

Horizontal inequalities and multi-sectarian societies: a study about the perception by Syrian refugees in Brazil of the socioeconomic situation and groups inequalities in Syria before the 2011 uprising

Desigualdade horizontal e sociedades multissectárias: um estudo sobre a percepção de refugiados sírios no Brasil da situação socioeconômica e das desigualdades dos grupos na Síria antes da insurreição de 2011

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Abstract

After the beginning of the Arab Spring and the conflict in Syria, researchers worldwide are trying to understand the reasons that led to the civil war in that country. Many hypotheses are raised, from the deterioration of socioeconomic conditions, the increasingly harsh political and police repression against the regime's opponents, to the interest of regional powers in changing the Syrian regime. In this article, we decided to explore another dimension of conflict. After applying a questionnaire to a group of Syrian refugees in Brazil, we sought to understand the perception of respondents about the existence or not of horizontal inequality between the Syrian religious groups, in the economic, social, religious, political and cultural spheres. The result sheds light on the important role of the perception of horizontal inequality between groups as an essential source of discontent and frustration, which may have contributed to the breaking of the Syrian state's social-political pact.

Palavras-chave: Syrian conflict; Horizontal inequality; Perceptions of Syrian refugees in Brazil.

Resumo

Após o início da primavera árabe e do conflito na Síria, pesquisadores de todo mundo buscam compreender as razões que levaram à guerra civil naquele país. Muitas hipóteses são levantadas, desde a deterioração das condições socioeconômicas, a repressão política e policial cada vez mais dura contra opositores do regime, até o interesse de potências regionais na troca do regime sírio. Neste artigo decidimos explorar uma outra dimensão do conflito. Após aplicarmos um questionário a um grupo de refugiados sírios no Brasil, buscamos entender a percepção dos entrevistados acerca da existência ou não de uma desigualdade horizontal entre os grupos confessionais sírios, no âmbito econômico, social, religioso político e cultural. O resultado encontrado joga luz sobre o importante papel da percepção da desigualdade horizontal entre grupos como uma fonte importante de descontentamento e frustração, que pode ter contribuído para a quebra do pacto político social do Estado sírio.

Keywords: Conflito sírio; Desigualdade horizontal; Percepção de refugiados sírios no Brasil.

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Introduction

Since the beginning of the Arab Spring in 2011, much is still unclear about the causes that precipitated the demonstrations. Many studies explored the general common conditions in the Arab countries that favored the protests. However, the empirical literature still struggles to specify the main factors in each country that motivated people to take to the streets. On the one hand, the frequently cited causes are questioned by several researchers. In objective terms, the situation in the 2000s was not so critical. In fact, the Middle East had some favorable social indicators compared to other developing regions (ARAMPATZI *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, considerable social, economic, and political differences between the Arab countries prevent the development of an analytical model for all countries affected by the Arab spring protests.

This article considers that this impasse stems from the lack of research on the popular perception of living conditions. It is possible that grievances stemmed not only from a change in the material condition but from changes in expectations. In this sense, it is essential to know how people make sense of reality to understand why people rebel against their governments and why groups enter into conflict.

The research presented in this article sought to expand the comprehension of the Arab Spring through the study of the Syrian case, which after the outbreak of the demonstrations in 2011, entered a period of civil war. In the empirical literature, there is no consensus on how the economic and social factors affected Syrians' willingness to take to the streets to protest. Equally problematic is the discussion of whether social and economic inequalities played a role in the escalation of sectarian tension. Considering this, this article seeks to discuss how Syrians perceive the socioeconomic situation in Syria in the years leading up to the 2011 crisis and how they perceive inequalities between different groups.

In order to assess the proposed question, a survey was carried out with Syrian volunteers in Brazil, addressing their perception of various aspects of quality of life in Syria in the 20 years before the 2011 crisis. the questionnaire was structured according to the following objectives: a) to assess whether there is a perception of a worsening in the quality of life in general in the years leading up to the 2011 crisis; b) assess whether there is a perception of increasing inequalities between religious groups in these years, and c) assess whether the respondent's religious identity is associated with distinct response patterns.

In order to make sense of the data obtained, this study chose to combine the analysis of the responses with the evaluation of what the empirical literature says about living conditions and inequalities between groups in contemporary Syria. Due to the lack of large-scale surveys on the subject, it is necessary to employ different complementary sources to help the researcher better understand the broader situation of horizontal inequalities in Syria. In this regard, the discussion of this article may contribute by directing future research on communal inequalities in Syria and the crisis of 2011.

The article begins by introducing the analytical framework that guided the research and the elaboration of the questionnaire. Subsequently, the answers obtained are presented, along with some observations. Then, the responses are analyzed in light of the empirical literature. Finally, the conclusion summarizes the main points of the research.

The analytical framework

As Cammett and Salti (2018) note, analysts were surprised by the outbreak of mass protest movements in the Middle East and the Maghreb in late 2010 and early 2011. The researchers, faced with a phenomenon of such magnitude, found themselves facing the challenge of explaining what motivated such mobilizations in several countries. The literature to date lists several general causes, such as resentments created by economic inequalities and impoverishment, feelings of alienation, widespread corruption, youth frustration with the absence of expectations for the future, political repression and lack of freedom (CAMMETT; SALT, 2018, p.64).

Nevertheless, when we evaluate the literature on living conditions in the Arab countries in the years before the protests in 2011, it is possible to recognize that there is no direct connection between the protests and statistics about the precarious living condition or deep social inequality levels in the region. Some authors point out that the Arab countries had significant success in reducing extreme poverty in the decades before the uprisings (HASSINE, 2014). For these authors, the Middle East region, in general, witnessed a reduction in the percentage of extreme poverty, hunger and infant mortality (HASSINE, 2014)¹.

On the other hand, opinion polls showed a different picture from that suggested by material indicators. Despite the irregular but gradual progress on crucial topics for the quality of life, such as poverty reduction and the level of human development, opinion polls showed a picture of dissatisfaction with the quality of life in several Arab countries. (ARAMPATZI *et al.*, 2018, p.83). More than profound changes in material indicators, what can be observed in the years prior to 2011 was a change in the level of the subjective feeling of happiness. Some studies show that the level of life satisfaction dropped significantly in Arab countries, especially Egypt, Syria, Tunisia, Libya and Yemen, in the years leading up to the Arab Spring (ARAMPATZI *et al.*, 2018; KOROTAYEV; SHISHKINA, 2019). This situation in some Arab countries contrasts with the situation in countries at similar levels of development that had, on average, a higher level of satisfaction in quality of life.

