and violent boundary-making practices, and therefore is concerned with fundamentalist claims about the religious doctrine (Brubaker, 2015 as cited in Hinnebusch, 2019). This distinction in the level of politicisation that sectarianism can assume is central in understanding its political saliency in the case of Syria.

According to Makdisi, “rather than emphasising the religious aspect of sectarianism, we ought to put politics first in order to think of sectarianism as what it is: politics organised along sectarian lines” (Makdisi, 2008, as cited in Shaery-Yadzi, p. 559). This means sectarian identities are exploited as a justification to pursue political goals, but they are historically contingent and therefore do not relate back to an irresolvable (and conflictual) identity issues. Therefore, sectarianism does not bear hatred and conflict, but it is rather about how the relationship between different sects are portrayed and are instrumentalised in the name of political gains. Hence, sectarianism has a mobilising power, which political leaders use to mobilise followers behind an offensive or defensive campaign (Farha, 2016, p. 9). In this sense, both sectarian groups and sectarian polities provide goods such as identity, legitimacy and protection in order to mobilise individuals behind a specific political cause.

On the contrary, a strand of literature has dismissed the concept of sectarianism as useful in analysing the patterns of violence, State collapse and State formation in the Middle Eastern area in the past twenty years. According to Haddad (2017), the existing academic research on sectarianism has been inconclusive and has not led to any agreement on how to define the exact object of study. Therefore, he points out that sectarianism per se is entirely emptied of meaning while the association to the adjective sectarian of other qualitative nouns such as ‘conflict’, ‘relations’, ‘identity’ give a conclusive meaning to the term and can be further researched. (Haddad, 2017). Haddad concludes that, even though qualitative and relational attributes might help researchers define sectarianism as a clear object of study, such concept remains so controversial and so difficult to define that it should be permanently abandoned (Saouli, 2019, 381).

According to Yasser Munif (2020), sectarianism as a concept is merely a post-colonial reminder and that sects are a mere instrument of political control in the hands of authoritarian regimes (Munif, 2020, 21). The author introduces the concept of polity as a more cross-cutting and adapt concept to theorise the identity, ethnic and religious divides that characterised Syria. In addition, he also thinks that socio-economic and class cleavages are way more important than religious ones.

* 1. **Sectarianism and the Syrian Conflict: Identity, Religion and Politics**

Applying the definition of sectarianism conceptualised above, we can see that the existence of sectarianism in the Muslim world, and particularly in the Middle East, has been mostly associated with the Shia and Sunni schism (European Parliament, 2016; Valbjørn, 2019). In the case of Syria, but also in the entire region more broadly, sectarian divides existed prior to the explosion of the conflict, and their existence was institutionalised during the colonial period. In fact, colonialism has been considered a factor in both the creation and permanence of sectarian divides, but also as a central component for their politicisation (Rahimah, 2016; Aslam, 2014). Therefore, “colonial policies towards different ethnic and religious groups contributed considerably to the friction between the legitimacy of state authority and its territorial control. While Middle Eastern borders did not usually delineate ethnic or religious communities, the colonial powers often manipulated ethnic and religious divisions for their own interests, following the old Roman strategy of ‘divide and rule’ (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 773). Tomass (2016) also highlighted that in Syria, the identification with the nation-state, even after obtaining independence, was superficial, and the region’s inhabitants felt their identity was linked to the own sectarian groups, and therefore perceived their own sectarian institutions as more legitimate than the actual state. In addition, the author reiterates that sectarian fractions have deep historical roots.

Therefore, it is interesting to reflect on how the politicisation of sectarian, religious and identity-based cleavages has been a process contextually fuelled by European colonial powers through the institutionalisation of the dominance of certain (religious) groups over others (i.e. crystallisation of power within the Alawi sect in Syria). The prominence of the Alawi sect was promoted and granted by the French authorities during the colonial times, whereby societal cleavages existing in terms of religion, ethnicity and culture were exacerbated to create a local elite which would mirror the expectations of the colonial powers. In fact, “since ancient times, processes of conquest and colonisation have been the most important drivers of political and economic inequalities” (Williams, 2003, p. 59). This is important to keep in mind as such religious and identity cleavages have started becoming strongly politicised during the colonial rule. Therefore, it is important to reflect upon the historical legacy of Europe in the post-European world, bringing to the fore the complexity of the political colonial apparatus in institutionalising ‘difference’ and in influencing the path to democracy, statehood and stability today. However, it is also important to reflect on the impact of socio-political and economic factors behind the empowerment of the Alawi sect. The roots leading to the empowerment of such sectarian minority existed in the colonial era, but also the hierarchical power structures existing during the Ottoman empire and the system of recruitment of the army contributed to existing divisions and the empowerment of one group over the other (M. Syoufi, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

In the context of Syria, we can gain an understanding of sectarianism and its meaning, both before and after 2011, by isolating three layers through which sectarian cleavages matter and operate: the individual level, the social level and, last but not least, the political level (M. Syoufi, personal communication, August 4, 2021). At the individual level, and therefore the level of people’s own identities, the Syrian society appears as very diverse; sectarian affiliations also overlap alongside ethnic differences, while racial traits are considered distinct from both religious and national cleavages. In the Syrian context, people’s awareness of themselves, their being and their identity is very strong and translates into very strong group affiliations. Therefore, belonging to a certain religious sect is considered as a fundamental part of one’s individual identity. Secondly, the social level helps us understand how these different groups relate to each other, and how existing sectarian affiliations shape the relationship between individuals and groups. This is also reflected, to some extent, into Syrian law of personal status, for example. Finally, the political meaning of sectarianism corresponds to the coming into power of the Alawi sect, and therefore the politicisation of the sectarian identity, bringing about control over political power. Such sectarian tensions, therefore, have always existed at the political and societal levels, and over time the balance of power has shifted from different groups to others. However, the repression of protests in 2011 brought about the explosion of violent confrontation between sects. Such vision is also integrated in existing literature (see Tomass, 2016), whereby sectarian cleavages are analysed as operating on the three levels enumerated above. Tomass (2016) further sheds light on the differences and meanings of self-identity (as a symbolic package of meanings about the self), social identity (created when individuals observe and categorise each other based on social factors, including religion) and political identity (how these layers interact in the public sphere and how they are regulated) and also interestingly adds that, in Syria, religious identity “takes precedence over all rival social identities (Tomass, 2016, p. 10). Finally, the distinction between the three layers of sectarian dynamics also partially mirrors the conceptualisation of different forms of sectarianism (banal, instrumentalised, militant) by Hinnebusch (2019).

Before 2011, Syria was enumerated among the strong, repressive and authoritarian states present in the region. However, the 2011 uprisings caused an increasing weaking of the state structure, which in turn brought about the emergence and growing power of many non-state actors, not all sectarian in nature. Some of these non-state actors identified with opposition forces, and therefore attempted to create political and governmental institutions concurring to the traditional state power (i.e. the Islamic State and Kurdish militias) (Del Sarto, Malvig & Lecha, 2019).

In 2011, the protests started being fuelled by social discontent, in a context in which sectarian groups existed but they were peacefully co-existing, beyond the mere idea and image of an integrated nation-state. After the protests broke out in the district of Deera, and the situation slowly degenerated into civil war, a hybrid system of governance emerged, whereby both the opposition and the regime coexisted, even if the latter was united along different lines and groups, promoting exclusionary sectarian policies (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019). These groups therefore became imperfect polities, to the extent that they represented groups based on a religious identity, which started competing for political power and provided, to some extent, material and immaterial goods, security and legitimacy. With the start of the conflict, these identities became further politicised and therefore violent, and also increasingly made territorial claims, as in the case of Da’esh. The issue of ‘sectarianisation’ of the conflict came to be quite rapidly, but it was even made more complex and more central to the international community when Da’esh declared the birth of the Islamic State caliphate in 2014 (Van Veel et al., 2021). The sectarian group therefore became a fully-fledged polity, which had control over large territories across Syria and Iraq territorial claims and started creating, with a varying degree of legitimacy, its own jurisdiction.

In addition, beyond the impact of extremist groups, also the divisive and violent actions of the Syrian regime and the external forms of Saudi interventionism have fuelled groups driven by the sectarian agenda (European Parliament: 2016, p. 10). The regional relevance of sectarian identities and their politicisation beyond borders is also is also evident according to “one of the substantial characteristics of the regional politics is the region-wide geopolitical context framed on a sectarian discourse and manifested as Iranian-Saudi rivalry having international backings” (Tinas & Tür, 2021, p. 322). Therefore, existing sectarian identities have been politicised and instrumentalised as a means to maintaining power (Del Sarto, Malvig & Lecha, 2019, p. 18). The politics of sectarianism has fuelled external interventionism in the region (i.e. Saudi Arabia versus Iran), but it has also reinforced regional dynamics rather than national ones (Del Sarto, Malvig & Lecha, 2019, p. 27).

As indicated above, the division of society in sects, along allegiances which are mainly religious-based, existed before the breakout of the conflict and could be considered as sectarian groups (i.e. the competition for political power was mostly absent, as identities were kept under control by the central government and prevented groups from formulating such claims). However, after the protests brought about a violent escalation of the conflict, Syria was and is still now confronted with the violent mobilisation of identity and religious fault lines beyond the mere provision of goods and legitimacy within the inside boundaries. (Hinnebusch, 2019; Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019; Saouli, 2019; Ahram, 2017). It is also interesting to note, however, that while sectarian fault lines are clear and correspond to religious-based networks of affiliations, the existing fragmentation of political actors operating on the ground also includes secular actors and groups divided along ethnic lines.

