Social Trust and Intercommunal Relations in Pre-Crisis Syria: Reflections from Syrian Refugees in Brazil

Confiança Social e Relações Intercomunitárias na Síria Pré-Crise: Reflexões de Refugiados Sírios no Brasil

Confianza Social y Relaciones Intercomunitarias en la Siria Precrisis: Reflexiones de Refugiados Sirios en Brasil

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ABSTRACT

This article examines social trust among religious communities in Syria and its role in escalating tensions before the 2011 conflict. Understanding intercommunal trust is crucial to analyzing the dynamics that led to violence between the regime and opposition. Based on a 2019 study with Syrian refugees in Brazil, it presents findings from a questionnaire exploring perceptions of social trust in Syria since the 1990s. The study did not explicitly address the 2011 conflict or refugee status but focused on intercommunal relations before 2010. The article details the methodology, analyzes responses, and discusses findings within the broader empirical literature on Syria's pre-crisis sociopolitical landscape.
Keywords: *Trust, Syria, Deeply Divided Societies*

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a confiança social entre comunidades religiosas na Síria e seu papel na escalada das tensões antes do conflito de 2011. Compreender a confiança intercomunitária é essencial para analisar as dinâmicas que levaram à violência entre o regime e a oposição. Com base em um estudo realizado em 2019 com refugiados sírios no Brasil, o artigo apresenta os resultados de um questionário que explora percepções sobre a confiança social na Síria desde os anos 1990. O estudo não abordou explicitamente o conflito de 2011 ou o status de refugiado, mas focou nas relações intercomunitárias antes de 2010. O artigo detalha a metodologia, analisa as respostas e discute os achados no contexto mais amplo da literatura empírica sobre o cenário sociopolítico da Síria antes da crise.
Palavras-chave: *Confiança, Síria, Sociedades Profundamente Divididas*

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RESUMEN
Este artículo examina la confianza social entre las comunidades religiosas en Siria y su papel en la escalada de tensiones antes del conflicto de 2011. Comprender la confianza intercomunitaria es fundamental para analizar las dinámicas que llevaron a la violencia entre el régimen y la oposición. Basado en un estudio realizado en 2019 con refugiados sirios en Brasil, el artículo presenta los resultados de un cuestionario que explora las percepciones sobre la confianza social en Siria desde la década de 1990. El estudio no abordó explícitamente el conflicto de 2011 ni el estatus de refugiado, sino que se centró en las relaciones intercomunitarias antes de 2010. El artículo detalla la metodología, analiza las respuestas y discute los hallazgos en el contexto más amplio de la literatura empírica sobre el panorama sociopolítico de Siria antes de la crisis.
Palabras clave: *Confianza, Siria, Sociedades Profundamente Divididas*

1. Introduction

When protests erupted in Syria in 2011, a heightened sense of insecurity among religious communities played a pivotal role in intensifying tensions and triggering violence between the regime and opposition forces (Goldsmith, 2015). This insecurity exacerbated preexisting identity cleavages within Syria's diverse and multi-sectarian society, transforming the country into a profoundly fragmented state from 2011 onward (Kerr, 2015; Cox, Sisk, Hester, 2017).

Historically, episodes of violent confrontation between the Syrian regime and opposition groups are not unprecedented. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, Syria endured a brutal insurgency led by Islamist groups against the Ba'athist regime under Hafez al-Assad. This conflict, marked by significant violence and sectarian undertones, threatened to push the country into a broader sectarian crisis. The culmination of these events occurred with the regime's devastating suppression of the rebellion in Hama in 1982, which effectively quelled the insurgency. In the aftermath, Syria experienced more than two decades of relative political stability, characterized by the absence of large-scale clashes between the regime and opposition or widespread sectarian unrest.

However, this period of apparent stability raises critical questions about the nature and resilience of Syria's social cohesion in the decades preceding the 2011 crisis. To what extent did the conflicts of the 1970s and 1980s—and their aftermath—intensify existing societal divisions? Alternatively, did Syria achieve a degree of reconciliation and normalization in intercommunal relations during this time? What was the state of mutual trust among religious and sectarian communities leading up to 2011? Did the bonds between these groups progressively erode, or were there meaningful efforts to restore intercommunal trust? These questions remain essential for understanding the dynamics that shaped Syria's fragmentation in the early 21st century.

The analysis focuses on a critical dimension of Syria's social cohesion in the decades following the 1982 Hama massacre: social and political trust. By examining the dynamics of trust in deeply divided societies, the study assesses Syria's vulnerability to escalating sectarian conflicts. The outbreak of the 2011 Syrian crisis revealed deep fractures in a society marked by significant cultural and religious diversity, where the erosion of social trust between religious communities emerged as a decisive factor in intensifying political and social tensions.

These fractures raise fundamental questions about the state of intercommunal relations in the years preceding the crisis, particularly regarding the role of trust in shaping perceptions of security and social cohesion.

To explore these questions, the study draws on the perspectives of Syrian refugees in Brazil, whose lived experiences and recollections provide valuable insights into the conditions that preceded Syria's social fragmentation. A particular focus is placed on refugees' expectations and perceptions regarding members of other confessional groups as a key aspect of intercommunal trust.

The research is based on data collected in 2019 through a structured questionnaire distributed among Syrian refugees residing in Brazil. The survey specifically explored participants' perceptions of social trust among religious communities in Syria during the years leading up to 2010. Importantly, the questionnaire did not directly address the 2011 conflict or the participants' refugee status. Instead, it aimed to capture their reflections on the pre-crisis period, enabling an analysis of how intercommunal trust—or its erosion—contributed to perceptions of insecurity and social fragmentation.

To provide a nuanced understanding of the dynamics at play, the investigation analyzes three aspects: (1) levels of social trust between confessional groups (e.g., Christians, Sunni Muslims, and Alawite Muslims); (2) the quality of intercommunal interactions, examining patterns of relations between Christians and Muslims, as well as tensions among Muslim subgroups; and (3) trust in specific political actors, whose actions and rhetoric often shaped perceptions of stability or insecurity. As emphasized by Hewstone et al. (2008), trust

is a multifaceted phenomenon with direct implications for social cohesion, influencing not only the stability of intercommunal relations but also the broader resilience of the social fabric. By incorporating these aspects, the study adopts a comprehensive approach that uncovers the factors contributing to vulnerabilities within the social fabric and the underlying dynamics preceding the Syrian conflict.

At the core of this analysis lies the degree of societal vulnerability to fragmentation and sectarianism during the 2011 crisis. This is assessed through the effects of trust—or its absence—on social cohesion. To refine the findings, the study incorporates additional contextual factors, such as the impact of the authoritarian regime on social relations, regional differences between urban and rural areas, and the demographic profiles of the refugees interviewed in Brazil.

