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## **Weaponization of Religion: The Manipulation of Religion in the Pursuit of Political Power in Yugoslavia and Syria**

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Weaponization of Religion: The Manipulation of Religion in the Pursuit of Political Power in  
Yugoslavia and Syria

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International Studies Senior Thesis

Global Affairs Track

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## Abstract

Religious conflict has played an important role in shaping human history, particularly in the last few decades with the proliferation of ethno-religious violence. This paper examines the development of the relationship between religion and politics, then analyzes how leaders manipulate religion to gain political power. Two case studies—Yugoslavia/Yugoslav Wars and Syria/Syrian Civil War—are used to demonstrate this ability religion has to spur conflict when coopted for political means. Yugoslavia and Syria make ideal case studies because both countries have a deeply rooted and seemingly inseparable link between ethnicity and religion. Methods of cooptation include using religious mythology and symbolism, influencing religious institutions, restructuring the government, and changing state policy towards religion and religious sects. Leaders, such as former Serbian President Slobodan Milošević and current Syrian President Bashar Assad, gained political authority and maintained legitimacy by manipulating religion and pitting their countrymen against each other in violent conflict. Ethno-religious conflicts and the associated protracted violence continues to undermine international security. Understanding the relationship between religion, political power, and conflict, is critically important to developing sustainable outcomes in peace processes.

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## Introduction

In popular culture and media, there are many misconceptions about religion, especially about religion and politics (“Common Misconceptions”). For example, when discussing conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, blame is attributed to Islam as this religion is singled-out and deemed to encourage violence (Pew Research Center). However, this narrative is inaccurate and based on prejudice (Lockman; Alsultany). Religiously inspired conflict can be found anywhere, including in the United States of America and in Europe, and it is not limited to one faith (Frost). Furthermore, religious affiliation is not the sole reason for violence, but makes a convenient cover for more fundamental issues or serves as a smokescreen for nefarious political intentions. Conflict stems from those in positions of power, such as state governments or community leaders, distorting religious teachings and exploiting differences for geopolitical gain through policy, propaganda/media, and other tools. Oversimplified misconceptions need to be corrected. This weaponization of religion is area of inquiry that is historically understudied, despite the fact that religion played a central role in some of the most devastating conflicts of the last hundred years and continues to divide society today (Klocek and Hassner; Gorur and Gregory).

I explore the understanding of the relationship between religion, politics, and conflict. There is a common oversimplification that religion by itself causes conflict; however, there are many other catalyzing and overlapping factors to consider, such as economic and social causes, as well as political causes. Political violence often results when leaders manipulate religious messages and institutions to fit their own agenda (Juergensmeyer). I examine how perpetrators of war have used religion as a weapon to fragment opposition as well as a tool for strengthening commitment from their supporters and gaining new believers. How are political leaders able to

do this time and time again? What methods do they pursue, and why do some resonate more than others with the populace? How do the people react to leaders as they manipulate religion? How can understanding the linkage between the state and religion help us defuse conflict in the future?

It is important that we understand the true nature of religious conflict in order to prevent it in the future and diffuse conflicts currently unfolding. Religious conflict (between religions and also within religions) has been ongoing in human history, shaping lives and states for thousands of years (Reychler). This is a national and international security issue that will continue to plague governments and society. Therefore, it is in both the state's best interest, as well as our own, to further understand the nuances of religious conflict and political religion. Additionally, understanding how religion and conflict intersect is vital to peacebuilding efforts. The vast majority of people around the world are religious (Hackett and McClendon). In order to be fully informed and create long-lasting, sustainable solutions to conflict, there needs to be a proper understanding of the various religious value systems and how those religions relate to their society and unique geopolitical circumstances (Gorur and Gregory). This is especially necessary in parts of the world that have been historically trivialized and understudied, such as the Middle East and Africa.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### *Defining Political Legitimacy*

Central to my argument is the concept of political legitimacy. Political legitimacy is central to political and sociological theory. It describes how political actors and institutions are

able to gain and sustain authority. According to influential German economist and sociologist Max Weber who wrote about this concept in his book *The Three Types of Legitimate Rule*, authority means “the probability that a specific command will be obeyed” (6). It upholds both the ruler and the rule of law, or any internalized power structure.

There are three different sources, or types, of legitimacy—traditional, rational-legal, and charismatic:

- 1) *Traditional legitimacy* “rests on the belief in the sacredness of the social order and its prerogatives as existing of yore” (Weber in Mouzelis 9). In other words, traditional authority comes from a respect for tradition and long-lasting norms. There does not necessarily need to be a written constitution bestowing authority onto the head of state, whereas that is the case for other modes of legitimacy. This fact lends this model to monarchies that are often based on years of political and social tradition, such as that of the United Kingdom, as mentioned by Polish political scientist Dr. Adam Bilinski. It is particularly important to the authority and continuation of absolute monarchies, such as those in Saudi Arabia or Morocco, who’s governments do have components of rational-legal legitimacy (“Politics”).
- 2) *Rational-legal legitimacy* stems from enacted laws and legal orders. It is best represented by a bureaucracy; therefore, it is needed for strong institutions (Bilinski). The foundation of authority comes from “laws [that] can be enacted and changed at the pleasure by formally correct procedure” (Weber in Mouzelis 7). Obedience is now owed to a single person, but to the system of rules and regulations. The people, or person, in charge are often established as leaders because they excel at the skills needed to govern and because they have mastered the rules of the system (“Politics”).



The United States is an example of a state whose leader derives authority from a rational-legal system.