Therefore, in some cases, the justification behind the conflict has become religious, and linked to the power differentials of different sects in post-2011 Syria (Aslam, 2014, 207). This scenario therefore does apply to the conceptualisation of sectarianism according to which the religiously-significant identity and understanding can become politically significant depending on the evolution of the political context at stake (Saouli, 2019). Therefore, the ‘sectarianisation’ of the conflict is central to understand how sectarian communities as both groups and imperfect polities, depending on their degree of politicisation, do not exist in isolation from themselves and other central factors, such as ideology and ethnicity, that may render them violently mobilised in contexts of conflict. However, at this stage, it is also important to make clear that the roots of the conflict are complex and multi-faceted, and sectarian violence is part of this escalation. Other factors central to the escalation of the conflict included inequalities and bad governance and the strong liberal economic turn, which left the most peripheral areas of the countries impoverished and dissatisfied. (Berti & Paris, 2015: 22). However, the access to privileges and resources takes us back once more to the conceptualisation of sectarian groups as imperfect polities, defined as networks of provision of resources, legitimacy and political capital. As already explained above, some of these imperfect polities also gained territorial control with the deepening and the escalation of the conflict, and therefore becoming fully fledged contestant polities.

In the context of the Syrian war, sectarian violence has also been fuelled and manipulated by an increasingly evident geopolitical game at play, seeing Saudi Arabia confronting Iran in the battle for regional hegemony (Berti & Paris, 2015: 26; former UN official, personal communication, March 27, 2021). However, sectarian identities exist and matter beyond the Sunni-Shiite divide and their contextualisation in geopolitics. In this sense, we argue that sectarian polities existed before the conflict as a group of parallel, sub-state, structures which became open for manipulation due to the changing social and political context. Therefore, the breakdown of the Syrian state created as a consequence a fertile terrain for politicisation of those sects which felt excluded from the sharing of power. In this sense, the sects operating in Syria, way beyond the schism Sunni-Shia, the different sectarian groups, turned into imperfect polities after the conflict, and finally polities have mobilised their resources for political purposes and to combat alongside or against the regime. This means that, in the case of Syria, we can note how the dynamic of conflict mobilised such pre-existing, harmless and identity cleavages, transforming them into violent political units . In particular, the ‘violent’ is associated with groups bearing extremist Islamist ideologies, such as the Islamic State for example, which made the patchwork of existing actors involved in the conflict much more complex and provoked a securitisation of the conflict which involved the international community.

* 1. **The EU as a Foreign Policy Actor in Syria: Normative Empire Europe and Decentring Perspectives**

In 2016, the publication of the European Global Strategy (EUGS) marked the beginning of a new era for the European Union’s external action. For the first time, after the significant strengthening of EU’s foreign policy brought about by the Lisbon Treaty, the High Representative Federica Mogherini, also recognised as the sui generis foreign minister of the European Union, published this strategic document highlighting the following key elements: the nature of the EU as a foreign policy actor; its identity, norms and values; its objectives in foreign policy and external action more broadly. The expression ‘principled pragmatism’ was coined for the first time, in order to reconcile the EU’s identity as a normative actor, but also its renewed desire to pursue its interests globally and to tackle insecurities threatening its own internal unity. However, the EU Global Strategy failed in enumerating a much more structural, twofold challenge that the EU was and is still facing today: that of understanding its historical legacy (or rather, its member states’ legacies) and its role in the world.

It is therefore evident that the European Union in the 21st century has to deal with the following twofold challenge: first, understanding and re-defining its role as no longer ‘at the centre’, but also facing the historical and colonial legacies which are the direct product of a formerly Eurocentric world order (Nicolaidis & Fisher Onar, 2013, p. 285). In this sense, the two authors (2013) propose a framework which is aimed at provincialising Europe and its values, norms, and structures. “The incremental and timid resurgence of the idea and practice of ‘Europe as a model’ can be seen as the product of a mixed strategy of amnesia, redirection and atonement on the part of public figures, intellectuals and broader publics” (Nicolaidis & Fisher Onar, 2013, p. 293). The decentring framework proposed by Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar (2013), therefore, allows the researcher to engage and to reconstruct Europe’s identity and role in the world both at the empirical and at the normative levels. Provincialising, aimed at overcoming the most longstanding, pervasive Eurocentric binaries, such as Europe and Islam, secularism versus religiosity but also the very conception of the state, and reconstructing, understanding the impact of non-Western structure on EU’s promotion of value and norms, is therefore in this sense central to this research (Nicolaidis & Fisher Onar, 2013, p. 283). Secondly, the conceptual category of engagement aims at studying, understanding and analysing not only the EU’s stance in the conflict but foremost how the EU is perceived in the recipient country (and therefore within the Syrian context), how its policy-making instruments and goals are impacting the local structures of power as well as the local rights to self-determination, but also the extent to which existing legacies, values and the vision of the world that the European Union wants to promote impacts its engagement in the world.

Therefore, this research will make use of the decentring approach (Lecocq and Keukeleire, 2018; Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar, 2013), and it aims at contributing to this strand of literature in placing and defining the European Union’s role in Syria from a post-European and post-Western perspective. It challenges the vision according to which the European Neighbourhood is seen as a functional space of normative expansion, whereby norms and values are exported and projected without being cleared from the Western bias. However, the destabilisation brought by the events following the Arab Spring has undermined the European Union’s ability to export its own norms in these concentric circles, and has made its action in the region increasingly contested and complex.

Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire (2016) further shed light on the operationalisation of the decentring agenda by bringing forward a two step-analysis which brings forward the categories of normative and empirical provincialising. In particular, the authors engage in the so called ‘inside-out’ perspective (Keuleers, Fonck & Keukeleire, 2016), whereby the analysis engages in understanding and assessing the EU’s foreign policy goals in a certain domain, but also questions surrounding the identity of the EU as a norm-setter or rather a norm-taker.

Finally, this conceptual analysis serves as an instrument to explain the EU’s influence or lack thereof in a specific context. The ‘inside-out’ analysis is guided by a series of questions, which themselves provide an understanding of the EU’s influence. Firstly, what are the EU’s goals in foreign policy, and in this case, in the Syrian conflict? Secondly, is the EU presenting itself as a norm-setter or rather as a norm-diffuser, adhering to the normative frameworks promoted by other international actors, such as the United Nations? In addition, the decentring agenda as proposed by Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire (2016) can also be operationalised to focus on the ‘outside-in’ perspective, allowing the researcher to focus on the perspective of the recipient country, and therefore delving into questions such as: what is the relevance and impact of the EU’s policy regarding the challenges facing the country, and in particular, the attempt to start the process of political transition; to what extent is the domestic context within which EU policies interfere or within which negotiations in the EU take place defined and shaped by sectarian identities? What is the perception or legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of various domestic groups, and do they support EU-promoted reforms? How do audiences within the countries understand relevant concepts? (Keuleers, Fonck, Keukeleire, 2016, p. 350). The application of the outside-in perspective allows the researcher to shed light on the Syrian perspective with respect to EU’s legitimacy in promoting (or dismissing) the importance of sectarianism as a factor in the ongoing conflict. The hypothesis brought forward is that sectarianism plays a central role in shaping the context (and therefore the subsequent limits) of action for the European Union in Syria.

In order to best capture the complexity of sectarianism as an identity-based, politicised identity in the framework of the Syrian conflict (Valbjørn & Hinnebusch, 2019), it is important to introduce the concept of polity as a useful analytical tool to study the political salience of sectarian cleavages.

Polities are defined as “political entities or authority structures that have a distinct identity; a capacity to mobilise persons and their resources for political purposes, that is, for value satisfaction; and a degree of institutionalisation and hierarchy“. (Ferguson and Mansbach, 2002). Polity is also defined as an “authority structure (consisting of an individual or group of people) providing identity, order, and vital goods and services to individuals or groups of people in return for political support in retaining a position of authority and power” (Lecocq & Keukeleire, 2018, p. 343). In addition, the domain of a polity consists of “those persons who identify with it, the resources it can command, the reach it has (with respect to adherents located in spaces and issues” (Ferguson et al., 2000, p. 30 as cited in Lecocq & Keukeleire, 2018). It is therefore clear how such concept bears strong connections to the issue of identity and identification. Polities can also be religion-based, to the extent that they provide (in a legitimate way) identity, order and public goods, both spiritual and material (Lecocq & Keukeleire, 2018). Examples of these religious polities are Hezbollah and Da’esh. In particular, the latter is identified as a sectarian polity which has connected the identity cleavage to a mechanism of power-sharing and aiming at “redrawing the borders of the Middle East according to sectarian lines (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 783). According to Lecocq and Keukeleire (2018), polities, regardless of their secular or religious nature, are also dynamic and fluid in nature, and are therefore complex objects of study. In fact, “areas and societies are characterised by a high degree of complexity and hybridity: several processes and realities can exist in parallel, can be overlapping or separated, compatible or incompatible, mutually reinforcing or undermining, visible or invisible, and dynamic in space and time” (Lecocq & Keukeleire, 2018, p. 280).

