THE RELIGIOUS ROOTS OF THE SYRIAN CONFLICT

**TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY PERSPECTIVES ON WAR,
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By Mark Tomass

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SYRIAN CONFLICT

THE REMAKING OF THE FERTILE
CRESCENT

Mark Tomass

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*In memory of the minds and bodies sacrificed on the altar of
what was once upon a time the Cradle of Civilization*

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PREFACE

This book is intended for Western college-educated readers seeking an alternative to the mainstream narrative describing the Syrian conflict. It is a broad interpretation of events offered by a Syrian native, born, raised, and educated in Aleppo, Syria. It accounts for key periods spanning the last two millennia that played a role in defining the current scene in Syria and the Fertile Crescent.

The Religious Roots of the Syrian Conflict is a new title for an old project that the author conceived in 1998 under the title “The Unmaking of the Nation-States of the Near East.” The motive for the initial project was to contemplate possible scenarios that would lead to the breakdown of Syria and Iraq into sectarian states parallel to the sectarian breakdown of Lebanon following its 1975–90 civil war.¹ Conceiving a repeat of the Lebanese scenario was inspired by the rise of the satellite-based al-Jazeera television channel in 1997. Al-Jazeera ushered in a new era in public discourse by surmounting state censorship and making privately held religious beliefs public. Its legitimization of sectarian rhetoric at the expense of secular nationalist ones gave the first sign that the region could be heading toward sectarian discord.² That trend was amplified by the emergence of subsequent new Internet-based media. The combined effects of the politicization of the Shīa identity after the establishment of the Shīa theocracy in Iran, the US invasion of Iraq that undermined Sunni power, and the prevalence of informal sectarian institutions further weakened the fragile secular institutions of the nation-states of the Fertile Crescent and paved the way for an intra-Muslim civil war.³

Much of the groundwork for this book on the formation of sects and the social psychological origins of religious conflict was done between 2009 and 2010 in preparation for a course entitled Exclusionist Religious Identities and Civil Conflict in the Middle East taught in Spring 2011.⁴ It aims to explain the importance and significance of religious and sectarian identification to the people of Geographical Syria in particular and of the Middle East at large. It employs historical narratives to outline the circumstances associated

with the formation of religious sects and uses ethnographic accounts to interpret the meanings that people attribute to their sectarian identities. Its methodology is based on the belief that shared experiences create a basis for comprehending the perspectives of others.

The author's descriptions and analyses draw from his direct observations, which have been gained through face-to-face interaction as well as documentary sources. On the basis of those observations, the author describes how sectarian identity affects an individual's interpretation of world events and his or her reactions to them. Experience has shown the author that Middle Easterners tend to speak candidly with those they trust. Such trust requires the kind of direct, repeated, and informal interaction that the author has had the privilege to experience.

Because this book's narrative regards religious identity as the dominant determinant of political allegiances in the Middle East, it does not tackle the presence of additional layers of conflict, especially a language-based nationalism that demarcates proponents of Arab, Armenian, Assyrian (Syrio-Aramaic), Kurdish, and Turkmen identities. Some readers may especially be dismayed by the absence of analysis of the Kurdish nationalist movement and its implication for the region of the Fertile Crescent. However, from the perspective of this book, the rise of Kurdish nationalism and the Kurd's strive for a separate state does not obscure the religious identity of the Kurds, or the manner in which that identity is viewed in the region by non-Kurdish Muslims or by non-Muslims. While at the contemporary stage of their history, the overwhelming numbers of Kurds are prioritizing their Kurdish over their sectarian identities, the autonomous Kurdish region in Iraq contains an array of religious groups that are susceptible to similar intra-Muslim discord that non-Kurdish Muslims are currently experiencing.

Moreover, because of the vast amount of literature that focuses on the Arab-Israeli conflict, this book does not engage that conflict directly. It provides a brief narrative of the formation of the Jewish identity and then confines its analyses to the implications of Israel's existence and military interventions in the region to the intra-Muslim sectarian conflict.

Finally, because of the sensitivity of the material discussed in this book, the author discloses that he is independent of any of the local or international propaganda outlets of the various forces that are engaged in the Syrian conflict and are influencing Western public opinion through news media, research centers, and think tanks. Furthermore, the author has not received any material or other form of support for the substance of this work from any Western or Middle Eastern political entity.

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