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Towards an ‘Interfaith Nationalism’? Christians and Their Relations to Muslims in the History Textbooks of the Syrian Arab Republic

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Abstract: This study examines how Christian–Muslim relations are presented in Syrian history textbooks and deployed by the embattled regime of Bashar al-Asad in its quest for legitimacy both at home and abroad since the eruption of the war that displaced half the country’s population. To that end, Critical Discourse Analysis is applied to selected texts from the school curricula stressing the harmonious coexistence between the country’s only two officially recognized faiths (Islam and Christianity), in addition to the Syrian Christians’ commitment to national unity from time immemorial, as nationalist discourses retrospectively assert. The historical narratives in question are juxtaposed with the ideological inconsistencies of the Arab nationalist Ba’th party that has ruled Syria since 1963 vis-à-vis religious sects and minorities, while being discussed against the backdrop of the recent geopolitical developments.

Keywords: Christians; curricula; nationalism; textbooks; sectarianism; Syria



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1. Introduction

1.1. Historical Context

The Syrian case is interesting for the discussion of this particular issue for two reasons. Firstly, it represents the last stronghold of Arab nationalism, at least in theory. Since its inception in the late 1940s, the Arab nationalist Ba’th party, endorsed the unity of all Arabs regardless of their religion or the state they belonged to (Dawisha 2002, pp. 153–54). Despite that ideology’s gradual retreat from the Arab political landscape since the 1970s (Ajami 1987, pp. 96–114), it remains embedded in state discourses and particularly school curricula without being at odds with parochial Syrian nationalism (Lesch 2005, pp. 57–98); on the contrary, the terms “Syrian” and “Arab” or “Arabic” are interchangeably used to describe the peoples of historical Syria and their achievements from past to present (Bolliger 2011, pp. 96–98). Secondly, like other nations in the Middle East, Syria consists of a mosaic of religious identities, both Christian and Muslim, that at times overlap and at times compete with the modern concept of *muāṭana* [citizenship], depending on the interplay between domestic and regional politics at different historical junctures (Hinnebusch 2020). From the very beginning, the Ba’th party was associated with humble officers from religious minority backgrounds, such as the Alawites, the Druze and the Ismailis, who were attracted by its secularism as a means to offset the political hegemony of the rich Sunni merchants and landlords (Owen 1992, p. 201; Pipes 1989, pp. 430–33, 442); eventually, they helped it capture the country through successive military takeovers during the 1960s (Galvani 1974, pp. 3–16). The last of those coups was *Al-ḥaraka al-taṣḥīḥiyya* [the Correctionist Movement] in 1970 that brought Bashar al-Asad’s father, Hafez, to power and ushered in a new era of pragmatism striking a delicate balance between the Sunni majority and the numerous religious sects (Van Dam 1996, pp. 38–64).

Regarding the religious minority that concerns our inquiry, it should be remembered that throughout its long history, Syria has been home to a rich diversity of Christian

denominations, many of which survive to this day. Even though many of them had been charged as Monophysite and Nestorian, *ergo* heretical, teachings by ecclesiastical authorities in Constantinople, Muslim rulers tolerated them on the condition that they paid the *jizya* [poll tax], giving them a free hand in handling their own affairs, irrespective of dogma (Cragg 1992, pp. 56–59; Griffith 2008, pp. 12–17; Hourani 1946, pp. 19–22). As a result, and despite mass conversions to Islam, the increasingly Arabized Syria hosted ancient Churches, like the Syriac, i.e., ‘Jacobite’, and the Greek Orthodox, which are to be found alongside more recent ones, such as the Greek Catholic, i.e., ‘Melkite’, the Armenian and the Protestant (O’Mahony 2013, pp. 248–55). According to the data provided by Hourani, Christians of every confession accounted for 14 per cent of the general population in the mid-1940s (Hourani 1947, p. 76). Today, that percentage has dropped to 10 or even less, although any data on Syria’s demographics remain unreliable after a decade of civil war and the mass exodus of refugees that ensued (CIA The World Factbook Syria 2023). As for their political attitudes, unlike the Lebanese Maronites who have traditionally feared their absorption into a borderless pan-Arab entity dominated by Muslims, most Christians in Syria have been favorably predisposed towards Arab nationalism, not least for the fact that the Ba’th party’s founder and great theoretician, Michel Aflaq, was himself Greek Orthodox (Phillip 1993, pp. 43–45; Tibi 1997, pp. 203–4). While it is true that on no account do they experience state-sanctioned religious discrimination, Syrian Christians are not allowed to run for the republic’s presidency, a post that is exclusively reserved for Muslims according to the 1973 constitution (Ziadeh 2011, pp. 151–56). During the recent crisis they generally sided with President Asad driven by their basic interest in safety and stability rather than ideological affinity.

