Volume 21 Issue 1 2020 *CENTRAL ASIA AND THE CAUCASUS English Edition*

RELIGION IN SOCIETY

RELIGIOUS ASPECTS OF THE SYRIAN CRISIS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

DOI: https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.1.10

Bauyrjan MAKANGALI

Ph.D. student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National State University (Almaty, Kazakhstan)

Sagynysh AMIRBEKOVA

Ph.D., Deputy Head, Scientific Training Center, Gylym Ordasy Republican State Enterprise, Committee on Science, Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Almaty, Kazakhstan)

Marvan KHAMITOVA

Ph.D. (Hist.), Assistant Professor, Department of Pedagogics and Humanitarian Disciplines, Central Asian University (Almaty, Kazakhstan)

Erkin BAYDAROV

Ph.D. (Philos.), Assistant Professor, Leading Researcher, R. Suleymenov Institute of Oriental Studies (Almaty, Kazakhstan)

ABSTRACT

The Syrian civil war stands apart as a huge tragedy amid the consequences of the Arab Spring revolutions of 2011 that radically changed the Middle East and North Africa. The country lost over 400,000 civilian lives, a dreadful number for the contemporary world, over 5.6 million became refuges, 6.6 million—internal migrants, and chemical weapons used against non-combatants and other atrocities are the very real details of a real picture of the war.

Inspired by the Arab Spring, which sent shockwaves through the Middle East and North Africa the Syrians joined the process with the slogan "The People Want to Overthrow the Regime." Unrest developed into an armed struggle that has been going on for many years now. The authors have posed themselves with the task of analyzing certain religious aspects of information war unfolding in the context of the Syrian crisis. It is manifested, in particular, on the YouTube video-sharing platform. Enemies of the regime are using religion as the central point of anti-Assad propaganda; terrorist groups (Al-Qa'eda, ISIS and others) are doing the same. This makes it highly expedient to analyze the approaches of those who use religious propaganda and the role of YouTube in the process. It is equally important to analyze the role of the Shi'a-Alawi interpretation of Syrian developments.

KEYWORDS: *the Syrian civil war, propaganda, YouTube, Alawis, Nusayris.*

Introduction

The Syrian crisis stemmed from hundreds of various reasons, the strongest of them being the regime change, which united people who poured into the streets and took part in rallies. The regime was not a product of Bashar al-Assad's personal efforts. He had inherited it from his father Hafez al-Assad and his closest circle who belonged to the Alawi religious minority and who had been building it up for several decades in the latter half of the 20th century. In the early 1970s, Hafez Assad took power to become president of Syria. In the post-colonial period, when the Third World was actively building up new independent states, Assad came to power with Arab socialism and nationalism (the Ba'ath Party) as the ideological cornerstone of his policy. Ba'athism advocated the secular nature of the state, which was highly beneficial for the Alawi religious minority in the predominantly Sunni country. However, Hafez Assad's Alawi affiliation, on the one hand, and the regime's secular nature, on the other, have finally led to a clash with Islamists and consolidated their determination to depose the president and his regime. These sentiments reached their apogee in the Hama events of 1982, when Hafez Assad had no choice but to use force to suppress the uprising. National minorities, likewise, caused a lot of problems. The autochthonous Kurds, in particular, were an alien element in the Arabian nationalist regime. All attempts at their Arabization failed. The problem survived until the Arab Spring and, as could be expected, made the Kurds an important side in the Syrian conflict.

As a military leader, Hafez Assad relied on the army and a ramified network of special services in which Alawis occupied the highest posts. In fact, Hafez Assad tailored the state to his own person and his closest circle that relied on power structures. It was a dictatorial or an authoritarian regime. Arab

researcher Adib Nehme defined it as a "neopatrimonial state,"[1] by which he meant the Weber's concept of patrimonialism adjusted to contemporary realities. In such states political power mainly rests on personal power, which is realized directly or indirectly by the ruler himself.[2] In the post-Cold War world these states should have revised their political order to avoid a "failed state" tag. Procrastination led to even worse consequences; certain other factors further complicated the situation in Syria. This case reveals numerous political, geopolitical, economic, territorial, ethnic, and confessional problems that have been building up since the very first day of de-colonization, when the political map of the Middle East as we know it today was formed. Previously, these problems were settled by cruel political leaders and repressive regimes, who justified their actions by the realities of the bipolar world and allowed the use of brute force with no consideration for the opinion of the international community. This explains why the Syrian crisis demonstrated a lot of dynamism since the very beginning and why various state and non-state actors were drawn into its orbit while the crisis was unfolding stage by stage.