- 3) *Charismatic legitimacy* sources its authority from the personality of the leader, but more specifically the faith of the people in the personality. It rests on “the affectual and personal devotion of the follower of the lord [a.k.a. leader] and his gifts of grace,” otherwise stated as that person’s charisma and talents (Weber in Mouzelis 12). The relationship between the people and the governing is often emotional and based on a perceived personal trust (Bilinski). In this system, political positions are often filled by loyal adherents. This source of legitimacy is perhaps the weakest because it needs constant renewal. It is based on the success of the leader to appeal to the people, lending itself to instability and demagoguery (“Politics”).

### *Measuring Political Legitimacy*

Political legitimacy can be measured in a multitude of ways. According to “Measuring Political Legitimacy” written by distinguished political scientist, M. Stephen Weatherford, measurement is often based off “political trust, the public’s perception of government responsiveness, and (to a lesser extent) efficacy and other aspects of alienation and system support” (151). They are all interrelated, depending on similar variables. Weatherford describes how four different paths affect “citizenship orientations” (civic pride and identity) and “evaluations of political system performance” (trust, or lack thereof, in government) (156). The figure “The Structures of Relations Among the Dimensions of Legitimacy Orientations” in his article demonstrates how the relationship between the political and the personal are formed, which is helpful for understanding how best to evaluate political legitimacy. By understanding

how and why people form certain opinions and attitudes towards political systems, we can better measure the strength and locate the sources of political legitimacy.

According to Weatherford 's figure, the relationship between politics and the person can be understood in two ways: causal and cyclical. Causally, one aspect of a person's stake (and therefore, trust) in a political system can be understood as stemming from or being informed by another. For example, individuals who feel they possess the traits of a good citizen (*personal/citizenship traits*) are more likely to be politically active (*political involvement*) and think of political systems as effective (*subjective political competence*) (Weatherford 156). Individuals who feel they are effective in social relationships are more likely think of the political system as *interpersonal assurance* and fostering *civic pride*. Cyclically, over time the state and the citizen influence each other (156). Therefore, opinions of a political system are not always straightforward. For example, individuals who think *representational procedures* increase accountability (*accountability mechanisms*) are more likely to have more *political interest* and optimism, leading to more *political involvement* (156).

### **Literature Review**

I analyze different theoretical understandings of the relationship between religion and politics, or political theology. In order to grasp how religion and politics influence each other today, I examine how they first came to be related, and then I address discourse surrounding religion and politics, including religion as a source of political legitimacy, as a catalyst for conflict and as a wedge used to divide society. Explaining this dynamic will help demonstrate how political actors manipulate religion and its various characteristics for political legitimacy.

### Historical and Social Origin of Religion and Politics

Distinguished international relations professors and co-authors Zeev Maoz and Errol Henderson link the history of societal development to the origin of the religious-political relationship in their book *Scriptures, Shrines, Scapegoats, and World Politics: Religious Sources of Conflict and Cooperation in the Modern Era*. Religion has historically linked people together through common goals and values. Those goals and values are then socialized and codified through institutions. The creation of institutions for people to participate in collective rituals together makes it extremely relevant to politics, which in and of itself is made of institutions (Maoz and Henderson 4-5). By linking people socially and institutionally, religion became extremely important to community cohesion. In turn, it became intertwined with the political process and maintaining power (Maoz and Henderson 2-3). A study for the US Army titled *Traditions, Changes, and Challenges: Military Operations and the Middle Eastern City*, highlights how religious teachers became administrators and bureaucrats. They were given leadership positions in government because the people already saw them as authority figures. Religious buildings came to serve a dual purpose of housing religious services and political meetings, especially in the Middle East (DiMarco 19). Thus, over time historical and social tradition contributed to the fusion of religion and politics.

### Religion as a Form of Political Legitimacy

The argument of Maoz and Henderson is very much in line with the Functionalist argument that religion acts as a preserving force for social norms, which then impact society and politics because they control over behavior (“Religion”). Functionalism focuses on the structural-functional role of religion in society, and it is the positivist (concerning the scientific study of the social world) belief that religion contributes to society by creating social solidarity (“Religion”).

Religion provides a shared identity and sense of belonging, critical to the success of any political movement or leader (which depend on cohesion and unity). One way social solidarity can be formed is through the employment of religious symbols, which was of concern to famous Functionalist and French sociologist Émile Durkheim. In 1912, after studying the religious traditions of the Aboriginal population in Australia, Durkheim concluded that society “in all its aspects and in every period of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism” (232). By worshipping religious symbols, one is also worshipping society (Durkheim 207). This unification is how society derives meaning. By associating ourselves with symbols, certain shared sentiments and communities arise.

Through this lens, religion can be understood as a form of political legitimacy. German liberation and feminist theologian Dorothee Sölle when discussing the role of religion in society in her book *The Strength of the Weak: Toward a Christian Feminist Identity*, recalls how Durkheim links society’s meaning with religion: “religion is the self-validation of a society by means of ritual practices and myths that create meaning and integrate society” (17). The “mythos” of religion creates a special feeling of assurance and inclusion with the elites (Sölle 17). That assurance can translate well into political legitimacy. Michael Hoffman, a comparative political scientist who specializes in religion and politics, agrees, arguing that religion does indeed serve as a form of legitimacy, if used in that way. Religion, influenced by political and theological conditions, affects how people interact “with politics, and in particular, the role it plays in building or undermining legitimacy” (Hoffman). It can serve as the foundation for both non-democratic, authoritarian regimes, as well as democratic governments. It can also serve as a delegitimizing, revolutionary agent.