1.2. Research Background and Objectives

This essay’s theoretical background draws upon the close-knit relationship between nationalism, religious identities and school curricula. Taking into account the pivotal role played by schools in indoctrinating the citizens in the state ideology of nationalism (Althusser 1971, p. 133; Anderson [1983] 1991, pp. 67–91; Gellner 1983, p. 34; Foucault 2003, p. 45), textbooks have always provided fertile ground to develop our understanding of top-down identity construction (Ahier 1988, pp. 41–121; Fuchs and Bock 2018); history, geography and civics textbooks constitute, in Schissler’s (2009) words: “excellent sources for analyzing the normative structures of societies” (p. 205). With reference to religious identities, the relevant literature suggests that they are inextricably linked to nationalist discourses and the dominant historiographic narratives that emanate from them. Older studies have pointed out how European history textbooks discussed the unifying and centralizing functions of religion at the service of their respective nations during the formation process (Louvain 1974, p. 102). Similar tendencies in the school curricula are detected today on a global scale. To mention but a few publications, Zambeta (2000) studied the congruence of the Greek nation with Orthodox Christianity in religious instruction material; her findings are in line with a more recent study by Soper and Fetzer (2018) investigating Greece’s “stable religious nationalism” (pp. 110–32). Durrani and Dunne (2010) shed light on the reformulations of Muslim Pakistani identity in the country’s curricula. Babahan (2014) assessed Islam’s role in shaping Turkishness in the school textbooks of the early republican period, while Hildebrandt-Wypych (2017) explored, via the application of Critical Discourse Analysis (hereinafter CDA) to Polish history textbooks, the intimate symbiosis between Polishness and Catholicism. Researchers in general opt for this method since it allows them to ideologically decipher linguistic choices which underlie existing power relations between the state and its citizens (Blackledge 2013) and our study is no exception. In like manner, Kumar (2022) underscored the indissoluble bond between Indian citizenship and Hindu religiosity and Neumann (2022) detected similar trends of nationalism-religion interrelation in Hungarian educational discourses.

Arab countries, and particularly Syria, are rather understudied in this regard and chapters are absent even in cross-cultural comparative studies (Aubry et al. 2015; Nicholls

2006). Mazawi and Sultana (2010) are the editors of a collective volume on politics and education in the Arab world; still, they do not include any chapters on Syria. Faour (2013) provided a glimpse of how patriotic and religious agendas become intertwined with the concept of citizenship in civic education textbooks in eleven Arab states without, however, including Syria. Alhussein (2019) explained how the Saudi leadership's re-appropriation of Islam reflected a "nation first" approach in revising the kingdom's curricula. Likewise, Ozgen and Hassan (2021) highlighted how the Emirati ruling class determines which 'version' of Islam will be taught to students. Lastly, Edres (2021) and Rawadieh (2022) traced how the Jordanian textbooks' references to Islam foster a distinct national identity along with Arabness. Among the first who offered insights about Ba'thist involvement in the religious instruction of Syria's Sunnis was Landis (2007, pp. 177–96). One of the few works on Syrian history textbooks is Bolliger's (2011) study that explored changes applied in the curricula from the presidency of Hafez al-Asad (1970–2000) to that of Bashar (pp. 98–112). Her objectives were different from ours though, because she confined her research to contemporary history and did not touch upon Christian identities. Frayha (2012) comparatively studied educational reforms undertaken in Syria, Lebanon and Oman since the 1980s (pp. 15–39) and Wattar (2014) disclosed useful information on the evolution of the Syrian education system since the Ba'thist takeover in 1963, albeit both studies' point of focus is not the ideological use of the curricula. Perhaps the most revealing research remains that of Pardo and Jacobi (2018), who monitored almost every Syrian textbook to detect state propaganda. On the same wavelength, is the study of Masud (2018, pp. 80–111), which grappled with the legitimacy purposes of *al-tarbiyya al-waṭaniyya* [patriotic instruction] class.

Therefore, our contribution lies in the originality of its objectives, since no work to date has focused on the representations of Syrian Christians in the history textbooks and the narration of their relations to Muslims since the Arab conquests of the seventh century AD. By applying CDA to the curricula of several grades, this research aims to elucidate the utilization of Christian identities by a deeply nationalist regime that survived a civil war and boasts about being the only guarantor of religious tolerance in the wake of the sectarian strife that ravaged the whole region. Examining Christian–Muslim relations in Syrian history textbooks also contributes to our understanding of sectarian dynamics in the Middle East and beyond; after all, the study of sectarianism and the formation of societal identity is consistent with the educational policies of the state. In this respect, the study's results may be informative for cross-national comparisons that expand on the existing body of research. Results are presented excerpt by excerpt, for each textbook separately, and then discussed within their broader historical, ideological and geopolitical frameworks. As the findings suggest, textbooks deliberately downplay Christian confessional diversity on anti-sectarian grounds; in the meantime, they oscillate between presenting Christians as sincere patriots who have always served the Arab nation on a par with Muslims and as a persecuted minority in constant need of [Muslim] protection.

2. Materials and Methods

The subject of history is considered the most appropriate for the purposes of this study, because it is targeted at an interreligious audience. Both Muslim and Christian students can identify with their respective religious identities and renegotiate them in tandem with their national identity. History class is compulsory for all students from seventh to tenth grade; while for the eleventh and twelfth grades it is chosen as a primary subject only by the students of humanities. With the exception of the ninth-grade curriculum, which does not include any references relevant to the subject of our inquiry, the curricula of the other five grades were singled out for our analysis, covering a historical period from the Roman occupation of Syria to the country's independence from the French. All the textbooks under discussion have been very recently updated and are easily retrieved from the websites of the Syrian Ministry of Education. Those revisions were implemented at a critical juncture when the tide of the war had already turned in Asad's favor. Needless

to say, the territories which remain outside the control of Damascus do not accept these textbooks in their curricula. The Kurdish Autonomous Administration of North-East Syria, known as Rojava, distributes its own textbooks and the same applies to the Islamist-run quasi-state of Idlib in the north-west (Dinç 2020; Jablawi 2015; Longuenesse 2019).