Back to Syria: from the very beginning, the country was a patchwork of ideological, religious, and ethnic contradictions held together by force. The great number of non-state actors of all sorts involved in the Syrian civil war confirms the deeply rooted fragmentation of Syrian society rooted in the distant past. It is the evidence of the failed experience of building a state out of one of the fragments of the Ottoman Empire. One cannot but agree with Yassamine Mather, who has written: "The collapse of the Ottoman Empire and the way Arab territory was divided immediately after the First World War had a profound effect on the contemporary history of the Middle East," including Syria.[3]

Social Networks as Drivers of the Arab Revolutions

Facebook and Twitter became highly popular during the Arab Spring protests, while YouTube found its very special place: it gave the world community the chance to obtain up-to-the-minute information about current events much faster than through the traditional media. In 2011, when the Syrian government limited the access of international media to certain zones, YouTube showed videos that confirmed that the government used force against the protestors.[4] Social media became a specific feature, or even an inalienable part, of the Arab Spring. Their role in the protest movements cannot be overestimated. Wael Ghonim's *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater than the People in Power*[5] *is a convincing confirmation of the importance of social networks as a space where people can declare their worldviews and pour out dissatisfaction. What is even more important, they can generate ideas, find those who share them and unite with people who also seek changes. The author of this bestseller, one of the activists of the Egyptian uprising, wanted to mobilize people with the help of his page in Facebook to fight dictatorship and injustice. It is not "an insider's account of what he experienced during the protests"; it is an instruction on how to transform social*

---

[1] A. Nehme, *The Neopatrimonial State and the Arab Spring,* Beirut, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, 2016, p. 38.

[2] See: J.I. Bakker, "Patrimonialism. Political Organization," *Encyclopedia Britannica,* 1 September 2017 available at [https://www.britannica.com/topic/patrimonialism], 17 March 2019.

[3] Y. Mather, "The Fall of the Ottoman Empire and Current Conflict in the Middle East," *Critique—Journal of Socialist Theory,* Vol. 42, No. 3, 2014, pp. 471-485 available at [https://doi.org/10.1080/03017605.2014.972151].

[4] See: R. Rifai, "Citizens' Videos Capture Syrian Uprising," Al Jazeera, 7 March 2013 available at [https://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2011/04/201141811535799497.html], 17 March, 2019.

[5] See: W. Ghonim, *Revolution 2.0: The Power of the People is Greater Than the People in Power: A Memoir,* New York, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012, 320 pp.

media into instruments of social change. At that time he was convinced that "if you want to liberate a society, all you need is Internet." Later, in 2015 at the Ted Global conference in Geneva he admitted that he had been wrong: the platform that had united them in the struggle against dictatorship later separated them. He specified his earlier statement: "Today, I believe that if we want a free society, we first need to have free Internet." This is debatable, since access to free Internet hardly makes any society free. In any case, social networks were amazingly efficient during the Arab Spring protests. It became obvious that their potentials were unlimited. Facebook and Twitter were best suited to outline positions, mobilize people, and explain what was going on. In Twitter the messages are short and highly emotional, while on Facebook people can clarify their ideas or support their imperatives with logical arguments. Their main function was the centralization of decentralized societies. Wael Ghomin spoke about this in Geneva: "We need to work hard on figuring out how technology could be part of the solution, rather than part of the problem."[6]

The Internet is not the only source of problems; there are also people who pass the *point of no return* in their thirst for change; the state that can or cannot respond to challenges is also a problem. This has been amply confirmed in 2009 and 2017-2018 in Iran, where protestors actively used social media to no avail. It seems that Iranians have not yet passed the point of no return, while the state is still strong enough to cope with crises of that sort.[7]