### *Politics, Religion, and Conflict: Conflict Theory*

Religious communities can be exploited by political actors, however, demonstrating one of Functionalism's greatest critiques ("Religion"). Conflict theory, according to sociology professor and textbook author Heather Griffiths, argues that the institutions and norms established by religion can maintain inequality and be used to support oppressive political and religious leaders. The point of the theory is to criticize the use of religion in politics or as a source of political legitimacy ("Religion"). A famous conflict theorist and one such critic was German philosopher and father of Marxism and Communism Karl Marx, who partially inspired this critical framework. In his 1843 article "A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right", he wrote that religion is "the opium of the people" (Marx). He asserted that religion disillusioned people, depriving them of their free will. It lulls them into a false sense of happiness and security, preventing them from realizing that the bourgeoisie (elites and ruling class included) are causing them (the "masses") undue pain and suffering (Marx). The social and political agency of the people can be easily and unjustly subdued, relating to another essential element of conflict theory that criticizes the idea that certain oppressive situations are allowable because of a divine mandate (in Marx's case, the oppression of the working class). Followers of a certain faith should not be satisfied with their lot in life, society, or leader, just because religion supposedly dictates or justifies that they should. Additionally, conflict theorists find that those in positions of power often dictate various aspects of religion, such as rituals and tenets, through their own interpretation of texts or divine communication.

### *Religion vs Ideology and Political Islam*

The many similarities of religion and political ideology are noteworthy. Religion is similar to ideology in that it is ordered around a shared set of beliefs that motivate people to act

in accordance with them (Griffiths). They both provide a sense of belonging and comradeship to adherents, for example, as noted earlier. This framework is helpful for understanding how religion and politics can be intimately related, and how leaders can manipulate religion as means for political ends. However, while thinking this way is helpful for conceptualizing how actors conflate religion with ideology, it is necessary to note that religion is distinct (Duffy et al.). As pointed out by leading international security and religious conflict scholars Monica Duffy, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah in *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics*, religions “offer answers to universal questions about the origins of existence, the afterlife, and realities that transcend humanity,” whereas ideology can only offer explanations for earthy matters and is more limited in scope (21). It is this distinctness, or difference, that proves that political leaders manipulate religion, and by extension believers, as ideology in disguise.

Ideology can be disguised by religion in two main ways, according to Cyril Hovorun, professor of Ecclesiology and International Relations at University College Stockholm. He delineates political religion and civil religion as the different ways of understanding this phenomenon. Political religion is coercive, whereas civil religion is contract based. These types conflate religion for ideology, but they do differ from religion. As Hovorun writes, “although their political promises to voters sound almost metaphysical, they cannot elevate anyone to the sphere of the divine.” They are products of secularism. They attract politicians “by the capacity of these religions to enhance the legitimacy of their authority, especially when this authority suffers from the deficit of conventional legitimacy” (Hovorun). Religion and ideology can be seen as interchangeable in some political circumstances.

Political Islam, for example, is seemingly a blend of religion and ideology. “Political Islam,” sometimes also called “Islamism,” refers to interpretations of the Muslim faith that

“serves as a basis for political identity and action,” according to an Oxford Bibliography Research Guide (Voll and Sonn). It refers to political movements that have increased in frequency during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This does not include political activities or activism, but rather refers to specific kinds of political behavior. The origin of this phenomenon resulted from a series of crises/conflicts in the Middle East from the late 1960s onward. Many regimes and Western modes of governance were discredited, leaving millions of people searching for a renewed sense of identity and pride. As a result, Islam was posited as a solution by political leaders, as noted by academic John L. Esposito. However, it wasn’t until 1980 that the term “Political Islam” was first used by Israeli-American scholar (and now leading authority on Islamism) Martin Kramer in his article “Political Islam” in *The Washington Papers*. He introduced the concept, but Armenian-American political scientist and fundamentalism specialist R. Hrair Dekmejian first connected it to the failure of secularism, which is most relevant to modern views on Islamism.

*My Contribution to the Study of Political Theology and Conflict*

While the phenomenon is recurring throughout human history, scholarship on religious conflict has been taken seriously only recently. As pointed out by Belgian political scientist Luc Reyckler, religion has been treated as a “marginal variable” (Reyckler). During the Cold War, attention was mostly paid to secular ideologies, such as communism and liberalism. Therefore, the multitude of ethno-religious conflicts that arose at that time caught Western analysts and governments off guard (Reyckler). In an effort to rectify this problem, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright most notably asserted that religion ought to be taken more seriously in diplomatic, political, and conflict resolution practices (Albright). Her experience during the breakup of Yugoslavia and the subsequent Yugoslav Wars cemented her conviction. Studying

how conflict and religion influence each other took on a new importance after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, and the beginning of the War on Terror. This is when America's number one enemy became Islamist extremist groups and other religiously extreme non-state actors (United States).

My scholarship is part of a growing body of work examining religious conflict. My work will contribute uniquely with a comparison of Yugoslavia (the Balkan States) and Syria, which little literature has examined together. Existing literature on this topic and comparing these two regions of the world, usually tend to cite Israel-Palestine instead (Bell; Silvestri, et al.; Scheindlin; The British Academy). However, I believe there is much more similarity between Yugoslavia and Syria, between the distinct high level of violence-causing sectarianism and their shared long history of religious and ethnic pluralism. The story of the Israel-Palestine conflict and Jews and Arabs living together is a new development, when comparing it to the centuries of sectarian history in both the Balkans and Syria. I also will examine the Syrian Civil War from a contemporary perspective. Coverage on the crisis has died down since the advent of newer crises, most recently Russia's war on Ukraine (Prasad). Therefore, I aim to refocus research and attention on this ongoing conflict.

The study of religion and politics, as well as religious conflict, requires an interdisciplinary approach due to the social nature and the multi-faceted importance of religion. Therefore, in my research, I use a combination of these political theology theories and frameworks in order to better understand how political leaders manipulate religion for legitimacy, specifically during times of conflict.