In the case of Syria, the complex interaction between legitimacy, authority and political power has painted a particularly complicated picture, especially as of 2011. Issues of sovereignty and territoriality have in fact become more important since the start of the Arab Spring (Del Sarto, 2017).

In order to understand the interaction between sects and polities, and therefore to grasp how it is necessary to distinguish between sectarian groups and polities in the context of the Syrian conflict, it is useful to refer back to the different forms of sectarianism, as analysed by Hinnebusch (2019). Banal sectarianism, described as an individual identity claim, is a non-politicised form. Therefore such identity claim is non-politicised, and we can speak of sectarian groups whereby the members of such group identify with a shared, religious identity. On the contrary, sectarianism can also assume an instrumental form, whereby a group competes for political resources but does not implement violent, exclusionary practices. We consider instrumental sectarianism to therefore generate imperfect polities, as they provide identity and public goods (both material and immaterial), but do not (yet) exercise territorial claims and engage in violent, exclusionary behaviour. Such concept successfully grasps the dynamics of sects on the ground in Syria, while at the same time overcoming some limitations that the concept of polity bears, in so far as it equates to power and authority structures connected to a territorial claim. Finally, as already illustrated above, sectarian polities come to be when sectarianism turns into a militant form, which assumes exclusionary and violent boundary-making practices, and it is also associated to the provision of order, identity, and public goods within a specific territorial space. In the context of Syria, the distinction between polities and imperfect polities is fluid, as the violent dynamics on the ground have sometimes led to the implementation of exclusionary and violent boundary-making practices also by imperfect polities and sectarian groups. However, in practice, it is quite challenging to draw a clear-cut boundary between sectarian groups, imperfect polities and sectarian polities, because these distinctions have evolved over time and space.

The political experience in the Middle East has been questioning the Westphalian model, in the sense that the state borders and the state authority exercised within those same borders is a far more complex construct than the simple delineation on a map (Del Sarto, 2017). The concept of sovereignty therefore, as already questioned by authors such as Nicolaidis and Fisher Onar (2013) and Lecocq and Keukeleire (2018) does not have the same meaning everywhere and can be given different definitions and declinations in different political systems. We can distinguish between international sovereignty and domestic sovereignty, whereby we define the latter as “effectiveness, legitimacy, and territorial scope of state authority” and therefore referring to the “configuration of state authority, borders and territoriality, and legitimacy” (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 771).

However, according to del Sarto, “profound disjuncture between state authority, legitimacy and territoriality lie at the heart of the state-formation process in the Middle East (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 771). Borders have been contested during the colonial occupation and are again being contested, after the Arab uprisings, as a result of grievances, inequalities and demand for change in the region.

The politicisation of (religious) sectarianism since 2011 has been central in affecting the relationship between authority, legitimacy and territoriality in the Middle East. (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 776). Sectarian tensions have always existed in the region, but they were not politically activated, or were less significant due to the strong state repression and different economic and social conditions (M. Yousfi, personal communication, August 4, 2021)[[1]](#footnote-2). In fact, “domestic economic policies have been interlocking with international prescriptions, however, as states have been pressured by the West to adopt the neo-liberal model of development. The policies of the nearby EU, in particular – the largest trading partner of many MENA states- resulted in a further fragmentation within and along state borders” (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 780). It is therefore because of the interlocking dynamics between sovereignty and territoriality and religious identity, that “it may also be worthwhile to explore alternative conceptualisations of the state and its borders, so as to assess the impact of the contentious nature of MENA borders since the uprisings of 2011” (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 785).

In order to complement the ‘outside-in’ and ‘inside-out’ perspectives and to shed further light on polity decentring, to understand the EU’s role in such a complex context as the one of the Syrian conflict, this paper proposes to adopt the concept of Normative Empire Europe (Del Sarto, 2016). Such concept is strongly linked to the Normative Power Europe concept (Manners, 2002), coined by Ian Manners in 2002 and since then at the centre of the academic literature as a tool to describe the EU’s nature as an entirely normative actor in international relations, rather than a realist one. This dichotomy between the normative nature and the realist nature of the European Union as an actor, considered as reductionist approach, loses its purpose if we look at the EU’s behaviour within its neighbourhood, of which Syria is part geographically, even if it is not formally part of the European Neighbourhood Policy framework.

According to Del Sarto (2016), the EU is rather a Normative Empire, in so far as it exports rules and practices to neighbours to pursue its own interest, therefore also creating the construction of a normative identity while pursuing its own self-interest (Del Sarto, 2016, p. 216). Therefore, this concept resolves the apparent and inherent contradiction or tensions between the EU’s ability and willingness to pursue norms and interests at the same time. According to this concept, it is possible (and, to some extent, desirable) that an actor pursuing a norm-driven behaviour also adopts it as a utility-maximising strategy (Del Sarto, 2017, p. 217). However, the ‘benevolent’ rule transfer, and therefore the normative nature of the EU, to the Southern neighbourhood bears problematic aspects, in light of the history and legacy of European colonialism (Del Sarto, 2017; Fisher Onar & Nicolaidis, 2013). Even though Syria is not formally part of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the relations with the EU have been suspended with the breakout of the war, the intent of transferring norms and practices both during the conflict, but in particular in the prospect of reconstruction and post-conflict dynamic, make this concept also adaptable and applicable to the case at stake. In fact, conflict resolution schemes and political transition models also represent such norms and practices that the EU attempts to externalise in its immediate neighbourhood. In particular, we can see how the value-based approach to mediation has been institutionalised through the New Concept on Mediation (Council of the European Union, 2020a).

Finally, to complement the findings on Syria, this research will also briefly add a comparative dimension by looking at two other cases, that of Lebanon, a fully-fledged ENP country, and Iraq, whereby the EU partnership has been deepened after 2018. This framework is also useful and conducive to the broader reflection around the EU as a civilising power, with objectives that reflect and diffuse norms and practices promoting a specific economic, social and political vision of the world (i.e. the neoliberal model is the only one contributing to prosperity and stability; the Westphalian state is the only legitimate and stable structure to organise political power). Therefore, the concept of Normative Empire Europe captures both the civilising mission of the EU (and hence its internal dynamics, governance patterns and values) and its unequal power relations with the so-called ‘borderlands’, the neighbourhood, and more specifically for this research, the Southern Neighbourhood.

1. **Methodology**
   1. **Research Design and Data Collection**

This paper is centred around a process of data triangulation, both acquired through fieldwork and through document analysis. Firstly, the paperwill analyse the results obtained from a structured questionnaire disseminated via Facebook and personal networks, aimed at reaching both Syrian citizens and citizens from the wider Middle Eastern region (and in particular Lebanon and Jordan, due to their ties with Syria). The data on sectarianism collected via the questionnaire will be then tested against, and therefore complemented by, one existing survey on the position of Syrians towards sectarianism in 2016, and more recent surveys (i.e. 2020) conducted on the future of Syria and its Constitution. These surveys and/or studies were conducted by the Syrian non-governmental organisation “The Day After”. The surveys will serve as a complementary tool to validate, complement, and to the extent necessary test the findings obtained through (limited) data collected conducted by the author. Finally, these data will be further informed and complemented by expert interviews.

The same triangulation method will be adopted to test the findings obtained on the European Union’s engagement with sectarian groups and polities in Syria, whereby existing literature will be complemented by the findings obtained from a systematic document analysis. The data gathered through expert interviews will also be used to further substantiate the findings. The analysis of EU documents is therefore based on a two-step analysis. First, a rigorous mapping of all relevant documents regarding the EU’s approach to the Syrian conflict, and especially with respect to sectarianism, was conducted. These documents were sampled from different institutions, such as the European Commission, the European External Action Service, the European Parliament and the Council of the European Union, and therefore reflect the complexity of the institutional architecture of the EU. The variety of institutional documents is also helpful in pointing out the alignment or the divergences of different institutional bodies on this issue. These include programmatic documents, strategies, briefings, European Parliament resolutions, and press statements. The sampling is also concerning a quite extended time period: the documents analysed have been adopted and/or published during the period between 2011 and 2020. These documents and sources therefore also guarantee a thorough understanding and review of EU’s objectives in the Syrian conflict and their evolution over time. Finally, the EU perspective is complemented by the analysis and mapping of existing documents of the United Nations, relevant for the purpose of the paper.

Secondly, the documents identified as relevant for this research were used to analyse the EU’s positioning within the context of the conflict and with respect to sectarianism, therefore shedding light on the EU’s identity and actorness in EU foreign policy. Finally, the data gathered through interviews with EU and UN officials and other experts on the topic are coupled with the data obtained via the document analysis.