Cammett and Salti recognize the importance of studies that identify general trends in the region. These studies contribute to a better understanding of the political, economic, and social dilemmas that afflict Arab countries. However, some of these studies overlook the actual dissemination of dissatisfaction in each country. Furthermore, these analyses consider only the objective data without considering public opinion. As a result, they assume an automatic relationship between specific indicators and the outbreak of protests without empirical evidence (CAMMETT; SALT, 2018, p.70). As Devarajan and Ianchovichina (2018) argue, studies that evaluate only the objective indexes cannot verify the existence of profound grievances in societies. According to the authors, traditional objective indices do not capture crucial subjective aspects for people's well-being, quality of life, and future expectations.

To understand the motivation underlying social conflicts, it is essential to comprehend how people interpret and give meaning to the social reality in which they are inserted. In other words, it is essential to assess the subjective process through which individuals consider a situation to be unfair. This article is in line with the argument made by the literature on *Relative Deprivation* and *Horizontal Inequalities* that grievances come from the act of comparing. Of particular importance is the comparison people make of their own situations with the living conditions of other people or other groups.

This article aims to assess which aspects the Syrian refugees in Brazil consider the most problematic and how dissatisfactions are distributed according to confessional groups. The article assumes that: a) what matters is the perception of social reality by individuals; b) that people evaluate different dimensions of life besides the macroeconomic dimension; and c) resentments are not evenly distributed among cultural groups.

The research presented in this article was structured using the theoretical approach of *Horizontal Inequalities* as a reference. Horizontal inequalities are defined as inequalities that involve economic, social, political, and cultural differences between culturally defined groups (STEWART; LANGER, 2008). According to the *Horizontal Inequalities* approach, deep and pervasive inequalities can incite social mobilization and violence along cultural lines through the spread of shared feelings of frustration and discontent (FUKUDA-PARR; LANGER; MINE, 2013, p2).

Traditionally, economic inequality has gained much prominence in the literature. However, it is not clear from the literature which economic aspects matter most for social mobilization. Some authors understand that macroeconomic factors matter less than factors linked to the quality of life in general. In this sense, some authors distinguish between economic differences and social inequalities. However, socioeconomic inequality is not the only or the most important

¹ Nevertheless, some authors contest this perspective. Assouad *et al.* who found an extreme level of inequality in Arab countries (2018).

cause for social unrest (OSTBY, 2008). As Arnim Langer and Satoru Mikami note, the likelihood of violent conflict between culturally defined groups increases considerably when socioeconomic, political, and cultural inequalities are consistent (BROWN, LANGER, 2008; LANGER; MIKAMI, 2013). The basic argument is that when political, economic, and social inequalities coincide with cultural differences, culture can become a vector of mobilization for various forms of collective action and social unrest, including violent conflict and civil war (OSTBY, 2013; STEWART; LANGER, 2008)².

Studies on the role of grievances in internal conflicts have been enriched by econometric analysis that assesses the correlation between the two concepts. However, these studies have some limitations regarding the understanding of the concatenation of the mechanisms that precipitate the conflict and the apprehension of the perceptual and emotional aspects. Numerous studies on horizontal inequalities postulate a correlation between group grievances and conflict, but they do not explain how grievances act in conflicts or measure them directly (MUST, 2018, P.2). Quantitative studies that assess material indicators fail to capture the different ways in which people and groups interpret reality and the way they value different aspects of life (LANGER; MIKAMI, 2013, p.208).

In recent years, several authors have highlighted the need to complement the analysis of socioeconomic indicators with research that addresses groups' perceptions of deprivation as a way of understanding what motivates groups to engage in contentious policies (SIROKY *et al.*, 2020). Some studies find robust evidence that perceived grievance, rather than material indicators, is associated with violent contentious policy support, particularly in cases where the political system does not favor political negotiation to redress the many groups' discontents (DYRSTAD; HILLESUND, 2020). As Dan Miodownik and Lilach Nir observe, "people often act on the basis of a socially mediated understanding of their conditions, rather than the conditions themselves" (MIODOWNNIK; NIR, 2016, p.24).

This article seeks to contribute to the discussion on the importance of the perception of individuals for the outbreak of protests in 2011. The research presented in this article included the distribution of a questionnaire among Syrian refugees residing in three cities in Brazil. One of the objectives of the questionnaire, among others, was to capture the perception of Syrians about the social, political, and economic reality in Syria in the years leading up to the 2011 crisis.

This study aimed to point out trends in the perceptions of a delimited Syrian community: those who sought refuge in Brazil. Due to social ties with Syrian communities in Brazil and socioeconomic factors, Syrian refugees in Brazil have a different profile from those who sought refuge in countries neighboring Syria or in Europe. That is, the very act of taking refuge in Brazil already introduces a selection of which perceptions will be addressed in the research. However, this feature is present, to a greater or lesser extent, in all surveys that seek to listen to Syrian refugees in other countries. Being aware of these aspects, the present research was limited to apprehending how Syrian refugees in Brazil see the recent history of Syria.

Operationalization

In order to assess the proposed question, a survey was carried out with Syrian volunteers living in Belo Horizonte, São Paulo, and Curitiba, addressing their perception of various aspects of quality of life in Syria in the 20 years before the 2011 crisis. In addition to asking for their opinion on the economic, political, social, and cultural situation, the survey asked them to compare the situation between faith groups. The questionnaire was based, in part, on the survey proposed by Langer *et al.* (2017), on the survey applied by The Day After (2016), a non-governmental organization committed to the defense of democracy in Syria, and on the questionnaire proposed by Charles Harb (2017) to assess the social cohesion in the Arab World.

² Inequalities are factors that increase the likelihood of internal conflict. They are not a direct cause. (STEWART; LANGER, 2008). The causal mechanisms linking horizontal inequalities to conflict are multiple and complex (CEDERMAN; GLEDITSCH, BUHAUG, 2013). Generally, there is a concatenation of numerous mechanisms constituting a broader process. Furthermore, the subjectivity of the individuals occupies a central place in this process. The impact of inequalities is mediated by the actors' perception, as objective data do not automatically translate into collective resentment. Numerous studies point that perception does not always match social reality (DEVARAJAN; IANCHOVICHINA, 2018; GIMPELSON; TREISMAN, 2018).