## Case Studies

Religion is used as a weapon for political legitimacy, particularly for leaders looking to start and/or sustain an armed conflict. One of the most consequential modern examples of this phenomenon (conflating religion with ideology) was in Yugoslavia during the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s, which is my first case study. My second case study is the Syrian Civil War that began in 2011, which is another important conflict that is still unfolding. The following portion of my thesis will weave together various scholarly works and sources of information, creating a wholistic picture of both religious conflicts and the intensity of religious manipulation.

### Yugoslavia

As seen in **Figure 1**, located in Southern Europe on the Adriatic Sea, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was composed of six modern day republics: Serbia, Croatia, Slovenia, Montenegro, Macedonia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina until 1992. Among them, Serbia is the largest. Yugoslavia had approximately 23.5 million people, according to the Sarajevo Times (“Critical”). The capital city was Belgrade, Serbia.

**Figure 1: Map of the Former Yugoslavia**



(Source: Vladimir Bessarabov, Cartographer of the United Nations)

### Historical and Religious Context of the Balkans

Religious tension in the Balkans is not a new phenomenon. The region first divided along religious lines in 1054 after the “Great Schism”, sometimes referred to as the “East-West Schism.” At the time, most of the population was Christian and the Catholic Church was the dominant institution. The East-West Schism split the church into two sects, the Western/Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern/Byzantine Orthodox Church. Eastern bishops disagreed with Western bishops over religious doctrine and practices (National Geographic). For example, they disagreed over the official language as Latin was used in the West and Greek in the East. As a result of these disagreements and additional political conflicts between the Roman and Byzantine

Empires, the Eastern Patriarch (leader) excommunicated the Pope, permanently separating the Church (National Geographic). The Balkan region found itself geographically and religiously in the middle of the schism, resulting in great division among the inhabitants.

A few hundred years after the Great Schism, the Ottoman Turks invaded and conquered the Balkans in the mid-1300s through the 1400s. There was a series of confrontations between the Ottomans and the various Balkan states: Serbia, Bosnia, Albania, and Croatia (Birn). The violent invasion brought with it a new religion: Islam. Islam was the official religion of the Ottoman state because the Sultan was Muslim. Even though it was not a codified law, conversion was essential if a non-Muslim aspired to political power (Sowards). The forcing of Islam led to hostility between Christians and Muslims across the Balkan region. Christians became openly oppressed. For example, corruption within the judicial system allowed landlords to rob their Christian peasant tenants, and Christian boys could be taken to be used as slaves or military personnel (Sowards).

This historic tension between religious groups was never fully resolved, contributing to the conflicts in Yugoslavia. As the *Los Angeles Times* reporter Alissa J. Rubin put it in 1999 when covering the wars, “Yugoslavia sits on an invisible fault line between the Islamic Middle East, and the eastern and western branches of Christianity.” Despite the passing of time and changes in socio-political and ethno-religious traditions, the Balkan peoples often find themselves in the middle of inter-religious and inter-ethnic conflicts.

### *The Creation and Breakup of Yugoslavia*

Yugoslavia was created at the end of World War I, when the Kingdom of Serbia and remnants of the Austro-Hungarian Empire united. It broke up due to Nazi occupation during

World War II, but reunified under the leadership of communist Josip Broz Tito. It was originally under the Soviet sphere of influence, giving it a more authoritarian government structure. However, after joining the Non-Aligned Movement in 1961, it adopted a decentralized form of government (“The Breakup”).

Under Tito’s Socialist Federal Republic regime, religion was excluded from socio-political matters. The official ideology of the state forbade religion, promoting atheism. However, religion remained central to the Balkan identity (Mojzes 24-25). The varying regions within Yugoslavia enforced the anti-religious legislation to varying degrees, leaving some room for the continuation of religious rituals and education (26). The population continued to participate in these activities, signaling to the Communist government that it needed to reevaluate its position on religion. It soon took up the attitude of religious tolerance as long as the people did not openly revolt (27). At this time, a link between politics and religion was created that grew stronger and more problematic leading up to the 1990s as political leaders recognized the importance of religion in Yugoslavia and how it could be used to control the people.

There are two main factors to the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s: decentralization and the end of the Cold War. Both factors severely negatively impacted the political and socio-economic identity of the country, needed for national unity (“The Breakup”). After Tito’s death in 1980, provisions in the constitution of 1974 took power away from the federal government. The republics and autonomous provinces were granted their own presidencies, significantly limiting the effectiveness of the federal government in all aspects of governance: economic, social, political, and cultural. Additionally, the weakening of the Soviet Union meant the absence of a security threat vital to the national unity of the state (“The Breakup”). In the past,

cooperation amongst states to secure Yugoslavia against the USSR created a “powerful incentive for unity” (“The Breakup”). Without that incentive, cooperation was no longer necessary. The fall of the Soviet Union was also accompanied by a movement away from communism and towards a more politically and economically free society.

### *Milošević and the Yugoslav Wars*

The result of all these changes was a power vacuum waiting to be filled. Slobodan Milošević self-appointed himself as the solution (Djilas). He was president of Serbia from 1989 to 1997, and later president of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia from 1997 to 2000. Milošević himself was not particularly religious. However, religion did influence his upbringing. A 1999 *CNN* article explains how his father at one point had studied to be an Orthodox priest and his mother was a “puritanical schoolteacher” (McGeary). He subscribed to Communism instead of religion, gaining the nickname “Little Lenin” amongst his colleagues (McGeary). He married Mirjana Markovic, who belonged to a prominent political family, in 1971. His background and newfound political connections uniquely situated him to rise through the political ranks of Serbia’s Communist Party and government. After a visit to Kosovo in 1987, where he heard the grievances of ethnic-Serbs, he became the champion and face of Serbian ultra-nationalism. His commitment to the Serbian cause led him to play a central role in the Yugoslav Wars, escalating the scale of violence.