Does this mean that those Arab states that could not control the situation behind the façade of autocracy had been failed states for a long time? It seems that American political scientist William Zartman was right in stating that after the Cold War many countries had collapsed, by which he meant that the state structure and the political regime as its part have disintegrated and should be reformed in one way or another. Collapse does not necessarily mean chaos.[8] This means that peace and stability are nothing more than a screen, behind which very complicated processes are unfolding and running the danger of bursting out with frightening force. This also means that the criticism of the Arab nation-building systems that initially unfolded during the bipolar world is justifiable. Arab regimes should have responded to the change of the world order with real, not decorative changes. They should not have allowed the critical mass to accumulate, but promptly dealt with the urgent problems of internal policy. This means that the Arab governments remained passive for two decades, hence the pitfall into which they fell in 2011. In the world of easily accessible and easily transmitted information, passiveness is worse than a crime, it is a blunder. On the other hand, at the time of state pressure and emotional stress, people resort to social networks to express their feelings and their hopes. Authoritarian regimes do not interfere; they maintain the delusion that their targeted audience is not big and that it is sufficient to control the traditional media to remain in power. To a certain extent, this explains how social media became drivers of uprisings. The uprising in Tunisia, where for the first time in the Middle East and North Africa people achieved regime change in a very short time, triggered similar developments in the Arab world.

YouTube as a Mirror of the Syrian Crisis

From the very first days of Syrian riots, videos of the unfolding developments were pouring into YouTube. Some of them showed rallies, marches and protests as well as the measures taken to dis-

[6] W. Ghonim, *Let's Design Social Media that Drives Real Change,* December 2015 available at [https://www.ted.com/talks/wael_ghonim_let_s_design_social_media_that_drives_real_change/transcript], 17 March 2019.

[7] See: "Iran Protests: Social Media Messaging Battle Rages," BBC News, 7 January 2018 available at [https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-42566083], 17 March 2019.

[8] I.W. Zartman, *Collapsed States: The Disintegration and Restoration of Legitimate Authority*, Boulder, Lynne Rienner, 1995, p. 330.

perse the crowds, including the use of force. The conflict was widening together with the number of videos, their content and format that reached YouTube. Its role in the unfolding civil war was increasing rapidly. Justin Kosslyn, product manager at Jigsaw, a technology incubator, has correctly assessed the situation as "the Syrian civil war is in many ways the first YouTube conflict in the same way that Vietnam was the first television conflict."[9] The Montage program created by Jigsaw was devised to help collect and analyze the facts of violations of human rights, violence, and chemical attacks caught by the videos of the Syrian war that appeared in YouTube.[10] Having appreciated the importance of analysis, researchers are actively developing different methods of analysis and classification of the videos uploaded to YouTube to be used in possible court cases some time in future.[11] There are other, equally important aspects, such as the use of the video hosting site as a universal platform for propaganda through the videos uploaded to it.

These materials have different technical descriptions; they can be very short, under several minutes, or very long requiring a lot of time to watch; some of them are made using a phone, others are properly filmed and professionally edited. Syria-related content on YouTube is uploaded by different authors; videos come from individuals or group accounts; there are supporters of the opposition, such as the Syrian Free Army, among them, as well as those who side with terrorist organizations both big (Al-Qa'eda, Nusra and ISIS) and small, or even practically unknown, such as ASALA (Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia). YouTube is a favorite platform of anti-Assad propaganda, because it is easy to access and very easy to use. This makes it very different from similar programs (Paltalk being one of them) used, in the 2000s, for the propagation of all sorts of ideas (of a religious and ideological nature in particular). It can be accessed from PC or any other electronic device, be it a mobile phone or a tablet computer. As soon as you upload your video to the platform, anybody anywhere in the world can watch it by using all sorts of hashtags to locate such videos; this excludes the Messenger programs. As the number of watched videos increases, the platform offers other similar videos.