As far as the research interviews are concerned, they have been conducted as semi-structured interviews. According to Bernard, this format is a useful tool to communicate with “high level bureaucrats or elite members of a community” (Bernard, 2006, p. 12), as they most likely will have less time to spend in an interview. They are also helpful in putting the researcher in control of the data-gathering process, while not imposing too much structure/control over the interviewee. The semi-structured format of the interview also contributed to creating a relationship of trust and to guaranteeing the ability to adapt the conversation and steer the discussion towards the most interesting and relevant topics of discussion. However, it is important to note that interviews as a data-gathering method also present limitations, and therefore it is central to critically approach the data gathered, as they might be encountering issues of accuracy (Bernard, 2006, p. 245). These research interviews were conducted with the support of digital tools such as Zoom, WebEx or Whatsapp. The paper relies on the insights collected from the the following interviewees: two former high-ranking officials, respectively coming from the European External Action Service (EEAS) and the United Nations (UN); a young PhD researcher with a strong expertise on the region; Jonas Slaats, an expert on Islam; an EU policymaker with a longstanding expertise on Syria; the Executive Director of a Syrian-based non-governmental organisation, the Day After, with a strong expertise on the issue of sectarianism in Syria, but also on EU-Syria relations. In addition, other EU policy-makers representing different institutions (i.e. European Parliament, European Commission and European External Action Service) were contacted but refused to take part in an interview. Therefore, these representatives of the EU institutions are considered as non-respondents, and their refusal to engage in a conversation on the issue or sectarianism in Syria is considered a source of data in itself.

The structured questionnaire administered through Facebook and the researcher’s personal network was built on the Google forms platform and it consisted of both closed and open questions; the open questions were building upon closed questions to allow respondents to further motivate/elaborate on their answers. The questionnaire is not intended as a survey, but rather as a written questionnaire to collect quality data in a shorter time. The questionnaire collected a total of 17 responses, with respondents coming from Syria (both currently living in Syria and some living abroad, particularly in Brussels), but also neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. It was designed taking into account the sensitivity of the topic, but also the positionality of the researcher. The questionnaire is divided into two main sections, which mirror the chapters of this paper. Firstly, the respondents were asked about their nationality; secondly, they were asked to provide a definition of sectarianism. Then, the respondents were asked whether they would define the conflict as sectarian. This question marks the end of the first part, focusing on sectarianism and Syria. The second part of the questionnaire aimed at collecting data regarding the EU’s role in Syria, and particularly with respect to sectarianism. The respondents were therefore asked the following: whether they are familiar or not with the EU; whether they believed the EU had any positive role in advocating for a solution to the Syrian conflict. The respondents were asked to justify this response by providing a short comment. Finally, respondents were asked whether they felt the EU took sufficiently into account the sectarian dimension of the conflict; the respondents who provided a negative answer could then answer a follow-up question on whether they thought the EU should do so more consistently. Last but not least, the respondents were asked to indicate whether they perceived the European Union as a neo-colonial actor within the context of its foreign policy towards Syria. The results of the structured questionnaire will be further analysed in chapter 4 and complemented by a graphic display of the results obtained. As previously indicated above, the structured questionnaire was disseminated via Facebook, in relevant groups filtered out based on their title, contents published and membership. In addition, the questionnaire was also disseminated via the researcher’s personal network, therefore guaranteeing a varied sample of data. When it comes to Facebook groups, the portion of the population reached through the semi-structured questionnaire is using them as a tool to express and exchange opinions and positions regarding the Syrian conflict. These groups are used as a safe space to express these opinions in a free, direct and non-judgmental environment or to share the latest updates. This space influences also the mix of respondents reached, their opinions and their visions of the world. The questionnaire was also shared through the network of a cultural center operating in Brussels, which focuses on the promotion of Arabic literature, music, and culture, and which is directed by a group of Syrians living in Belgium. Therefore, the results differ also in light of the different geographical positioning, personal experiences and sensitivities of the respondents coming from Facebook groups and those based in Belgium. Finally, gaining access to information worked both through reading updates on the conflict, opinions and ideas of group members but also to their expertise by creating an actual Facebook post.

It is important, in the context of this research, to also briefly reflect on the impact of the pandemic on data collection, and therefore to enumerate the challenges and opportunities arising from the digital field and fieldwork. When looking at Zoom, WebEx or other tools used to conduct online interviews, it is important to make a distinction to understand how the interviewees interpret and use those same tools. It is safe to assume officials working within the context of the EU institutions were used to working with platforms such as WebEx and Zoom as a professional tool to host meetings, to access their team and to discuss important tasks and deadlines. NGOs also use these tools for professional purposes and maybe for personal ones. The familiarity and accessibility of these tools to the interviewees also influenced the unfolding of the interview, together with the willingness of the interviewee to share information and, therefore ultimately, the ability to collect relevant findings.

In the case of semi-structured interviews conducted with policy-makers and experts on the topic, the activities, ideas and spaces made accessible depended mostly on the interviewee and are not necessarily strictly linked to the tools used. However, some important information regarding the space surrounding the interviewee could be easily manipulated or eliminated through the use of background images or also by changing the position of the camera. In some cases, the interviews were conducted without switching on the webcam; this has impeded any access to the interviewee’s facial expressions, movements and body language more broadly.

Finally, as far as the structured questionnaire is concerned, what might have remained obscured are, to some extent, some specific information shared in the group (i.e. entirely in Arabic, therefore the linguistic barrier might play a role), but also the identities and the roles of the participants “outside” of the digital space.

1. **The EU and sectarianism in Syria: Operationalising the Decentring Agenda and Understanding the EU as Normative Empire**

After gaining an understanding of the concept of sectarianism and its meaning and within the context of the Syrian conflict in, but also after looking at the EU’s profiling as an international actor and the values and interests it aims to pursue in the previous sections, this chapter will analyse the way that the European Union has engaged with this concept, focusing on both the ‘outside-in’ and ‘inside-out’ perspectives (Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire, 2016).

In particular, as outlined above, this section will delve deeper into the following core questions: what are the EU’s goals in foreign policy in the Syrian conflict? Secondly, is the EU presenting itself as a norm-setter or rather as a norm-diffuser, adhering to the normative frameworks promoted by other international actors, such as the United Nations? Finally, the research will clarify whether sectarianism can be considered as a factor in assessing EU’s influence or lack thereof in the context of the Syrian conflict and the contribution to shaping a post-conflict transition, based on the principles of democracy and human rights. In addition, the concept of Normative Empire Europe (Del Sarto, 2016) will be used in order to gain an understanding of the EU’s involvement in the Syrian conflict and its nature, testing whether its approach towards sectarianism responds to normative, interest-based concerns or rather a combination of the two. This set of conceptual questions will be necessary to gather the necessary insights in order to answer the following overarching research question and sub-questions:

1. **To what extent has the European Union (EU) recognised and engaged with sectarianism as a concept and sectarian groups (and polities) throughout the Syrian conflict?**
   1. *With* ***which definition*** *of sectarianism does the EU engage with?*
   2. ***Does the EU engage*** *with sectarian groups and polities in the Syrian context?*
   3. *Why does (or does not) the EU engage with sectarian groups and polities?*

As outlined in the methodology section, the data gathered derive from the document mapping and document analysis, and will be tested against existing literature and the findings deriving from the semi-structured expert interviews.

In the second part, this chapter will test the EU’s understanding and (dis)engagement with sectarianism against the Syrian perspective. For this purpose, the data collected through the structured questionnaire will be analysed together with existing surveys and studies on the Syrian perspectives on sectarianism and the political future of the country. This chapter will also rely on the insights collected from the semi-structured interviews conducted with experts.

* 1. **The EU and sectarianism**

Before 2011, the EU had not paid much attention to Syria, as it did not consider it a key strategic partner in the Southern Mediterranean; similarly, President Bashar al-Assad did not consider the EU as a key partner (Pierini, 2016, p. 4). The EU-Syria prospect Association Agreement, negotiated between 1997 and 2004, was revised in 2008 but it was never signed. However, after the breakout of the conflict, preoccupations with security issues and the migration crisis made it impossible for the EU to not engage in the attempt to mediate and solve the conflict. In addition, the international involvement on the ground, including that of the United States, Russia and Iran, made it ever more complex for the EU not to engage in the mediation efforts and in encouraging the dismissal of the Assad regime. Therefore, as already previously discussed, Syria is not formally a part of the European Neighbourhood Policy. However, it forms part of the wider concept of the EU’s neighbourhood and therefore it is part of EU’s normative and regulatory space beyond its immediate borders.

When looking at the European Global Strategy, the programmatic document defining the priorities and objectives of EU’s external action, but also outlining the EU’s nature as an international actor, we can see that the EU profiles itself as a pragmatic actor, whereby “interests and values go hand in hand. We have an interest in promoting our values in the world. At the same time, out fundamental values are embedded in our interests. Peace and security, prosperity, democracy and a rules-based global order are the vital interests underpinning our external action” (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission, 2016, p. 13). This intersection between values and interest, and therefore their reconciliation, is what in the programmatic document is defined as ‘principled pragmatism’ (High Representative, 2016).The concept of ‘principled pragmatism’ can naturally be associated to the idea of Normative Empire Europe as described by Del Sarto (2016), which is therefore indirectly integrated in a programmatic document on EU’s role in external action. In fact, the idea of ‘principled pragmatism’ translates into the synergy between values and interests, therefore underpinning the promotion of norms, but also governance structures, economic structures and political structures abroad. As an example, the Strategy mentions the commitment of the EU to achieve the objectives of both state and societal resilience in the neighbourhood, as well through the promotion of norms and values (High Representative, 2016). Alongside the objectives of resilience, more pragmatic interests promoted in the neighbourhood include the countering and containing of spill-overs of security threats (such as human trafficking, smuggling, terrorism and migration. These security challenges are explicitly tied and made dependent on successful strategies of conflict resolution (High Representative, 2016). In particular, the High Representative underlined that “the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of states, the inviolability of borders and the peaceful settlement of disputes are key elements of the European security order. These principles apply to all states, both within and beyond the EU’s borders” (High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Vice-President of the European Commission, 2016, p. 33).