To provide a deeper understanding of the collected data, the results of the questionnaire were analyzed in conjunction with existing literature in history and anthropology. The analysis emphasizes critical topics such as the historical memory of intercommunal conflicts, which shaped perceptions of threats and alliances, and the Ba'ath regime's policies for managing Syria's cultural diversity, particularly its strategies of exclusion and political control. By situating the research within this broader historical and theoretical framework, the study offers a comprehensive exploration of the conditions that preceded Syria's social fragmentation and the escalation of the 2011 crisis.

By exploring these questions, this article contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersections between social trust, cultural diversity, and vulnerability to conflict. It offers a perspective that combines historical and so-

ciological analyses with empirical data gathered from Syrian refugees. This approach aims to shed light on the social mechanisms that drive fragmentation dynamics in contexts of crisis and diversity, with implications not only for the Syrian case but also for other societies marked by deep divisions.

2. Social and Political Trust

Since 2011, Syria has become a profoundly divided society, marked by escalating tensions and deepening identity cleavages (Kerr, 2015; Cox, Sisk, Hester, 2017). As Leon Goldsmith (2015, 2018) highlights, the sense of insecurity among religious communities played a central role in sparking violence between the regime and the opposition during the early stages of the Syrian conflict. This case underscores the importance of social and political trust in understanding the mechanisms that transform latent societal tensions into open conflict, both triggering and perpetuating violence.

Timothy Wilson (2011, p. 280) sheds further light on this dynamic by examining how seemingly ordinary tensions in deeply divided societies can quickly escalate into broader conflicts. According to Wilson, these divisions often persist in a "latent state", only to resurface during periods of crisis, when they emerge as organizing principles for collective action. This observation is particularly relevant to the Syrian case, where decades of underlying tensions, though suppressed, remained unresolved. The apparent stability preceding 2011, therefore, may not have reflected genuine social cohesion but rather the temporary containment of deeper societal fractures.

In such deeply divided societies, ethnic affiliations tend to transcend their original spheres, infiltrating organizations, activities, and social roles that might otherwise appear unrelated to ethnic concerns. As Horowitz (1985, p. 7-8) argues, this pervasiveness causes ethnic conflicts to spread across multiple sectors of social life, amplifying their severity and increasing the impact of political disputes. This phenomenon is particularly significant in the Syrian context, where sectarian divisions were not merely confined to religious identities but also influenced access to political, economic, and social resources. As divisions become embedded in broader aspects of societal functioning, they exacerbate existing vulnerabilities, intensifying societal fragmentation.

This fragmentation highlights the critical role of trust—or its absence—in shaping the dynamics of conflict. In societies where ethnic and sectarian divisions permeate various sectors of life, the erosion of trust between individuals and institutions becomes both a symptom and a driver of societal breakdown. Among the various critical factors influencing conflict dynamics, the level of trust—or its absence—between individuals and between them and the state often emerges as a pivotal element in the escalation of internal conflicts. Trust functions as the societal 'glue' that binds individuals together, and when it is lacking, society becomes more susceptible to conflict (Gambetta, 1988; Langer et al., 2017). However, the relationship between trust and violence operates bidirectionally: distrust between groups can escalate conflict, and conversely, conflict situations tend to deepen distrust among individuals (SPENCE, 1999).

Understanding trust in this context requires examining its multidimensional na-

ture, as it involves not only rational assessments but also emotional and perceptual elements. In this sense, "trust" designates an expectation that is usually related to a set of emotions and perceptions, which can profoundly influence behavior (Bauer, Freitag, 2018, p.15). Several theoretical approaches exist regarding how trust is established, ranging from those that emphasize trust as a calculated and strategic behavior to more subjectivist perspectives that highlight the role of beliefs and values (Kramer, 2018, p.96). This study recognizes that trust is not purely rational; it also contains a strong emotional dimension. Fear and anxiety, for instance, can transform seemingly neutral or mundane situations into perceived threats, amplifying distrust and shaping behaviors in conflict-prone societies (Bar-tal, Alon, 2016).

Social trust is partly socially constructed over the medium term, influenced by beliefs and worldviews (Bar-tal, Alon, 2016). However, it's essential also to consider individuals' diverse personal experiences shaping their perceptions of other groups and political institutions. This perspective suggests that perception isn't solely shaped by socialization but by the interaction between personal experiences and social contexts but from the interplay between personal experiences and social interactions. Therefore, evaluating trust levels between individuals and political institutions should consider various factors affecting this dynamic (Cox et al., 2017, p.16). This research aims to assess the trust levels of Syrian refugees concerning issues involving inter-religious community relations. To achieve this, the research employed the concept of social trust, which refers to individuals' expectations towards others with whom they interact daily[3].

The literature often distinguishes between particularized trust, which concerns relationships between close individuals, usually face-to-face, and generalized trust, which refers to expectations about unknown people (Lenard, Miller, 2017, p.57). Generalized trust extends beyond the immediate circle of a person's social relationships and serves as the basis for social interactions between strangers. As some authors argue, it is generalized trust that sustains cooperation between individuals in a society (Lenard, Miller, 2018, p.57).

This research examines social trust from an intermediate perspective situated between particularized and generalized trust. It explores how social cleavages influence individuals' expectations regarding other groups. In situations of social uncertainty, people actively seek signals and information about others' intentions and likely behaviors. One way to obtain such information is to infer intentions and motivations from the social groups to which the unknown person belongs. This process of social categorization tends to affect the perception and judgment people make of others (Kramer, 2018; Tajfel, 1974). Given this tendency, the questionnaire aimed to capture this social dimension of trust among Syrian refugees towards other groups in Syria in the years prior to 2011.

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In addition to social trust, this research also examined political trust, understood as the expectations individuals place in political leaders and institutions. Specifically, political and institutional trust refers to the belief that these actors and entities will act appropriately and in accordance with expected norms (Lenard; Miller, 2018, p. 63).The aim in exploring political trust was not to conduct a comprehensive survey of people's perceptions regarding all political institutions, but rather to focus on specific actors in order to identify potential shifts in response patterns. By doing so, the research not only values the individual responses obtained but also prioritizes a comparative analysis of participants' response patterns across different themes. This approach allows for a more refined assessment of variations and trends in the respondents' perceptions.

3. Methodology

This study employed a questionnaire designed specifically for Syrian refugees in Brazil to capture their perceptions of Syria during the years preceding 2011. The research is part of a broader investigation conducted by the author (Zahreddine; Pires, 2022) that assesses Syria's social cohesion through three interrelated aspects: identity, horizontal inequalities, and social and political trust. The present study focuses exclusively on trust, both interpersonal and political, while findings related to identity and inequalities are discussed in separate publications. These analytical aspects are methodologically interconnected and provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping social cohesion in pre-2011 Syria (Langer et al., 2017; Stewart, 2008).