There is another, highly important aspect: by circulating the video, the sender can achieve the highest emotional effect, especially if the video shows acts of violence against civilian population. This type of materials stirs up a lot of emotions; religiously loaded videos stir up hatred of the regime among the Muslims all over the world. In fact, this is what the authors need; this explains why in the beginning of the Syrian conflict there were a lot of mixed content, where religious deliberations were accompanied by scenes of violence perpetrated by government forces. Ideological brainwashing easily transforms negative emotions or even anger into an active desire to help, up to and including joining the armed struggle. In the case of Syria, the groups that unfolded the information warfare in social networks (YouTube in particular) attracted the greatest number of foreign fighters. ISIS terrorists waged the most efficient and highly structured propaganda campaign through the Al Hayat service, created for this specific purpose.[12] Some researchers call online organizations of this type The Electronic Brigades.[13] Much has already been written about ISIS online activity. The authors analyze the content and details of specific resources in different languages, the ways and means by which

---

[9] Quoted from: A. Rosen, "Erasing History: YouTube's Deletion of Syria War Videos Concerns Human Rights Groups," *Fast Company,* 3 July 2018 available at [https://www.fastcompany.com/40540411/erasing-history-youtubes-deletion-of-syria-war-videos-concerns-human-rights-groups], 17 March 2019.

[10] See: J. Kosslyn, Y. Green Y., "Montage —The Next Generation of War Reporting," Medium, 20 April 2016 available at [https://medium.com/jigsaw/montage-the-next-generation-of-war-reporting-a04f4176aff], 17 March 2019.

[11] See: J.I. Wessels, "YouTube and the Role of Digital Video for Transitional Justice in Syria," *Politik,* Vol. 19, No. 4, 2016, pp. 30-52 [DOI: https://doi.org/10.7146/politik.v19i4.27634].

[12] See: S. Gates, S. Podder, "Social Media, Recruitment, Allegiance and the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism,* Vol. 9, No. 4, 2015, pp. 107-116.

[13] See: J. Stern, J.M. Berger, *ISIS. The State of Terror*. London, William Collins, 2016, p. 398.

propagandistic materials are presented, etc. ISIS is the most advanced terrorist organization when it comes to the use of social networks: the results of its religious anti-Assad propaganda cannot but amaze. The top spot on the podium, however, does not belong to ISIS. Religiously tinged anti-Assad propaganda had begun together with the protest movements; the active phase of the collective idea of the "anti-Islamic" nature of the Assad regime had begun before 2014, when ISIS developed into a serious force. Religious propaganda has always relied and relies today on the "anti-Islamic" nature of the Assad regime (supported by the Alawi minority).

The Alawi Issue in the Muslim World

Since the Syrian ruling military and political elite is Alawi, religion and religious issues had moved to the fore in the initial days of the Syrian crisis.

Alawis (Nusayris) belong to a religious sect living in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey. Sunnis look at Nusayrism as a symbiosis of different faiths; it is a melee of religious dogmas of Islam, Christianity and pre-Islamic Oriental faiths, which makes it a religion on its own right in the eyes of the Muslims. For many centuries, Sunni theologians have remained undecided on whether the Alawis are Shi'a or they profess their own religion; some believe that Alawi is a religious system unrelated to Islam. The majority, however, throughout many centuries considered them Shi'a ("extreme Shi'a, to be more exact, because their convictions contradict, to a great extent, the fundamentals of traditional Shi'ism). Muhammad al-Shahrastānī, the medieval Arab scholar wrote in his *Kitāb al-Milal wa al-Nihal* (The Book of Sects and Creeds): "The Ghaliya (the 'Extremists') are those who went to extremes regarding their imams, whom they excluded from the limitations of creatures and upon whom they bestowed divine qualities. Sometimes they likened an imam to God, at other times they likened God to man. Thus they fell into two extremes. These erroneous ideas of the Ghaliya have their origin in the doctrines held by those believing in incarnation and transmigration of souls [the teachings of Hululites and Tanasuhites] or in the beliefs of Jews and Christians."[14] In the Islamic literature the tern Hululites is used to define those who believe that Пod can be incarnated in people, that is, followers of pantheism. "Tanasuhites" believe in transmigration of souls. According to medieval Islamic theologian Nuṣayr al-Numayri, one of the ideologists of pantheism and founder of the Nusayri sect, he was a reincarnation of God. This was what medieval Arab scholar Abu Mansur Al-Baghdadi stated in his book *Difference between the Trends.*[15]