It is important to mention here that the present paper is part of a broader research that sought to assess various dimensions of social cohesion in Syria from the perception of Syrians on various indicators. In addition to inequalities, the questionnaire explored topics linked to the social identities of volunteers and the degree of trust that volunteers have in relation to political institutions and members of other religious groups. The results presented here, which in themselves are already important, need to be analyzed in a broader analytical framework considering the salience of social identities (national, ethnic and religious), the relationship between them, and the political context.

For greater convenience of respondents, the questionnaire was translated into Arabic with the help of an Arabic language teacher. In addition, a test was carried out with some Syrian volunteers who helped correct inaccurate terms, bring some sentences closer to the purpose of the research and, finally, helped to adjust some details in the questions.

The questionnaire used closed questions in order to assess the participant's opinion on previously defined topics and the frequency and pattern of certain responses according to religious cleavages. For most of the closed questions, a classification scale was adopted, presenting ordered answers from which the participant should choose only one. The second set of questions involved questions that asked participants to say whether or not they agreed with statements presented by the questionnaire.

Whenever possible, the time frame was specified in the questions so that it would not be vague. This temporal distinction is essential for studying the participants' perception of socioeconomic changes in Syria in the 21st century. The time frame initially established was the year 2000. However, after test application of the questionnaire with Syrian volunteers and their suggestions, the cut-off date was changed. The year 2000 was chosen because it marked the political rupture caused by the death of Hafez al-Assad and the rise to power of Bashar al-Assad, his son. In the amended version, the cut-off years, in addition to 2000, are 2005 for more general questions about living conditions. The choice of more recent years is due to the fact that the profile of Syrian refugees in Brazil is younger. As a result, questions about living conditions before the 2000 period may generate more vague answers. And the choice of the year 2005 refers to important events and processes in recent Syrian history. In 2005, more liberal economic reforms and the onset of a severe drought created an economically more delicate context for Syria³.

The questionnaire was designed bearing in mind that the order of the questions and the response options influence how people respond. For example, a particular sequence of questions can make the participant interpret and answer them differently if the order of the questions were different (SCHWARZ, 2007). As a result, the research first presented questions about social identity, as it is the intention that participants answer the other questions with their social identities in evidence. Then, questions about the person's perception of general living conditions as a member of a given social group were introduced.

Of the 20 participants, 16 are men and 4 are women. The age range ranges from 25 years to 35 years. The level of education is high, with 1 having primary education, 2 having secondary education and 17 having higher education. It is important to note that the number of total responses varies according to the question, and there was a tendency to have fewer total responses at the end of the questionnaire. As for the religious identification of the participants, 3 are Catholic Christians, 8 are Orthodox Christians, 6 are Sunnis, and one Ismaelite. One identified himself as the "other" option, and another chose not to respond to the question. Ethnic identification was less diverse: 16 were Arabs, one was Assyrian, and two opted for the "other" option. And one did not identify himself.

Finally, there is one last but important observation about the questionnaire and the number of participants. The questionnaire was extensive, and participants were given complete freedom to answer only the questions they were comfortable answering. Therefore, the number of respondents to each question differed. It is possible to observe a greater

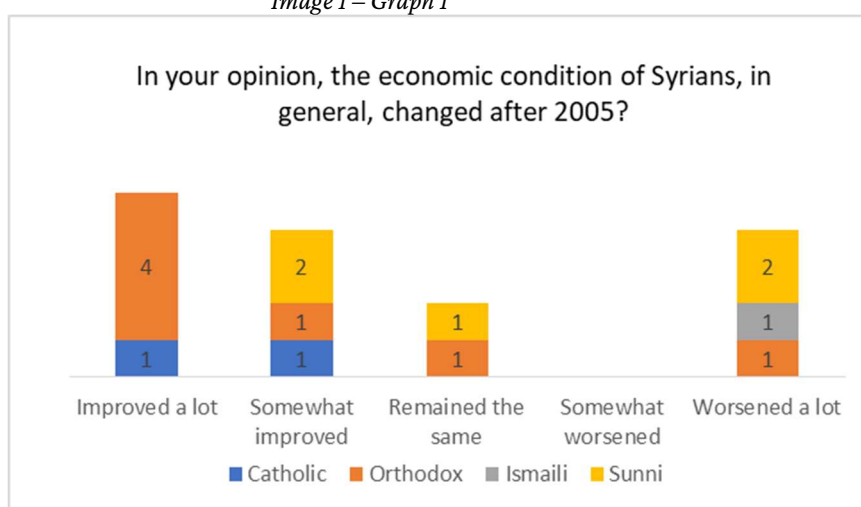
³ The questionnaire does not directly address the 2011 conflict or the participant's refugee status. The questions only address the perception of the participants about the years before 2010 and, therefore, before the conflict and the refugee experience. Although these two elements inform the participant's perception, this research does not aim to bring these elements to the center of the discussion, elements that deserve to be evaluated in other studies.

engagement in the first questions and a smaller engagement in the last questions. In addition, the topic of the questions also affected engagement. Because of this, the total number of respondents was less than 20.

The questions and the answers

The first question asks the participant if, in his opinion, Syria's economic condition changed after 2005. The literature points out that 2005 is an important year for the Syrian economy because of the liberal reforms (MATAR, 2019). At this time, Syria has adopted more extensive packages of liberal measures. In addition, there was a convergence of several domestic and international processes that impacted the Syrian economy, such as the occurrence of a major drought in the countryside, jeopardizing the production of essential foods, and the global financial crisis that occurred in 2008 (AZMEH, 2014).