Hence, ‘principled pragmatism’ (or, as argued by the paper, the conceptualisation of the Union as a Normative Empire), is particularly relevant when studying the EU’s approach towards its neighbourhood.[[2]](#footnote-3) In addition, the Global Strategy makes a clear reference to the EU’s adherence to the United Nations’ system. This strong relationship between the United Nations and the EU is particularly relevant in the field of conflict management, and it is in fact relevant and evident in the case of the Syrian conflict, as it will be further discussed in the first part of this chapter. As one of the programmatic goals set in the strategy, the EU sets itself to act decisively and promptly to respond to crises, and in particular to promote locally-owned agreements for conflict resolution (High Representative, 2016, p. 17). When mentioning the privileged partners the EU is willing and looking to cooperate on conflict management, reference is made to states, regional bodies and international organisations (therefore those international and national actors recognised by international law, challenging only partially the Westphalian views on sovereignty). Religious groups are often mentioned in the strategy, but there is no specific reference to their significance and to their role in contexts of conflict.

Focusing on the European Union’s foreign policy goals in the context of the Syrian conflict, we can identify some main, key elements: bringing forward the mediation efforts alongside the United Nations, to put an end to the conflict; managing the refugee inflows both in neighbouring countries and in Europe; condemning human rights violations and the breach of the law of armed conflicts, to bring Syria back to stability and peace; guarantee accountability for breaches of international humanitarian law (former UN official, personal communication, March 27, 2021; European Parliament official, personal communication, April 29, 2021; former EEAS official, March 19, 2021).

In this context, one of the most conspicuous and most successful effort that has been undertaken by the European Union has been the provision of humanitarian aid, both within Syria but also in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan (EU Delegation to Syria, 2016). The main principles the EU has been proposing and standing behind in its involvement in the crisis include opposing any military solution to the conflict and the eradication of Da’esh and other terrorist organisations through a political solution to the conflict (EU Delegation to Syria, 2016; Council of the European Union, 2020). In addition, the EU officially deplored the “exacerbation of political and sectarian differences” over time (EU Delegation to Syria, 2016), however without clarifying the EU’s understanding, role and origin of sectarian tensions, for example failing to differentiate between the context before and after the start of the conflict. The main objectives around the conflict are ending the war with a genuine political transition in line with the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254, negotiating an inclusive political transition in Syria, promoting human rights and democracy and providing humanitarian aid to the vulnerable civilian population (United Nations Security Council, 2016). Almost ten years later, the Geneva Communiqué drawn in 2012 remains the main document to which the European Union refers when drawing up the action guidelines for the political settlement of the conflict. In addition, the EU is acting pursuant to the Geneva Communiqué, drawn up in 2012, reiterating how “there is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds” (United Nations General Assembly, 2012). However, this statement reduces the explanatory function that sectarianism might have on the dynamics of conflict. This formulation hints at sectarianism as a discriminatory and violent dynamic of exclusion between rivalling groups but fails to understand that such pre-existing identities existed prior to 2011, but were mobilised in the context of the conflict.

When looking at the EU’s engagement with sectarianism in the case of Syria, it is also important to acknowledge that the EU has strongly promoted a regional approach to solve the conflict, and it has especially tied together the mediating role in Syria with the push for political change in Iraq. In particular, the EU has promoted a “Syrian-led political transition and inclusive political governance in Iraq” (Council of the European Union, 2014, p. 2), while preserving the multi-ethnic and multi-religious character of both the Syrian and Iraqi societies. The language includes taking into consideration the grievances of all groups, including both ethnic and religious minorities. However, these are not indicated as sects. The official language also refers to the need to tackle sectarian tensions within the Iraqi society (Council of the European Union, 2014, p. 5). The focus of the EU on preserving the rights of minorities has also, however, been perceived critically by Syrian citizens, and especially by the Sunni majority, who has been subject to the violence of the government troops and has therefore suffered human rights violations, displacement and violence after the breakout of the conflict ( M. Syoufi, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

In the EU regional strategy on Iraq and Syria, as adopted in 2015, the Council reiterates the overarching objectives of achieving lasting peace, stability and security both in Syria and in the wider region (Council of the European Union, 2016). Again, there is a reference to the need of preserving and protecting the multi-religious and multi-confessional character of the Syrian society. In addition, the importance of preserving existing state structures and functions is accompanied with the support provided to the moderate opposition. In this sense, the EU has supported the moderate opposition consisting of the National Coalition of the Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, but also other civil society actors and political forces to foster inclusivity and to represent in the most representative way possible existing religious groups (Council of the European Union, 2016). However, this has created issues as the reconciliation of many divergent positions on anti-government forces and pro-government groups has made the inclusion of parties more complex (European Parliament 2016, p. 3; European Parliament official, personal communication, April 29, 2021). Therefore, this means that the EU has engaged indirectly with sectarian groups and imperfect polities, rather than polities, and has therefore attempted to support the more moderate fringes of the opposition, focusing on the political aims of such groups, rather than taking into account their pre-existing sectarian identity.

When studying the EU’s approach to the Syrian conflict, security interests and the threat of terrorism is also occupying a very significant space. According to the EU Regional strategy for Syria and Iraq, Da’esh is a “cross-border phenomenon spanning two sovereign states, with the intent to act as a state (control of territory, organisation of revenues to finance a central budget, imposition of taxes, provision of basic services etc.)” (Council of the European Union, 2016) . It can therefore be identified as a sectarian polity, rather than a group, operating across the Syrian and Iraqi territory. In addition, the regional approach to the Syrian conflict also touches upon countries such as Lebanon and Jordan. For the purpose of this research, it is interesting to note that the EU did not take any official, strong position regarding the Lebanese governance structure, and therefore regarding the organisation of political life along sectarian lines.

Over the time period analysed, the EU has repeatedly condemned the exacerbation of both political and sectarian differences and has also reiterated that “the continuation of the war in Syria could lead to either the division of the country along sectarian lines which could further fuel violent extremism and terrorism, or the imposition of military control by the regime over the whole country” (European Commission & High Representative, 2017 p. 6). In this passage, sectarian governance is considered as damaging as the potential victory of the regime, and therefore is seen as a negative outcome which could further underline the ability to solve disputes in the region. Sectarianism is associated to the spread of violent extremism, but it is also linked to the emergence of deeper fractions within society, therefore undermining further the possibility (and success) of reconciliatory processes. This is not the case in the report on sectarianism, which is further analysed down below. The language speaks only about countering violent sectarianism, but, as already emerged from the analysis of previous policy documents, there is no definition of sectarian groups nor polities, there is no clarification of what is meant (and whether there is any distinction between different groups and polities).

The most recent Council Conclusions on Syria, adopted in 2018, reiterated that the EU refuted any military solution to the conflict, therefore advocating for a political agreement and the start of a transition out of the conflict context (Council of the European Union, 2018). There is, once again, a strong focus on granting humanitarian access, providing humanitarian aid and relief to the civilian population, as part of the so-called EU’s ‘humanitarian diplomacy’. Again there is reference to the unity, sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Syrian state, as defined in the 2012 Geneva Communiqué.

In addition, the language employed during the fourth Brussels conference, held in 2020, reinstated the EU’s firm commitment “to end the conflict in Syria, establish credible and inclusive, non-sectarian governance and set a process in motion for drafting a new constitution” (Council of the European Union, 2020b). Moreover, the calls to preserve sovereignty, unity and territorial integrity are also central to the main objectives represented by the European Union. In this context, the European Union is rather presenting itself as a norm-diffuser, adhering to the principles established by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2254 and successive resolutions, the Geneva Communiqué, and the more general approach promoted to guide the mediation process in the context of the conflict.

The European Parliament has also reiterated the commitment to the unity, sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of Syria, again criticising the stance of the Council whereby there is no initiative nor concrete action on how to contribute to the preservation of multi-ethnic, multi-religious and multi-confessional character of Syria (European Parliament, 2017a). In addition, the European Parliament has also repeatedly expressed the preoccupation with the governance structure for the post-conflict Syria, whereby the promotion of non-sectarian governance is the main focus (European Parliament, 2017b). As reflected in the policy documents from other EU institutions, the European Parliament also underlined how “among the risks and threats to core EU interests associated with the war, the communication mentions a possible division of the country along sectarian lines “(European Parliament, 2017a, p. 11). This is a very interesting quote as it underlines how such a settlement would be detrimental to EU’s interests but does not necessarily elaborate on the local view/needs. From such statement, it also appears unclear how, why, or to what extent sectarian governance would be counterproductive in the restoration of relations between the EU and Syria.

