

Sectarian Framing in the Syrian Civil War

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Abstract

How do civilians respond to civil war narratives? Do they react to ethnic frames more strongly than to alternatives? Governments and rebels battle for hearts and minds as well as strategic terrain, and winning the narrative war can shift legitimacy, popular support, and material resources to the sympathetically framed side. We examine the effect of one-sided and competing war discourses on ordinary people's understandings of the Syrian civil war — a conflict with multiple narratives, but which has become more communal over time. We conduct a framing experiment with a representative sample of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in which we vary the narrative that describes the reasons for the conflict. We find that sectarian explanations, framed in isolation, strongly increase the importance government supporters place on fighting. When counterframed against competing narratives, however, the galvanizing effect of sectarianism drops and vanishes.

1 Introduction

How do civilians respond to competing civil war narratives? Rebels and governments go to great lengths to win not only battles over strategic terrain, but also propaganda wars over hearts and minds — themselves a strategic resource. Winning the battle of narratives helps warring factions rally their own support bases, demobilize their opponents, and attract foreign sympathy and material support (Berman and Matanock, 2015; Humphreys and Weinstein, 2008; Lyall, Blair and Imai, 2013; Sambanis, Schulhofer-Wohl and Shayo, 2012).

Civil wars are often fought along ethnic lines, or, at least, are described that way (Christia, 2012; Fearon, 2006; Kaufmann, 1996; Sambanis, 2001). Do people respond more strongly to war narratives framed around ethnicity than they do to alternatives? Possibly, but not unconditionally. Research on ethnic conflict suggests that violence increases the salience of communal identities, but it also highlights elite efforts to encode events in ethnic terms in order to build coalitions of support (Brubaker and Laitin, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2000). By emphasizing a favorable cleavage, framing the conflict in *ethnic* terms can benefit some factions at the expense of others, suggesting that ethnic appeals may not be equally compelling to all constituencies (Kalyvas, 2006, 2008; Varshney, 2003; Wilkinson, 2004, 2012).

How can warring factions convince civilians to adopt their preferred narrative — ethnic or otherwise? Public opinion research demonstrates the importance of controlling the framing of an issue for how mass publics perceive a problem and what to do about it. Foundational work showed that aptly-framed narratives could alter citizens' views dramatically by focusing their attention on different aspects of an issue (Chong and Druckman, 2007*b*; Kinder, 1998; Zaller, 1992). Later work, however, demonstrated that competitive framing, by exposing citizens to rival narratives, reduces people's susceptibility to framing effects (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a*; Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004). In the context of a civil war, the factions may try to propagate their preferred narratives unchallenged, but opponents have incentives to break the discursive monopoly with their own counternarratives.

The Syrian civil war is partly a contest of narratives, an important one of which is that it is *sectarian* at its core — a conflict between a popular supermajority of Sunnis fighting

a minority-dominated regime. Yet this claim competes for an audience with revolutionary appeals for democracy and counterrevolutionary denunciations of foreign meddling (Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds, 2015; Christia, 2013; Pearlman, 2016). The dogged efforts of the government and opposition to propagate their narratives suggest that neither side is willing to concede the conflict over the nature of the conflict (Horowitz, 1991).

We examine the effect of this narrative competition on popular perceptions of the war with a framing experiment embedded in a large-scale survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon — one of the first of its kind. The experiment varies the war narratives describing the conflict and whether they are presented in isolation or in competition with one another. We expect sectarian frames to induce Syrians to interpret the causes of the fighting in communal terms, but, given the narratives promoted by the warring factions, to affect government and opposition supporters differently. Yet we also anticipate that competing frames, by stimulating Syrians to think about the conflict in multiple ways, will limit the degree to which sectarian arguments can influence citizens' understandings of the war.

We find substantial framing effects for the sectarian narrative — but also important limits on the capacity of frames to move people. When presented alone, sectarian narratives cause government supporters, but not their opposition counterparts, to emphasize sectarian differences in the conflict, along with cognates such as minority rights and the role of religion in politics. When presented alongside one of its discursive competitors, however, the effect of the sectarian frame drops in magnitude and often vanishes. These findings suggest that sectarian narratives have a galvanizing effect on government supporters, consistent with regime propaganda efforts, but that exposure to competing arguments can counteract this effect. Meanwhile, we find little evidence that the other narratives alter Syrian views on their own, suggesting that people will not simply adopt whatever frame is placed before them.

This paper contributes to the literatures on civil war, ethnic conflict, and issue framing. It demonstrates that ordinary people may, indeed, respond more strongly to civil war narratives pitched in ethnic terms than to alternatives, but that these responses are neither automatic nor unconditional. Instead, it suggests that people's receptivity depends on their factional

preference in the war, and whether or not they have multiple frames of reference to consider. The literature on ethnic conflict often indicts ethnic entrepreneurs for activating identity categories for their own purposes, but this paper suggests that their ability to do so may be more limited than commonly supposed. While some elites may try to convince people to think about conflict in ethnic terms, strategic opponents have incentives to reorient the conflict around other, non-ethnic dimensions — and providing a viable discursive alternative may be enough to disrupt ethnic narratives.

Lastly, this paper extends the literature on issue framing to the extreme setting of a civil war. Nearly all framing studies are set in stable democracies and address issues such as welfare policy or international trade that do not approach the existential crises that people face when facing the violence of a civil war. This paper demonstrates that framing dynamics occur even on issues of extremely high salience — suggesting that, when frames move people, they do so by making the considerations they highlight applicable and not just accessible.

2 Conflict Framing

Violent conflict provokes impassioned struggles to explain why people are fighting, to justify the behavior of some actors, and to condemn the actions of others (Brass, 1997; Brubaker and Laitin, 1998; Fearon and Laitin, 2000). This battle of narratives is what Schattschneider (1960, 68) called the “choice of conflicts” and Horowitz (1991, 2) called the metaconflict over meaning — “the conflict over the nature of the conflict.” Winning the narrative war can help the antagonists win the physical one by shifting legitimacy, popular support, and material resources to the sympathetically framed side.

As a descriptive matter, many civil wars are fought along ethnic lines — or, more precisely, are summarized in those terms by participants and outside observers (Christia, 2012; Fearon, 2006; Sambanis, 2001; Sambanis, Schulhofer-Wohl and Shayo, 2012). Such a summary is a *choice* rather than a self-evident truth. As Kalyvas (2006, 78) observes, warring parties compete to frame their conflict in favorable terms in order to “mobilize the population around the cleavage dimension they represent, because they know that the population is divided in

a multitude of contradictory ways.” Efforts to pick a strategically beneficial cleavage from a wider menu of options — and to convince people that it is the most relevant one — are thus part and parcel to the conflict itself (Schattschneider 1960, ch. 4; cf. Chandra 2006, 2012*a*).

As such, attributing *ethnic* meaning to a civil war is part of the metaconflict over the relevant social cleavages. As Brubaker and Laitin (1998, 444) note, “the ‘ethnic’ quality of ethnic violence is not intrinsic to the act itself; it emerges through after-the-fact interpretive claims” that assert who is fighting whom. Ascription, if accepted by the people so ascribed, separates groups, hardens boundaries, and frames the conflict in existential terms (Fearon and Laitin 2000; Hardin 1995; Kaufmann 1996; but see Kalyvas 2008 for a dissenting view). Instrumental accounts of identity choice focus on the supply side of the story, however. Although elites may offer an explanation for the conflict, they must nonetheless convince ordinary people to accept their preferred interpretation (Hardin, 1995; Varshney, 2003).

Research in the literature on political communication demonstrates the importance of controlling narratives for how mass publics perceive issues (Chong and Druckman, 2007*b*; Kinder, 1998; Zaller, 1992). Numerous scholars note that elites fight to shape public definitions of problems and induce their audience to weigh some considerations more heavily than others (Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 145; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997, 577; Druckman and Lupia 2016, 20). In so doing, the competing sides “wage a war of frames because they know that if *their* frame becomes the dominant way of thinking about a particular problem, then the battle for public opinion has been won” (Nelson and Kinder, 1996, 1058).

Issue frames “define what the problem is and how to think about it” by summarizing a complex issue, curating considerations for relevance, and promoting a particular interpretation of the matter (Kinder 1998, 172; cf. Entman 2004, 5, 26; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997, 567–568; Sniderman and Theriault 2004, 135).¹ Applied to ethnic conflict and civil wars, frames lay out “master narratives” that provide “a handy way . . . to simplify, stream-

¹Issue frames, which focus on qualitatively different but potentially relevant considerations, should not be confused with *equivalency* frames, which use logically equivalent ways of making the same statement (Tversky and Kahneman 1981; cf. Druckman 2004).

line, and ultimately erase the war’s complexities” (Kalyvas 2006, 386; cf. Varshney 2007). Early work in the framing tradition showed that aptly chosen narratives could move people’s opinions dramatically, especially when framed in culturally resonant terms that are easy for the target audience to understand and apply (Chong and Druckman 2007*a*, 652; Entman 2004, 6, 14–15). Scholars have studied framing effects on a wide variety of issues, including civil rights, welfare policy, and international trade (see Appendix A.4 for examples).

Work on framing and cognition suggests that several psychological processes influence the extent to which a consideration affects people’s opinions.² First, it must be both *available* and *accessible* in memory — that is, people must understand the consideration and think about it when formulating their opinions. When sufficiently motivated, however, people also evaluate how *applicable* the consideration is to the broader issue. Framing can work through all of these processes: by making new considerations available, making available ones accessible, or convincing people to place greater weight on some considerations and less on others (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a,b*; Nelson, Oxley and Clawson, 1997). Although closely related to priming — indeed, the two terms are often used synonymously³ — framing does more than draw attention to a consideration: it also suggests a way to apply it to the broader issue (Druckman 2001*a*, 1043; Kinder 1998, 182; Nelson and Kinder 1996, 1073).

²In the literature on political communication, a “consideration” is “any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other” (Zaller, 1992, 40).

³Commenting on the literature’s inconsistent use of the terms, one major review explains that “framing effects and what communication scholars have called priming effects share common processes, and the two terms can be used interchangeably” (Chong and Druckman 2007*b*, 115; see also Chong and Druckman 2007*a*, 640, note 3; Entman 2004, 26–28). Theories of priming focus on the accessibility mechanism, although some experimental studies suggest that accessibility alone is insufficient to move opinions because people “may consider an accessible concept to be irrelevant or unimportant for the issue” (Nelson, Oxley and Clawson 1997, 236–237; cf. Druckman 2001*a*; Nelson, Clawson and Oxley 1997, 570–576).

From this perspective, civil war narratives that invoke ethnicity provide compelling frames by making considerations about communal conflict available and accessible — if they are not already — but also by encouraging people to place greater weight on inter-communal differences. Ethnic frames summarize complex and ambiguous wartime events in simple, discrete terms that are easy to apply and compatible with people’s “constrained epistemologies” (Hardin, 1995) and “everyday primordialism” (Fearon and Laitin, 2000). Public opinion research suggests that group referents require little sophistication to use and are easier to apply than more abstract concepts such as ideology, making them attractive appeals for a wide audience (Berinsky, 2009; Converse, 1964; Nelson and Kinder, 1996). Indeed, even when warring elites pick allies based on power considerations, they often feel compelled to justify those choices in identity terms that “have psychological and emotional import for the rank and file” (Christia, 2012, 6–7).