In terms of methodology, CDA better corresponds to the study's objectives, since it departs from the simple interpretation of the textbooks' language, adopting instead an interdisciplinary approach that is grounded in the collaboration between linguistics, history and political science (van Leeuwen 2006, p. 292). According to Fairclough (1989) who was the first to introduce CDA in his seminal work *Language and Power*, any kind of text is described as a product of the process called *discourse* [italics in the original] that "involves social conditions of production and social conditions of interpretation" (p. 25). The rather vague concept of discourse may be elucidated as the conjunction of "language use, communication of beliefs and interaction in social situations" (Van Dijk 1997, p. 2). As far as our study is concerned, even though the juvenile readers of the Syrian history textbooks "seem to be more passively involved in the interaction" (Van Dijk 1997, p. 3) interactions do exist. On the one hand, Assad's regime began to "use textbooks to attack its challengers, display its power, and deny accusations of human rights violations" (Masud as cited in Sheff 2022) and on the other, tomorrow's citizens embrace its dominant narratives out of fear, conviction or sheer apathy, or—especially after the Arab Spring—resist them and publicly reject them as fabrications (Najar 2017).

CDA can be implemented at the "micro" and the "macro level" (Van Dijk 1997, pp. 9–10). The analysis of the microstructure concerns the semantic representations of the discourse, such as word order, the use of certain nouns, verbs and prepositions, the sequence of the sentences together with their grammar and syntax, i.e., what Fairclough (1989) termed the "descriptive stage" of discourse analysis (pp. 109–39). Textual analysis is not complete unless it is both linguistic and intertextual, thus "bridging the gap between texts and contexts" (Fairclough 1995, pp. 188–89). This brings us to the level of the macrostructure that roughly corresponds to Fairclough's "interpretative and explanatory analytical stages" (Fairclough 1989, pp. 140–68). Quoting Van Dijk (1997), at this level of analysis "we leave traditional linguistics and grammar behind us" (p. 10) and emphasis is put instead on disclosing the broader discourse meanings which are at stake. In the results' section our sample is presented. It consists of 18 excerpts which were isolated from their respective texts and chosen for our analysis depending on key-words, like "*masīhiyyīn*" ["Christians"], "*muslimīn*" ["Muslims"], "*idṭihād*" ["persecution"], "*madhāhib*" ["dogmas"], "*tasāmuḥ*" ["tolerance"], "*muāṭana*" ["citizenship"] and many others in agreement with the research objectives discussed in the introduction. Each excerpt was translated from Arabic into English. In the discussion section linguistic choices are simultaneously analyzed at the micro and macro level and, when necessary, transliterations of the original Arabic text are provided.

3. Results

3.1. *Tarikh Suria al-Qadīma* (Ancient History of Syria, Seventh Grade, 2019–2020)

3.1.1. Excerpt 1: "The Monotheistic Religions and the Status of Women"

"...during their occupation of the Arab East they [the Greeks and Romans] issued laws curtailing the status of women until the advent of the monotheistic religions that came to restore the woman to her erstwhile position; Syrian society accepted the restoration of her position since it was familiar to it. Respect towards women's status was clearly manifested in the personality of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus, peace be upon him, in the Christian religion. In order to confirm the status of women and the effectiveness of their role in society, Islam granted them equal rights and obligations with men, even if the roles assigned to them are different". (Syrian Arab Republic 2019–2020b, p. 28)

3.1.2. Excerpt 2: “Melting Pot of the Monotheistic Religions”

“Syria witnessed the birth of Jesus Christ, peace be upon him, and the missionary activity of Paul the Apostle who made the Syrian city of Antioch his base; the city would become the capital of the Eastern Church. Syria’s religious prominence increased after Prophet Muhammad’s, may blessings of God and peace be upon him, attestation on its significance: *Shām*¹ will be given to you and if you were asked where you want to settle in it, then choose a city called Damascus”. (ibid., p. 32)

3.1.3. Excerpt 3: “The Spread of the Monotheistic Religions”

“Due to the continuation of the Roman occupation of Syria and the persecution of its Arab residents, a proportion of whom were observing Christianity, the people [of Syria] rejected their [the Romans] rule. During the same period the Arab Islamic conquests began and thereupon the people of *Shām* and Iraq welcomed the conquerors and their new religion. Following the will of the Prophet, may blessings of God and peace be upon him, most of his *ṣaḥāba* [companions] arrived at the Aramaic capital, Damascus, thereby the city was assigned the mission of spreading the Islamic religion across the world. Meanwhile, Christianity, that had existed there before, continued to exist and the new state, with Damascus as its capital, was built and assisted by the peoples of the region, Christians and Muslims alike”. (ibid., p. 33)

3.2. *Suria al-Haḍāra* (Syria, the Civilization; Eighth Grade 2019–2020)

3.2.1. Excerpt 4: “The Liberation Wars”

“The peoples of *Shām*, Egypt and Iraq were persecuted and suffering under the dual occupation of the Byzantines and the Persians (. . .) living conditions were deteriorating, due to the imposition of heavy taxation and the destruction of commerce, thus locals yearned for a new state. Hence, they found a sanctuary in the fundamentals of justice and equity that began to prevail along with the emergence of the new religion”. (Syrian Arab Republic 2019–2020a, p. 21)