Therefore, this underlines a negative understanding of the concept of sectarianism as the political mobilisation of identity, with the aim of mutual destruction and violent escalation. Therefore, drawing on the distinction between different forms of sectarianism and their relative political salience, the EU equates sectarianism with its militant form. However, sectarian identities existed and mattered before the conflict, and had a different role to play as sectarian groups, to the extent that the social and political context was still characterised by a strong central state. Therefore, sectarian identities do not only matter in so far as they are associated with terrorist and extremists groups, a narrative also supported by President Bashar al-Assad (Hinnebusch, 2019): they also matter as networks of identity and recognition, which became politicised (and to some extent violent) in the evolving context of the Syrian conflict. It is therefore highly unlikely that dismissing the existence of such polities, their internal network and structures of legitimacy will be possible to guide the post-conflict political transition. It is for this reason that the EU, by provincialising concepts such as sovereignty, state, legitimacy, and engaging, will need to contextualise and understand such sects, as an interaction of meanings between the identity, social and political levels (M. Yousfi, personal communication, August 4, 2021) and their relationship to the conflict.

To conclude, we note that the European Union’s position towards sectarianism is constant both over time and across institutions. The violent nature of sectarianism is present across different documents, issues at different times in the conflict. In particular, the preoccupation with sectarian violence is more central to the documents during the period of the growth and expansion of the Islamic State. In fact, the concept of sectarianism seems to be often associated to the terrorist group and therefore to dynamics of exclusion of different religions and ethnic groups. However, the European Union has to some extent recognised and therefore engaged with an understanding of the sectarian nature of the Syrian conflict ‘behind closed doors’ (former UN official, personal communication, March 27, 2021). Such silent engagement has been motivated by the association of religious cleavages with extremism, but also because of the relevance of geopolitical considerations and dynamics in the fuelling of sectarian tensions within Syria. It is therefore safe to assume that the fear of partition and of further civil unrest which could be caused by a settlement of the conflict privileging sectarian affiliations has been guiding the public condemnation of sectarian cleavages by the European Union.

It is interesting to also further delve into the EU’s vision for Syria after the end of the war, in order to further understand the EU’s nature as a Normative Empire (Del Sarto, 2016). If we look at the EU’s vision in Syria after the end of the war, and therefore in a transition phase, we therefore see that the priority goals, alongside stabilisation, free elections and the reconstruction of basic political and structural infrastructures, to promote democracy and human rights.

Pursuant to article 21, comma 1 of the Treaty on the European Union (TEU), the Union’s foreign policy shall be “guided by [...] democracy, the rule of law, the universality and indivisibility of human rights and fundamental freedoms, respect for human dignity, the principles of equality and solidarity, and respect for the principles of the United Nations Charter and international law.” (Treaty on the European Union, 2012). When analysing the text in the Treaties and studying existing policy documents around democracy promotion (Council of the European Union, 2009; European Commission and High Representative, 2011; 2020), we acknowledge that the European Union has not officially adhered to one, single definition of democracy. However, if we refer to such official documents on democracy promotion in EU’s external action, we may identify the following existing definitions: “though democratic systems may vary in form and shape, democracy has evolved into a universal value. Democracy ensures that rulers can be held accountable for their actions. Governments with democratic legitimacy must deliver on the basic rights and needs of people or they risk losing legitimacy and public support” (Council of the European Union, 2009). If we delve deeper into which are the conditions or elements defining a democracy as such, we can see the following: “free and fair elections; freedom of association, expression and assembly and a free press and media; the rule of law administered by an independent judiciary and right to a fair trial; fighting against corruption; security and law enforcement sector reform (including the police) and the establishment of democratic control over armed and security forces” (Joint communication of the Commission and High Representative, 2011). Similar principles are also reiterated in the latest communication regarding EU-Southern Mediterranean relations (European Commission, 2021). According to the EU, however, principles of ownership and adherence to local understandings of declination of democracies is fundamental to inform positive change (Zamfir, 2018, 3; EU Action Plan Democracy 2020-2024, 2020, 4). In a context of violent civil conflict, the scope for promotion of human rights and democracy has been particularly limited to requesting accountability for the violations of international humanitarian law of armed conflicts. However, democracy and human rights promotions will be the tenets of the renewed partnership between the EU and Syria after the conflict will be over. In this sense, this paper argues that understanding sectarian affiliations as polities in their own right can contribute to the re-definition of governance after the conflict is resolved. The EU looks at sectarianism beyond an identity and religious key, but more in a security perspective. It also creates problems of inclusiveness, recognition and understanding of the parties involved.

Today, the war is not yet over but the regime practically won militarily (European Parliament official, personal communication, April 29, 2021). According to Asseburg (2020), the European approach to the conflict has had a very limited (if no) impact on the dynamics on the ground, and has also been unable to influence the conduct of the Assad regime. The EU, as already clearly proved by the analysis of official documents, has invested in providing humanitarian aid. However, such provision has created tensions between the aim of reaching the population and the issues of redistribution mechanisms through the government, that has been able to use aid as a war tool against civilians and to promote and advance its own agenda (Asseburg, 2020). Furthermore, an additional layer of complication is provided by the reality of regional and global powers all providing irreconcilable interests and political visions of the future societal and political order in Syria (Asseburg, 2020, p. 16). In addition, the EU has invested too little of its aid to work and support development projects run by Syrian civil society organisations. The risk of Assad coming back to power is the resurgence of grievances and a further breakdown of the political order, risking to slip again into conflict. The EU has adopted a “value-based approach to peace mediation”, which however, has failed to take into account local dynamics of power and has therefore risked being unsuccessful (Council of the European Union, 2020a). This demonstrates the behaviour of the EU as a Normative Empire, as the EU is promoting its core norms and values to advance its interests in stabilising the country, eliminating the security threat represented by terrorism, and also keeping migratory flows under control. It takes as a reference the UN as the cornerstone of the rules-based international order, but it also sets the goal of being inclusive, involving civil society, political leaders, and local communities in peace processes. This has been contradicted, however, by the practice in the case of Syria.

Therefore, the European Union’s main foreign policy objective in Syria is offering a mediating role to end the conflict and push the political transition forward. In the context of offering a political solution to the conflict, the EU does not contemplate sects and their role in a positive way, but rather associates them with the escalation of violence and also with a form of weaponisation of religion by extremists. In addition, the EU engages with a definition of sectarianism which underpins dynamics of exclusion, marginalisation and discrimination of one sect against the others. Such dynamics of exclusion are considered both within Syria, but also in their regional aspects, whereby sectarianism is conceived not only as a national, but as a regional threat. Therefore, the EU did not engage with sectarian groups as such, even though the opposition groups supported in furthering the negotiation talks also represent sectarian identities, but do not promote such identity (nor a sectarian order) when engaging in peace talks. An interesting comparative perspective to understand why the EU has not so far (publicly) engaged with sectarian groups can be gained by looking at the EU’s approach to the Lebanese sectarian governance structure.

Therefore, if we look at the European Union’s positioning on sectarianism in Lebanon, we surprisingly find that it does not have any official position regarding the Lebanese Taif and the intersection of sectarian identities and governance in the country. The only reference to sectarianism in the case of Lebanon can be found in the programmatic document of the EU-Lebanon Partnership Priorities 2016-2020 (EU-Lebanon Association Council, 2016). In this context, there is a reference to the need to monitor sectarian tensions, in order to foster economic growth and job creation. This can point to the fact that the EU’s stance towards sectarianism is different in contexts of conflict (i.e. Syria and Iraq, as discussed above) and in contexts of peace. Therefore, this highlights the EU’s behaviour as a ‘Normative Empire’, adapting its understanding and policy towards sectarianism depending on whether it serves its own interests. For example, it is beneficial to cooperate with the Lebanese government because of economic but also security interests, therefore a sectarian form of governance becomes acceptable. In addition, as previously discussed, Lebanon is constituted by sectarian groups rather than violent polities, hence facilitating the EU’s political engagement. On the contrary, in the case of Syria, whereby sectarian divides are also correlated to terrorist organisations, accepting and engaging with sectarian groups becomes more complex, and therefore also contestable.

This is why, for the EU, the negative notion of sectarianism is refuted and is either ‘erased’ from the narrative on the political future of Syria or is oversimplified by attaching it to the notion of geopolitical competition. There is, of course, a politicisation component to the meaning of sectarianism, but there is also a genuine, useful declination of the concept as a specific identity, linked to religious traditions, knowledge and faith, that is disregarded and eclipsed from the narrative of the EU, one that can be linked to a local re-definition of power, a fully Syrian-owned political transition and future in which a local conception and understanding of democracy can be envisaged and supported by the international community. In this sense, it is possible to conclude that the understanding of sectarianism as a mere dynamic of violence (and therefore moving away beyond its identity and religious nature) will have an impact on the EU’s legitimacy and ability to guide the political transition in Syria. In this sense, the EU should engage in fully understanding the meaning and role of sectarianism by Syrians, in Syria and perhaps move beyond the definition of democracy as Western, based around the concept of a unitary, sovereign state.

In the following chapter, this paper will compare the objectives of the European Union to the aspirations of Syrian citizens, therefore underlining whether and to what extent sectarian governance is really refused by Syrians. There is also issues of legitimacy for the representation of the opposition and which groups are recognised as legitimate by the European Union, which in turn creates a mismatch on the ground with legitimacy provided and attributed by Syrians to the different negotiating parties.