By privileging one form of social cleavage over others, warring factions may be able to use ethnic narratives instrumentally to attract supporters and resources, and, more generally, increase identification with their cause. If it were the *only* narrative to which people were exposed, it might actually sway them with its selective presentation of the conflict. But, to the degree that ethnic frames benefit some factions at the expense of others, rivals have strong incentives to contest the ethnic narrative and recast the struggle along other dimensions.

Initial work on framing effects, based on single-frame studies, suggested that people’s views were easily manipulated, but subsequent research highlights the fact that political discourse is rarely the monologue that a single frame implies. Competitive framing, a naturally-occurring component of political debate, may disrupt the capacity of one party or another to manipulate the mass public. A number of studies show that competing frames, by exposing people to rival narratives and a wider range of considerations, motivate citizens to evaluate those considerations consciously, locate their views on the issue, and reduce their susceptibility to framing effects (Chong and Druckman, 2007*a,b*; Druckman and Lupia, 2016; Kuklinski et al., 2001; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004).

In principle, then, ethnic narratives may encourage people to understand a conflict in

communal terms, but exposure to competing narratives may limit the extent to which people adopt ethnic claims. In practice, however, it may be hard to move people's opinions in the midst of a civil war. To date, most scholars have studied framing effects in stable, democratic polities with issues of modest salience; the canonical application asks Americans to assess a proposed white supremacist rally framed in terms of free speech or public order. A civil war, in contrast, is a high salience issue over which people may have already formed strong opinions, and people with strong predispositions are less receptive to frames that contradict their views (Chong and Druckman, 2007*b*, 111).

Despite the more extreme circumstances, we expect framing dynamics to apply in civil war settings, helping to explain the persistence with which the antagonists compete to disseminate their preferred war narratives. While ordinary citizens may prefer one *side* or another, they may be considerably less certain about the *reasons* for the fighting, especially since they observe no more than a small fraction of the events that make up the war — and the frames provide them with ready-made syntheses of the events they do not see. Each side therefore has incentives to frame the war around a favorable dimension in order to increase their supporters' commitment to the cause and demoralize their opponents.

In the context of the Syrian civil war, we anticipate that citizens exposed only to sectarian explanations of the conflict will adopt that frame of reference and use it to make sense of the civil war. Given the array of forces in that conflict, we expect government and opposition supporters to react differently to the sectarian frame, with the former most likely to adopt it and the latter most likely to reject it. Yet we also expect that people exposed to competing narratives will be less susceptible to sectarian framing effects as they bring more considerations to bear on the reasons for the fighting.

3 Framing the Syrian Civil War

The Syrian conflict is one of the most destructive civil wars of the modern era, killing a quarter to a half million people, displacing more than half the population, and creating one of the largest refugee crises since the second world war. Government and opposition forces

have disagreed about the causes of the conflict from the outset, but a common argument is that the fighting has become increasingly communal over time — pitting a government dominated by an “alliance of minorities” against a Sunni supermajority. Sectarian narratives of the war cast it as the latest installment of a broader Sunni–Shia struggle for dominance in the Middle East: the inevitable next chapter to the sectarian strife in Iraq, Bahrain, Lebanon, and Yemen, and tied to the regional rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran (Abboud, 2015; Droz-Vincent, 2014; Heydemann, 2013; Hokayem, 2013; Lynch, 2016; Matthiesen, 2013).

Despite the appeal of simplicity, the sectarian narrative is not the only one to circulate, nor is it even the most prominent. Localized protests against authoritarian rule began in earnest several months after the outbreak of the Tunisian and Egyptian uprisings, then spread around the country as protesters voiced an escalating series of demands for political reform (Brownlee, Masoud and Reynolds, 2015). Local committees attempted to channel the early demonstrations toward civically-oriented demands for democratic freedoms and good governance, as when a coalition of such groups proclaimed that “the first goal of the revolution is to change the regime in Syria” in pursuit of “the transition to a democratic and pluralistic state based on freedom and equality for Syrian citizens.”⁴

Like its counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world, the Syrian regime is the clear loser in the democracy-versus-dictatorship framing of the conflict. Unsurprisingly, then, the Syrian president moved quickly to change the narrative to one of fear and uncertainty by denouncing “sedition,” highlighting foreign conspiracies against Syria, and portraying the protesters as criminals, armed gangs, extremists, and terrorists (Lynch, 2016; Matthiesen, 2013). In his first public remarks on the uprising, the president belittled the “revolution” and declared that “Syria is facing a great conspiracy whose tentacles extend...inside the country.” He went on to accuse those conspirators of sectarian incitement by “[sending] masked people to neighborhoods with different sects living in them, knocking on people’s doors and telling each

⁴See “Vision of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) for a political solution in Syria,” <http://www.lccsyria.org/751> (accessed 12 May 2016).

that the other sect has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction.”⁵

Opposition activists responded by denouncing the government for “playing the invalid card of sectarianism,” stressing universalist appeals for “equality and citizenship,” and discouraging divisive rhetoric that could alienate minorities.⁶ Local committees attempted to subvert sectarian rhetoric by organizing demonstrations around the country under banners such as “freedom is my sect,” while the umbrella National Coalition stressed the opposition’s core narrative of “freedom and democracy for Syrians” and declared that “there is no room for sectarianism or discrimination on ethnic, religious, linguistic or any other grounds.”⁷

By and large, the opposition held to its pro-democracy and anti-sectarian narrative even as the government cracked down and the conflict militarized. The opposition-aligned Free Syrian Army’s statement of principles, for example, proclaimed that:

We believe in a free and democratic Syria where all Syrian citizens, regardless of their ethnicity, creed, religion or class shall enjoy equal rights and live in

⁵Some of the claims were either self-delusional, or, more likely, cynically self-aware, as when the president declared that critics “will say that we believe in [a] conspiracy theory. In fact there is no conspiracy theory. There is a conspiracy.” See “President Bashar al-Assad’s Speech to the Syrian Parliament, Wednesday, March 30, 2011,” <http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/speech-to-the-syrian-parliament-by-president-bashar-al-> (accessed 12 May 2016). Opposition sources, in turn, claimed that incitement *was* occurring, but at the hands of government provocateurs (Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 2016).

⁶See the “Vision of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC) for a political solution in Syria” (<http://www.lccsyria.org/2863>; accessed 12 May 2016).

⁷See, e.g., Ismail (2011), Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami (2016, ch. 4), and Droz-Vincent (2014, 54). For the quoted passages, see <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-components/syrian-national-council.html> and <http://en.etilaf.org/coalition-documents/declaration-by-the-national-coalition-for-syria> (accessed 17 May 2016).

liberty, justice and peace. . . We seek a peaceful end to Syria’s crisis but will fight if necessary to end the tyranny and dictatorship of the Assad regime.⁸

The rhetoric hardened over time, however. In addition to unity-oriented slogans such as “Syria in all its colors and sects,” and “neither Sunnism nor Alawism, we want freedom,” more chilling alternatives, rumored to be the work of government provocateurs, began to surface, such as the infamous “Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave.”⁹ The inflow of foreign forces, mostly Sunnis on behalf of the opposition and Shiites on behalf of the government, further contributed to the vitality of the sectarian narrative (Lynch, 2016).

Hence, an uprising that began with peaceful demands for democratic freedoms met with a government response that denounced its opponents as extremists and foreign agents. The conflict’s rhetoric became more sectarian over time, but none of the narratives have achieved hegemonic status. Ultimately, we seek to understand how these competing narratives affect how ordinary Syrians make sense of the war. In particular, we expect sectarian arguments to affect people in different ways, with government sympathizers most receptive to them and opposition supporters more likely to reject them. Yet we also expect that exposure to multiple narratives will reduce the influence of the sectarian frame by increasing the number of considerations people bring to bear when trying to understand the conflict.

⁸See “Free Syrian Army: Statement of Principles” (<http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/50243?lang=en>, accessed 30 January 2017).

⁹See Ismail (2011, 543) for the former slogans (our translations differ slightly). For the latter, see Fabrice Balanche, “The Alawi community and the Syrian crisis,” *Middle East Institute*, 14 May 2015 (<http://www.mei.edu/content/map/alawi-community-and-syria-crisis>; accessed 12 May 2016).

4 Data and Methods

As a practical matter, large swaths of Syria proper are inaccessible, so we study the effect of the war narratives among displaced Syrians in neighboring Lebanon, where some 1.5 million people have taken refuge. Sampling Syrians in Lebanon is challenging for conceptual and operational reasons, however. We use the term “refugee” inclusively to refer to Syrians displaced by the civil war, regardless of whether or not they are registered formally with the United Nations (UNHCR). This target population in Lebanon nests, in turn, within a wider conceptual population of displaced Syrians in the Middle East and the rest of the world.

4.1 Refugee Sample

Refugees constitute a transient population for which there is no sample frame. UNHCR has registered roughly two-thirds of the displaced Syrians in Lebanon and regularly issues updated data on the spatial location of the registered refugees. The displaced population congregates in space, regardless of registration status, partly for family reasons and partly due to housing costs. We use area sampling techniques to extrapolate from the UNHCR data to locate refugee households. We sample from each province (*muhafazas*) in proportion to the number of refugees registered with UNHCR, and then sample localities within districts (*qadas*) where displaced Syrians concentrate. Enumerators used random walk patterns within sampled neighborhoods to select households, and then randomized within households according to the next adult birthday. Ultimately, we drew a sample of 2000 adult subjects between 19 May and 12 June 2015 with a response rate of 91 percent.¹⁰

Although this design yields a reasonable sample in light of the practical limitations, it is not perfectly representative of the population (compare Humphreys and Weinstein,

¹⁰Beirut-based Information International drew the sample based on data from UNHCR. Enumerators solicited interviews from randomly drawn household members 20-years old or older, skipping households with no resident Syrians, and included one follow-up visit in case the selected member was not home before declaring a unit non-response.

2008, 443–445). First, it almost certainly undersamples Syrians at either end of the wealth spectrum: the most destitute and transient Syrians are not easily located, while wealthier Syrians do not live in the low-income neighborhoods where registered refugees concentrate. Second, as expected with a population holding traditional gender views, we undersample women — who constitute 40 percent of the sample — due to about 10 percent of householders demanding that a male participate in place of a female. The replacements tend to be older and less educated, but are otherwise similar to their peers.¹¹ Lastly, security constraints imposed by the Lebanese army prevented us from sampling in the border town of Aarsal.

Although there are few benchmarks with which to work, Appendix A.1 provides descriptive overviews of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon, against which the sample compares favorably. Hence, although we focus on the internal validity of the experiment, we believe that this sample allows us to make cautious generalizations to the underlying population of displaced Syrians. Recent research demonstrating the generalizability of treatment effects in purely convenience samples, particularly for framing studies, lends further confidence that our findings may travel as well (Mullinix et al., 2015).