Shi'a scholars, likewise, discussed the delusions of the Nusayris; the most prominent of them wrote in his *Kitāb Firaq Al-Shī'a* (Shī'a Sects) that Nuṣayr al-Numayr, the founder of Nusayrism "claimed that he had been a prophet sent by al-Hasan al-Askari … he believed in transmigration of souls … and said that everything that was banned was allowed."[16] Those who subsequently studied the teaching of the Alawis (Nusayris) also concluded that Nusayrism was an independent religious teaching. In 1848, the Asiatic Society in Paris and the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft (German Orientalist Society) in Berlin pooled forces to publish a book (*The Book of Sulaiman's First Ripe Fruit*) written by former Nusayrist Sulaiman Effendi of Adhanah and translated by prominent Orien-

[14] Al-Shahrastānī, *The Book of Sects and Creeds* available at [https://archive.org/stream/BookOfSectsAndCreedsBy-Shahrastani/Book-of-Sects-and-Creeds-by-Shahrastani_djvu.txt].

[15] See: Abu Mansur Al-Baghdadi, *Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq.* Cairo, Maktaba ibn Sina, p. 320.

[16] Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b Mūsā an-Nawbakhtī,, *Shiitskie sekty.* Translation and commentaries by S.M. Prozorov, Moscow, Nauka, p. 255.

talist van Dijk, who wrote the following about the book: "It was written by a Nusayrist whose religion was close to the ideas of Jews, Muslims, Orthodox Christians and Protestants."[17]

Before the Syrian crisis, few of the Muslims, especially at the periphery of the Islamic world, had any more or less comprehensive ideas about the Alawi minority. This relatively widespread ignorance about the Alawis and their religion was caused by the highly private nature of the Alawi community. So far, its religious dogmas and religious practices remain terra incognita for the Muslims and the academic community: the secrecy and reticence of the Alawis who practice *taqiyya* allows them to conceal their true convictions and declare loyalty to other religions in public. That is why at the preliminary stages of the conflict, therefore, a lot of videos merely explained the essence of the Alawi provisions from the point of view of Islamic dogmas.

The complex attitude to the Alawis in the Middle East was caused, in particular, by the secularist policies of the ruling Ba'ath Party. In fact, often enough the secular policies in the Middle East are supported not only by the military, but also by religious minorities and trends. This is what is happening in Syria and in Turkey, where many of those who support Kemalism are the generals who belong to the local Alawi (alevi) community.[18] This explains why it had been difficult, if at all possible, to identify the supporters of the Syrian regime among Arabs; this became even harder after the civil war: the ranks of supporters are limited to the Shi'a community or, to be more exact, to Shi'a activists in the first place.

The Main Methods of Anti-Assad Propaganda

The first and most evident instrument of religious propaganda on YouTube were the materials, mostly excerpts from the media and public lectures of theologians of all sorts, religious activists and agitators from Arab countries about the Alawis, their religious convictions, practices, specifics, etc. These videos were not necessarily moderate; some of them were fairly radical. Their content was more or less identical: due to its highly secretive nature Alawi religious teachings have remained an enigma for centuries. This means that rather often religious figures rely on the opinions of the great medieval theologians, Al-Shahrastānī being one of them. In view of the specifics of the Alawi religious dogmas, many religious Islamic figures apply the takfir procedure (excommunication) to them. Despite the fact that it is the favorite instrument of radicals who habitually abuse it, it is one of the absolutely legitimate norms of the Shari'a. Extremists use the term without going into nuances, norms and rules; often enough they are not aware of elementary norms or deliberately push them aside in pursuance of personal aims. According to the Shari'a, the prerogative of excommunication belongs to prominent and respected theologians, Islamic scholars and the Shari'a courts of justice rather than to the rank-and-file Islamic religious activists. In the case of Syria, damage could be done by propagating theological conclusions related to the Alawi and their faith. For those who have sided with Muslim Brotherhood, as well as those who supported takfir and jihad, this was a chance to organize the masses for the regime change, while the Salafis (those who supported major Saudi Arabia religious figures) were aware that any attempt at regime change in the current realities would spell disaster. Never have prominent Salafi theologians concealed their opinion of the Syrian regime as anti-Islamic and of Alawis as a sect that had lost its bearings. In 1980, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia

[17] V.N. Sautov, *Alavity v obshchestvenno-politicheskoy zhizni Sirii (40e-90e gody XX veka),* Candidate thesis, Moscow, 2001, p. 212.

[18] See: V. Nasr, *The Dispensable Nation: American Foreign Policy in Retreat,* Doubleday, 2013.