3.2.2. Excerpt 5: “Underpinnings of the State”

“In the Umayyad era the Arabs solidified the underpinnings of the Arab state, the remarkable personality of which was based on the region’s cultural heritage (. . .) The state was established on the principles of integral stability and religious tolerance. . .” (ibid., p. 28)

3.2.3. Excerpt 6: “Safeguarding Openness to the Other”

“...the internal organization of the Arab state relied on two principles: receptiveness and reform. The former entailed the selection of the most qualified men to run administrative and political posts irrespective of religion, such as Sargun [Sergius] Mansur and his son [John the Damascene]; as for reform, it was realized through the implementation of Arabization policies, since it was deemed inappropriate to keep the records of the state in a language other than its official one. . .” (ibid., p. 29)

3.2.4. Excerpt 7: “Celebrations and Feasts”

“We witness today diverse feasts like the coming of the month of Ramadan and Eid al-Fitr [its cessation], as well as Eid al-Adha [Feast of Sacrifice], the Prophet’s birthday and both the *hijrī* and the *milādī* new year, in addition to the Eid al-Bishara [Annunciation of Virgin Mary]² and Eid al-Milad [Christmas]. . .” (ibid., p. 60)

3.3. *Qadaia Tarikhiyya (Historical Questions; Tenth Grade 2021–2022)*

3.3.1. Excerpt 8: “The Emergence of Christianity”

“The emergence of Christianity constituted a turning point in the history of religions in the ancient world in general and Syria in particular. Due to its openness and its belief in one deity Syrian thought had the ability to adapt [to Christianity] (. . .) Therefore, the openness of Syrian religious thought to the existence of many deities combined with its belief in one deity paved the way for its acceptance of the monotheistic concept that the Abrahamic religions brought with them. Consequently, Syria became the springboard of many missionaries of the new religion enabling them to teach it all over the world”. ([Syrian Arab Republic 2021–2022b](#), p. 107)

3.3.2. Excerpt 9: “Places of Worship”

“...The temple of the Aramaic god Hadad in Damascus that the Romans turned into a temple of their own great god, Jupiter, before becoming the Church of John the Baptist after the spread of Christianity. Upon the arrival of the Islamic conquests in 622 AD and after the residents of Damascus had sanctioned their entry into the city through its gates with the exception of the Paradise Gate, which the Byzantine occupiers refused to open, part of the church was transformed into a mosque. The church was not separated from the mosque, except by a wall, until 705, when the Umayyad king Walid ibn ‘Abd al-Malik bought the land of the church and ordered the completion of the mosque’s construction thus becoming the Great Umayyad Mosque of Damascus”. (*ibid.*, p. 109)

3.4. *Qadaia Tarikhiyya (Historical Questions; Eleventh Grade 2021–2022)*

3.4.1. Excerpt 10: “Historical Role”

“The Ghassanids settled in the south of *Shām* (. . .) they embraced Christianity and built many monasteries that remain to this day as witnesses to their civilization and religious, intellectual and architectural advancement especially in the Golan. . .” ([Syrian Arab Republic 2021–2022a](#), p. 18)

3.4.2. Excerpt 11: “At Present”

“Why are both the Islamic and its concurrent Gregorian calendar employed in the official documents of the Syrian Arab Republic?” (*ibid.*, p. 23)

3.4.3. Excerpt 12: “Policies of the Occupation”

“Given that the people [of *Shām*] observed the dogma of the Syriac [Jacobite] Church, the Byzantines implemented policies of religious persecution against them and imposed heavy taxation. . .” (*ibid.*, p. 24)

3.4.4. Excerpt 13: “A Sign of Strength”

“Among the gravest challenges that nations face are the political crises that aim at disintegrating the nation into competing factions (. . .) the nation remains coherent, insofar as it addresses the political challenges with rationality and flexibility. How was this possible in the age of the Arab Islamic civilization?” (*ibid.*, p. 32)

3.4.5. Excerpt 14: “Solid Foundations”

“The Arab state was established at the beginning of the Middle Ages and amalgamated with the peoples under its control into one single state (. . .) Damascus was the capital of a state that was characterized by a new spirit of religious tolerance, harmonious coexistence and cultural diversity”. (*ibid.*, p. 32)

3.5. *Qadaia Tarikhiyya (Historical Questions; Twelfth Grade 2021–2022)*

3.5.1. Excerpt 15: “The Arabic Press”

“The first printing machine in the Arab nation using Arabic letters was found in Aleppo in 1704; it was brought to the city by the Metropolitan of Antioch, Athanasios IV and its Arabic letters were designed by Abdallah al-Zakhir al-Halabi”. (*Syrian Arab Republic 2021–2022c*, p. 50)

3.5.2. Excerpt 16: “The First Glimpses of Citizenship”

“According to Butrus al-Bustani³: ‘the famous Syria in the lands of *Shām* with all its plains, mountains and coasts, is our homeland and the residents of Syria are the people of our homeland, regardless of their faith and status”⁴. (*ibid.*, p. 56)

3.5.3. Excerpt 17: “Cultural Unity”

“When the Turkish government of Union and Progress adopted abusive policies that targeted the peoples of the region like the Syriac [Christians] and the Assyrians and in the aftermath of the Armenian genocide in 1915 those who survived sought refuge in Syria (...) the Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians contributed under their capacity as Syrian citizens to cultural, economic and political life”. (*ibid.*, p. 102)