4.2 Background Descriptives and Factional Support

Overall, the sample leans poor, uneducated, Sunni Arab, and religious — all consistent with what we know about the war’s refugees (see Appendix A.1). Only 20 percent of the sample has a secondary school education. We proxy material well-being with household room

¹¹More precisely, we sampled all *households* randomly, but 11 percent of them prevented us from completing the randomization *within* the household: 5 percent are males who entered after a female relative refused to participate, while 6 percent are males who entered after a male refused to allow a female relative to participate. Other than being older and less educated, we find surprisingly few imbalances between these replacement males and the rest of the sample in terms of location and length of time in Lebanon, sect and degree of religiosity, political engagement, and factional sympathies in the war.

density, with a median of 2.5 residents per bedroom — 50 percent more crowded than homes in Syria. Sunni Arabs predominate among the refugees; 12.5 percent of the sample belonging to one of Syria’s minority communities (Kurds, non-Sunni Muslims, and Christians) against roughly 30 percent of the polity. Personal religious practices are similar to those found elsewhere in the Arab world, as are degrees of political engagement.

In simplified terms, 39 percent of respondents support the sitting government, 53 percent sympathize with the rebels, and the remainder express no preference. To measure factional leanings, we asked subjects to rank their top three choices from a list of six groups: the Free Syrian Army (FSA), the Syrian government, Syrian Islamist groups, foreign Islamist groups, Kurdish groups, and Hizballah.¹² People’s first choices split almost entirely between majority support for the FSA — which respondents used as a catch-all category for the rebels — and a substantial minority in favor of the government. People supporting the Kurdish groups invariably expressed support for the government, so we group them together. About half of the opposition supporters cited Islamists with their second choice, and half (who we call “Nationalists”) did not. As we demonstrate later, both groups responded similarly to the treatments, so we group them together in the main analysis.

People’s factional preferences are consistent with qualitative assessments of the government and rebel support bases, increasing our confidence in the sample (cf. Abboud, 2015; Hokayem, 2013; Pearlman, 2016; Yassin-Kassab and Al-Shami, 2016). Appendix A.2 reports a baseline descriptive model of support for the Syrian government. In short, there are no major surprises in these data: minorities and people of higher socioeconomic status support the government, while politically engaged and religiously devout people favor the opposition.

¹²The question reads: “I’m going to read you a list of some of the groups fighting in the conflict right now. In general, with which one do you sympathize most? How about second-most? And how about third-most?” We chose this format because of the complexity of the choice set and to limit non-response.

4.3 Experimental Design

Ultimately, we seek to understand how the different war narratives spun by the government and the opposition affect how people view the causes of the conflict. To do so, we expose subjects to randomized descriptions of the war, mirroring established procedures in the experimental literature on issue framing (compare examples in Appendix A.4). Control group subjects received an innocuous, unframed prompt:

People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways.

Immediately following the control prompt, subjects in the treatment conditions received a randomized framing of the conflict. Those treated with a *single frame* in isolation heard:

People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways.

For example, many people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME*.

where *FRAME* (with its shorthand label) was one of the following:

- “Sunnis and Alawis” (*Sectarianism*),
- “democracy and dictatorship” (*Democracy*),
- “religion and secularism” (*Secularism*), or
- “foreign forces fought on Syrian soil” (*Foreigners*).

Finally, we contrasted the *Sectarianism* frame against a competitor from the the above list. Subjects treated with *competing frames* (one of which was always *Sectarianism*) heard:

People have explained the Syrian conflict to us in a number of different ways. For example, many people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME 1*, and a few people have described it as a conflict between *FRAME 2*.

Note that we randomized the *many people* versus *a few people* quantifiers, but found little evidence that people reacted to them; as such, we pool them to conserve statistical power when comparing the frames. In total, we have one control group, four single frame conditions, and three competing frame groups, for a total of eight experimental conditions. As Appendix A.3 confirms, these conditions balance across the pre-treatment covariates.

The treatment conditions attempt to capture some of the most widely used — and familiar — narrative tropes about the Syrian conflict while also keeping them short, to the point, and non-inflammatory. In particular, sensitivity concerns prompted us to avoid harsh polemics in the frames. As such, the treatments are milder versions of the more forceful narratives repeatedly deployed by the government and opposition over the course of the war.¹³

Theoretically, we are most interested in the frame that cites a conflict between “Sunnis and Alawis;” although there are other communal groups in Syria, this formulaic statement is common shorthand to invoke sectarianism. The “democracy and dictatorship” frame draws on opposition-friendly language dating back to the early days of the uprising, while “religion and secularism” corresponds to the rising prominence of Islamist groups as the conflict progressed. Finally, early government rhetoric about foreign conspiracies took on greater relevance as foreign funds and fighters poured into Syria in support of, or in opposition to, the rebellion — a narrative we capture with the “foreign forces” frame.

We are interested in how the content of the frames affects how people explain the fighting — and, particularly, how a sectarian narrative of the conflict influences their reasoning. People sometimes encounter these frames alone, and sometimes alongside each other. The single frame corresponds, roughly, to narratives propagated by centrally controlled media outlets (Hardin, 1995, ch. 6), or conversations between like-minded individuals in the absence of opposing viewpoints (Druckman and Nelson, 2003). The competing frames correspond to the wider debate within Syrian society about the country’s descent into civil war.

¹³Ethically, we did not want to subject people to the derogatory slurs that pepper extreme versions of sectarian rhetoric — particularly those targeted by such slurs. More generally, we abstained from provocative wording to avoid compromising the survey’s tone of impartiality in order to protect our enumerators’ safety and minimize the risk of interview break-offs.

4.4 Outcome Measures

The core outcome measure asks subjects to assess, on a four-point scale of importance, why people are fighting in the conflict. The battery includes eight reasons:¹⁴

- Democratic freedoms,
- Sectarian differences,
- International rivalries,
- The role of religion in politics,
- Minority rights,
- Terrorist activity,
- Declining living standards, and
- Corruption.

Following existing practice in the framing literature (cf. Appendix A.4), some of the reasons listed in the battery — e.g., *democratic freedoms* and *sectarian differences* — are clearly connected to the experimental frames. Other battery items, however, have no direct connection to the treatments. For example, *declining living standards* and *corruption*, although cited in the protests early in the uprising, began to fall out of the central narrative as the conflict militarized. We include these items to discriminate between reasons that are plausibly connected to the frames and those that are not.

Conceptually, the outcome battery measures the importance people place on various factors behind the fighting — that is, what the war is about. Convincing people to view the war in a favorable way is part of the contest to mobilize hearts and minds. The government and opposition have struggled to win over popular support bases, whether to recruit fighters, encourage civilian collaboration, or simply to deter defections. To do so, they have tried repeatedly to frame the war in ways that increase the salience of factors favorable to their

¹⁴The question wording reads: “Why do you think people are fighting in the conflict? Let me list off some possibilities. For each of them, please tell me if you think it is very important, somewhat important, not very important, or not important at all.”

own side, and unfavorable to their opponents. The outcome battery measures a number of these factors, including items that have, and have not, remained central to the war of frames. The battery helps us measure perceptions of what the war is about, which the antagonists labor to influence in order to win the metaconflict and rally people to their cause.

To substantiate the wide gulf in narratives between opposition and government supporters, Figure 1 plots the mean responses in the control group on each of the outcome variables. As an observational baseline, opposition supporters stress democratic freedoms, declining living standards, and corruption, while government sympathizers highlight international rivalries and terrorist activities. On average, then, ordinary Syrians adopt views of the conflict that are consistent with the narratives of their preferred factions and not their opponents.

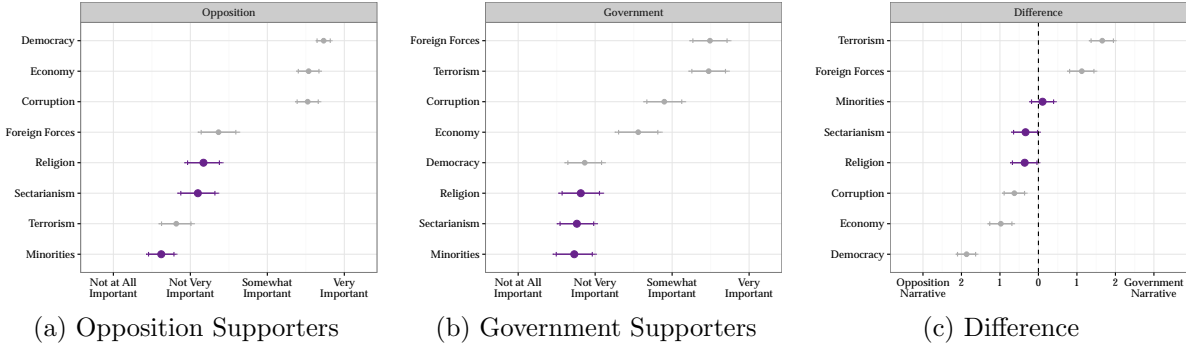


Figure 1: Importance of various factors for the fighting (control group). Plots depict sample means with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

Intriguingly, neither government nor opposition supporters cite sectarian differences, religious politics, or minority rights as central components of the conflict. They are, in fact, the three *least* important items for government sympathizers, and three of the bottom four for their opposition counterparts. This lack of importance in the control group suggests that, in the absence of explicit prompting, people are *not* focused on the sectarian aspects of the fighting — consistent with arguments that communalism is an elite-driven phenomenon.

5 Effects of Sectarian Framing

If sectarian narratives affect how Syrians understand their civil war, we should observe the sectarian frame, by itself, altering the importance that subjects place on sectarian differences as a cause of the fighting. *How* it affects perceptions of importance may not, however, be the same for all Syrians. Government narratives that invoke sectarianism tend to highlight the threat of extremism, especially to minorities. In contrast, the mainstream opposition has repeatedly denounced government efforts to “play the sectarian card” and tried to downplay sectarian differences. As such, we should see different — and possibly countervailing — reactions to the sectarian frame between government and opposition constituencies.

5.1 Narrative Frames and Their Outcomes

To begin, we test the effect of the sectarian frame by modeling the importance that government and opposition supporters place on sectarian differences according to the treatment frames, adjusting for the baseline covariates described in Appendix A.1. In general, we use ordinary least squares on normalized outcome variables to express estimated effects in standard deviation units, although ordered categorical models yield similar inferences. Here, we plot the core marginal effects for clarity; for completeness, we report full regression estimates for all models in Appendix A.8.¹⁵ Accordingly, Table 7 in that appendix reports the coefficient estimates, from which Figure 2 distills the marginal effects of the sectarian frame when presented *Alone* and alongside the competing frames about *Democracy*, *Secularism*, and *Foreigners* fighting in Syria.

Consistent with the wide gaps in the government and opposition narratives, we do observe

¹⁵We discuss the split-sample estimates in the main text for simplicity and ease of interpretation. For completeness, Table 12 in Appendix A.8 reports estimates for all outcomes regressed in the full sample on a fully interactive specification that includes all *Government* \times *FRAME* terms to capture the heterogeneous effects between government and opposition supporters.