Image 1 – Graph 1

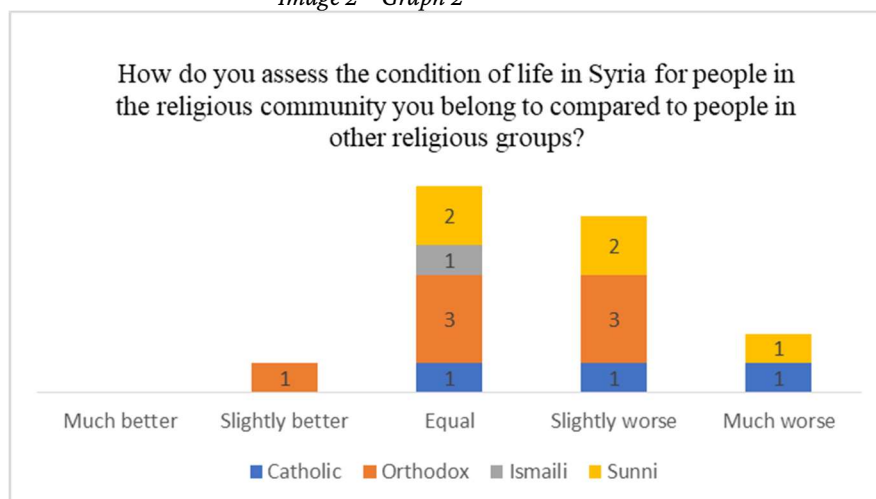


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate a greater preponderance of options that point to an improvement in Syria's economic situation. However, the option that indicates a significant worsening of the economic situation was expressive. It is important to emphasize that the option of continuity of the condition had a low relative weight compared to the options that indicate the occurrence of the change.

The next question asks how the participant assesses the living conditions of people of his religious community compared to people from other religious groups. The question encompasses a general condition beyond the participant's personal experience.

Image 2 – Graph 2

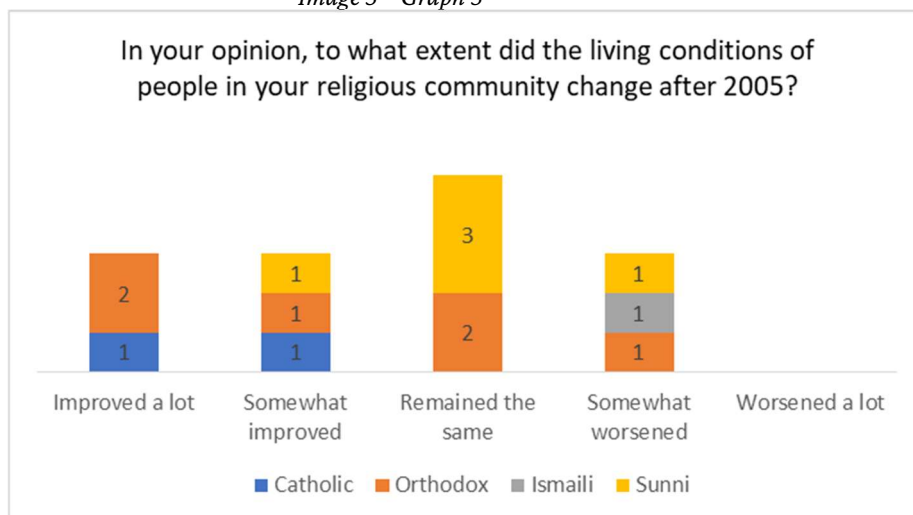


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

When assessing the interviewees' perception of the situation of their respective groups compared to that of other groups in Syria, it is possible to perceive a less positive picture. In the previous answers, the positive attitude toward the situation of the Syrian economy was more significant. In this question, the tendency of the answers was more median and negative. Besides that, it is important to note that, in the above question, the religious cleavage did not represent a relevant cut.

The next question addressed the same topic but introduced the temporal component:

Image 3 – Graph 3

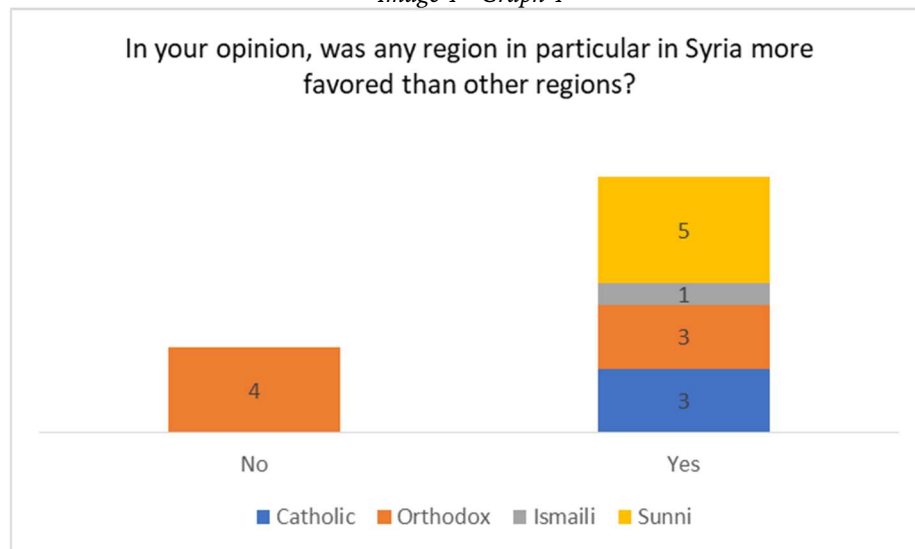


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

It is possible to observe that, overall, the answers were not so negative. Volunteers did not indicate a significant worsening of living conditions for their religious groups.

The next question asked the participant if, in his view, any region in Syria was more favored than the others.

Image 4 – Graph 4

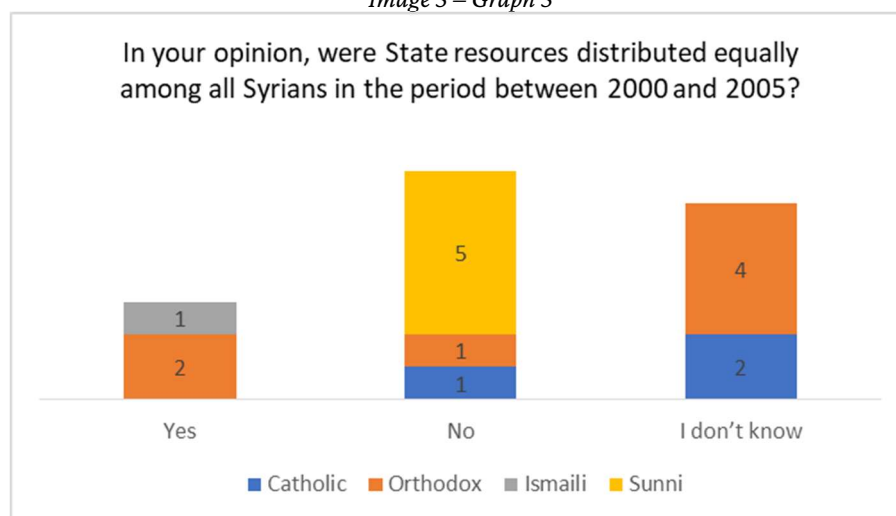


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate that majority of participants recognize the existence of inequalities between regions in Syria. This corroborates what part of the literature suggests about the prominence of regional disparities in contemporary Syrian history (BATATU, 1999).