The questionnaire was grounded in Social Identity Theory and studies on Horizontal Ine-

qualities, which emphasize the role of group identities and disparities in shaping trust and societal relations (Horowitz, 1985; Cuhadar; Dayton, 2011). Existing models, such as those by Harb (2017) and *The Day After* survey (2016), were adapted to the Syrian context, with particular emphasis on questions exploring trust in other groups and political actors. The survey employed closed-ended questions with structured rating scales to ensure clarity, consistency, and comparability across responses. Given the demographic profile of Syrian refugees in Brazil—most of whom arrived after 2011 as young male adults[4]—the study prioritized questions focusing on the 2000s. This approach aimed to enhance the relevance and accuracy of responses by concentrating on a more recent timeframe. To further anchor participants' memories, key temporal markers were included: 2005, marked by liberal economic reforms and a severe drought, and 2007, which saw the re-election of Bashar al-Assad, both pivotal moments influencing perceptions of institutional trust and living conditions.

To ensure accessibility and precision, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic with the assistance of a specialized professor and subsequently tested with Syrian volunteers. This process refined terminology, clarified ambiguities, and ensured alignment with the study's objectives. Participants' high levels of education—reflecting Syria's historical emphasis on basic and higher education (Rodrigues; Sala; Siqueira, 2017)—were also taken into account, ensuring that the language and structure of the questions facilitated nuanced and detailed responses. The historical context of the early 21st

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4 With an average age of 26 at the time of arrival, comprising 57% men and 43% women (Calegari; Justino, 2016).

century played a central role in shaping the questionnaire, connecting participants' individual perceptions to significant events and social structures. The research incorporated the lived experiences of Syria's ethnic, religious, and social groups, offering insights into nearly two decades of social dynamics and vulnerabilities.

A total of 20 Syrians participated in the study, located in São Paulo, Belo Horizonte, and Curitiba, and aged between 25 and 35 years. The group was predominantly male, with 16 men and 4 women, and exhibited a high level of education: 17 participants had completed higher education, 2 had completed high school, and 1 had completed elementary school. The respondents reflected diverse geographic origins within Syria, including Aleppo (4), Damascus (4), Homs (5), Hama (2), Latakia (2), Tartus (1), As-Suwaida (1), and Rif Dimashq (1). Regarding religious affiliation, 19 participants provided information: 3 identified as Catholic Christians, 8 as Orthodox Christians, 6 as Sunni Muslims, 1 as Ismaili, and 1 as belonging to another religious group. While Christians predominated in the sample, alongside a significant presence of Sunni Muslims, this distribution does not reflect Syria's demographic reality, where Christians represent approximately 10% of the population. However, it aligns with historical patterns of Syrian migration to Brazil, which began in the late 19th century, predominantly involving Christians, followed later by Muslims and Jews (Baeza; Pinto, 2016).

The most recent wave of Syrian immigration, starting in 2012 due to the escalating conflict, initially comprised predominantly Christians from Homs, a city historically connected to the Syrian diaspora in Brazil. As the war intensified, the refugee profile evolved, with an increasing number of Sunni Muslims arriving, particularly in São Paulo (Baeza, 2018). Regional differences in refugee settlement patterns are notable: studies show that 95% of refugees in São Paulo are Muslims (Calegari; Justino, 2016), while Christians are more prevalent in Belo Horizonte (BBC, 2015). To capture this diversity, the research was conducted in São Paulo, Curitiba, and Belo Horizonte. These cities were chosen due to their established Syrian communities and diverse refugee profiles. However, time and budget constraints prevented the inclusion of other major cities, such as Rio de Janeiro, which also host significant refugee populations. Despite these limitations, the study remains exploratory and establishes a foundation for future research to address these gaps (Rodrigues; Sala; Siqueira, 2018).

It is worth noting that the questionnaire was extensive, requiring considerable time and commitment from participants to address its questions. Although the survey did not focus directly on the 2011 conflict, the sensitive nature of the topics explored required careful consideration. To prioritize participants' well-being, respondents were allowed to skip questions they found uncomfortable, which did not compromise the integrity of the study given its qualitative and exploratory nature. As a result, the number of responses varied across questions. Notably, questions related to trust, positioned toward the end of the questionnaire, received fewer responses compared to other sections, reflecting both the sensitive nature of trust as a topic and the effort required to complete the survey.

4. The Questions and the Responses Obtained

The questions presented in this study explore social trust, with a special focus on interfaith trust, across various themes. The first question investigated the sense of security felt by individuals belonging to the interviewee's religious groups during the period between 1990 and 2000.

Table 1 - How would you describe the sense of security experienced by members of your religious group in Syria during the 1990s and early 2000s?

Response Options	Count (Total = 16)	Percentage
Verygood	9	56.25%
Good	3	18.75%
Neutral	2	12.50%
Poor	1	6.25%
Verypoor	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration
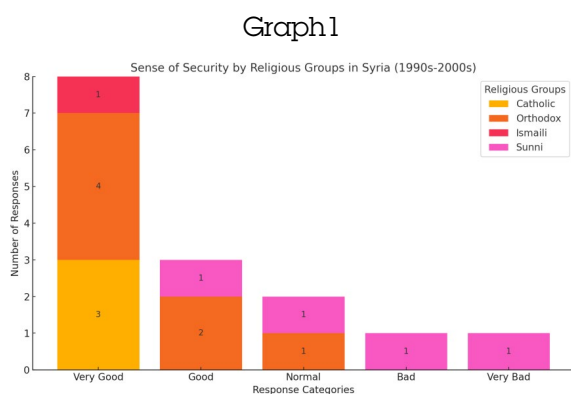
Graph 1

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses show that the interviewees considered Syria a very safe place in the 1990s. This finding corroborates qualitative and ethnographic studies that highlight Syrians' impression that, overall, Syria was a very safe country (Rabo, 2012a). Although Syria experienced a turbulent period in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the subsequent years were marked by an absence of violent clashes and crime. From a confessional perspective, there is a distinct pattern in the responses. Christians expressed a stronger sense of security compared to Sunnis. The responses from Sunni participants indicated a more heterogeneous view, ranging from very poor to good perceptions of security.

The next question addresses the same theme, but from the year 2000 onward. It aimed to determine if the political transition represented a significant period for the sense of security. The early 2000s were marked by a brief political opening, followed by a tightening of the regime. It is important to understand if these events had any impact on the sense of security.

Table2 - Did the sense of security within your religious group change after the year 2000?