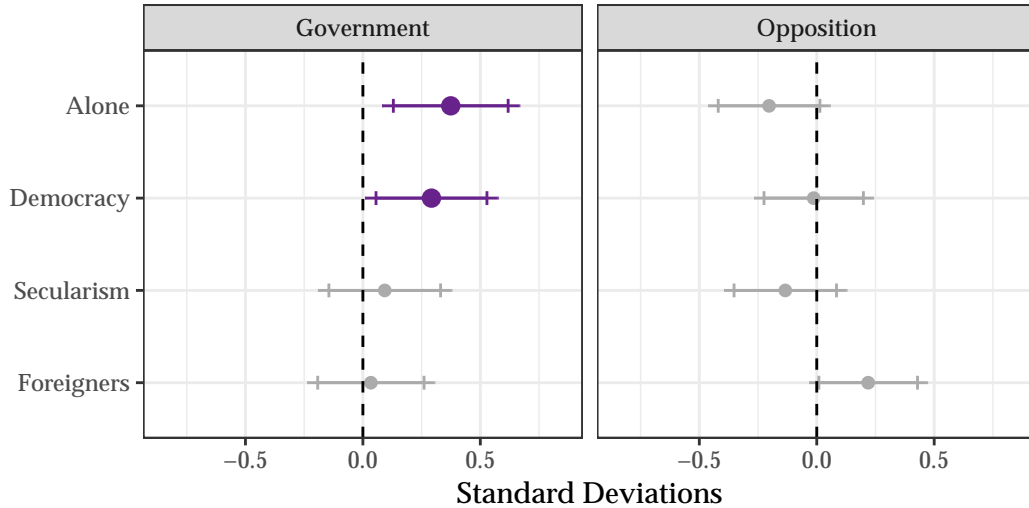


Figure 2: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the importance of sectarian differences when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

systematically different responses to the sectarian frame. Figure 2 shows that, when framed alone, the sectarian narrative causes government supporters to place *greater* importance on sectarian differences by nearly 0.4 standard deviations. For context, this effect is comparable in size to the gap between the least and best educated government sympathizers, and to the baseline difference between government and opposition supporters.

As expected, the sectarian frame affects opposition sympathizers very differently. The point estimate suggests that the sectarian frame, presented alone, causes these subjects to place *less* importance on sectarian differences, consistent with opposition efforts to denounce sectarian incitement. Yet the observed effect is half the magnitude of the government effect (-0.2) and is imprecisely estimated ($p = .13$). Contrary to our expectations, the preponderance of evidence that we report below suggests that the weak opposition effect is actually a true null rather than an underpowered result.

In isolation, the sectarian frame moves people — or at least government supporters. Yet Figure 2 also shows that the effect of the sectarian narrative *vanishes* when presented alongside two of the three alternative frames: *Secularism* and *Foreigners* fighting in Syria. Although moved by sectarian arguments in isolation, government supporters did not move

at all when those arguments were paired directly with alternate explanations of the conflict. Competing narratives eliminate the effect of the sectarian frame in two of the three instances, but not, however, when the counterframe invokes *Democracy* versus dictatorship. Although the marginal effect of sectarianism drops by about 25 percent when paired against the *Democracy* frame, it does not disappear — a point to which we return below.

In contrast to the theoretically anticipated effect of the sectarian frame, we find little evidence that the other, non-sectarian narratives altered the importance placed on sectarian differences. Moreover, we find virtually no effects of these latter frames on the outcomes that are closest conceptually to them (Figure 3). We estimate all null effects for the *Democracy* frame on the “democratic freedoms” outcome, all nulls for the *Foreigners* frame on “international rivalries,” and mostly nulls for the *Secularism* frame on “religion in politics.” Even the one “detectable” marginal on the latter appears to be a false positive: it is both difficult to interpret and disappears after we correct for multiple comparisons (Appendix A.5).

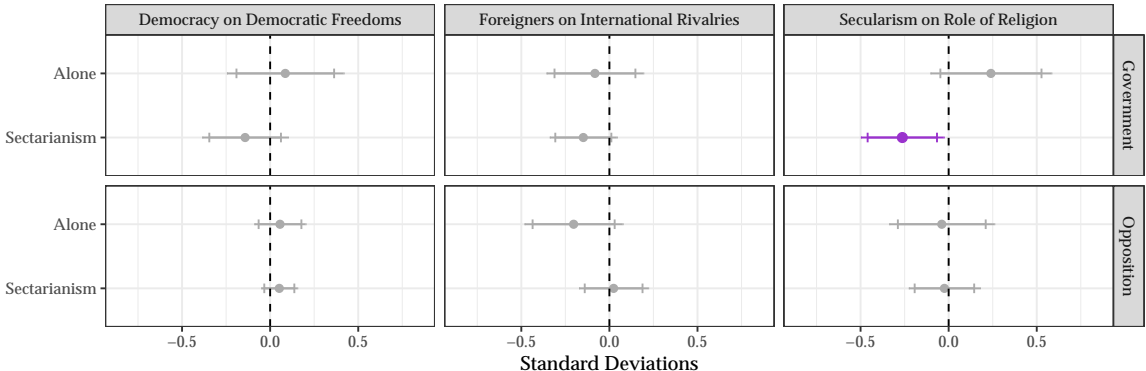


Figure 3: Marginal effect of the non-sectarian frames on the importance of their closest conceptual outcome matches when presented *Alone* and alongside the sectarian frame. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

In sum, the sectarian narrative pushes people as anticipated — greater emphasis on sectarian differences for government supporters, less for the opposition — while the other narratives fail to move people. These findings highlight two takeaway points. First, sectarian discourse does work, but only for some people, and only when sheltered from discursive competitors. Second, the non-sectarian frames fail to move people, despite being well-known

tropes in the competition of narratives; simply making a consideration accessible is not enough to induce movement. Put together, these points suggest that elites are more constrained in their ability to frame than we commonly suppose.

5.2 Sectarianism Ramified

Sectarian differences are one manifestation of sectarianism — but, conceptually, not the only one. To the degree that people perceive a sectarian conflict in Syria, they should also perceive it as a conflict over *something*. In addition to the communal conflict, sectarian discourse also invokes the role of religion in politics, a close cognate that imputes religious content to communal differences. Similarly, sectarian conflict implies a struggle over institutions through which to channel demography into political power.

We repeat the same modeling procedures as before, but swap in the *religion in politics* and *democratic freedoms* assessments. Tables 8 and 9 of Appendix A.8 report the coefficient estimates, and the first two columns of Figure 4 summarize the marginal effects of the sectarian frame. In short, the results for these cognate outcomes closely track those for *sectarian differences*. We see the same patterns as before among government supporters: a large, positive effect for sectarianism framed *Alone* that attenuates when counterframed against *Democracy* and vanishes when pitched against the *Secularism* and *Foreigners* narratives. Also as before, we observe no detectable treatment effects among opposition supporters, whether for the focal *Sectarianism* frame or any of its competitors (cf. Appendix A.5).

We repeat these procedures for each of the outcome variables in the *Fight* battery and find largely consistent patterns across them, as reported in Figure 4. First: the nulls. We can detect almost no effects of the sectarian frame among opposition supporters on any of the outcomes. Further, even the stray “detectables” disappear after correcting for multiple comparisons (Appendix A.6). We again find little evidence that the non-sectarian frames influence the importance people place on the battery outcomes (Appendix A.5). These *null* findings demonstrate that people do not move their views on just anything framed for them.

In contrast, the sectarian narrative, when framed alone, causes government supporters

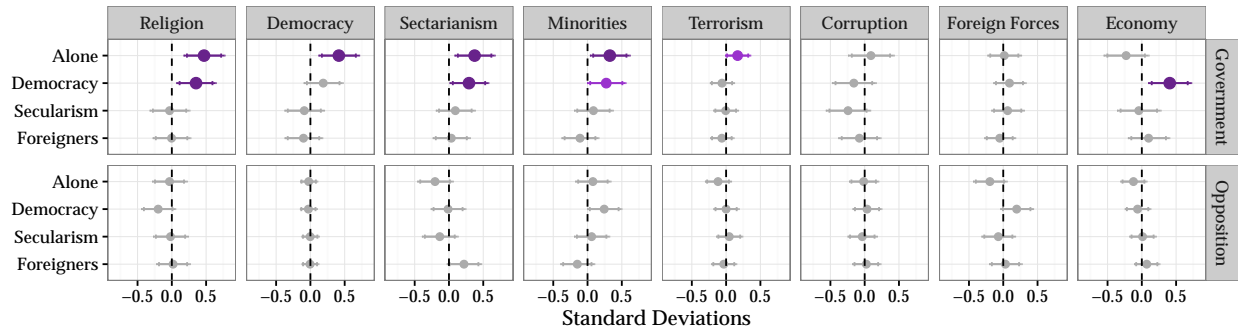


Figure 4: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on each of the outcomes in the *Fight* battery when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

to increase the importance they place on most of the *Fight* battery. The effect is detectably positive on five of the eight outcomes; of the remaining three, two — corruption and the economy — are more conceptually distant from communal conflict than are the other battery items. Meanwhile, we see much the same pattern of competitive framing as described previously: the effect of sectarianism attenuates when presented alongside the *Democracy* frame, and vanishes when contrasted with the *Secularism* or *Foreigners* narratives.

5.3 Sectarianism to Rally Supporters

Unlike their opposition counterparts, government supporters react to the sectarian frame by placing greater importance on sectarian differences — but also on a number of other reasons for the fighting as well. What could explain these patterns? One possibility is that the *Fight* battery taps into a syndrome of related concerns for government sympathizers, but not opposition supporters. In line with this interpretation, the battery outcomes are much more consistent internally for the former than for the latter.

As Figure 5 reveals, Cronbach’s α for government supporters is twice that of their opposition counterparts, as well as above the conventional .70 threshold for scale reliability. Likewise, the average inter-item correlation for the former is some four times that of the latter’s estimate. Nor are these between-faction differences obscuring meaningful variation among sub-groups. Estimates for these summary measures are virtually identical for oppo-

sition nationalists and Islamists, and are similarly close for government supporters from the minority communities and from the Sunni Arab majority.