Abdul Aziz ibn Baz wrote about it in his letter to Hafez Assad, in which he condemned the use of force against religious figures in Aleppo.

Historical events with religious undertones are another trump card in religious anti-Syrian propaganda. References to the events when the Nusayris fought on the side of foreign invaders became especially popular. Videos tell the story of how Nusayris fought side by side with the Crusaders against Salah ad-Din (Saladin); how they captured Damascus together with Mongolian invaders and fought on their side in the Battle of Ain Jalut against the Egyptian Mamluks. In addition, there are even more popular subjects. Prominent Arab theologian and religious figure Ibn Kathir in his fundamental work on the history of Islam *The Beginning and the End* described, in particular, the 1317 capture of the Syrian city of Jableh, in Latakia on the Mediterranean coast, the historical home of the Alawis. Syrian-born Ibn Kathir, one of the contemporaries of the events, left a detailed description of how the city had been captured by the sect of Nusayris led by Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi. Like many of his contemporaries Ibn Kathir believed that the Nusayris were disoriented heretics. He began his story by saying that the name of al-Mahdi was Muhammad ibn al-Hasan, who insisted that he was Ali ibn Abi Talib, creator of the sky and the earth and that the Nusayris, rather than the Muslims were true believers. In fact, he spoke of reincarnation of God in the Fourth Righteous Caliph of the Muslims, which brought man beyond the borders of Islam. The Nusayris insisted on the postulate "There is no god but Ali" that replaced the Islamic Shahada "There is no god but Allah." Al-Mahdi went even further: having consolidated his position as the ruler of the Nusayris and having knocked together an army out of a great number of like-minded people in the mountains of Latakia, he moved on to the city of Jableh to capture it amid the chaos caused by the Mongolian army. Ibn Kathir further wrote that, having captured the city, Nusayris slaughtered its citizens, forced the captives to admit that Ali was their God and to bow deeply to him (in Islam this honor is limited to God) and drank alcohol in mosques.[19] Finally, Muslims drove the Nusayris from the city. This story gained popularity during the civil war in Syria as part of the information war waged against the Assad regime. Quite often videos of historical events are shown along with the videos of similar recent events.

Much of what is used as religious propaganda against the regime of Bashar al-Assad is supplied by the Syrian army who fight on the side of the regime. There are numerous videos that registered tortures of civilians accompanied by humiliation of their religious convictions. Photos of torture (beatings with iron objects, setting live people on fire, etc.) are actively used for the propagandistic purposes. Here we want to focus on the humiliations of the Muslims' religious convictions by regime supporters. The most frequent form of humiliation is the use of coercion and the threat of death to force people to say "There is no God but Bashar" and bow deeply in front of portraits of Bashar al-Assad. There are videos that display other forms of humiliation of Muslims; mosques are desecrated with inscriptions saying that Bashar al-Assad is the God of Syria and that he alone is worth worshipping; Islamic prayers are parodied; mosques are destroyed by heavy military machinery, etc.

The Problem as Viewed by Shi'a and Alawis

Today, the situation in Shi'a Islam is highly specific. On the one hand, starting with the first half of the 20th century, the Shi'a centers of Iraq and Iran have been treating the Alawis as part of the Shi'a world. On the other, there is no agreement among Shi'a theologians on certain Alawi-related

[19] See: Ibn Qasir, *al-Bidaya wa al-Nihaya* (The Beginning to the End), Vol. 18, Giza, 1998, p. 736.

points. The Syrian civil war added fire to these disagreements and moved them over to the YouTube. In the last few years bits and pieces of public lectures, interviews with and commentaries of prominent Shi'a theologians have been published on the Internet. Grand Ayatollah Kamal al-Haydari, a prominent religious figure in Iraq, said that there was no interconnection between the Shi'a and Alawis. Ali al-Kourani, another prominent Shi'a theologian from Lebanon, is of a different opinion. He believes that some of the Alawis are Muslims because they accept and declare the Shahada, the Muslim symbol of faith that contains the most important Islamic dogmas. He admits that not all Alawis recognize the Shahada: those who reject it believe that God was reincarnated in Ali ibn Abi Talib, the fourth caliph of the Muslims. Yasser al-Habib, another Shi'a theologian born in Kuwait who now lives in Great Britain, offered an even clearer classification of the Alawis. He divides them into two groups, the first of the two are Alawis who accept the postulates and ideas of Islam in their Shi'a interpretations. The second are the Nusayris: they are still the victims of the delusions of Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr al-Numayri. Yasser al-Habib interprets the Syrian civil war as the struggle between these groups: the former want to join the Shia's world, while the latter adhered to their previous views.