Opções de respostas	Contagem (total=15)	Porcentagem
Improved a lot	4	26.67%
Improved	3	20%
Stayedthesame	4	26.67%
Worsened	2	13.33%
Worsened a lot	2	13.33%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 2
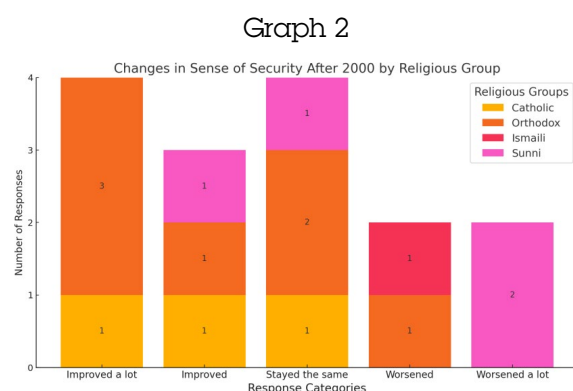
Source: Own Elaboration

Evaluating the responses, it is possible to see that they are well distributed among the options, indicating that the personal experience and impressions of the interviewees vary

greatly. There is a tendency toward options indicating some degree of improvement or maintenance. However, these are not much more significant. When assessing the responses from a religious cleavage perspective, it is observed that despite maintaining the trends of the previous response, there is a slight increase in the significance of options indicating maintenance or worsening of the situation for both groups.

Next, the questionnaire poses a more direct question about the interviewee's perception of how members of other groups viewed their group. Note that in this case, the question is not whether the participant trusts members of other groups, but whether they believe that people from other groups trusted the group to which they belong.

Table3 - Do you believe individuals from other groups trusted members of your religious community?

Response options	Count (total = 16)	Percentage
Yes, always	2	12.50%
Sometimes	13	81.25%
Never	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph3
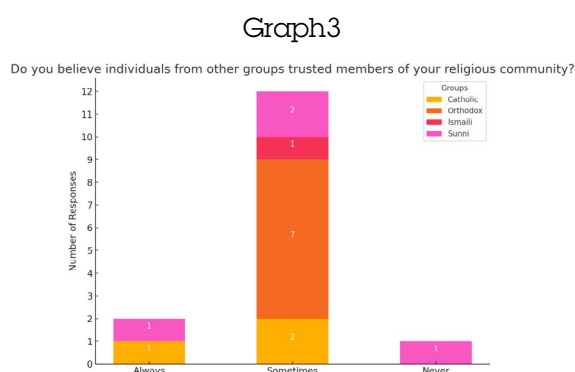
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses to the above question present a positive picture. They indicate that participants perceive that others, on certain occasions, harbor distrust toward their group. As a result, the picture of social trust becomes

slightly less positive when considering the expectations that actors have regarding the expectations of others. It is not about doubting the intentions of others but recognizing that others may lack sufficient information to engage in a more cooperative relationship. From a confessional perspective, volunteers from all confessional groups share the impression of eventual distrust.

The next question asked the participant how they would describe their interaction with people from other religious communities in the city where they lived. Syria is a very diverse country, and each region reflects this diversity in a distinct way.

Table4 - How would you describe your interaction with people from other religious communities in the city where you lived?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Verygood	6	37.50%
Good	9	56.25%
Neutral	1	6.25%
Bad	0	0%
Verybad	0	0%
No interaction	0	0%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 4
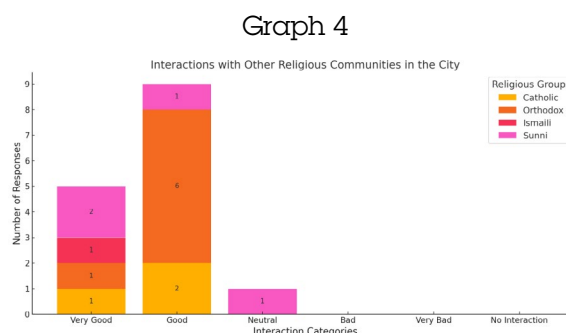
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses to the above question are categorical. They clearly indicate that all interviewees perceived the relationships between

religious communities in the cities where they lived as positive, except for one volunteer who considered them average. This is an important finding regarding how the interviewees assess the quality of relationships between people from different groups. It demonstrates how coexistence among members of distinct groups reached a significantly positive level in Syria. Evaluating the responses from a confessional perspective, it is evident that all groups expressed a very positive view.

The next question asks participants to describe their interactions with certain groups between 2000 and 2005. The most relevant responses will be presented here.

Table 5 -How would you describe your interactions with Christians? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Opções de respostas	Contagem (total=16)	Porcentagem
Muito cauteloso	0	0%
Cauteloso	1	6,25%
Moderada	6	37,50%
Confiante	5	31,25%
Muito confiante	4	25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 5
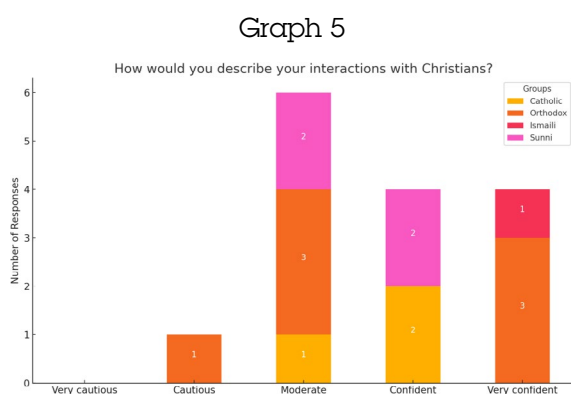
Source: Own Elaboration

When asked about their perception of Christians, it is evident that Christians, in general, are well-regarded by the participants. The quality of interaction with Christians varies from moderate to very good, with the exception of one Orthodox Christian who chose the option indicating a more cautious interaction. These responses align with empirical literature regarding Christians, who have a good reputation in Syrian society (Rabo, 2012b).

Table6 – How would you describe your interactions with Alawites? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Options for answers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Verycautious	3	18.75%
Cautious	3	18.75%
Moderate	7	43.75%
Confident	3	18.75%
Veryconfident	0	0%

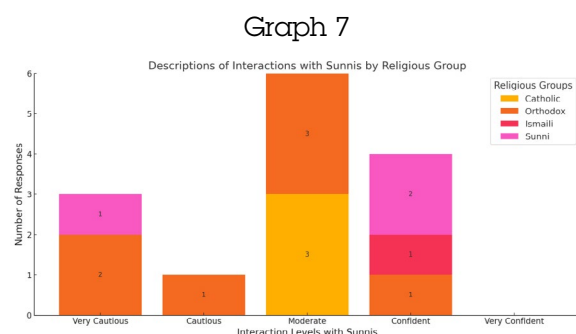Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 6
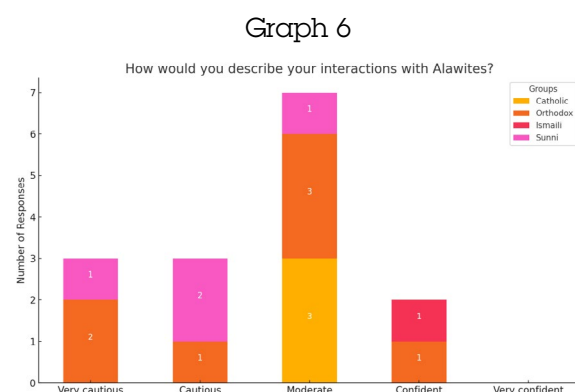
Source: Own Elaboration

On the other hand, the quality of interactions with Alawites, according to the participants, is less positive compared to their interactions with Christians. It is important to note that the questionnaire did not include the opinions of Alawites themselves. Most Christian volunteers expressed a moderate level of interaction with Alawites, but some also expressed a higher degree of caution. However, one Christian respondent indicated trust. The responses from Sunnis, on the other hand, demonstrate a higher degree of caution compared to Christians.