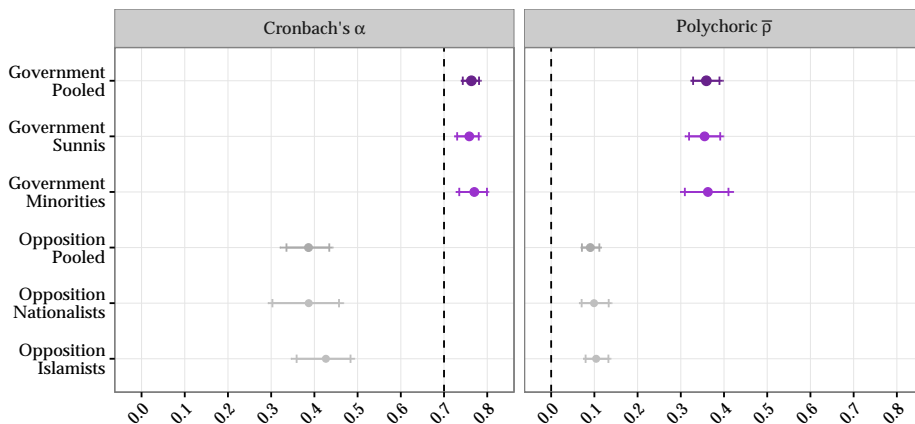


Figure 5: Cronbach’s α and mean polychoric correlation coefficient for *Fight* battery. Plots depict point estimates with bootstrapped 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

This disparity in internal consistency suggests that the two sides see the outcomes in qualitatively different ways — with government supporters thinking less about the importance of fighting over specific aspects of the conflict and more about the importance of *fighting at all*. To confirm this intuition, we examine the battery’s first and second moments by distilling each subject’s normalized mean and variance over the eight outcomes.¹⁶

In the control group, the battery average is about a quarter of a standard deviation *lower*

¹⁶More precisely, we calculate the mean and variance over the eight items for each subject i and then normalize according to the full sample values to express units as standard deviations. Doing so leads to the semantic oddity of discussing the standard deviations of the normalized variances — a mind-bender, to be sure, but one we think is worth tolerating for the sake of consistent units of measurement. Note that using the full battery is conservative insofar as it includes at least two outcomes — “economy” and “corruption” — that are conceptually far removed from sectarianism and whose inclusion attenuates the relationship toward zero. Unsurprisingly, the battery average correlates strongly with the first principal component — Pearson’s $r = .49$ when including all outcomes, and $r = .86$ when removing the “economy” and “corruption” outcomes. The latter behaves similarly to

for government supporters — consistent with qualitative accounts of a more motivated opposition. At base, then, government supporters appear to place less importance on the fighting than do their counterparts in the opposition, putting an extra burden on the government to motivate its support base. If sectarian discourse actually rallies people, we should observe two types of variation in the battery data. First, the sectarian frame should increase the overall importance of fighting. Second, it should decrease the variance as people’s responses pile more uniformly on the “important” side of the scale.

We model the battery mean and variance as before, reporting the coefficient estimates in Table 10 of Appendix A.8 and distilling the marginal effects of the sectarian frame into Figure 6. Consistent with the above expectations, the sectarian narrative, framed *Alone*, increases the mean importance of fighting while decreasing the variance among government supporters by nearly half a standard deviation each. As before, these effects attenuate when counterframed against *Democracy*, and vanish when presented alongside the *Secularism* and *Foreigners* frames. The sectarian narrative moves opposition supporters tenuously at best, and the other frames have only minimal influence (cf. Appendix A.5). Put together, these findings suggest that sectarian narratives rally government supporters when they are the only discourses offered — but lose much of their appeal when competing against other narratives.

5.4 The Limits of Framing

Why did the sectarian narrative affect government supporters but leave their opposition counterparts largely untouched? A partial explanation begins with the asymmetric use of sectarian discourse among the warring parties. Sprinkled in with its denunciations of foreign conspiracies and criminal gangs, government propaganda efforts have highlighted the threat of religious extremism and its own role as protector of Syria’s minorities. Notwithstanding extremist rhetoric, to which we return in a moment, the mainstream opposition has repeatedly denounced sectarianism and efforts to scare minorities into submission. The government

the simple average when used as a dependent variable.

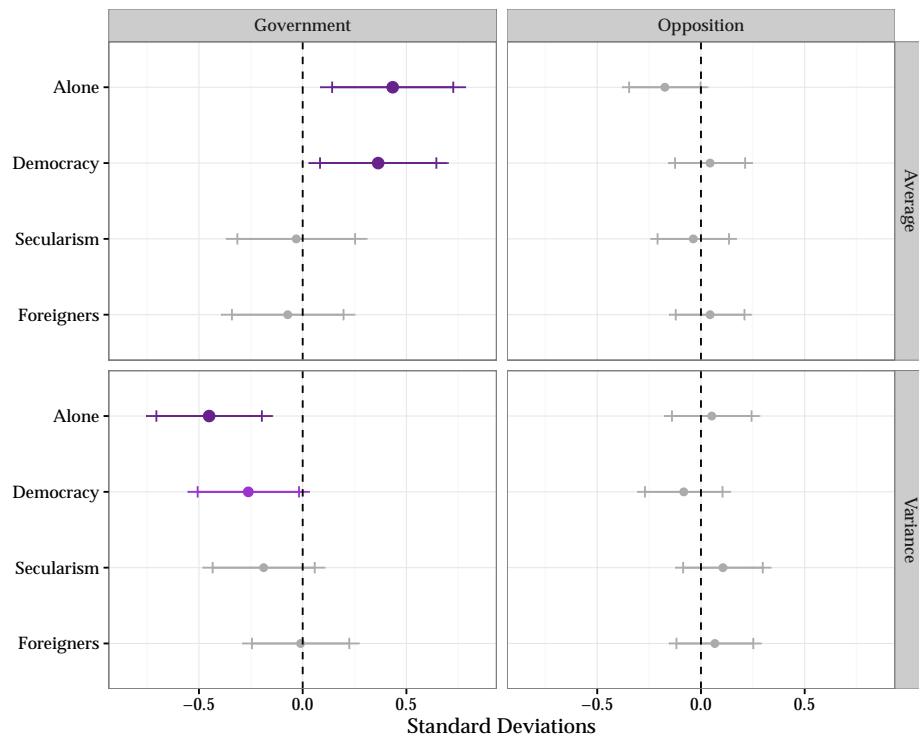


Figure 6: Marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the *Fight* battery average and variation when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

has used sectarianism to rally its base, while the opposition, for the most part, has not.

The governing coalition in Syria is often characterized as an alliance of minorities — possibly accurate for elites, but not at the mass level. Minorities are themselves a minority in the government support base: in our sample, there are nearly three Sunni Arabs that sympathize with the government for every minority that does so. Despite their confessional differences, these sub-constituencies respond to the *Fight* battery in similar ways.

Government supporters of both types react similarly to sectarian discourse, as Table 11 in Appendix A.8 and Figure 7 demonstrate. Other than differences in precision due to limited sample sizes, Sunni Arabs and minorities are virtually identical in their response to the sectarian narrative when framed *Alone*: an increase of nearly half a standard deviation on the battery mean, and a drop of similar magnitude on the variance. As before, this effect vanishes when counterframed against *Secularism* and *Foreigners*. The main distinction is that the effect of sectarian discourse disappears among minorities when framed alongside the democracy narrative; the democracy anomaly identified previously concentrates among government supporters from the majority Sunni Arab community. Even then, that anomaly mostly disappears after we correct for multiple comparisons (cf. Appendix A.6).

Sectarian narratives induce the government support base to see the fighting in sectarian terms. Yet these frames also affect their views on other aspects of governance, including minority rights, the public role of religion, and democratic freedoms — because they are additional ramifications of sectarian conflict in Syria. Government sympathizers find themselves on the wrong normative side of the uprising’s democracy versus dictatorship narrative by supporting a regime with an abysmal record on human, civil, and political rights — one reason why the government competes so hard to convince Syrians to put more weight on other, less damaging considerations.

Sunni Arab supporters have reason to feel particularly ambivalent. As members of the demographic majority, a shift to democratic governance benefits them in strictly communal terms. Yet, to the degree that they are wealthier and more secular than their peers in the opposition, majority rule may look worrisomely like an extreme form of *majoritarian* rule.

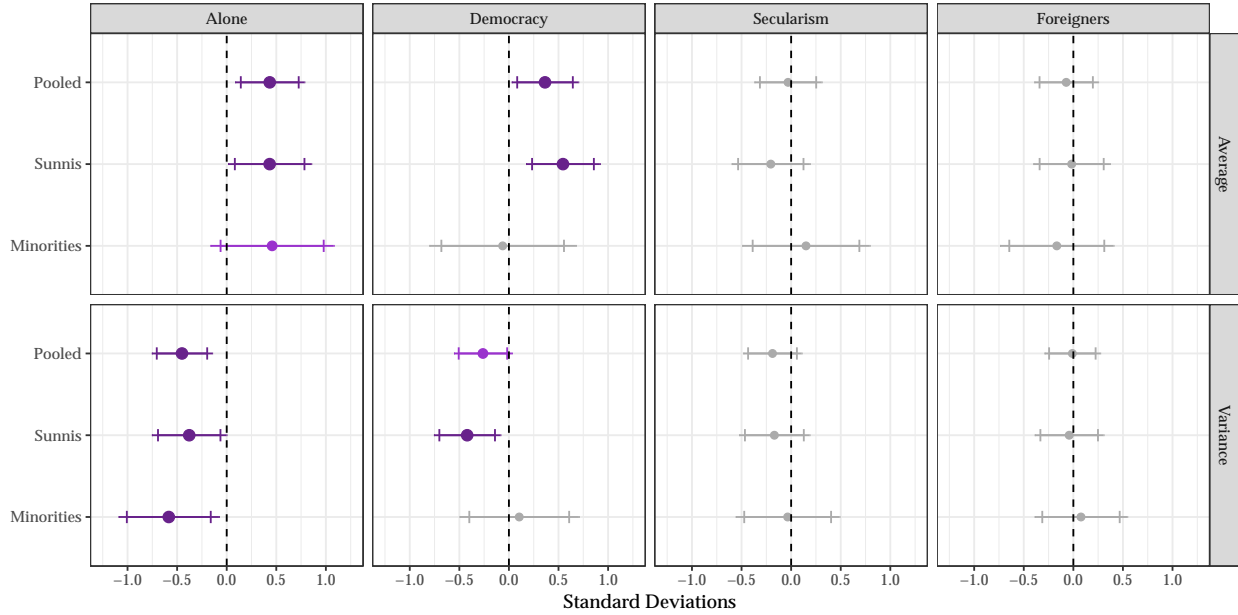


Figure 7: Government supporters only: marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the *Fight* battery average and variation when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

As such, they may respond to regime discourse that highlights Sunni religious extremism — even as it implicates their own community and calls their loyalty into question.

In contrast, opposition-aligned Sunni Arabs do not respond to the sectarian frame, consistent with Zaller’s (1992, 77) observation that “some people may possess considerations that are so consistent... that the admission of additional considerations should have no effect.” Further analysis demonstrates that this null effect is not an artifact of pooling disparate opposition factions together: we observe the same non-finding among opposition nationalists as well as Islamists (see Appendix A.7). This *lack* of response suggests that the harsh rhetoric and behavior of jihadi groups such as ISIS do not deflect ordinary Syrians from the uprising’s original, pro-democracy narrative — an outcome as opposed by the jihadis as it is by the regime. Instead of building a support base for themselves, the jihadis seem, by word and deed, to be galvanizing support, however reluctant, for the government.