In the 1980s, Milošević began consolidating power to support his nationalistic cause of creating a greater Serbia, upholding the Serbian ethnic group (and by extension their Christian Orthodox religion) as the rightful inhabitants of the region. As Milošević rose to power, he simultaneously began implementing policies and influencing politicians to lay the groundwork for the creation of greater-Serbia that encompassed all the Yugoslav states. By 1989, his allies

had replaced Montenegrin leadership, and Kosovo and the region of Vojvodina had been reintegrated into Serbia (“The Breakup”). Within weeks of becoming president, he removed the Tito-era policy giving Kosovo a special autonomous status that was meant to appease the Muslim Albanian ethnic majority (“How Did Kosovo”). As a result, the Kosovar Albanians protested, calling for independence from Serbia. Also at this time, in the first two years of the 1990s, other Yugoslav republics were declaring independence through free elections, such as in Slovenia and Croatia. The Serb minority in Croatia declared their independence and desire to join the Serbian state, causing conflicts to break out between the Serbian-Orthodox and Croatian-Catholic ethno-religious groups there. The Yugoslav Army (JNA) tried to occupy Croatia as a way of keeping it part of Yugoslavia, mitigating damage. However, the largely Serbian armed forces soon revealed a clear bias in favor of the Croatian-Serbs, a position that reflected Milošević’s influence and political power. The Serbian minority in the newly declared Bosnia-Herzegovina boycotted their referendum-mandated independence decision (“The Breakup”). Things begun to get violent. In response to the breakout of these sectarian wars in Croatia, Bosnia, and Slovenia, President Milošević sent Serbian security forces to support the cause of ethnic Serbs in each respective country, exacerbating the violence. His intention was to “carve a greater Serbia out of the ruins” he helped create (“How Did Kosovo”). He played a major role in the perpetuation of violence in the Balkans, leading to the Yugoslav Wars.

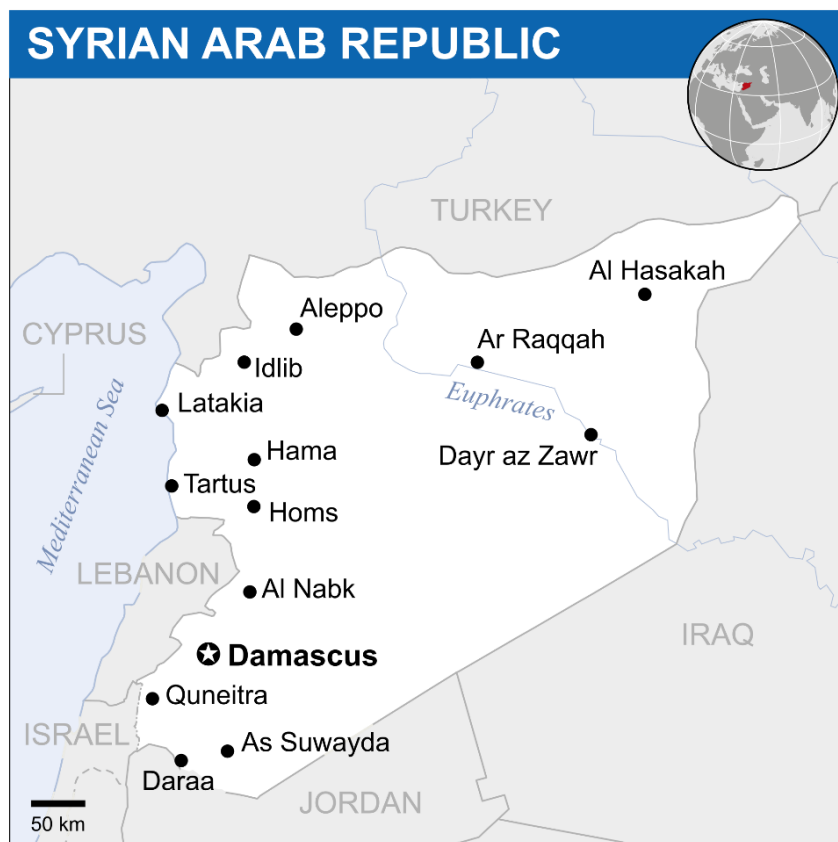
### Kosovo War

Ever since conflicts between Baltic religious sects in the seventh century, each group has tried to assert political and territorial dominance over the other, and the particularly brutal Kosovo War is no exception. The Kosovo War was one of the Yugoslav Wars begun and heightened by President Slobodan Milošević. The Orthodox Serbs saw Kosovo as their national

homeland, stemming from a 1389 defeat by the Muslim Ottomans, which became memorialized in Serbian national folklore (BBC News). Milošević exploited this historical sore point, using it to rally Serbs behind him and his political ambitions: invading Kosovo and incorporating it into greater Serbia. He positioned himself as the person to correct history and sent in Serbian security forces (in addition to Yugoslav JNA soldiers) to fight a rebel Kosovar group that sprung up to win Kosovo's independence, the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA). The ensuing conflict between Serbia and Kosovo caused the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Albanians were massacred in the name of ethno-religious cleansing. Furthermore, due to the religious dimension of this war (fueled by Milošević), religious clergy and places of worship in particular became collateral damage. They became symbols of the enemy because ethnicity and religion are so closely related in Balkan society. Garentina Kraja, a young Muslim Kosovar who was displaced by the Kosovo War, remembers that "destroying a mosque or a church became a way of destroying a community's identity" (Coughlan). The Kosovo War, one of the many conflicts within the Yugoslav Wars and one of the most brutal, was perpetrated by Slobodan Milošević to win the support of ethnic Serbs in Yugoslavia via military support.