* 1. **Sectarianism and the War: the Syrian Perspective**

The decentring agenda, as proposed by Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire (2016) will also be operationalised to focus on the ‘outside-in’ perspective, allowing the researcher to focus on the perspective of the recipient country, Syria and therefore delving into questions such as: what is the relevance and impact of the EU’s policy regarding the challenges facing the country, and in particular, the attempt to start the process of political transition; to what extent is the domestic context within which EU policies interfere or within which negotiations in the EU take place defined and shaped by sectarian identities? What is the perception or legitimacy of the EU in the eyes of various domestic groups, and do they support EU-promoted reforms? How do audiences within the countries understand relevant concepts? (Keuleers, Fonck, Keukeleire, 2016, p. 350).

In order to delve into the ‘inside-out’ approach, this paper makes use of data collected during online fieldwork, which addressed the issue of sectarianism with citizens from Syria, but also other Middle Eastern countries (such as Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine). As already outlined in the methodology section, the sample data presents limitations in its scope, and for this purpose, the findings will also be compared and contrasted against the only existing database on sectarianism in Syria from 2016 (The Day After, 2016a) and other relevant studies and surveys conducted over the period 2016-2020.

The structured questionnaire conducted for the purpose of this research also highlighted interesting results on the definition of sectarianism. Many respondents underlined the conflictual dimension inherent in the concept of sectarianism, seen as groups opposing each other (with groups being defined as sub-fractions of the regime versus opposition narrative). Some respondents also highlighted how such conflictual dynamics take the form of discrimination of different groups belonging to the same religion. Other definitions of sectarianism reflected groups of citizens, united by a religious affiliation, that hold different rights and obligations based on those same affiliations. Many other respondents mentioned the ‘organisation-like’ character of such movements and their relation to religion. The element of boundary and identity-making was particularly striking in the definitions provided. One respondent highlighted how sectarianism can be defined as a “social habit”. This particular definition of sectarianism finds support in existing literature. For example, according to Tinas & Tür (2021), sectarianism is not only linked to religious identity and dogmas, but it is rather an “evolving social phenomenon, which continuously constructs unlimited sets of collective identities, defining community boundaries and functioning as a potent source of social power” (Tinas & Tür, 2021, p. 322). In addition, Makdisi affirms that the culture of sectarianism is produced and hence fluid (Makdisi, 2008, as cited in Shaery-Yadzi, 2020).

As far as the data collected during the online fieldwork are concerned, the respondents were equally divided on the question ‘would you define the Syrian conflict as sectarian’. 94.1% of the respondents declared that they were familiar with the European Union. On the question ‘Do you think that the European Union (EU) had any positive role in advocating for a solution to the Syrian conflict?’, 64.7% of the respondents replied negatively, 5.9% positively and 29.4% had no position on this matter. The justifications provided to the negative answer were the following: dismissing the role of geopolitics in the conflict and regional dynamics of power versus the EU seen as a normative power lacking geopolitical grip and instruments to enter in competition with Russia and the United States, seen as ‘ticking the balance’; the EU as advocating for a political resolution to the conflict while at the same timing not being capable to lead actors towards a political solution and focusing more on guiding actors towards political resolutions and aid/interventions provided have remained short term (i.e. provision of humanitarian aid, issue of refugees in Europe); EU member states targeting Syria at the military, economic and diplomatic level, leading to further instability and empowering of extremist groups on the ground; the EU acted as a humanitarian actor and they did not really engage in negotiations and mediation processes. In addition, respondents also underlined that, according to their view, the EU does not take sufficiently into account the sectarian dimension of the conflict (62.5%), even though on this point the respondents were more deeply divided than on other questions. In addition, 76.9% of those who held that the EU should take into account the sectarian nature of the conflict, also indicated that such consideration should be exemplified more openly and more consistently. Finally, roughly half of the respondents considered the EU as a neo-colonial actor within the context of its foreign policy towards Syria; 17.6% had no position on this issue and 29.4% found that the EU is not behaving as a neo-colonial power in this context. This particular data reveals the struggle of legitimacy and perception of the European Union in the region, as an example of the struggle between Eurocentrism and the post-Western world.

In order to triangulate the data obtained from the structured questionnaire, this section will further analyse existing surveys conducted by the NGO ‘The Day After’ and rely on the findings from expert interviews. When analysing the perspective of Syrians, it is interesting to note that the European Union is not really enumerated among the actors contributing to the failures and successes of the Geneva negotiations process (The Day After, 2016c). There is rather a reference to member states but not to the European Union as an actor overall.

Comparing the data obtained during the online fieldwork to the existing data on the view of Syrians around sectarianism, we can see how most respondents to the 2016 survey have indicated that sectarianism is either a positive concept in the context of Syria, or that it is neither negative nor positive (The Day After, 2016a, p. 13).

The geographical distribution of respondents on sectarianism, within the report, is also interesting: the concern regarding sectarian forms of identity and political structuring is particularly high in those peripheral areas, such as Deera for example, where the protests first exploded. The largest proportion of respondents has linked the sectarian issue to political power (since the coming into power of Baath party, and therefore a longstanding historical process) which has resurfaced after the revolution (The Day After, 2016a, p. 19). The Sunni groups have been the ones showing support to the revolution in an outstanding majority, identifying the state and its political power with an unequal, unfair system of oppression. Sectarianism has been identified by many respondents as the cause of anti-regime demonstration; this view was represented more consistently among Islamists than seculars, higher with those with lower income and less educated. This shows that sectarian identities bear a clear connection to both identity and religion, but also interact with other factors such as class, ethnicity etc. (Saouli, 2019).

If we look at the opinions regarding the future of Syria, different sectarian groups are divided on the importance of the belonging of the future President to a specific sect, but also regarding the role that sectarianism should play in the broader political structure of Syria (The Day After, 2016a). Therefore, regardless of the different understandings of sectarianism, it is evident that such a concept is, beyond its complexity, central in understanding dynamics of legitimacy and identity in Syria, both before and after the breakout of the conflict.

Generally, the Syrian population rejects any proposal or perspective of partition, rather advocating for equal citizenship before the law (The Day After, 2016b, p. 19). Federalism as organised by sect is generally opposed across all ethnic and religious groups and the Alawi, Shite and Druze sects largely agree on a modern model of centralised state (The Day After, 2016b, p. 7). The main motivations driving the positioning on a federalist sectarian state concern fears of partition of the Syrian state. However, the survey (The Day After, 2016b) highlighted interesting perspectives on prospects of decentralisation. These perspectives and views on decentralisation vary across geographical areas, religious sects and ethnicities and therefore highlight the great fragmentation of the Syrian society (The Day After, 2016b, p. 19). The form of governance most broadly supported across different sects, according to the study, is an elected local administration vested with broad authority, together with an overarching and equal citizenship which would overcome sectarian discriminations, while acknowledging and giving space to such existing sectarian differences. These findings are further confirmed in a later survey, on the contents and shape of the future Constitution, conducted by the organisation in 2020 (The Day After, 2020). In general, this survey highlights the necessity of the new constitution to be able to balance out and respect sectarian differences and cleavages existing in the country. Religion is isolated as a decisive factor in influencing the respondents’ positions and aspirations on the future of Syria. In fact “religious affiliation, in turn, has a clear effect on the respondents’ hopes. It can be observed that levels of frustration among those of the Alawi sect are lower than those of Sunni, Druze and Ismaili sects. We can translate this on several overlapping levels, related to the tendency of the sects to reside in places with different security situations, as well as the link of political position in Syria to sectarian polarisation, which is directly reflected in the levels of satisfaction and hopes placed on the parties supported by the respondents” (The Day After, 2020). The topic of religion is particularly thorny, and the survey study highlights a high degree of polarisation on the answers to questions about the relationship between religion and the state in the new Constitution. Such fragmentation can be attributed to the presence of sectarian affiliations, which together make up a particularly complex puzzle in the context of Syria. Sectarian affiliations influence strongly the way Syrians conceive the relationship between religion and the state and the way they would like this relationship to be implemented in the future of the country. In particular, minorities are against linking the state to a particular religion or to specific sectarian arrangements, in fear of persecution and discrimination. Other factors such as class, geographical positioning, age, educational background influence such attitudes towards religion and politics and are often difficult to isolate. For example, the poorest respondents see a strong link between religion and the state as fundamental (The Day After, 2020). In addition, there is a decline in favouring explicit links between the state and Islam due to the impact that the proliferation of Islamic projects linked to Salafi/jihadist factions has had on civilians (The Day After, 2020, p. 45). It is therefore for this reason that it is difficult to establish a linear, causal relationship between sectarian identities and forms of political mobilisation.

In general, the survey highlights a common trend towards combating sectarian discrimination, while at the same time the salience of sectarian cleavages emerges from this study (The Day After, 2020, p. 46). Therefore, sect matters but Syrians advocate against it becoming an instrument of manipulation of political identities. When asked whether they would be in favour of a system of government explicitly based on the principle of sectarian quotas, only 4.9% of the respondents positively. This once again highlights that, despite the existence and relevance of sectarian cleavages, and their importance in understanding and managing the conflict, the future of Syria should be based on equality and citizenship, together with a strong recognition of cultural and ideological rights of religious and ethnic minorities, within a decentralised form of governance (The Day After, 2020, p. 55).