3.5.4. Excerpt 18: “How Does a Society’s National Struggle Shape Its History?”

“Oh, sons of my homeland: today I congratulate this nation, the youth and the elder, the crescent and the cross, I congratulate that peasant who responded to the nation’s preacher call...”⁵. (*ibid.*, p. 111)

4. Discussion

The aforementioned excerpts reveal two inconsistencies in the nationalist discourses of the Syrian Arab Republic which are nonetheless dictated by political realities on the ground throughout the sixty years of uninterrupted Ba’thist rule (*Leverett 2005*, pp. 22–57). The first concerns the deployment of religious identities by the Ba’th that is in conflict with its early vows to eradicate *al-tā’ifiyya* [sectarianism]⁶, a ‘burden’ allegedly dating back to the Ottoman and French eras (*Ma’oz 1986*, p. 30). On the one hand, the omission of religious adjectives and their replacement with non-religious “*dawla jadida*” [“a new state”] and “*al-dīn al-jadīd*” [“the new religion”] (excerpt 4), or ethnic ones “*al-dawla al-‘arabiyya*” [“the Arab state”] (excerpts 5 and 14), the association of Christian figures with the Arabization of Syria, yet while downplaying their religion “*akfa’ al-rijāl bigaḍi al-naẓar ‘an al-dīn*” [“the most qualified men irrespective of religion”] (excerpt 6) and last but not least, the quote of Butrus al-Bustani on defining the residents of Syria “*‘ala ikhtilāfi madhāhibihim*” [“regardless of their faith”] (excerpt 16) comply with Ba’thist secularism: “the national tie is the only tie that may exist in the Arab state. It ensures harmony among all the citizens by melting them in the crucible of a single nation and counteracts all religious, communal, tribal, racial or regional factions” (*The Party of the Arab Ba’th 1962*, p. 236). Similarly, excerpt 13 warns students that “*min akhṭar al-taḥaddiyāt ‘alā al-ummam*” [“among the gravest challenges that nations face”] are the threats to their coherence and unity “*wa tufakkikuha ilā mukawwināt mutaṣāri ‘a*” [“disintegrating the nation into competing factions”]. The impact of the 2011 uprising, that had become largely sectarianized over its course (*Corstange and York 2018*, pp. 441–55; *Zeno 2022*, pp. 1040–60), is obvious in invigorating the traditional Ba’thist phobia of sects.

On the other hand, references to Christianity abound. Being the birthplace of the Virgin Mary and Jesus (excerpts 1 and 2), Syria is not simply the cradle of Christianity “*shakkala zuhūr al-dīāna al-masīhiyya muna’atafan fi tārikh (...) wa Suria khāṣṣatan*” [“the emergence of Christianity constituted a turning point...”], but its gate to the world as the change of the subject (from Christianity to Syria) demonstrates “*fa aṣbaḥat Suria markaz inṭilāq al-kathīr min al-mubashshirīn*” [“...Syria became the springboard...”] (excerpt 8). Furthermore, the Arab Ghassanids’ peaceful transition to Christianity illustrates nationalist claims to the

‘nativeness’ of that religion and its cultural heritage. Certain nouns carrying positive connotations testify this “*al-qudra ‘alā al-takayyuf*” [“the ability to adapt”], “*infītāḥīhi*” [“its openness”] and “*imānihi bi ujūd ilāh wāḥid*” [“its belief in one deity. . .”] (excerpt 8) in addition to the verbs “*‘itanaqū*” [“embraced”] and “*banū al-kathīr min al-adīra (. . .) wa la siyamā fi minṭaqa al-Jūlān*” [“built many monasteries (. . .) especially in the Golan”] (excerpt 10). The emphasis on the Arab–Christian personality of the Golan Heights, which have been occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six-Days War (Winter 2019), confirms the deployment of religious identities at the service of nationalist propaganda. This is also the case in excerpt two regarding the missionary activities of Apostle Paul. Even though the students know that the text refers to Syria from the very beginning “*shahidat Suria*” [“Syria witnessed”], the adjective “*Syrian*” is used again two lines below to describe the city of Antioch “*madīna Antakya al-sūriyya*” [“the Syrian city of Antioch”]. This repetition reminds students of Syria’s claim to the city and its surrounding *sanjak* [province] of Alexandretta that the French ceded to Turkey in 1939 (Aras and Köni 2002, p. 52).

References to the Christian presence in Syria do exist, they underwent a process of ‘de-sectarianization’ though that should be taken into consideration. Confessional pluralism is understated on purpose and denominations are grouped together under the umbrella term “*masḥīyyīn*” [“Christians”]. The mentioning of Syriacs, Assyrians and Armenians in excerpts 12 and 17, who are depicted as the victims of the Byzantines and the Young Turks, both sworn enemies of the Arab nation, are rare exceptions, justified by the regime’s strategy to divert international attention away from accusations of war crimes and foreground instead its protection of the old Eastern Churches amidst ISIS’ heinous acts in the region (Black 2013; Oueis 2019). A similar umbrella term applies even more strictly to the numerous Islamic sects, e.g., Shia, Alawites, Ismailis and Druze, which are absent from the school curricula (Faour 2014; Landis 2007), reflecting Bashar’s appropriation of his father’s ‘two faiths only’ legacy. In his bid to ‘de-sectarianize’ society and dispel the misgivings of the most conservative Sunnis (Weismann 1993, pp. 601–23), Hafez al-Asad reinstated the president’s Muslim faith in the 1973 constitution along with incorporating the Sharia as “a principal source of legislation” (Article 3) and making an appeal to the prominent Shia cleric Imam al-Sadr in Lebanon to issue a *fatwa* [religious ruling] that recognized the president’s Alawite coreligionists as Shia, ergo ‘true’ Muslims (Seal 1989, pp. 172–73). In the same fashion, all sects were labelled either as Muslims or Christians and that discourse has left its blueprint on public life to this day, from ID cards to TV programs and, of course, the whole edifice of the educational system (Pinto 2015, pp. 154–75; Zisser 2006, pp. 179–98).