## **Syria**

As seen in **Figure 2**, the Syrian Arab Republic, Syria for short, is located in the Middle East Levantine region. It has an estimated population of roughly 21.5 million people, according to the CIA World Factbook. The capital city is Damascus.

**Figure 2: Map of Syria**

(Source: United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs)

### *Historical and Religious Context of Syria*

Greater Syria has been home to many different religions and ethnicities for thousands of years. Due to its central location in the Middle East, where the Abrahamic religions originated, and along the Silk Road, it acted as a cultural and religious hub. Syrian history can be viewed as a series of religious eras, beginning with a Jewish era in Ancient Syria, transitioning to a Christian era and ending with Islam (Ahmad). In Ancient Syria, there was a significant and prolific Jewish population. After the expansion of the Roman Empire, Christianity was brought to Syria in the first century AD, where it flourished and came to play an important role in early



Church debates. Islam was introduced around the time of the Umayyad Dynasty/Caliphate in the 600s and today dominates influence on Syrian society (Ahmad).

As of 2022, approximately 87% of Syrians are Muslim, 74% of which are Sunni. 10% of the population are Christian and the remaining 3% are a combination of Druze, Jews, and atheists (“Syria”). 11% of Syrian citizens belong to the Alawite ethno-religious sect. It is a branch of Shiite Islam that Sunni Muslims often brand as heretical (“Alawism”). Alawites practice an “esoteric” form of Islam that combines various beliefs, such as reincarnation and the Christian-like celebration of a mass-like ritual and emphasis on a trinity. Additionally, Alawism has its own religious texts and recognizes holidays from both the Muslim and Christian faith traditions (“Alawism”). The status of Alawism as Muslim or non-Muslim has been a contentious issue among Muslim scholars for centuries. Conflicting fatwas (a ruling on Islamic law) have divided the Muslim community on the acceptance of this faith tradition. Most notably, in 1936, a Sunni cleric issued a fatwa declaring that Alawites are Muslim. Decades later in 1973, another fatwa was issued by a Shi’ite Imam declaring the opposite (that Alawites were not Muslims) to support the legitimacy of former Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (“Alawism”).

### *The Assad Dynasty and the Rise of Alawites*

Alawite Hafez al-Assad, the father of current ruler Bashar Al-Assad, ruled Syria from 1971 to until his death in 2000. At the time of his birth in 1930, the Alawite sect was impoverished and isolated. Alawites were ostracized by Syrian society. He came into his own after attending school in Latakia, where he was introduced to ideologies such as Communism, Arab Nationalism, and Islamic Fundamentalism. He joined a new party called the “Arab Baath Socialist Party,” that advocated for a secular and socialist state. Wanting to position himself strategically in politics, Hafez attended the Air Force College. The military was a notable avenue

for Alawites to gain an education and then use it to supplant the political elites who disgraced them. After a later air force assignment, he would go on to plot the overthrow of the government. In 1966, he became the Minister of Defense, a position he would use in the early 1970s to stage a successful, bloodless coup that he called “the corrective movement” (Macfarquhar).

President Hafez modeled his government on the Soviet system, making Syria a “single-party police state” (Macfarquhar). He had fifteen different intelligence agencies working for him and spying on his own people. This authoritarian structure and citizen surveillance created a lasting atmosphere of fear. He also worked to reconstitute Syria’s elite. Alawites, despite being a small minority of the total population, now became the majority of elites. They were given opportunities and protections that other religious groups were not. The Syrian army officer corps became predominately Alawite, creating a military that was blindly loyal, due to the strength of ethno-religious bonds (Yadav3). His son, Bashar, would follow his example, championing the Alawite sect at the expense of innocent Syrian civilians.

Bashar Al-Assad has been president of Syria since the death of his father in 2000. In many ways, he carries on the legacy of his father. Hafez’s policies informed Bashar’s. The military remained Alawite-led and loyal to the Assad regime, even to the “point of massacring its own citizens” (Yadav3). Bashar continued to monitor his people and restrict access to information by restricting the internet and news coverage. However, he differs in one crucial way: a divided Syria. When Hafez died, he left a united Syria. Even though the state was not democratic, the people had an operating government. Under Bashar’s leadership, Syria and the government itself has fragmented into many different warring groups. A civil war was begun.

*Syrian Civil War and Bashar's Response*

The Syrian Civil War has been ongoing since 2011 after pro-democracy demonstrations – inspired by those of neighboring Arab countries – occurred in Syria but were violently repressed by President Bashar al-Assad. Violence escalated quickly into a full-scale civil war. The original intent of the war was regime change, in other words ousting the Assad regime. Protestors and anti-government rebels were fighting for democracy and ethno-religious pluralism. However, as time went on, the conflict became much more complicated than that. Islamic extremists, jihadis, became involved and pushed for a Sunni theocracy. Major global powers, like Russia and the United States, saw Syria as a strategic battleground for regional, and therefore global, supremacy (Laub). Turkey seized the opportunity to attack the Kurdish people who inhabit Northern Syria and Southern Turkey (on the border). Pro-democracy forces lacked the resources to effectively navigate through the competing priorities and the multiplicity of issues and actors.