According to Fakhoury (2019), power-sharing arrangements cannot be simply advocated as a simple and effective tool for de-escalating and ending violence in the context of protracted conflicts. However, power-sharing arrangements that go beyond the Westphalian model and are understood through the prism of sectarian identities (but at the same time do not reproduce such identities) might be beneficial in promoting a peaceful transition in the Syrian conflict. The complexity, duration and extent of violence that characterised the Syrian civil war makes such study more complex and multi-faceted, and the regional spill-overs of such crises make it also more complex to advocate for a one-way, power-sharing arrangement to put an end to the conflict and ensure sustainable peace. As sectarian identities and their relevance in society can be studied through three different levels, the individual, the societal, and the political, it seems evident that the political settlement of the war should consider all Syrians as equal before the law and before the state, therefore safeguarding their individuality and societal sectarian dynamics without transforming those identities and affiliations in discriminatory practices. However, understanding and factoring in sects as a fundamental component of the Syrian society is fundamental, as what needs to be fostered to contribute to peace and stability is a process of “reconciliation of identities”, national and individual, religious and secular, between different sectarian groups (M. Yousfi, personal communication, August 4, 2021). Therefore, what Syria needs is a new social and political pact, contract, which is able to both reconcile but at the same time to safeguard and integrate sectarian identities and the differences they bear, with a neutral state apparatus as the guarantor of such pact (The Day After, 2020; M. Yousfi, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

It is interesting to note that in the case of Lebanon, as indicated above, the sectarian consociational arrangements have created a growing gap between the elite-led politics and the politics from below, with an increasing contestation coming from civil society organisations (Fakhoury, 2019, p. 18). Critics of sectarian models of governance highlight that, looking at the existing examples of both Lebanon and Iraq, the organisation of political life along sectarian lines did not bring about neither peace nor stability (M. Yousfi, personal communication, August 4, 2021).

If we look at Iraq, the EU has recognised the shortcomings of the current existing governance arrangements. According to Fusco, “the Iraqi *thawra* has exposed the intrinsic connection between corruption, poor public services, inequality and unemployment on the one hand, and the sectarian political system on the other” (Fusco, 2021, p. 2). This means that the EU recognised that political systems organised around sectarian divisions is sub-optimal. This does not mean that Syria should be organised along the same lines or that something should be imposed from outside, important to look at what the people truly want and which arrangements they believe can safeguard and represent their religious and ethnic identities. A model of democratic integration with a strong federal system, and therefore decentralised, which takes into consideration religious and identity-based affiliations could be a plausible way forward. What is however necessary is that the European Union would start decentring itself, opening up to definitions of state and sovereignty, democracy and human rights which are locally defined, legitimate and enforceable in Syria.

Therefore, to conclude, the relevance of the EU’s role in the Syrian conflict has been focused on supporting the mediation process, providing humanitarian aid and promoting accountability. However, efforts to promote an inclusive political transition after the settlement of the conflict will need to take into consideration the importance of understanding sects as assuming different shapes: groups, imperfect polities and polities (Ferguson and Mansbach, 2002; Hinnebusch, 2019). Imperfect polities and polities are therefore entities equipped for the provision of material and immaterial goods, legitimacy and also holding a certain basic structure of power. In this sense, an inadequate or partial understanding of sectarian identities as pre-political but politicised, and identity and religious based might jeopardise the EU’s attempt to promote a meaningful transition. As indicated above in the analysis of data, many respondents to the structured questionnaire have indicated that they perceive the EU as a neo-colonial power. This means that such perception might undermine EU’s legitimacy in the eyes of the different parties to the conflict, therefore also undermining its mediating role. We can therefore argue that the liberal, Western-centred model of democracy can be re-negotiated through the prism of identity and religious-based affiliations, as meaningful existing political and social (and to some extent, political) units (as both polities and imperfect polities). We can then also conclude that, in redefining such concepts such as democracy, statehood and influence, both the EU and its member states should recognise their colonial legacy, understanding the interaction that the historical past of Europe bears a connection to its legitimacy in the Middle East, and in Syria more particularly, today.

1. **Conclusion**

This research has found that, despite claims in literature that wish to dismiss the analytical relevance of the concept of sectarianism (Haddad, 2017; Saouli, 2019; Munif, 2020), these identity-based religious cleavages matter in Syria, on at least three, interlocking levels: the individual, the societal and the political. It also pointed to the importance of considering sectarianism in its political implications and its politicisation potential.

In addition, the paper shed light on the meaning of sectarianism in the context of the Syrian conflict and developing a comprehensive understanding of how sectarianism might represent an obstacle to the EU’s promotion of a meaningful political transition in Syria. This transition might entail a need for incorporating polities beyond the unitary vision of the nation state, to promote the vision of Syrians regarding a federal forms of governance. Sects should be considered as structures providing identity, and to some extent, legitimacy and power subsumed within the nation state and gaining independence after the breakdown of the Syrian political unity. Therefore, this research aims at critically assessing EU’s role in the Southern Mediterranean and putting into question the Eurocentric understanding of concepts such as state, sovereignty, identity, secularism and democracy, through the lenses of polity decentring. According to Wimmen, “rather than operating with normative concepts of democracy and governance, or standard blueprints for state-building, external actors seeking to contribute to long-term solutions that will address rather than suppress the potential for conflict inherent in divided societies therefore will have to seek out and strengthen potentials for cross-cleavage solidarity and participatory governance that exists in these societies” (Wimmen, 2014, 28)

Sectarianism and its political and social role, however, should not be considered without criticism: it is evident that sectarianism and its politicisation is also increasingly contested in the Middle East, especially by the youth and by civil society (see Zemni & De Smet, 2013). Therefore, the paper does not argue that sectarian divides should represent the basic political structure around which Syria should be reconstructed. On the contrary, the paper argues that such structures should be acknowledged by the EU, as representing a patchwork of polities which influence state-making and democratic governance, and being not only violent, but also a structural existing element should be taken into account to enhance the EU’s legitimacy in the region. The operationalisation of the decentring agenda and the lessons that can be learnt through its application will positively contribute to de-colonising and re-defining the European Union, acknowledging different existing values, structures of legitimacy and definitions of democracy beyond the Western paradigms. In addition, the recognition that the European Union is and acts as a Normative Empire, therefore collating norms and values with its pragmatic interests, will be a first stepping stone towards adopting a decentred perspective which privileges the aspirations and needs of the policy recipients, rather than the policy-makers.

This research therefore explores and operationalises the decentring agenda to re-define and re-negotiate the European Union’s role in the context of the Syrian conflict, understanding how and to what extent acknowledging sects as local, identity and religion-based polities might call for a re-definition of its role in this protracted crisis.

We conclude that the European Union has not formally engaged with sectarianism as a concept, or at least, as a religious-based identity cleavage as presented in this research. On the contrary, the document analysis highlighted how sectarianism has been attached to forms of religious extremism and violence (and therefore militant sectarian polities), and very often equated to the concurring polity structure represented by the Islamic State. Such conception of sectarianism has been influenced by security considerations (both concerning the terrorist threat and the migration crisis). We also conclude that the lack of understanding of sectarian dynamics within Syria, both during and after the conflict, has had an impact on the perception of the EU as a mediating actor, but also on the success of its initiative and on the promotion of a post-conflict transitions and democracy and human rights in the country. The reiteration of the need to establish a strong, unitary state contradicts the wish of Syrians, as highlighted in the existing surveys on sectarianism and on the future constitutional set-up of Syria. Instead, an innovative social and political pact, based on a principle of decentralisation, which could at the same time incorporate the need to promote equal rights and duties of Syrians before the law and safeguard the diversity characterising the country, would be the way towards the rebirth of a country torn by a ten-year long civil war.

This research presents intrinsic limitations in so far as the sample of data collected through the structured questionnaire is limited; in addition, the anonymous form of the questionnaire also posed limits in controlling the respondents’ population. However, such limitations have been mitigated through a triangulation of data, comparing existing databases such as the EPDR data set (see Bormann, Cederman & Vogt, 2017), surveys, and studies with a thorough literature review. The same triangulation method has been used to analyse the EU’s stance on the conflict, its goals and its impact.

The issue of sectarianism in the context of the Syrian war, and more generally its meaning and relevance in the entire region, and the integration of such concept in the EU’s policy towards the Middle East is particularly understudied, and therefore represents an interesting angle to conduct further research. Even though the literature around the EU’s nature as a foreign policy actor is increasingly moving away from the benevolent image of the European Union as a purely normative power and has increasingly focused on the need to integrate the historical colonial legacy and the often neo-colonial nature of the EU’s approach to its neighbourhood, such approaches are far from being mainstreamed in the European integration scholarship. The decentring framework represents an innovative instrument to move beyond the Westphalian nation-state as the main unit of analysis, and it is increasingly opening the doors to existing overlapping groups, identities, polities and actors and their legitimacy in the eyes of the European Union. This paper wants to be a limited contribution to such critical discussions.

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1. Please refer to Annex I on page 69 for further information about the semi-structured interviews and the interviewees. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. As already discussed previously, this paper adopts a geographical definition of neighbourhood, therefore including also countries, such as Syria, which geographically belong to this particular space beyond the EU but do not (yet) formally take part in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)