Two core points emerge from this experiment. First, sectarianism can indeed rally people in a civil war, but only under limited conditions. In Syria, our evidence suggests that only one

side of the war responds to sectarian rhetoric, and even then, does so only when confronted by the sectarian narrative in isolation. For opposition supporters, sectarianism is an illegitimate smear on their revolution, but for government sympathizers, it is a familiar and superficially plausible explanation for the war. In the absence of competing considerations to stimulate evaluation of the sectarian claim, government supporters adopt it; with alternatives, they reconsider the superficial explanation and become less susceptible to sectarian discourse.

The second point builds upon the first. These data demonstrate not the *ease* with which elites can manipulate their followers by framing events sympathetically, but rather the *limits* of framing. The sectarian frame affected only some of the people some of the time, and the other frames affected no one. It was *not* the case that we could tell subjects about democracy and have them parrot democracy back at us, or that the war is about foreign intervention and expect to hear about international conspiracies. Early contributions to the framing literature expressed anxiety at the apparent ease with which people's views could be moved by a well-chosen frame. Our findings buttress recent work that offers a cautionary corrective: elites have less leeway to mold the public than we sometimes suppose (Druckman, 2001 *a,b*; Druckman and Nelson, 2003; Kuklinski et al., 2001; Sniderman and Theriault, 2004).

6 Conclusion

Since its origins in a peaceful uprising against authoritarian rule, the Syrian conflict has become one of the most destructive and intractable civil wars of the modern era. In addition to the fighting that has killed up to half a million people and displaced millions more, there is a metaconflict over the meaning of the conflict itself — is it a struggle for democratic freedoms, is it foreign meddling in Syrian affairs, is it a sectarian war, or is it something else entirely? Judging from their dogged efforts to frame the conflict in terms sympathetic to their own side, neither the government nor the opposition view the war narrative as a semantic nicety. By justifying some actions and actors, and villifying others, winning the narrative war helps in waging the physical one by rallying popular support bases to the cause, demobilizing opponents, and attracting material support from abroad.

The opposition’s core narrative of a struggle between dictatorship and democracy met with immediate government counterclaims about terrorism and foreign conspiracies. Over time, the war’s sectarian undertones became overtones as the government moved to shore up support among minorities, the opposition denounced efforts to “play the sectarian card,” and mounting atrocities against civilians took on a communal tone. Melodramatic accounts sometimes pitch the war as the latest installment of a primordial, region-wide struggle between Sunnis and Shiites. Yet the repeated invocations and denunciations of sectarianism — to galvanize supporters, or else peel them away from opponents — suggest a more instrumental motivation on the part of elites. For this rhetoric to have substantive repercussions on the conflict, however, at least some ordinary Syrians must come to *accept* this framing — that the relevant cleavage is, in fact, sectarian, rather than one of the alternatives.

Issue framing offers one plausible explanation for how war narratives influence ordinary people’s understandings of the conflict in which they find themselves. By focusing attention on some aspects of the issue and downplaying others, aptly-framed narratives can orient people’s thinking on a problem and possible solutions to it. But while early studies showed that a single frame, presented in isolation, could move people’s opinions in dramatic fashion, subsequent work demonstrated that competitive framing — exposing people to multiple narratives at the same time — substantially reduced their susceptibility to framing effects.

These framing dynamics offer a reason for the warring parties to propagate their preferred narratives to the exclusion of others: an unchallenged frame may indeed move opinions, but competing ideas limit their ability to define the conflict. Despite government and opposition efforts to push hegemonic narratives of the war, none have definitively supplanted the others — at least not within the Syrian body politic as a whole. Yet what government sympathizers hear in regime strongholds, and what opposition supporters hear in the liberated areas or the refugee camps, may not be a contest of ideas so much as the propagation of local hegemonies. If so, we speculate that the absence of competing ideas, and the consequent widening and hardening of the narrative gap, will complicate efforts to negotiate peace and sell it to a reconstituted Syrian public — whose components believe they are fighting each other for

qualitatively different reasons.

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A Appendices

A.1 Sample and Population

This appendix compares the demographics of our sample with the statistics available from pre-war Syria and from the refugee population in Lebanon per the UNHCR. Country-level data comes from censuses conducted in 2004 and 2014, via the World Bank and UNESCO. For Syria proper, the 2004 census is likely more reliable but is also somewhat out of date for our sample. Data on the refugee population are gathered from the UNHCR data portal and publications on refugee assistance organizations.

A.1.1 Basic Demographics

Our sample is roughly in line with existing data on the Syrian population (Table 1). As noted in the main text, the most striking disparity with expected refugee demographics is that our sample skews male. On educational attainment metrics, our sample is roughly consistent with existing metrics.¹⁷ Illiteracy among our sample is comparable to the general population. The rate of college completion within our sample is lower than the estimate for the general population; this is unsurprising for a refugee population. It is also slightly lower than the estimate identified from a separate survey of refugees in Lebanon, but this metric specifically identifies educational attainment for heads of household, which is likely higher than that of the adult population in general. Finally, measures of family size are very similar for both pre-war and refugee populations.

Detailed age distributions are not available for the general Syrian population pre-war. Figure 8 compares the age distribution from our sample with one developed through a Vulner-

¹⁷Based on third wave Arab Barometer data, our sample estimates suggest that education levels among Syrian refugees are on par with national levels in Morocco and Yemen, which are at the bottom end of the education distribution in the countries sampled by the Arab Barometer.

Table 1: General Demographics

Statistic	Syria 2004	Syria 2014	Refugees in Lebanon	Survey Sample
<i>Gender</i>				
Proportion Male	.523 ^a	.523 ^a	.475 ^b	.604
<i>Education</i>				
Illiteracy, Male	12.2% ^c	8.5% ^c		9.8%
Illiteracy, Female	26.4% ^c	19.7% ^c		19.0%
Holds Bachelor's Degree		6.2% ^d	4% ^e	2.4%
<i>Households</i>				
Family Size, Pre-war	5.8 ^e			6.4
Family Size, Post-war			5.1 ^f	5.5

^aDerived from Sex Ratio at Birth. United Nations Population Division, World Population Prospects. The World Bank (distributor). <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/gender-statistics>

^bSyria Regional Refugee Response: Lebanon. UNHCR Data Portal for Syrian Refugees. <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

^cLiteracy rate among the population aged 15 years and older. UNESCO Institute for Statistics. <http://uis.unesco.org/en/country/SY>

^dUIS: Percentage of population age 25+ with a completed bachelor's or equivalent degree (ISCED 6). Education Statistics — All Indicators. The World Bank (distributor). <http://data.worldbank.org/data-catalog/education-statistics>

^eSyrian Arab Republic — Population Statistics (compiled from the 2004 census). UN OCHA Regional Office for the Syria Crisis (distributor). <https://data.humdata.org/organization/ocha-rosc>

^fVulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, 2016. Produced jointly by the United Nations Childrens Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

ability Assessment produced by aid organizations in Lebanon¹⁸ Note that the vulnerability assessment was, itself, also constructed using a survey sample. The distributions are roughly analogous for the range of our sample (adult individuals). Discrepancies are likely due to the fact that our survey tracks only respondent ages (rather than ages for all household members) as well as the previously noted issues in gender parity (scenarios where a male respondent took the survey in place of the selected female respondent).

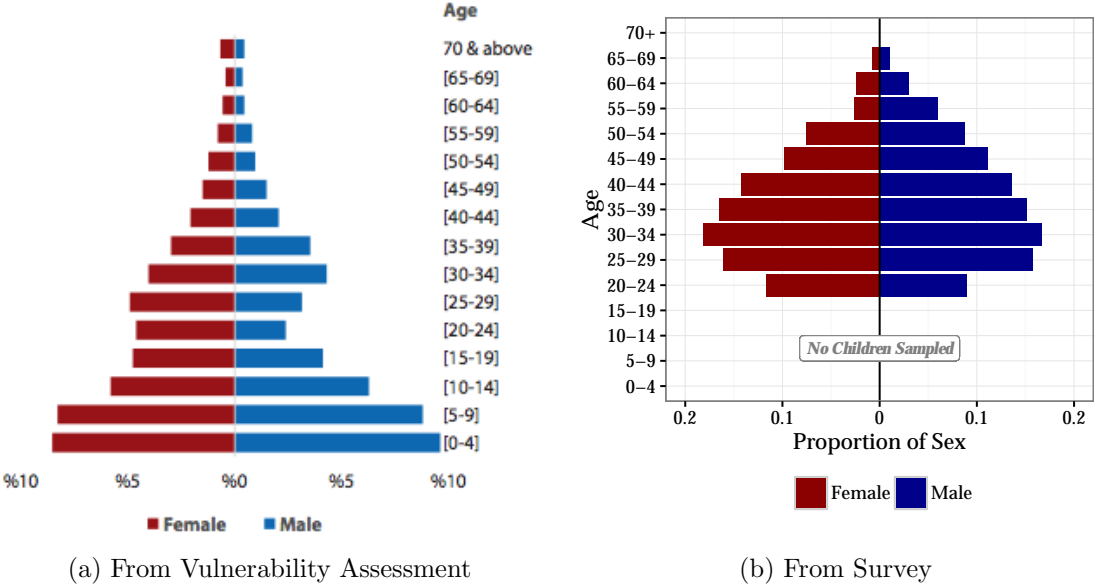


Figure 8: Age Distribution of Refugees in Lebanon

A.1.2 Demographic Weight of Sects and Communal Groups

As we note in the main text, Sunni Arabs are over-represented in our sample of refugees vis-à-vis the Syrian general population — unsurprising, given the protections offered to minorities by the government and the focus of fighting on Sunni-majority areas. Precise figures on Syria’s communal composition do not exist, but mainstream estimates place the Sunni Arab

¹⁸Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, 2016. Produced jointly by the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP).

population at 60 to 70 percent of the total, Alawis and ethnic Kurds (themselves mostly Sunni) at around 10 to 15 percent each, and various Christian denominations and other Muslim minority faiths rounding out the remaining 10 percent (Abboud, 2015; Hinnebusch, 2001; Hokayem, 2013). Note, however, that the Gulf/2000 Project (<http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/>) estimates the Sunni Arab population at just under 60 percent of the total (see Table 2). Unfortunately, UNHCR does not track ethnic or sectarian demographics for the Syrian population in Lebanon, so we cannot benchmark our sample on these dimensions.

Communal Group	Hinnebusch (2001)	Gulf/2000 Project	Survey Sample
Sunni Arab	69 %	59 %	87.5%
Kurd	8 %	9 %	5.1%
Alawi/Shia	13.5%	11.8%	3.8%
Christian	14.5%	9.3%	1.2%
Druze	3 %	3.2%	1.2%

Table 2: Communal Groups in Syria. No official data exist on the popular shares of each group. The Gulf/2000 Project data come from http://gulf2000.columbia.edu/images/maps/Syria_Ethnic_Detailed_1g.png, last accessed 27 February 2017. Hinnebusch (2001, 19–20) refers to Sunnis of the cities and central plains at 69 percent of the population, but also refers to Kurds as comprising 8 percent of the population. Because his figures add up to 108 percent, we infer that the Kurdish figure should be subtracted from the 69 percent we have listed under Sunni Arab.