The following question explored other aspects of inequalities and asked whether, in the participants' opinion, State resources were distributed equally among all Syrians from 2000 to 2005.

Image 5 – Graph 5

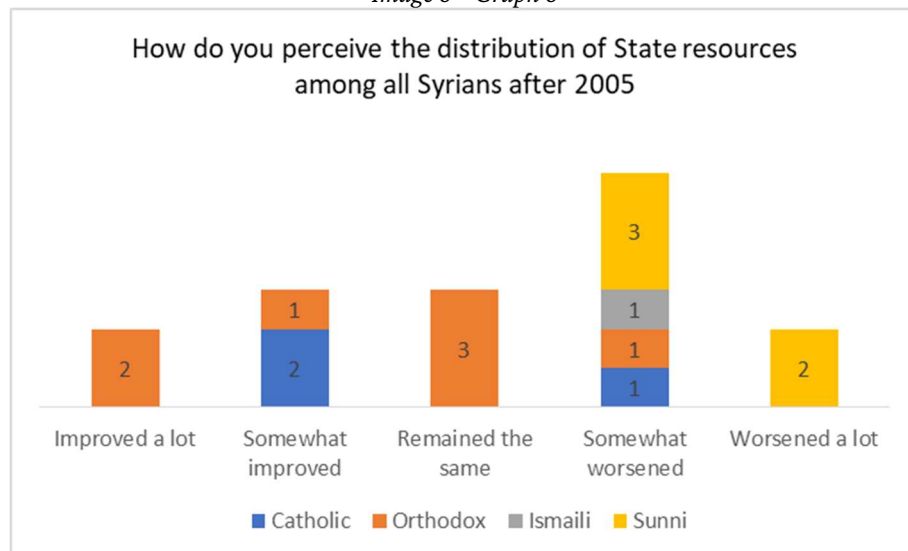


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate a negative or uncertain attitude toward the distribution of State resources in the early 2000s. Besides that, it is possible to observe that the Sunnis were unanimous about the unequal distribution of resources.

The next question developed the previous topic and asked whether state resource distribution among all Syrians changed after 2005.

Image 6 – Graph 6

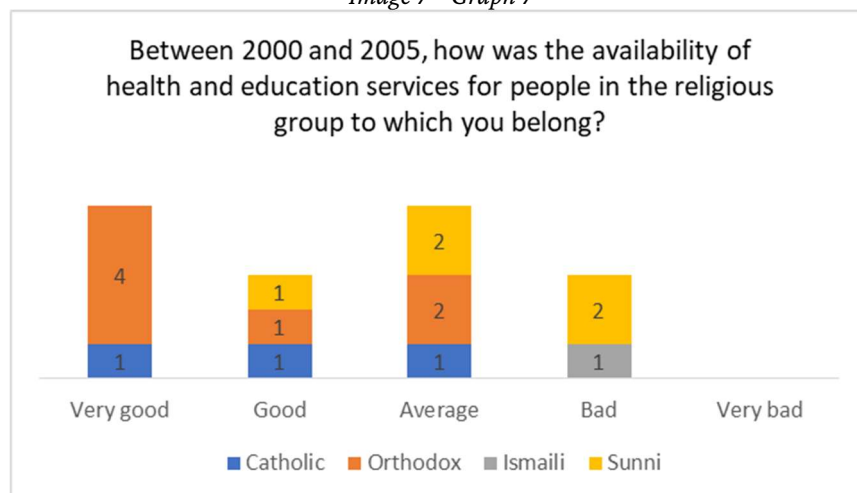


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses were well distributed among the options, but it is possible to observe a difference in the response pattern of Christians and Sunnis. The Sunnis demonstrated an assertively more negative view.

The next question evaluated the opinion of participants about some basic services provided by the state between 2000 and 2005.

Image 7 – Graph 7

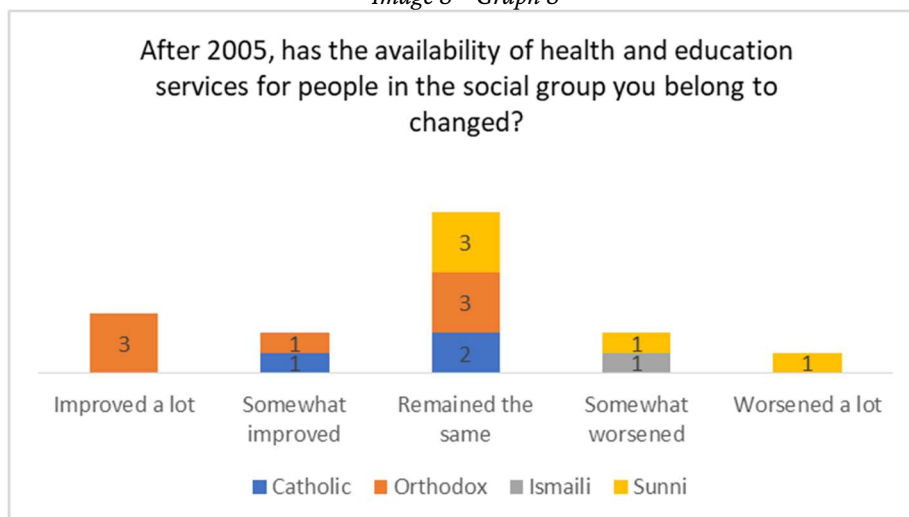


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate an overall positive picture. Among Christian participants, there is a preponderance of a more positive attitude that ranges from median to very good. Sunnis, meanwhile, take a more median attitude.