Table7 - How would you describe your interactions with Sunnis? (Between 2000 and 2005)

Options for responses	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Verycautious	3	18.75%
Cautious	1	6.25%
Moderate	6	37.50%
Confident	5	31.25%
Veryconfident	1	6.25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 7

Source: Own Elaboration

Regarding Sunnis, the responses obtained indicate a prevalence of a moderate stance. However, there is also significance in options that demonstrate some degree of caution. It is important to note that, although Sunnis generally expressed more confidence in interactions with fellow Sunnis compared to what was expressed by Christians, there was also a Sunni who exhibited extreme caution. This information is important as it indicates that there is no automatic relationship between belonging to a particular group and the quality of relationships with other members. Social reality is always complex, and many factors influence the quality of interactions an individual has with others. It is crucial to be attentive to these nuances in order not to reproduce stereotypes or overly simplistic conclusions.

The next question asked participants if they felt insecure or anxious when interacting with people from other communities. This

question is important because a lack of trust can be a barrier to people interacting with members of other groups, thus creating a positive experience (Gambetta, 1988).

Table8 - Did you feel insecure or anxious when interacting with people from other communities?

Answer Options	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	1	6.26%
Sometimes	8	50%
Never	7	43.75%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 8
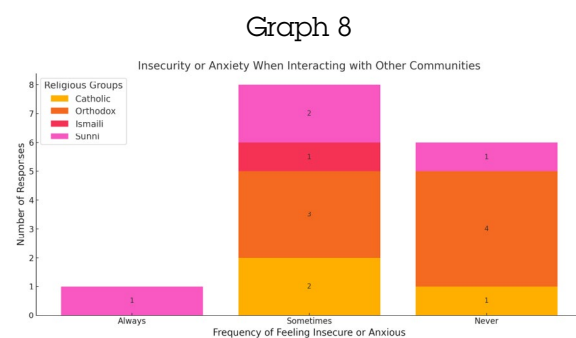
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate that there was no widespread sense of insecurity or anxiety among the participants in their interactions with others. Only one participant indicated a constant state of insecurity and anxiety. However, it is important to evaluate under what circumstances the feeling of insecurity or anxiety was more pronounced for those who occasionally felt insecure. It is crucial to gain a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that stimulate feelings of insecurity or anxiety in social interactions, as these mechanisms can be key to understanding broader phenomena. But overall, the picture presented by the responses was positive.

The next question aimed to assess the participant's perception of the intentions of individuals from other groups. It asked the vo-

lunteer whether they believed that people from other groups were trying to diminish the status of their own group. It is important to note that this question tangentially addresses the dimension of inequalities by introducing the aspect of group status.

Table9 - Do you believe that people from other groups tried to diminish the status of your group?

Options for answers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	1	6.25%
Sometimes	11	68.75%
Never	4	25%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 9
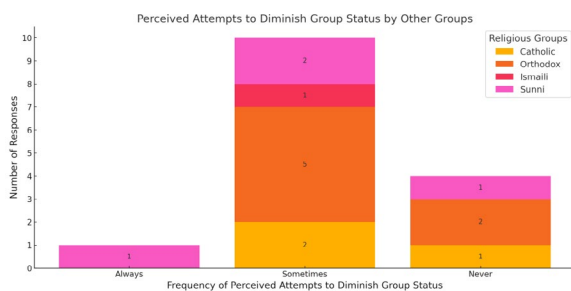
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate a positive attitude, but they still demonstrate a cautious stance from the participants. Most of them believe that members of other groups occasionally try to diminish the status of the group they belong to. Looking at it from a confessional category perspective, there is not a significant difference in the responses between the groups, except for one Sunni volunteer who indicated that individuals from other groups always sought to diminish the status of Sunnis.

The next question asked the participant if they felt safe openly expressing their religious and cultural identity in public spaces. It encompasses a broader dynamic than face-to-face interactions.

Table10 - Did you feel safe expressing your religious and cultural identity openly in public spaces?

Options ofanswers	Count (total=16)	Percentage
Always	10	62.50%
Sometimes	4	25%
Never	2	12%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 10
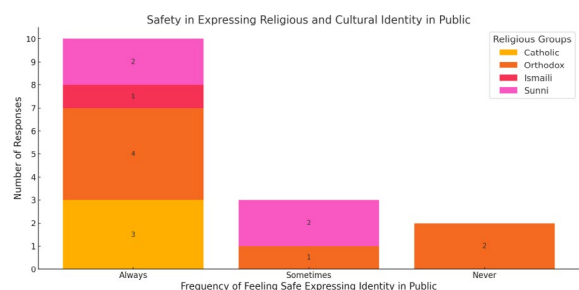
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate that, overall, the sense of security regarding the expression of religious identity is high among the participants. The majority indicated that they always felt comfortable expressing their religious identity. The option indicating they felt safe in certain cases was also significant. The option indicating they never felt safe came last.

It is important to note that those who considered themselves never safe to openly manifest their religious identity are Christians. Understanding that the Christian community is a minority in Syria, and Syria is predominantly a Muslim country, this response may indicate a certain anxiety linked to this condition. On the other hand, two Sunnis indicated that in some situations, they did not feel comfortable openly expressing their religious identity. This might reflect what the literature suggests, that part of the Sunni community felt that the Syrian regime sought to control Islamic religious symbols in public spaces.

The next question asked volunteers if they felt safe in neighborhoods where another religious community is in the majority. Just as cities and regions are diverse in terms of cultural demographics, neighborhoods are equally diverse. Therefore, it is crucial to spatially situate these relationships.