Recently, Alawis have intensified their efforts to substantiate their belonging to Islam. This tendency is manifested in two different ways.

- First of all, they use videos that explain the ideology of the Alawis accompanied by commentaries of viewers who say that they are Alawis and they accept the Islamic postulates, in particular the Shahada, the prophesies of Muhammad, etc.
- Secondly, some of the prominent Alawi religious figures have been demonstrating increasingly greater willingness to contact the media and have generally become more open to the world. In 2017, for example, the France24Arabic TV channel uploaded a series of programs on Alawis to YouTube. Ali Kaddur, an Alawi religious figure from Lebanon, explained that the Alawis recognized all Islamic postulates (in their Shi'a interpretation as the viewers could surmise from what he said). The Alawis practice the Ja'fari school of Shi'a jurisprudence. Al Kaddur spared no arguments to refute all accusations related to religion and history by saying that they were nothing more than a heap of lies. He said, in particular, that Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr al-Numayri had never claimed to be a prophet.

Religious activity of President Assad is just as interesting. From time to time he meets the religious leaders of his country and attends collective prayers on big holidays, such as Kurban Bayrami. These events are widely publicized: they are covered by TV and uploaded to YouTube. At the early stages of the war, these events caused a lot of noise that forced the president to personally sort things out. On 25 August, 2011, when talking to the Syrian religious leaders during the month of Ramadan he said that those who had forced people to say "There is no God but Bashar" and bow in front of his portrait are "infidels" and should be punished. He deemed it necessary to point out that all military personnel and all special services officers cannot be accused of infidelity indiscriminately, and that the guilty ones should be imprisoned and taught to become true Muslims. Nevertheless, these facts merely fanned the religious propaganda against the Assad regime and escalated the conflict. Each time when the regime used force against its own population was exploited by its opponents to fan the fires of the information war. In 2014, speaking in front of Syrian religious leaders, Bashar Assad emphasized his Islamic identity and tried to present his regime as an Islamic type of state. He pointed out, in particular, that the Constitution and the laws related to public life were based on the Sharia. He, however, resolutely declined the possibility of legitimizing political Islam as an acceptable form of the Syrian state which meant that he had moved away from the policy of Ba'athism on the points related to the place of religion in state governance. Similar trends had been detected in what Saddam Hussein, head of Iraqi

Ba'athists, had said at one time. He used religious paradigms when he saw it fit for the purposes of external and internal policy, while treating religion merely as part of cultural heritage.[20]

Conclusion

The civil war in Syria attracted a lot of attention across the world not only because of its scope but also because of the level of information transmission, its mobility, quality, and volume. The Internet (and Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.) plays the main role in this process. This has become one of the distinctive features of the Arab Spring and the civil wars that followed it.

Religious propaganda against the Assad regime employed three methods.

- The first and the most popular of the three entailed making references to religious leaders, respected by certain groups or trends. Generally, Islamic groups are highly mobile when it comes to the transfer of information, religion-related information in the first place. The Internet is one of the most important vehicles used by all Islamic trends and groups.
- The second includes references to history and historical events associated with the Alawi. The third displays confirmations of anti-Islamic behavior of Assad's supporters, from among the Syrian military personnel in the first place, confirmed by videos.
- The three methods formed the platform on which the ideas of the "anti-Islamic nature" of the Syrian regime are based.

Each act of violence against civilians has bred the desire among Muslims to help the Syrian Muslims, which created significant flows of people, mainly neophytes, to Syria. They are more responsive because of the fairly shallow knowledge of religion. Those who circulate these videos on the Internet seek to make the greatest possible emotional effect and to use those who succumb to it in their interests.

[20] See: S. Helfont, "Saddam and the Islamists: The Ba'thist Regime's Instrumentalization of Religion in Foreign Affairs," *The Middle East Journal,* Vol. 68, No. 3, 2014, pp. 352-366.