Imbued with the ‘two faiths only’ discourse, history textbooks introduce pupils to a recurrent narrative of the Ba’thist ideology, what we have coined for the purposes of this study as ‘interfaith nationalism’: no matter what is their denomination, the Syrian Christians are, above all, Arabs who have been on good terms with their Muslim compatriots from time immemorial thus forging the nation in unison. This narrative has been reinforced during the civil war with the Greek-Orthodox, the Syriac-Orthodox and the Melkite Greek-Catholic Patriarchs calling for “Christian unity” and joint “Christian–Muslim prayers”, the Mufti of Aleppo calling the Christians and the Muslims “one nation” and President Asad stating in his speeches that “Christians in Syria have never been ‘strangers’ in this land, but they have been and still are the builders of its civilization and bearers of its human message to the whole world side by side with their Muslim brothers” (Syrian Arab News Agency 2014a, 2014b, 2015b, 2019). The mobilization of the nation’s two officially accepted religious constituents instead of classes and other social forces lies at the core of Makdisi’s (1986) argument that “sectarianism refers to the deployment of religious heritage as the primary marker of modern political identity” (p. 7). Moreover, as Kastrinou (2016) asserts, nationalism and sectarianism are not inconsistent with each other, since they “both are historically closely related processes, and both are connected, indeed both are strategies of state reification” (p. 21).

In their praise of Arab nationalism, the textbooks teach students that the Christian–Muslim symbiosis has been possible only under the aegis of the Arab state that “*tabannat*”

["was established"] on "*al-tasāmuḥ al-dīnī*" ["religious tolerance"] (excerpt 5) and "*al-taqabbul wa-l-iṣlāḥ*" ["receptiveness and reform"] (excerpt 6); the Arab state is exalted by virtue of its three characteristics "*al-tasāmuḥ al-dīnī wa al-ʿaīsh al-mushtaraka wa al-tanawwʿ al-thaqāfi*" ["religious tolerance, harmonious coexistence and cultural diversity"] (excerpt 14). Viewed through the prism of 'interfaith nationalism', the mentioning of the capital's name in the same excerpt "*fakānat Dimashq ʿasīmatan jadīdatan lidawla mutamayyiza bihadhihi al-rūḥ al-jadīda*" ["...the capital of a state that was characterized by a new spirit"] hints at the regime's attempts to draw parallels between the past and the present via portraying itself as an heir to the allegedly tolerant policies of the Umayyads. Students are reminded that the Syrian Arab Republic today functions as a successful interfaith society that celebrates and observes the "*hijrī*" ["Islamic"] and the "*milādī*" ["Gregorian"] new year and calendar respectively (excerpts 7 and 11).

We thus arrive at the second inconsistency of the Syrian Arab nationalist discourse concerning the representations of Christian–Muslim relations in the history textbooks. At times the modern concepts of equal citizenship and national conscience are invoked in retrospect to diachronically narrate relations between Christians and Muslims and at times Christianity seems to play a secondary role in Syrian history acting as a 'supplement' to Islam. Christians are sometimes depicted as a weak, albeit indigenous, community that has always sought the protection of the—demographically, militarily and politically stronger—Muslims. With regard to the first case, Christianity and Islam are taught to students as being in a state of unity "*al-dīnāt al-samāwiyya*" ["the monotheistic religions"], as well as separately, "*al-dīn al-masīḥī*" ["the Christian religion"] and "*al-dīn al-islāmī*" ["the Islamic religion"] (excerpt 1) stressing their distinctness and equality alike in agreement with the tenets of 'interfaith nationalism'. In excerpt three the two subjects of the last sentence, "*masīḥiyyīn*" ["Christians"] and "*muslimīn*" ["Muslims"] are connected in copulative conjunction pinpointing their mutual importance in developing the Arab state. Likewise, students are taught that Christianity in Syria did not only survive the arrival of the Muslims but became a factor in nation-building as well, much like Islam did "*maʿa istimrār al-masīḥiyya allati sabaqatha liyabdaʾ bināʾ al-dawla al-jadīda*" ["...continued to exist and the new state was built..."]. Excerpt nine is interesting too. Among the monuments that succeeded each other in sharing the same place of worship only in the case of the temple of Jupiter is the subject of the sentence explicitly referred to using active voice "*alladhī jaʿalahu al-Rumān maʿabadan*" ["that the Romans turned into a temple"] in contrast with the passive verbal forms "*liyuṣbiḥa*" ["becoming"] and "*tahawwalat*" ["transformed"] when referring to the Church of John the Baptist and the Great Umayyad Mosque which do not need subjects. This change of voice highlights the alien nature of Roman rule as opposed to the Christian and Islamic elements of which the Syrian nation consists. The sentence "*al-kanīsa wa-l-masjid la yafsiluhuma ʿan baʿaḍ siwa jidār*" ["The church was not separated from the mosque, except by a wall"] underscores the spiritual and social proximity between Christians and the Muslim newcomers. As for the more recent historical references, in excerpt 15 two Syrians, a Christian and a Muslim, contribute to the Arab renaissance thanks to their efforts to devise the first printing machine that uses Arabic letters and President Shukri al-Quwatli singles out the Muslims and the Christians and congratulates them for realizing together the nation's independence "*...hilālan wa ṣalīban*" ["...the crescent and the cross"] (excerpt 18).