A.1.3 Province of Origin

For the refugees, Figure 9 reports the Syrian province of origin as estimated by UNHCR¹⁹ (lefthand bars) and in our survey sample (righthand bars). In general, the provincial distribution of refugees matches favorably. The jagged line down the middle plots the difference in proportions between the UNHCR figures and our sample estimates, and hugs the 0 line. The median province level difference is, in fact 0.002, with an interquartile range of 0.013 in favor of the UNHCR and 0.011 in favor of the sample. The largest disparities are for the

¹⁹UNHCR Lebanon — Beirut Country Office. Syria Refugee Response Lebanon: Places of Origin of Syrian Refugees Registered in Lebanon. 31 March 2015.

provinces of Daraa, with a survey sample proportion of 0.129 and a UNHCR proportion of .071, and Idlib, with a survey sample proportion of 0.091 and a UNHCR proportion of 0.131. (Note that both provinces are opposition strongholds, so the Daraa overcount partially compensates for the Idlib undercount.) In short, the geographical distribution of the refugees in our sample matches the UNHCR estimates closely.

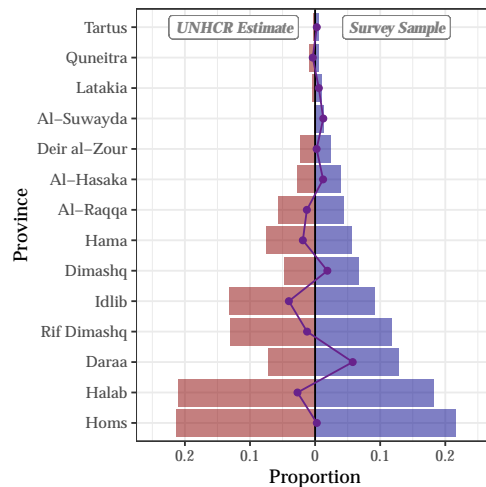


Figure 9: Province of Origin. Bars represent the proportion refugees from each province in the UNHCR estimate (left) and the survey sample (right). The jagged line through the middle represents the province-level difference in proportions between the two data sources.

A.1.4 Religiosity and Political Engagement

Data from the third wave of the Arab Barometer suggest that the Syrian refugees are broadly comparable to their counterparts elsewhere in the Arab world in terms of personal religiosity (Table 3) and political engagement (Table 4). Based on similar questions for the two data sources, three quarters of both the Syrian refugee and the Arab Barometer samples pray daily. About half of the former read the Quran or Bible weekly, against about two-thirds of the Arab Barometer sample. An additive index of the two measures yields a close correspondence between the two samples.

The two samples are also broadly comparable on measures of political engagement, although the question wordings differ somewhat, and there are only two knowledge questions

in the Arab Barometer. Levels of interest in politics are virtually identical between the two samples, while the refugees have higher levels of knowledge and self-report greater understanding of politics. Again, an additive index of the three measures yields a very close correspondence between the Syrian refugee sample and the Arab Barometer sample.

	Prayer		Quran		Piety Index		
	<i>L</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>
Syrian Refugee Sample	22	78	51	49	22	30	49
Arab Barometer Pooled	26	74	34	66	16	28	56

Table 3: Personal Religiosity. Frequency of prayer and Quran/Bible readership, with an additive index of the two measures. Values are *L = Low*, *M = Medium*, and *H = High*. Cells are percentages of the row group for each of the indicators. Row batches may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Wave three Arab Barometer data pooled across all sampled countries provided for comparison, although question wording differs somewhat.

	Understand		Interest			Knowledge			Index		
	<i>L</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>H</i>
Syrian Refugee Sample	65	35	58	27	15	19	41	40	46	29	26
Arab Barometer Pooled	80	20	60	27	13	37	38	25	50	25	25

Table 4: Political Engagement. Understanding of, interest in, and knowledge about politics, with an additive index of the three measures. Values on each item are *L = Low*, *M = Medium*, and *H = High*. Cells are percentages of the row group for each of the indicators. Row batches may not sum to 100 due to rounding. Wave three Arab Barometer data pooled across all sampled countries provided for comparison.

A.2 Descriptive Model of Government Support

Table 5 provides a descriptive model of support for the government. Covariates are as follows. *Minority* is an indicator variable for non-Sunni Arabs. *Crowding* is the natural log of the ratio of room densities in Lebanon and Syria, which captures the deterioration of living standards.²⁰ *Education* is a three-category factor with primary education or less at the baseline, middle school in the middle, and secondary education or more in the high category. *Political Engagement* is a three category, additive index of people’s understanding of, interest in, and knowledge of politics (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .80$, average inter-item polychoric correlation .83). *Personal Religiosity* is a three category, additive index of frequency of prayer and frequency of Quran/Bible readership (Cronbach’s $\alpha = .67$, polychoric correlation .99). Exact question wording available upon request.

As Table 5 demonstrates, the covariates sort the data on support for the government or opposition in ways consistent with mainstream qualitative accounts. Minorities strongly favor the government, as do people of higher socioeconomic status — see the negative coefficient estimate on *Crowding* and the positive ones on *Education*. Meanwhile, the negative coefficients confirm that government supporters are less likely to be engaged in politics or religiously devout. In short: these data tell us things we already know — or at least think we know — which increases our confidence in the viability of the sample.

²⁰Technically, we calculate the room density as resident family members per bedroom plus one — the latter to account for families living in single-room dwellings or tents in which the main dwelling area serves as the family’s collective bedroom. As expected, people’s living standards have deteriorated since fleeing Syria: the median respondent lives in a household that is 50 percent more crowded in Lebanon (median 2.50 people) than the one left behind in Syria (median 1.67 people).

	Support Government
(Intercept)	-0.21 (0.15)
Age	0.00 (0.00)
Female	0.03 (0.07)
Minority	1.79** (0.14)
Crowding	-0.19** (0.06)
Education (Mid)	0.33** (0.08)
Education (High)	0.39** (0.09)
Political Engagement (Mid)	0.12 (0.08)
Political Engagement (High)	-0.18* (0.08)
Personal Religiosity (Mid)	-0.43** (0.10)
Personal Religiosity (High)	-0.69** (0.09)
Log Likelihood	-1067.28
<i>N</i>	1928

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 5: Correlates of government support (probit coefficients and standard errors)

A.3 Balance Checks

We randomly assign subjects to one of eight experimental conditions. Inspection of pre-treatment covariates reveals no evidence of imbalance across these conditions. To summarize, Table 6 reports p -values distilled from ANOVAs and χ^2 tests for group assignment against the continuous and categorical covariates, respectively. It shows that $p \geq .20$ for all covariates, a median of .53, and an interquartile range of .36 to .70.

Covariate	Data Type	p -value
Age	Continuous	.44
Female	Categorical	.99
Minority	Categorical	.27
Crowding	Continuous	.20
Education	Categorical	.40
Political Engagement	Categorical	.93
Personal Religiosity	Categorical	.62
Factional Preference	Categorical	.71
<i>Minimum</i>		.20
<i>First Quarter</i>		.36
<i>Median</i>		.53
<i>Third Quarter</i>		.70

Table 6: Balance Checks Across Experimental Conditions

A.4 Examples of Framing Designs

There are many studies of issue framing that vary in the complexity of their experimental designs. On the simpler end, they use short prompts and randomize between one of two frames. On the more complex end, more elaborate designs may manipulate multiple dimensions, do so over time, and use actual or simulated news articles or broadcasts.

Here, we provide several examples of frames and outcomes variables from the literature. We do so to demonstrate that our own experimental design conforms to standard practice in the framing literature in terms of the setup of the frames and the conceptual link between the frames themselves and the outcome measures.

A.4.1 Nelson and Kinder (1996)

Nelson and Kinder (1996) conduct a series of framing experiments. The first addresses government spending for the poor, framed either as a problem of freeloaders or a huge budget deficit. The question skeleton reads as follows:

Our next question deals with government programs to assist the poor. Some people say that government spending on such programs for the poor needs to be increased, to help those who, through no fault of their own, simply cannot earn enough to take care of themselves and their children. Others say that government spending on such programs for the poor should be decreased, because **FRAME**.

Subjects received one of two randomized **FRAMEs**:

- *Freeloader frame*: "...they give away money to people who don't really need the help."
- *Budget deficit frame*: "...given the huge budget deficit, we simply can't afford it."

After hearing the framed question, subjects answered the following **outcome** question:

If you had a say in making up the Federal budget this year, would you like to see spending on programs that assist the poor increased, decreased, or stay the same?

A.4.2 Nelson, Oxley and Clawson (1997)

Nelson, Oxley and Clawson (1997) conduct an experiment on welfare reform, framed in terms of undeserving recipients or threats to the economy. The question skeleton reads as follows:

On Tuesday, you were asked about your familiarity with various arguments for and against welfare. As you probably know, welfare was a “hot topic” during the recent national elections. Many candidates made “welfare reform” a big part of their campaign. Many candidates criticized welfare by arguing that **FRAME**.

Subjects received one of two randomized **FRAMEs**:

- *recipients frame*: “. . . most people on welfare don’t deserve the special treatment.”
- *economy frame*: “. . . excessive welfare payments are seriously thrp the American economy.”

After hearing the framed question, subjects answered an **outcome** question about the degree of support for welfare policy on a seven-point scale (exact wording not reported in the article).

A.4.3 Sniderman and Theriault (2004)

Sniderman and Theriault (2004) report results from two experiments that offer single and competing frame conditions. The first is a government spending experiment. The question skeleton reads:

- *Single frame*: “Are you in favor of or opposed to a big increase in government spending to increase opportunities for poor people **FRAME?**”
- *Competing frames*: “Are you in favor of or opposed to a big increase in government spending to increase opportunities for poor people **FRAME 1, FRAME 2?**”

The two frames are:

- *Get ahead*: “. . . so they can have a better chance of getting ahead in life”

- *Higher taxes*: "...even if it means higher taxes"

Here, the frames are embedded directly within the question that yields the outcome measure.

The second experiment investigates support for an extremist group to hold a public rally. The question skeleton reads:

- *Single frame*: "This question is about a group that has very extreme political views. Suppose they wanted to hold a public rally to express their ideas. Given **FRAME**, would you be in favor of or opposed to allowing this group to hold the rally?"
- *Competing frames*: "This question is about a group that has very extreme political views. Suppose they wanted to hold a public rally to express their ideas. Given **FRAME 1** and **FRAME 2**, would you be in favor of or opposed to allowing this group to hold the rally?"

The two frames are:

- *Free speech*: "...the importance of free speech"
- *Public order*: "...the risk of violence"

As with the first experiment, the frames are embedded directly within the question that yields the outcome measure.

A.4.4 Hiscox (2006)

Hiscox (2006) conducts a framing experiment on international trade. It comprises four main conditions.²¹ The control group offers no frame. Two single frame conditions offer pro- and anti-trade arguments, while a competing frames condition offers both the pro- and anti-trade arguments:

- *Control*: (no introduction)

²¹Four additional groups parallel the main conditions, but also read an introduction that notes consensus among economists favoring trade openness.