Table11 - Did you feel safe in neighborhoods where the majority was composed of people from another religious community?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
At all times	6	40%
Sometimes	7	46.67%
Never	2	13.33%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 11
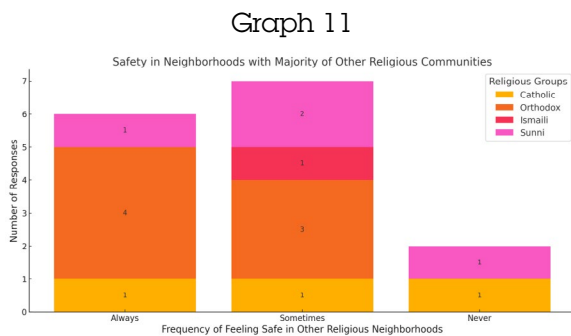
Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate a moderate and positive degree of security in neighborhoods where another religious community is in the majority. However, some nuances are observed. It is important to understand the circumstances and spaces that favor or hinder trust among members of different groups. The responses point to a positive outlook, but they also indicate that there were circumstances in which participants did not feel as secure. Looking through the confessional lens, it is observed that no group showed a consistent trend in responses.

The final questions ask the volunteer to position themselves regarding statements about the importance of personal and cultural ties in times of need. These questions assess the importance of social bonds and networks of solidarity in everyday situations, especially in times of need. Since trust involves positive expectations about others' behavior in situations of vulnerability, understanding how people deal with certain daily situations can provide important insights into the level of social trust in Syria.

Table12 - Do you agree with the statement: "Members of your religious community can always rely on one another"?

Options for responses	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Yes	5	33.33%
No	4	26.67%
Prefernottoanswer	6	40%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 12
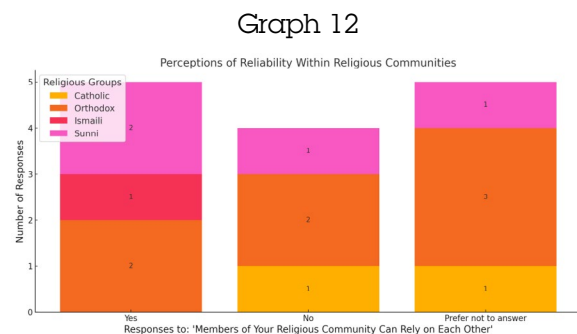
Source: Own Elaboration

The above responses indicate a perception of some fragmentation within their respective communities. The Sunnis showed a slightly more positive perception regarding the possibility of mutual support among internal members, but it is not significant.

Table13 - In times of personal need, could you trust individuals from other religious communities?

Options of responses	Count (total=15)	Percentage
Yes	3	20%
No	3	20%
Prefernottoanswer	9	60%

Source: Own Elaboration

Graph 13
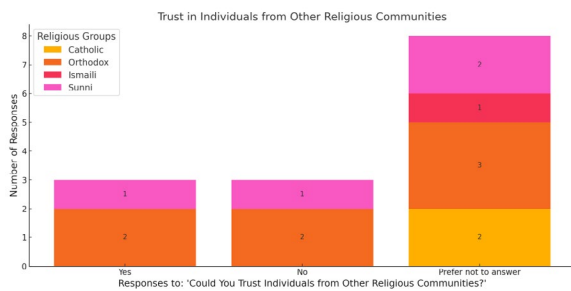
Source: Own Elaboration

The above scenario presents a less positive character than the previous question. Only 3 agreed with the statement, demonstrating that, in certain occasions, trust between people from different groups may not be as positive. However, it is not a definitive conclusion. It is important to note that the majority preferred not to take a stance on this, indicating sensitivity towards the topic.

To assess the degree of political trust, the next question asked participants to indicate their level of trust in specific political actors. The first and perhaps most significant actor considered was the president. As discussed in the historical chapter, the president occupies a central role in Syrian politics under the Ba'ath regime. The political system in Syria is heavily centered around the presidency, to the extent that a cult of personality has developed around the president (Wedeen, 1999). Furthermore, beyond sectarian ties, the regime is sustained by personal networks of trust, particularly within the president's extended family.

Table14 -How much trust do you have in the President?

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
No Trust	4	26,67%
Low Trust	1	6,67%
Moderate Trust	4	26,67%
Full Trust	3	20%
Total	3	20%

Source: Own Elaboration

The table above shows a distribution of responses across the options, with no single choice dominating significantly. This suggests that there was not a complete lack of trust in the figure of the president. The period in question primarily covers the early years of Bashar al-Assad's presidency, marked by a brief phase of political openness, which was soon followed by a tightening of the regime's control.

Graph14
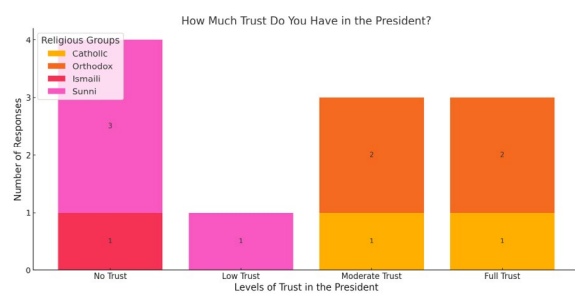
Source: Own Elaboration

When evaluating the responses through the lens of confessional cleavages, a completely different picture emerges. The answers reveal a clear tendency among participants to assess social reality differently based on their confessional affiliation. Sunnis exhibit a predominantly negative stance toward the president, while Christians display views ranging from moderate to highly positive. These responses underscore the significance of this issue in understanding the primary divisions within Syrian society.

Next, the questionnaire asks participants to evaluate the People's Council of Syria, the legislative authority. Of its 250 members, the National Progressive Front, led by the Ba'ath Party, holds the majority. However, there is limited space for opposition, which does not, of course, indicate that the regime is open or democratic.

Table15 -How much trust do you have in the Assembly of Syria?

Response Options	Count (total=14)	Percentage
No Trust	4	28,57%
Low Trust	3	21,43%
Moderate Trust	7	50%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	0	0%

Source: Own Elaboration

Participants expressed views ranging from neutral to highly negative regarding the People's Council of Syria, with a notable prevalence of responses indicating a moderate level of trust. The literature highlights that the Council is not a key political actor in major decision-making processes, as these are subordinated to the executive branch. The responses may reflect this subordinate role of the Council.
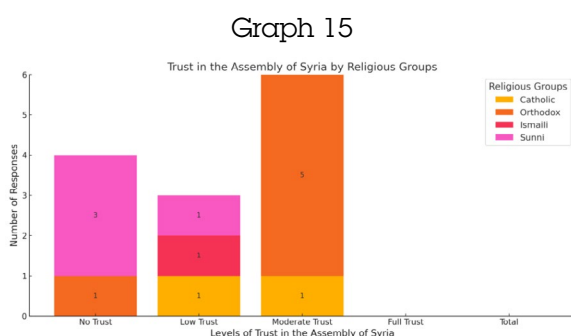
Graph 15

Source: Own Elaboration

When evaluating the responses through the lens of confessional cleavages, distinct response patterns can be observed between Christians and Muslims, though not to the same degree as the polarization seen in assessments of the president. There is no clear polarization of opinions regarding the People's Council; the majority of Christians expressed moderate trust, although some reported little to no confidence. Muslims, particularly Sunnis, demonstrated an explicitly negative perception.