The next question reproduced the same idea but introduced a temporal component. It asked the participant to compare before 2005 and after:

Image 8 – Graph 8

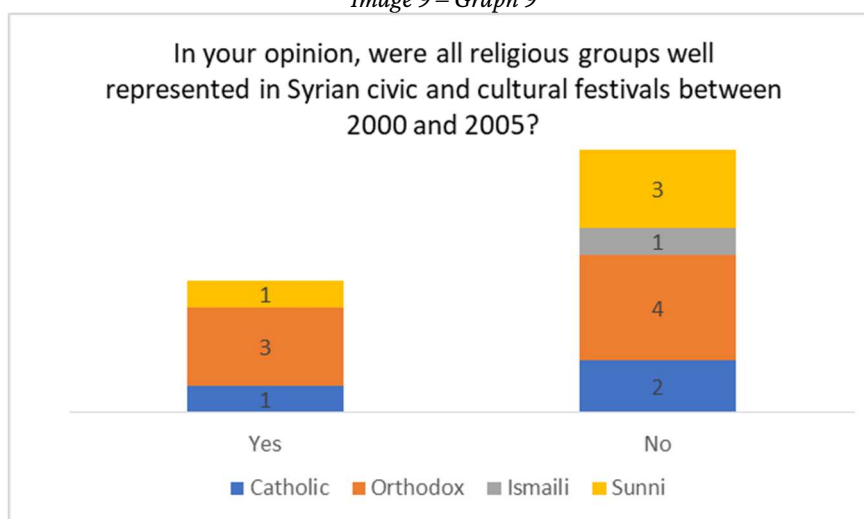


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The option indicating the maintenance of the situation was the most chosen. However, it is possible to see that the Sunnis had a more negative opinion than the Christians.

The next question questioned the participant if all religious and ethnic groups were well represented in Syrian civic and cultural festivals between 2000 and 2005:

Image 9 – Graph 9

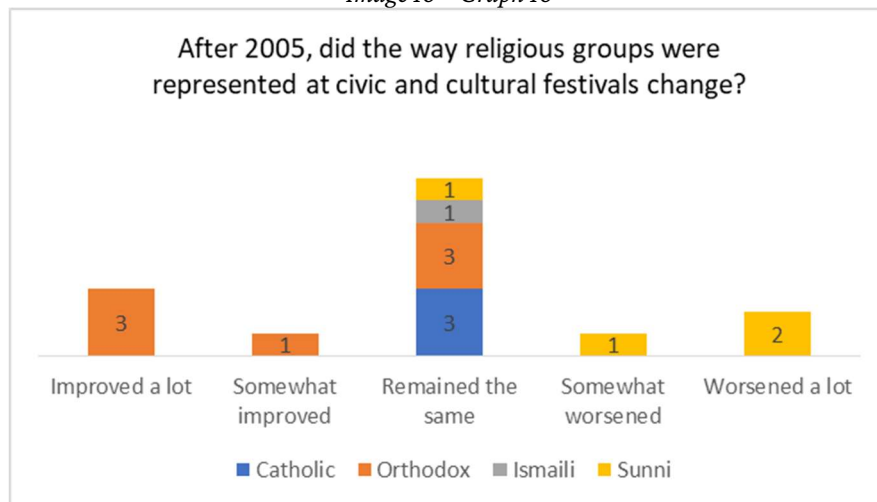


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate that inequalities were not limited to economic and social dimensions. Most answers indicate that civic and cultural festivals did not look at all groups equally.

The next question reproduced the topic of the previous one but demanded if the situation changed after 2005.

Image 10 – Graph 10

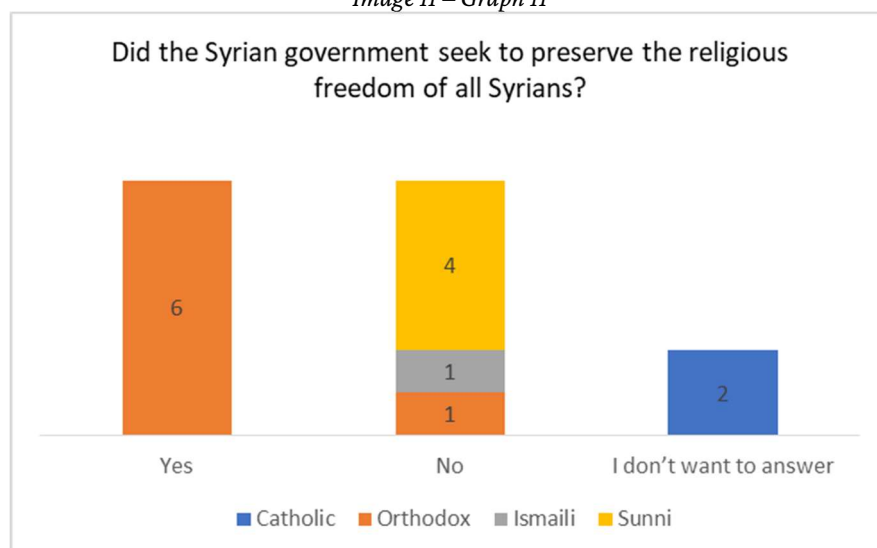


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The responses indicate that, for most participants, there were no major changes in the representativeness of different groups in cultural festivals during the 2000s. It is important to note that the cultural aspect remained relatively stable compared to social and economic dimensions. Among orthodox Christians, the option indicating a relative and significant improvement was significant. In turn, the majority of Sunni volunteers pointed to a relative worsening and a substantial worsening in how the groups were treated at civic and cultural festivals. It is a very negative picture, considering that the majority already judged the situation unfavorable.

The next question demanded the participant to evaluate the assertion that the Syrian government sought to preserve the freedom of religious manifestation of all Syrian

Image 11 – Graph 11

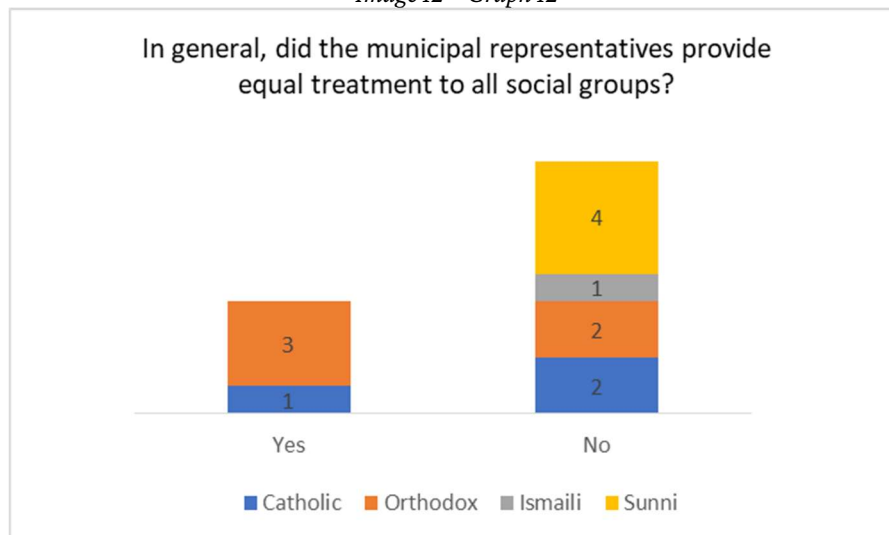


Source: Own elaboration (2019)

It is possible to observe that religious cleavage is associated with quite different positions on this issue. Among the Orthodox, everyone agreed except one. Among Catholics, volunteers preferred not to take a stand. On the other hand, Sunnis unanimously disagreed.