Still, our application of CDA reveals the nationalist narratives' allocation of inferior tasks and status to Christianity compared to Islam. In excerpt one the use of the subjunctive particle "*li*" ["to"] proposes an active role for both religions in redressing the injustices inflicted upon [Syrian] women under the Greeks and the Romans "*litaʿtīa wa tuʿida*" ["that came to restore"], but a few lines below that role is reserved for Islam only "*liyuʿakkida*" ["to confirm"]. According to Fairclough (1989), verbal performances are ideal for ideologically representing historical reality and are "rated in terms of facility, efficiency and social impact" (p. 115), thereby the correlation of the verbal sentence "*izdādat*" ["increased"] with the nominal sentence "*baʿada taʿkīd al-nabī*" ["after the Prophet's attestation"] (excerpt 2) emphasizes Islam's complementary mission to that of Christianity; were it not for Islam,

Syria's religious status would not have risen to such prominence. The Islamic honorific “*‘alaihi al-salām*” [“*peace be upon him*”] that accompanies the name of Jesus runs counter to the core of the Christian students' faith, since it degrades their Messiah to a ring in the Quranic chain of prophets (Cook [1983] 1996, pp. 31–38). Lastly, the ancient Syrians' acceptance of “*tawḥīd*” [“*monotheism*”] as it is described in excerpt eight alludes to the fact that Christianity took root in Syria only to precipitate the advent of Islam, which is the epitome of the monotheistic revelations. Such references echo Asad's prudence to not alienate the Sunni majority by denying Islam its *primus inter pares* position in Syrian society (Khatib et al. 2012, pp. 31–41).

Publicly acknowledging the existence of minorities in Syria is prohibited by law (Kas-trinou 2016, pp. 136, 150; Worren 2007, pp. 50–51), however ample attempts to indirectly minoritize Christians were detected throughout our analysis. First and foremost, Christianity is not recognized as the religion of the entire people of Byzantine Syria “*lisukkāniha al-‘arab alladhī kana qism minhum yu‘minu bi-l--masīḥiyya*” [“*...a proportion of whom...*”] (excerpt 3), indicating that Christians were never the majority in that region. On top of that, Christians are presented as being weak and helpless, who suffered under the Byzantines (excerpt 4) and who had been long waiting for a savior, as the particle “*fa*” [“*thereupon*”] implies “*fa-istaqbala*” [“*and thereupon (...) welcomed*”] (excerpt 3). Excerpt 2 quotes a *ḥadīth* [Prophet's saying] “*satuftaḥu ‘alaikum al-Shām*” [“*will be given to you*”]. We may presume that the use of passive voice is deliberate on the part of the authors hinting at the Christians' acquiescence to the Islamic conquest. Although both empires had conquered Syria, only the Byzantines are associated with the negatively loaded words “*iḥtilāl*” [“*occupation*”] and “*iḍṭihād*” [“*persecution*”] (excerpts 3, 4, 9, 12), whereas for Muslims the euphemism “*fātihīn*” conforms to the Islamic historiography's prevalent view of the early Arab “*futūḥāt*” as a ‘civilizing mission’ (Jiddi 2020). In this regard, the relational value of the two antonymic verbal sentences “*rafaḍa al-nās ḥukmahum*” [“*the people rejected their rule*”] and “*istaqbala ahālī al-Shām wa-l-‘Irāq al-fātihīn*” [“*...welcomed the conquerors*”] (excerpt 3) is ideologically significant. In excerpt 4 the use of active voice “*yataḥalla‘ūna*” [“*yearned*”] and “*wajadū*” [“*found*”] stresses the agency of the locals who in their quest for “*malādh*” [“*sanctuary*”] accepted Islam whether as rule “*dawla jadīda*” [“*a new state*”] or religion “*al-dīn al-jadīd*” [“*the new religion*”]. The two objects are linked together in a cause-effect relationship showcasing their complementarity.

Summing up, the history textbooks' oscillation between Muslim–Christian partnership and the minoritization of Christians conceals the *quid pro quo* relationship of protection as a reward for being loyal to the regime (Darke 2021). There is nothing new in this kind of ‘social contract’ that is reminiscent of the Ottoman *millet* system: deprivation of political rights and power in exchange for safety, religious freedom and prerogatives for the Church (Mitri 2018, pp. 115–17). What is more, the Syrian regime replicates the very protectionist/interventionist discourses of the much-detested French Mandate (1920–1946) the sectarian and *divide et impera* legacies of which the early Ba'thists were poised to get rid of, at least theoretically (Rabinovich 1979, pp. 693–712; White 2011, pp. 43–66). Yet, inside the classroom religious policies are portrayed as vehemently anti-sectarian, modelled after the state-backed religious tolerance of the Umayyad Caliphate (661–750 AD). This oscillation has been exacerbated under the circumstances of the civil war judging by public articulations during the last decade. Several patriarchs asking for the regime's protection have called on the international community to stop turning a blind eye to the “massacre of Christians by ISIS terrorists”; in response Asad called Christians “the basis of the homeland's existence that without them, there is no existence for the diverse Syria that we know” and that they “have contributed, through their stances and patriotism, to foiling projects of partition in the region and they have sent a message to the enemies of Syria and sponsors of terrorism that all their colonial projects are doomed to failure (Syrian Arab News Agency 2014c, 2015a, 2017, 2019).