In response to the fragmentation and violence that Syria now faces, Bashar Al-Assad claims to champion Baathist secularism as a way of overcoming the sectarian divides that exist in Syria (“Assad Remakes Syrian Faith”). However, Assad has been employing his own interpretation of Islam and restructuring his government in order to exert more influence over the Syrian people to keep himself in power. One way in which he has done this is by creating a new relationship between the Ministry of Religious Endowments and party-affiliated organizations. Groups such as the Revolutionary Youth Union and the National Union of Syrian Students, are forced to ingest Baathist ideology and propaganda through events and lectures (“Assad Remakes Syrian Faith”). In this way, Bashar is attempting to shape the future of Syria by influencing its young leaders and by connecting the religious and secular branches of the government. In doing

so, he foments “mutual suspicion [between religious groups] and religious intolerance in many parts of the country” (Manfreda).

### **Analysis**

Both religion and politics have the aim of mobilizing people and spreading certain beliefs and values. They both exert significant some measure of influence over adherent populations. Therefore, they can work well in tandem. As a result, many conflicts in history, and today around the world, have been considered religiously motivated. However, we know that there is more to the story. Masterminds of politicizing religion use it to instigate conflict and strengthen their legitimacy. In the case of the Yugoslav Wars, differences in the identities of Muslims and Christians were exploited for the political gain of Serbian leader, Slobodan Milošević. With the Syrian Civil War, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad manipulates religion and religious authorities to sow the seeds of mutual skepticism and violence between the different branches of Islam, but also between Islam and sects of other religions, such as Christianity.

#### *Religion in State-Sponsored Propaganda*

One of the primary ways religions are used for political ends in both case studies is through state-sponsored propaganda. The leaders and governments carefully crafted political and religious messaging in attempts to mobilize certain sections of the population against each other. State-sponsored propaganda was used to manipulate the religious populations into backing their governments and political agendas.

In Kosovo, Milošević used “carefully planned propaganda” to paint a “negative image of Albanians as well as a positive perception of Serbian nationalism,” exploiting existing ethnic and

religious tensions (Vučetić). Identified as the most consequential example of this manipulation was the exploitation of the “Kosovo Myth,” which is nation-building folklore surrounding the defeat of the Ottomans (“Yugoslavia”). The mostly Christian Serbian people overcame the Islamic Turks in 1389. The victory was then enshrined, and later evoked, in Serbian national consciousness through art, literature, and oral tradition (Stoianovich). June 28th, 1989, was the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo. Milošević “revived” the myth, thereby stoking nationalism. He then tried to pin the blame for the ensuing division on the media. However, it was actually a “skillfully implemented propaganda campaign with the aim of mobilizing the masses for the future [Yugoslav] wars” (Vučetić). The revival took to form of a speech, the famous Gazimestan Speech that was given by Milošević as he was flanked by “ornately-dressed Serbian priests” giving the appearance of divine approval and legitimacy (Elzarka). He identified himself and his ideology “with a holy cause and invoked a spirit of violence” catalyzing the Kosovo War and ethno-religious skirmishes (Doder and Branson). His propaganda “cultivated a popular sense of victimization at the hands of foreigners,” the foreigners being Albanians and Kosovar, “that was the source of his strength” (Doder and Branson). Slobodan Milošević appealed to, and was successful at in mobilizing, the Christian Serbian population to support his nationalism and invasion of neighboring Kosovo.

In Syria, Bashar Al-Assad’s government set up their own state media, including television and radio channels, in order to make their political and religious messaging more accessible and digestible. One television channel in particular is dedicated to spreading the specific interpretation of Assad’s Islam: Nour Al-Sham (Eddin). The TV station, whose name translated to “The Light of the Levant” in English, is a blatant attempt to hide Assad’s manipulations. The Assad regime preaches secularism, but the programming aims to appeal to

people covertly via religious messaging instead (Eddin). According to Ahmed Haj Ali, a Syrian Ba'ath political and media official, the station “present[s] Islam’s comprehensive and moderate message” as a way of convincing the Syrian people they should side with the Alawite government (Eddin and Haj Ali 44). Furthermore, defectors from other channels and state-controlled media outlets have corroborated this tactic of state-sponsored propaganda. A reporter from the Al Ikhbariya network and the Addounia channel (both also state-owned), Ghatan Sleiba, said he “was not reporting. It was simply acting as the tongue of the regime” (Eddin and Chulov 47). Bashar al-Assad used the Syrian mediascape to manipulate the religious opinions, and therefore public opinion, of his people to his benefit.

### *Religious Policy and Government Restructuring*

Another tactic of religious manipulation employed by Yugoslavia’s Milošević and Syria’s Assad is the rewriting of state policy (and preferences) and restructuring of government bureaucracy in order to further their political ambitions, thereby strengthening their claimed political legitimacy.

In Yugoslavia, Serb nationalists closely tied with the Church became a protected group. In fact, at the beginning of the conflict (the invasion of Kosovo by Serbia), many Serbian Orthodox clergymen were supporters of Milošević. They were among the first elites to originally conspire to help Milošević influence public opinion through the media, as demonstrated by the aforementioned Gazimestan Speech (Stoianovich). The Church saw themselves as the “protector of the [Serbian] nation,” so it used its institutional authority, taking advantage of the people’s trust in it, to galvanize support for Slobodan Milošević nationalistic agenda (Pereira and Viana 57). The cultural mistrust of Muslim Kosovar Albanians due to the aforementioned Kosovo Myth) was exploited; those Serbian monks and priests were the first to spread the false notion

that “fundamentalist” ethnic-Albanians wanted “to remove Christianity” (Knudsen and Laustsen 28). By allying himself with the Serbian Orthodox Church, Slobodan Milošević was able to influence public opinion and gain supporters.