The next question asked the volunteers whether, in general, the municipal representatives treated all social groups equally.

Image 12 – Graph 12



Source: Own elaboration (2019)

The answers indicate that most of the participants considered that there was favoritism at the local level. The percentage of responses disagreeing with the sentence was slightly lower but still important. From the confessional perspective, it is possible to see that the answers of the Sunni participants were assertively negative.

Discussion

For the analysis, this article compared the responses with what qualitative studies say about the topics discussed in the questionnaire. The questionnaire begins by asking questions about the economy and living conditions. Numerous studies indicate that Syria has undergone social and economic changes since the 1990s (MATAR 2019, p.95). In the decade of the 2000s and the rise of Bashar to power, the government opted to deepen the liberal economic reforms initiated by Hafez to solve the problems caused by the exhaustion of the economic model of the previous decades (HADDAD, 2012; MATAR, 2019). In 2005, the regime announced a change in the economic policy, shifting the model centralized in the state to a mixed economic model. This positioning was a critical rhetorical reorientation, explicitly indicating the implementation of what the regime called the Social Market Economy (HADDAD, 2012). In 2005, the government announced a change in the economic policy, shifting the model centralized in the state to a mixed economic model. This positioning was a critical rhetorical reorientation, explicitly indicating the implementation of what the regime called the Social Market Economy (HADDAD, 2012).

Despite the government's attempt to modernize the economy, the results did not meet expectations. Bassam Haddad notes that since 1986, the transition to a new economic model has been erratic, and from 1994 to 2005, Syria went through a period of stagnation. Although the economy began to recover in the late 1990s, with the GDP growth, the per capita income fell until 2004. And since 2005, Syrian economic growth has declined (HADDAD, 2012). In addition, Syria's failure to develop a productive sector has compromised the independence and soundness of the Syrian economy, which was vulnerable to "external economic disturbances" (MATAR, 2019, p.98).

Linda Matar notes that the macroeconomic reforms promoted by the Syrian government have reduced the middle class, an important base of support for the Ba'th regime, especially during Assad's presidency. Besides that, the reforms increased the gap between the rich and poor (MATAR, 2019, p.98). Matar argues that the failure of state policies to create jobs for the growing workforce pushed the population to informal activities (MATAR, 2019, p.109).

According to graph 1, there is no consensus among participants about the economic condition of Syrians after 2005. It is important to note that religious cleavage also does not influence the response pattern in this question. The

majority felt that the situation had improved, but a significant part felt it had worsened. Perhaps a more diversified sample including low-income people, the segments of society most vulnerable to the economic downturn, would show a higher percentage of responses indicating the worsening of living conditions. As some studies show, one of the segments of society most affected by the reforms was the peasants, especially the Sunni peasants (PHILLIPS, 2015)⁴. The peasants, who had already suffered from a severe drought in the mid-2000s, saw living conditions deteriorate with poor government management and the cut of subsidies for fuel and fertilizers, which contributed to a wave of migration to the urban centers (DE CHÂTEL, 2014; PHILLIPS, 2015).

It is difficult to assess to what extent the poor performance of economic reforms has affected inequality among religious communities. In absolute terms, the participants did not detect a significant negative change in the living conditions, as shown in graph 3. On the other hand, when asked about the condition of their group compared to the condition of other groups, the participants had a more negative view. There is a symmetry between those who see equality between groups and those who understand that their religious group had a worse quality of life compared to other groups⁵. Although these results cannot be generalized, they highlight the importance of comparison for how people make sense of economic and social reality.

Quality of life involves several aspects beyond economic growth. Public services represent an important aspect of people's lives. Graph 7 shows that participants have a more positive stance on public services. As the literature shows, the Ba'th regime was established in a social contract in which the state offered free basic services, public jobs, and subsidies to guarantee some level of legitimacy (HINNEBUSCH, 2012). Even though the Syrian state has undergone a gradual change since the end of the 1980s, providing essential goods and basic services was one of the pillars of the regime's legitimacy. Some authors point out that the breach of this contract was one of the factors that precipitated popular dissatisfaction (HINNEBUSCH, 2012). However, the responses in Graph 8 do not fully reflect this reality. Once again, this may reflect the fact that the sample does not include people who are more vulnerable to the deterioration of basic services.

Another important dimension of inequality is regional disparity. Some studies highlight regional historical differences in Syria (BATATU, 1999). To what extent these differences have increased or decreased during Bashar al-Assad's rule is difficult to say. However, there is a widespread perception among Syrians that regional inequality is very significant. Graph 4 endorses this position and points to another essential element: the unanimous perception among Sunnis that some regions are privileged. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a certain overlap between confessional and regional cleavages in Syria. Although all regions are quite complex in terms of demographic composition, certain regions are associated with specific minorities, particularly the districts of Latakia and Tartus. Both of these regions have an Alawite majority and are seen by Syrians as privileged regions (GOLDSMITH, 2015).

To better understand how Syrians make sense of inequality, it is necessary to look at an indispensable component of internal conflicts: the attribution of responsibility. Some studies show that the awareness of inequality is not enough to generate contentious politics (CEDERMAN; GLEDITSCH; BUHAUG, 2013). People and groups must hold some political actors accountable for dissatisfaction with inequality to become a mobilization resource⁶. The responses suggest that the political factor is critical in how people assess the condition of their religious groups. Graph 6 indicates that when the question mentions a political actor, the participants present different attitudes about social, economic, and political

⁴ Traditionally, the Sunni peasantry was one of the bases of support for the Ba'th regime. Their support explains why the Islamist movements failed to mobilize the Sunni population in the countryside against the regime during the internal conflicts in the 1970s and 1980s (HINNEBUSCH, 2012).