5. Conclusions

Relying on material that remains, to our knowledge, largely unexplored by previous scholars, this research chose Syria as its case-study and adopted CDA as its methodology with a view to contributing to the existing literature on nationalism and religious identities. Our analysis of the history textbooks underscored their value as research tools for the study of Christian identity formation and the minoritization strategies employed by nationalist ideologies in the sectarian context not only of Syria, but of the entire Middle East and beyond. In spite of being at times contradictory and inconsistent with each other, the state narratives that permeate our selected excerpts regarding Christians and their relations to Muslims make perfect sense when considered against the background of Syrian politics, notably in times of crisis. Since the outbreak of the war, thinktanks in the West which are critical of the regime have affirmed that in his struggle for survival Asad has exploited sectarianism and the Christians' fears that an Islamist takeover was imminent (Berbner 2011). Some critics went even further implicating Asad's actual involvement in devising ISIS for his own ends, such as whitewashing his alleged war crimes (Griffing 2018). Even if we have serious reasons to doubt such exaggerated claims, the threat of Jihadism was existential not only in war-torn Syria, but in Iraq as well, thus enabling Asad to rebrand himself both at home and abroad as the Christians' last hope in an extremely volatile environment (Erlich 2013).

The study's results speak volumes about the Syrian Arab Republic's perception of its own citizenry. Equally important are the implications for Syrian Christians' religious identities of retaining antiquated pan-Arab references in the national curricula. In the era of Bashar al-Asad (2000–present) and especially amid the civil war, 'interfaith nationalism' that was supposed to de-sectarianize society in fact *re-sectarianizes* it [italics mine], thus becoming a synonym for Christian minoritization. Christian citizens are reduced to the status of 'protected minorities' and the teaching of their history follows suit, as our analysis has shown. From a demographic perspective, the historical narration of Christian–Muslim relations by the regime seems to be in line with its security concerns at present. At the peak of the refugee crisis in 2016, Asad had admittedly stated to foreign journalists that "Syria's social fabric was much better than before the civil war began" (Barnard 2016) implying that it was much easier to run a country mostly consisting of loyal Christians and other non-Sunni groups, who have gone through a deliberate process of minoritization for decades.

Regarding Syrian Christians' reception of the 'protected minority' status imposed on them, it should be noted that some activists, among them monks, contested the regime's framing of the revolutionaries as al-Qaeda terrorists (Heydemann 2012) and even participated in the uprising, projecting their Syrian identity at the expense of confessional affiliation; nevertheless, they had to cope with two insurmountable difficulties. Much to their dismay, it is the Church that speaks on the Christians' behalf and the various patriarchates have always abided by the *millet* rules of their relationship with the state, whether it was controlled by the Ottomans, the French or the Ba'th (Al-Abdullah and al-Halaq 2017). Meanwhile, as the years passed, the sectarianization of the uprising left the Christian activists no choice but to re-sectarianize their discourses and deploy the regime's 'interfaith nationalism' in reverse: a revolution of Sunnis and Christians united against a corrupt [Alawite] regime (Fahmi 2018, pp. 7–10).

Finally, yet importantly, this research should be seen within a larger scope, that links its findings to wider discussions, such as the Christian minorities' future and the sectarian phenomenon by and large. No doubt, the Syrian regime guarantees full religious freedoms for its Christian populace; still, the systematic attempts to victimize and consequently minoritize Christians through the media of formal education and historical narration can contribute to our rethinking of the different sorts of state persecution that today's Middle Eastern Christians are subject to in the long run (Mitri 2021). Furthermore, our findings can be juxtaposed with those of other studies conducted in the history textbooks of neighboring Lebanon and Jordan whose sectarian social fabric has much in common with that of Syria,

even if the structures of power and the systems of governance differ; besides, diverse political contexts and international relations constitute insightful variables in the analysis. Such comparative endeavors are indeed needed, suffice to bear in mind the complexity of “actually existing” politics in the Middle East (Hinnebusch 2020, p. 139), wherein boundaries between nationalism and sectarianism are usually blurry, coupled with the scarcity of relevant cross-national surveys or essays that bring together Arab countries with other sectarian environments, e.g., Ireland or India.

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Notes

- ¹ Historical term defining the region of ‘Greater Syria’ that consists of today’s Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Palestine and Israel.
- ² According to the Islamic and the Gregorian calendar respectively.
- ³ An Arabic-speaking Ottoman Protestant, he is considered among the pioneers of early Syrian and Arab nationalism in the second half of the nineteenth century (Hourani 2009, pp. 101–2).
- ⁴ Retrieved from Bustani’s famous journal *Nafir Suria*, Vol. 4, 25 October 1860.
- ⁵ Quoted from the speech of the Syrian President Shukri al-Quwatli on the declaration of the country’s independence on 17 April 1946.
- ⁶ According to Makdisi, the modern term of sectarianism that concerns the segregation of a society on religious lines is “a practice that developed out of, and must be understood in the context of nineteenth-century Ottoman reform and as “a discourse that is scripted as the Other to various competing narratives of modernization” (Makdisi 1986, p. 6).

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