In Syria, Bashar al-Assad institutionalized his religious manipulation by creating the Ministry of Religious Endowments, also known as the Ministry of Awqaf, to influence the people’s behavior (and/or prevent anti-Assad sentiment) through the governing religious activities. The idea began in April 2014 when Bashar al-Assad gathered together the religious leaders of Syria and detailed his plans for this new government office that would be aimed at “preventing any uncontrolled religious mobilization” (Al-Kassir). In 2018, it was formally created via presidential decree. This decision strengthened the religious establishment within Syria, but at the same time it allowed for “[the state] co-opting the right to dictate what is acceptable religious behavior in Syria” (Aldoughli, “Assad Remakes Syrian Faith”). The Islam allowed to exist in the country was redefined by the regime to make its adherents obedient to the state. It “place[s] a strong emphasis on the cultural hegemony of the state and the views of its leaders,” who are influenced by Assad-the man who empowers them (Aldoughli, “Assad Remakes Syrian Faith”). The Ministry of Awqaf at the direction of the state further institutionalizes this manipulated, Ba’athist form of Islam through cultural mediums, like literature, education, and academia. For example, a series of publications with accompanying materials on state websites called “Jurisprudence of Crisis” intended to “correct 14 centuries of false interpretations of Islam,” according to Assad himself (Assad in Aldoughli, “Assad Remakes Syrian Faith”). An additional example is the regime-sponsored lecture titled “Interpreting the Quran in Light of Assad’s Intellectual Foundations,” which quite clearly states how Assad is remaking religion to suit his needs.

In addition to the Ministry of Religious Endowments, Assad has ordered the surveillance of religious discourse in order to construct a pro-Assad-religious national identity and sway religious/public opinion to his favor. In the midst of a civil war and sectarian violence, national unity is difficult to achieve, especially unity based around approval of the ruling government. Assad tries to overcome the sectarianism by creating his own national identity via religious identity. He aims to “cultivate religious identities as marker of political loyalty” (Aldoughli, “Sectarianizing Faith”). In order to do this, his regime has been heavily monitoring and controlling religious discourse in Syria. In October 2018, Assad issued Law 31, which consolidated religious power solely under the Ministry of Awqaf (“Syrian Arab Republic”). He changed the structure and function of the Ministry to give himself more control because he appoints/approves the head bureaucrat- the Minister of Awqaf. He then by extension has control over the populace’s opinion on the government and him as the president because the religion and government have become so closely intertwined. Furthermore, the law also established the Jurisprudential and Scholarly Council, which has the power to deem religious discourse inappropriate or appropriate. Law 31 “formalizes the regime’s longstanding hegemony over religious affairs,” which is “part of its [the Assad regime’s] broader pragmatic strategy of manipulating state institutions to maintain a tight grip over society” (Al-Kassir). Surveillance of religious discourse and the construction of a new Syrian identity under the religious direction of the regime has resulted in increased influence of Assad over religious, and therefore public/political, discourse.



## Conclusion

As demonstrated, religion can be effectively used as a weapon by authority figures to increase their political power and legitimacy. Due to religion's strong historical link to ethnic and other important social identities all over the world, but especially in the Balkan States and in Syria, political leaders can successfully use aspects of religion to galvanize their supporters while dividing and weakening the opposition. In doing so, they garner support for their political agendas and for their own status as a leader. Religious symbolism, representation, and even doctrine, are strategically employed, leading to devastating conflict. Both the Yugoslav Wars and Syrian Civil War could have been significantly mitigated had it not been for the presence of religious manipulation. Both Slobodan Milošević and Bashar Al-Assad were able to fragment society, which consolidated their power. Milošević took advantage of ethnic Serbs' deep-rooted connection to Eastern Christian Orthodoxy in order to disguise Serbian ultra-nationalism that violently divided the Yugoslav States. By deeming non-Serbs inferior and normalizing this bias through the media and in society, he cemented a legacy of tension and sectarianism. Assad created his own interpretation of Islam, professed as secularism, in order to splinter the many ethno-religious populations native to Syria. They were so weakened that they could no longer sustain a concerted effort to oust his regime. In both cases, neighbor turned against neighbor, creating some of the most traumatizing religiously inspired conflict the world has seen.

This relationship between religion and politics and religion and conflict presents new concerns and questions for the future of war and conflict resolution. Since the end of World War II, and especially in the last thirty years, we have entered a new era of conflict and violence ("A New Era"). War is increasingly fought within states, rather than between states. Dominant causes of conflict, such as "breakdown in the rule of law" and "absent or co-opted state institutions," are

leading to protracted wars (“A New Era”). Fragmentation as well as “regionalization of conflict, which interlinks political, socio-economic, and military issues across borders” are rendering traditional forms of conflict mediation and resolution less effective (“A New Era”). Religion obfuscates and exacerbates all these concerns. Espousing a new approach to understanding conflict and religion that reframes religion as part of the solution, not just a source of violence, is necessary. Sustainable solutions require a thorough understanding of religious values and proper respect for religious peoples and their unique orientation to society and geopolitical situation (Gorur and Gregory).

Peacebuilding and academic organizations such as the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and The British Academy are beginning to recognize religion’s role in conflict and investigate it could play a role in peace processes (Hayward; The British Academy). Research from the *United States Institute of Peace Special Report*, suggests possible actions steps including: integrate secular and religious peacebuilding efforts, implement religious mediation amongst the local populations (not just between high-ranking clerics), center youth and women in the religious conversations, and encourage dialogue between the Abrahamic traditions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and indigenous and dharmic traditions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Taoism, etc.) (Hayward 7-8). These recommendations and the new nature of conflict beg the question why isn’t religion being taken more seriously in political, economic, and social study? Furthermore, how can religious competence and training be integrated into existing diplomatic, political, and military practices? Future research to address these questions would be beneficial not only to the study of religion and political violence but also to peacebuilding efforts globally.

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