⁵ Authors of social psychology (SIROKY *et al.*, 2020) show that people tend to evaluate the situation of their social group in comparison with other groups in society. However, researchers need to distinguish people's perceptions of social status and the social and economic reality of the country. For example, Christa Salamandra (2013) notes that, despite being seen by many Sunni Arabs as a privileged group, most Alawites did not directly enjoy the privileges granted by the regime, and many had precarious living conditions. On the other hand, some authors argue that even though the Ba'th regime did not systematically favor all Alawites, there were more opportunities for Alawites, especially within key sectors of the economy and in the state apparatus (GLASSMAN, 2013, p.39).

⁶ As studies of social movements indicate, the process of diffusion of collective grievances goes through several stages. First, individuals realize the existence of an unfair situation; then, they attribute responsibility to some political actor, and finally, they engage in contentious movements (CEDERMAN; GLEDITSCH; BUHAUG, 2013).

contexts compared to questions that did not mention any actor. In particular, it is important to note how Sunnis had a negative view of how state resources were distributed among all Syrians.

In addition to influencing how people frame socioeconomic inequality, politics plays a central role in generating inequalities in Syria. The political variable is fundamental for understanding the concentration of state power in the hands of a confessional minority (SAOULI, 2018). Political power was concentrated in the hands of the officers who led the coup in 1963, a coup that gradually extirpated the participation of the traditional oligarchies from power. When Hafez al-Assad came to power, he revised the state's relationship with the former Syrian bourgeois class. With Hafez, the regime sought to economically accommodate part of the Sunni urban establishment (mainly from Damascus) to take advantage of the economic potential of this arrangement to build a stronger state (HADDAD, 2012). In addition, it was essential to keep the Sunni community away from ideologies and protest movements, such as Islamist movements. In this way, the regime coopted some leaders to gain at least their consent and create a social situation that, although not desired by Sunni leaders, was preferable to social chaos. However, the cooptation of the Sunni elite was marked by latent tensions, as the regime sought to contain the influence of the Sunni economic elite (HADDAD, 2012).

In this context, a situation of balance emerged between these social groups, "anchored by common interests, but tied with mutual resentment" (SALAMANDRA, 2013, p.304-305, our translation). Each group saw itself as a victim of an unequal system and denounced the privileges of the other. On the one hand, the Alawites condemned the prosperity of urban Sunni families, which was a consequence of the political rise of urban oligarchies at the end of the 19th century and the mandate period (KHOURY, 1987). On the other hand, the Sunni middle class resented the privileged access of the Alawite elite to state resources and the smuggling networks and illegal activities tolerated by the Syrian State (SALAMANDRA, 2013, p.304-305).

Political privilege is not present only in high politics. It is possible to observe the local unfolding of this uneven system. Graph 12 shows that most respondents indicated that local authorities favored certain groups over others. It is important to note how Sunnis are unanimous in pointing out inequality⁷. When assessing responses from the confessional divide, it is possible to see that Sunnis are unanimous about the situation of inequality. Christians, for their part, present a more balanced view.

Some studies point to the discrepancy in how regional authorities dealt with the local demands of each community. For example, Christopher Phillips notes that some Sunnis resented that the government provided greater assistance for Alawite drought-affected properties than Sunni properties. In addition, Phillips notes that many Sunnis and Christians have resented that Alawite economic migrants have benefited from the government in Homs. (PHILLIPS, 2015, p.367). Thus, it is possible to see that the exclusionary logic that guides politics at the central level is reproduced at local levels, even though the composition of society in each city is distinct and particular.

Inequalities between groups are not limited to political and economic dimensions. An essential aspect, and not so studied, is cultural inequalities. Cultural inequality is about the difference in status regarding cultural expressions and individuals' perceptions about their group's societal position (BROWN; LANGER, 2008, p.42). This dimension is the one that showed the most significant polarization among the participants. In graphs 9 and 10 on the representation of religious groups in civic activities, this polarization is not so evident, even though it is possible to observe a tendency of Sunnis to have a more negative attitude. However, the picture changes significantly when the question explicitly mentions the government. Graph 11 shows an evident difference between the perception of Christians and Sunnis about the government's role in guaranteeing religious freedom for all groups.

⁷ The questionnaire did not ask the participants to take a political position openly. The intention was to separate, as far as possible, the answers from the discussions about the clash between the Assad regime and opposition groups after 2011. The concern was that the participants did not overexpose themselves. In addition, the political dimension was explored in other questions of the questionnaire that addressed political trust. However, it is possible to indirectly assess the participants' attitudes towards political actors, especially at the local level.

The responses show that some volunteers, especially the Sunnis, understand that the state adopted culturally discriminatory practices and did not value the cultural expression of all groups in the same way. This is in line with what empirical literature demonstrates. Some studies reveal that many Sunni Arabs considered the Ba'th regime's secularist project a form of cultural and religious discrimination against Sunni symbols (RABO, 2012). Nassif, for example, points out that among Sunni officers, there was a perception that the ethos of the armed forces was hostile to Sunni values and symbols. In addition, many Sunni officials resented the adoption of strange and offensive practices against Islam, such as the distribution of alcohol at social events and a disregard for Muslim religious practices (NASSIF, 2015, p.631). Although very limited, the answers of Sunni participants indicate that this dissatisfaction may be more widely shared.

Conclusion

The perception of inequalities is a crucial factor in the outbreak of the 2011 protests in Syria and the escalation of the sectarian conflict. Although the present study did not explore the mechanisms that triggered the conflict, the argument presented here maintains, in line with the recent literature on horizontal inequalities, that the perception of inequalities is a powerful mobilization resource when it overlaps with salient cultural identities (MUST, 2018, p.1). Although the study result cannot be generalized, the answers indicate the robustness of the model (as proposed by Langer *et al.*, 2017), which could be used in other cases.

The article argues that the perception of inequalities involves several factors which cannot be inferred only from objective indicators. For instance, changes in the perception of political and economic reality can result from several social and cognitive mechanisms that relate to how reality is represented. In this sense, the increase of expectations in a scenario of economic stagnation can cause frustration in some segments of society.

This research shows that, the difference in the assessment of inequality by people from different groups depends on which aspect of reality is being addressed. Some aspects had a greater degree of divergence between confessional groups, while other aspects were similarly perceived among individuals from different groups. Religious groups are heterogeneous, but that does not mean that grievances are equally distributed in society. It is possible to perceive a tendency for different assessments of social reality by each group. The overlapping of inequalities and cultural cleavages induces specific trends in the assessment of social reality by social groups.

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