The next actor evaluated is the Ba'ath Party. Some scholars argue that, over the decades, the party has lost its significance in decision-making to the military establishment. In this sense, the core of the regime rests on the armed forces and intelligence services. Nevertheless, the Ba'ath Party remains the ideological cornerstone of the government.

Table 16 - How much trust do you have in theBa'ath Party?

Response Options	Count (total=13)	Percentage
No Trust	5	38,46%
Low Trust	3	23,08%
Moderate Trust	4	30,77%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	1	7,69%

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses indicate low levels of trust in the Ba'ath Party, with the exception of a small minority that expressed full confidence. This suggests that the level of trust in the party does not align with the trust placed in the figure of the president. This is an important finding, as it reveals that political actors who have historically been closely associated—such as the president and the Ba'ath Party—are not perceived by the population in the same way.
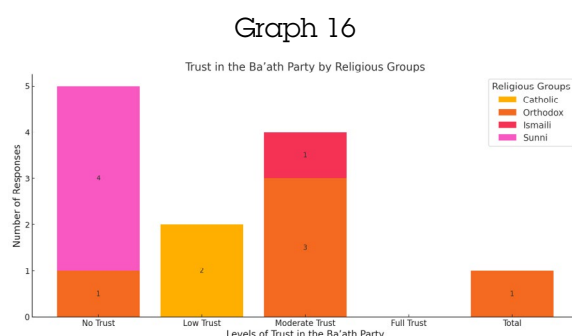
Graph 16

Source: Own Elaboration

Evaluating the responses through the lens of religious cleavages reveals an important pat-

tern. Once again, Sunni participants expressed an explicitly negative stance (though it is worth noting that the Ismaili participant displayed a moderate position). Christians, on the other hand, presented responses ranging from moderate to negative, with one isolated case showing full trust. This pattern highlights a disconnect between the figure of the president and the Ba'ath Party. This is a critical insight for understanding how Syrians attribute responsibility for the regime's failures and abuses.

The findings suggest that, for some segments of the population, the president is not perceived as responsible for the crises the country experienced in the 2000s, nor for the regime's abuses and cases of corruption. While further research is necessary to explore this possibility, the current findings indicate that the Ba'ath Party is viewed more negatively, whereas the president is seen in a comparatively more positive light by part of the population.

Table 17 - How much trust do you have in theopposition parties?

Response Options	Count (total=12)	Percentage
No Trust	5	41,67%
Low Trust	4	33,33%
Moderate Trust	2	16,67%
Full Trust	0	0%
Total	1	8,33%

Source: Own Elaboration

The opposition parties are generally viewed negatively by participants, with one isolated case expressing an extremely positive perception. It is important to contrast this finding with the responses regarding the Ba'ath Party and the People's Council of Syria. In this context, it raises the question of how representative these opposition parties are perceived to be by the general population. The responses obtained

here are particularly significant, as the period under analysis corresponds to the brief phase of political openness in Syria.

Graph 17
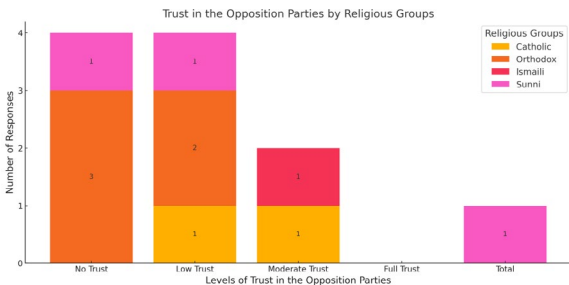
Source: Own Elaboration

Analyzing the responses through the lens of religious cleavages, it becomes clear that there is no radical polarization between the groups. Most Christian participants expressed a distinctly negative stance, although one individual demonstrated a more moderate view. Similarly, Sunni participants generally conveyed a negative perception, but there was one notable case of full trust in the opposition parties.
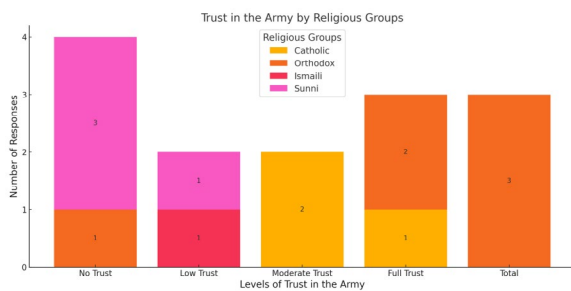
Table 18 - How much trust do you have in thearmy

Response Options	Count (total=15)	Percentage
No Trust	4	26,67%
Low Trust	2	13,33%
Moderate Trust	2	13,33%
Full Trust	4	26,67%
Total	3	20%

Source: Own Elaboration

The responses reveal a significant distribution of participants' opinions across all options. Therefore, there is no clear consensus among the volunteers.

Table 18

Source: Own Elaboration

The religious cleavage reveals a trend toward polarization in the responses. While this polarization is not as pronounced as it was regarding the figure of the president, it remains significant. Among Muslims, there is a consensus on a negative perception of the armed forces. In contrast, Christians exhibit responses ranging from moderate to full trust, with one exception indicating no trust at all. Although not unanimous among participants, this suggests a distinct response pattern for each group.

5. Discussion

The responses presented above, in line with the literature, suggest that Syria in the years preceding the 2011 conflict was not an explicitly or uniformly divided society, where sectarian antagonisms dominated all aspects of social relations. Distrust and hostility were not pervasive in everyday interactions, and there was a general environment of mutual respect among people from different confessional groups, particularly between Christians and Muslims (Rabo, 2012). However, tensions did exist—albeit often latent—surfacing in specific contexts or circumstances. These tensions were neither universal nor constant; rather, certain topics and relationships revealed more polarization, with some intergroup dynamics proving more strained than others. As Annika Rabo (2012, p. 131) highlights, the perception of "good neighborliness" prevailed in public spaces, especially in major cities. In fact, friendships across religious boundaries were not uncommon, and mutual trust was frequently observed in day-to-day life. This nuanced dynamic is reflected in the questionnaire responses, where the majority of Christians reported feeling secure expressing their religiosity in public, at least on certain occasions. Yet, a cautious stance was still evident among a minority of Christians, underscoring that while trust characterized many relationships, it was not universally experienced.

Given this backdrop, an essential question emerges: how did sectarian tensions escalate so rapidly during the 2011 crisis? Both the questionnaire responses and the empirical literature suggest a series of interconnected factors that rendered Syrian society vulnerable during this period, despite the generally positive perceptions of social trust. First, the quality of intergroup relationships varied significantly across communities. Evidence suggests that relationships between Christians and Muslims were generally positive. Christians were respected and admired by Muslims, often viewed as trustworthy—though sometimes through a paternalistic lens. However, relationships within the Muslim community, particularly between Sunnis and Alawites, were more strained (Salamandra, 2013). These uneven dynamic underscores the complexity of intergroup relations in Syria, which did not follow a uniform pattern and were further influenced by regional differences and overlapping social and political divisions.

The political context further complicated these relationships. Annika Rabo (2012a;

2012b) argues that Syrians displayed a marked caution when discussing cultural diversity, a sensitivity rooted in the Ba'ath regime's state-building process. The regime emphasized constitutional equality among citizens while minimizing religious and ethnic differences, portraying them as either irrelevant or potentially threatening to national unity. This approach was shared by other secular ideologies, which feared that highlighting such divisions could undermine societal cohesion (Rabo, 2012b, p. 80). Consequently, public discussions on sectarian identity often remained muted, though underlying divisions persisted.

Historical memory also played a significant role in shaping intergroup perceptions. The insurgency of the 1970s and the violent crackdown in Hama in 1982 left lasting scars on Syrian society. Although the opposition movements of the 2000s were distinct from the radical insurgencies of the 1970s, the memory of these events continued to influence perceptions. Lefèvre (2015, p. 129) argues that the trauma of the 1980s "planted seeds of distrust" between Alawites and Sunnis, leading many in 2011 to question the sincerity of moderate Islamist factions within the opposition. Similarly, Goldsmith (2015, p. 154) notes that some Alawites interpreted the 2011 uprising as an act of revenge by Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, for their defeat in 1982. Despite the lack of direct historical continuity between the two movements, these anxieties were effectively exploited by the regime, which positioned itself as the guarantor of order and protector of minority rights against the threat of radical religious groups. As Lefèvre highlights, Alawite distrust of Sunnis has deep historical roots, extending even to groups considered "moderate," such as the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (Lefèvre, 2015, p. 125).

Yet, as Annika Rabo (2012) demonstrates, the memory of past traumas did not always dominate everyday interactions. These memories gained salience only under specific historical circumstances. The responses suggest that, despite the weight of history, participants did not exhibit excessive levels of distrust toward other religious groups. This observation points to the need for further studies on collective memory in Syria to better understand how historical events shaped intergroup relations in the decades leading up to the conflict.

Regional dynamics add another layer of complexity to the issue of trust. Goldsmith (2015, p. 152) observes that despite migration to major urban centers, Alawites maintained strong ties to their rural regions of origin, preserving solidarity networks that were rooted in village life. These networks played a critical role in times of crisis, enabling Alawites to maintain routes of return to their home regions (Goldsmith, 2015, p. 153). This phenomenon reflects the broader role of insecurity in sustaining communal cohesion in deeply divided societies.

A further factor is the uncertainty surrounding perceptions of "the other." While participants generally expressed a willingness to trust individuals from other groups, many were unsure whether this trust was reciprocal or whether others trusted members of their own group. These dynamic underscores the interactive nature of trust, where expectations about others' intentions and behaviors are shaped by limited information and social categorization (Jervis, 1970). During the uncertainty of the 2011 conflict, Syrians increasingly relied on group-based categories to infer the inten-

tions and actions of others. Alawites, in particular, often became "hostages" of the regime, as this environment of distrust solidified their alignment with the ruling elite. This fragmentation ultimately benefited the regime by weakening the formation of a unified opposition and preventing alternative power structures from emerging within the dominant Alawite community (Leenders, 2015; Wieland, 2015).

The precarious position of Alawite dissidents during the 2011 protests highlights these dynamics. Carsten Wieland (2015) observes that many Alawites participated in the demonstrations, driven by demands for better living conditions and greater political openness. However, the Sunni-led opposition was often reluctant to integrate Alawite dissidents fully into the movement due to the Alawite community's close association with the regime. As a result, many Alawite protestors withdrew, convinced that others did not trust them despite their willingness to trust others (Wieland, 2015). This situation was further aggravated by historical grievances, as segments of the Sunni opposition viewed the Alawite community as beneficiaries of regime-granted privileges. Mutual distrust weakened the cohesion of the opposition front, while the presence of Alawites in high-ranking positions within intelligence services fueled suspicions that Alawite dissidents were infiltrators or regime collaborators (Wieland, 2015, p. 229).

Finally, the intersection of social, cultural, and religious cleavages with Syria's political and institutional structures must be emphasized. The questionnaire responses reveal that political trust differs markedly from social trust, with sharper polarization between Sunnis and Christians. While Christians demonstrated slightly higher trust in political institutions—

particularly in the figure of the president—Sunnis expressed deeper skepticism. For many Christians, the president was not perceived as the primary cause of Syria's challenges during the 2000s. In contrast, Sunnis tended to attribute greater responsibility to the president, reflecting the broader political marginalization they experienced. This overlap between political and social trust underscores the degree to which Syria's political system often favored certain groups at the expense of others, further entrenching societal divisions.

6. Conclusion

The central argument of this study posits that social trust in pre-2011 Syria was heterogeneous and marked by selective dynamics. Generally positive relations between Christians and Muslims contrasted with significant tensions among Muslim subgroups, such as Sunnis and Alawites. This selective distrust was further exacerbated by historical memories of conflicts and the Ba'ath regime's policies of exclusion and favoritism. The core argument of this investigation is that, while positive relations and trust-based interactions existed between certain confessional groups in pre-2011 Syria, the presence of selective distrust—rooted in historical, social, and political factors—may have heightened the vulnerability of Syrian society during the crisis.

The research suggests that distrust toward Alawites can be understood as an extension of distrust toward institutions and political actors. The fact that Alawites are widely associated with the group holding political and military power creates an intersection between political trust and social trust. In this sense, the study contributes to the debate on hori-

zontal inequalities by emphasizing the need for a deeper understanding of the role of trust in such contexts.

Inequalities and distrust are intrinsically linked, as situations of political, social, and economic inequality generate vulnerability. It is essential to investigate whether marginalized groups trust institutions and power holders to address their grievances or, conversely, whether they feel even more exposed to those who control material and symbolic resources. On the other hand, those who benefit from the social structure tend to perceive the demands of marginalized groups as threats to the status quo that favors them—not only in material terms but also in relation to their security.

In the Syrian case, there is evidence that individuals associated with the privileged group, even if they did not directly benefit from those privileges, felt a sense of insecurity at the prospect of revenge or indiscriminate violence against their religious group. This social fragility, in turn, may have facilitated the spread of sectarian narratives, further deepening social fragmentation and accelerating the transition from a movement of political contestation to a devastating civil conflict.

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