- *Single frame*: “Many people believe that increasing trade with other nations **FRAME**.”
- *Competing frames*: “Many people believe that increasing trade with other nations **FRAME 1**. Others believe that **FRAME 2**.”

The two frames are:

- *Pro-trade*: “... creates jobs and allows Americans to buy more types of goods at lower prices.”
- *Anti-trade*: “... leads to job losses and exposes American producers to unfair competition.”

After hearing the framed question, subjects answered the following **outcome** question:

Do you favor or oppose increasing trade with other nations?

A.4.5 Ardanaz, Murillo and Pinto (2013)

Building off of the Hiscox (2006) experiment, Ardanaz, Murillo and Pinto (2013) examine trade policy preferences in Argentina. As with the Hiscox (2006) setup, their experiment includes a control group with no introduction, two single-frame conditions, and a competing frame condition:

- *Control*: (no introduction)
- *Single frame*: “Some people believe that increasing trade with other nations **FRAME**.”
- *Competing frames*: “Some people believe that increasing trade with other nations **FRAME 1**. Others believe that **FRAME 2**.”

The two frames are:

- *Pro-trade*: “... creates jobs and allows you to buy more goods and services at lower prices.”
- *Anti-trade*: “... causes unemployment and hurts Argentine producers.”

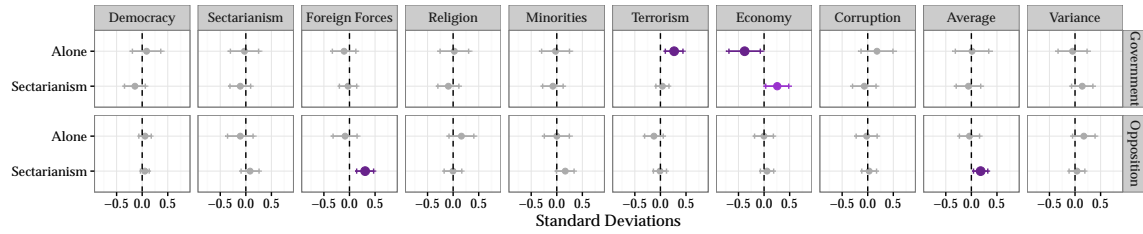
After hearing the framed question, subjects answered the following **outcome** question on a five-point scale:

Do you agree or disagree with Argentina increasing its commerce with other nations?

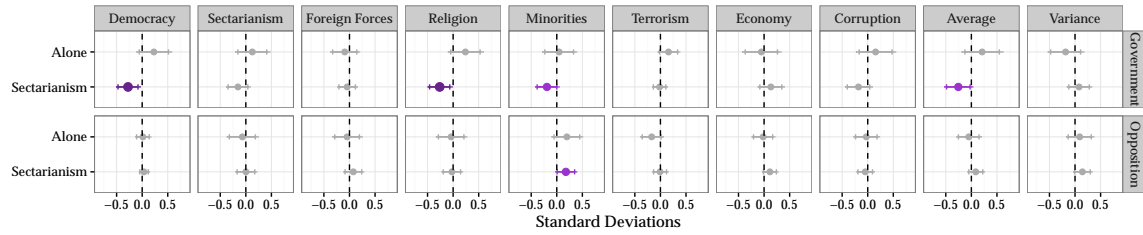
A.5 Effect of Non-Sectarian Frames

Figure 10 reports the marginal effects of the three non-sectarian frames when presented *Alone* and alongside the *Sectarianism* frame for each of the outcome variables, as well as the battery average and variation. Nearly all of the marginal effects are statistically insignificant, and the ones that do meet conventional levels of statistical detectability are scattered and largely uninterpretable.

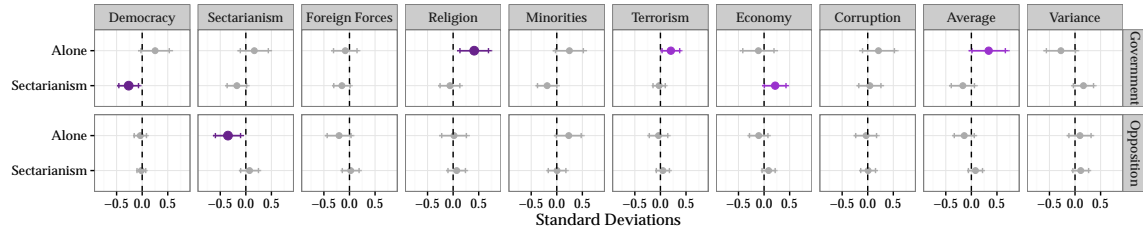
In practice, Figure 10 reports a large number of comparisons, and therefore suffers from the possibility of false positives due to the multiple comparisons problem (see Appendix A.6). Figure 11 summarizes the results of controlling the false discovery rate. It indicates that *all* of the stray “significant” results in the raw data (capital letters, going upward) disappear after correcting for multiple comparisons (lowercase letters, going downward).



(a) Democracy Frame

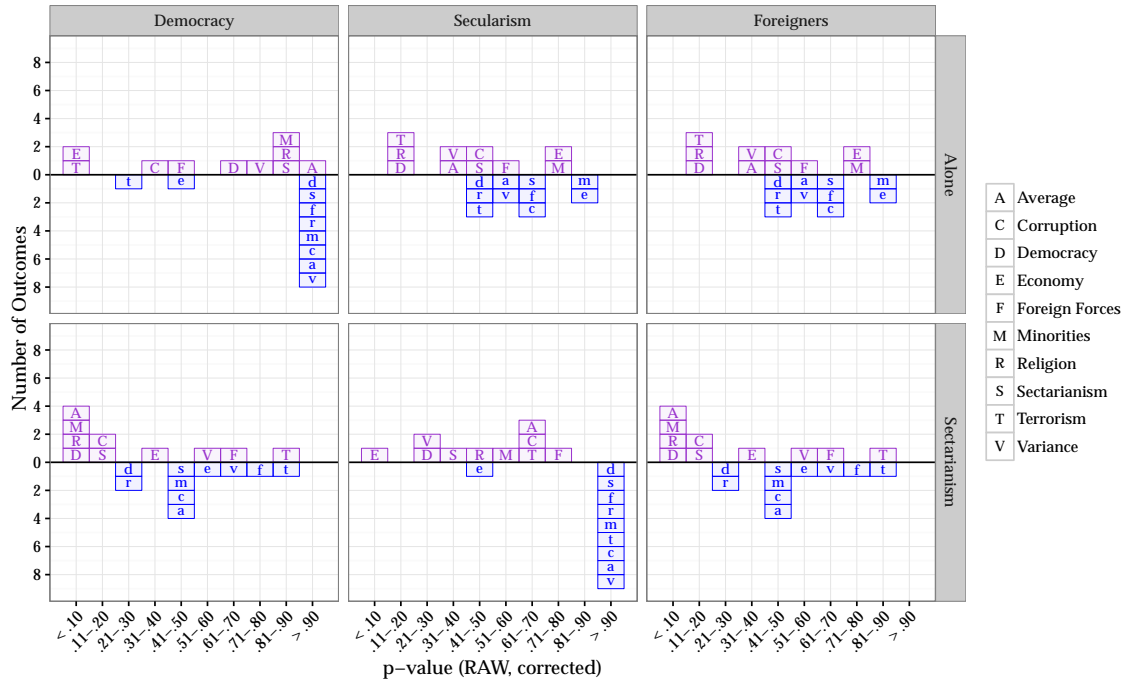


(b) Secularism Frame

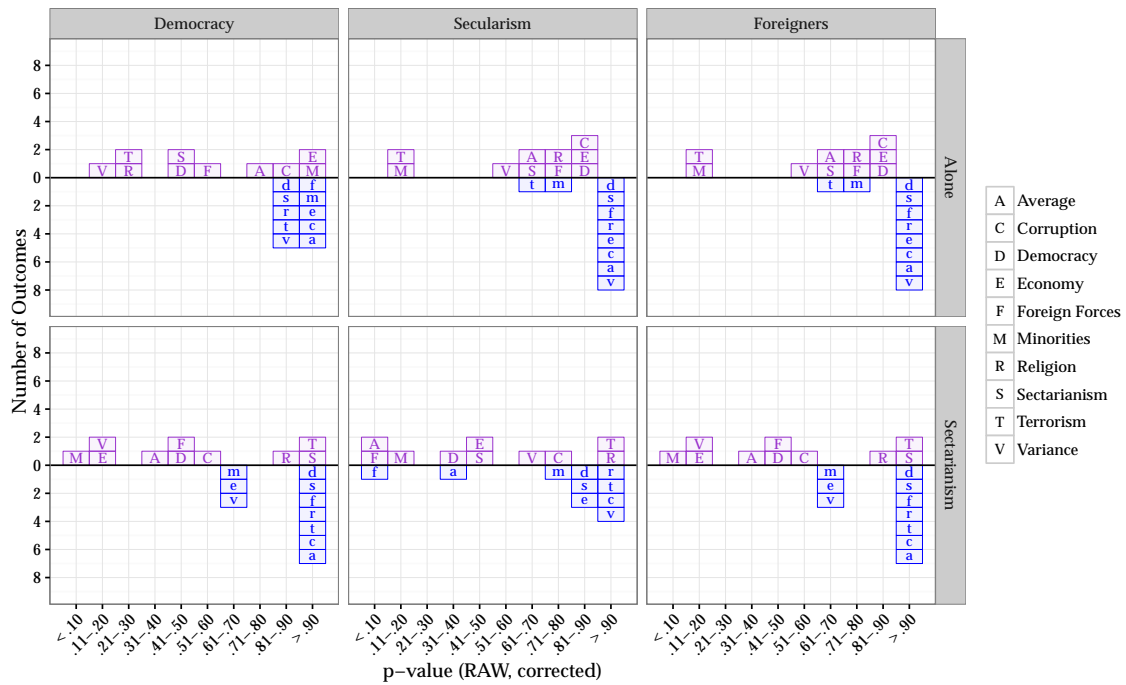


(c) Foreigners Frame

Figure 10: Marginal effect of the non-sectarian frames when presented *Alone* and alongside the *Sectarianism* frame. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.



(a) Government Supporters



(b) Opposition Supporters

Figure 11: Multiple comparison corrections of the p -values of the marginal effects of the non-sectarian frames when presented *Alone* and alongside the *Sectarianism* frame. *CAPITAL* letters going up indicate raw p -values, and *lowercase* letters going down indicate false discovery rate-corrected p -values (a.k.a. q -values).

A.6 Correcting for Multiple Comparisons

Our outcome battery includes a number of potential explanations for the fighting in the Syrian civil war, raising a multiple comparisons problem. Estimating treatment effects on more than one outcome increases the chances that we will mistake false positives due to random sampling variation for “statistical significant” findings. As one step to address this problem, we reduce the dimensionality of the outcomes by using the battery average. As another, we control the false discovery rate.

Figure 12 summarizes the results for the effects of the sectarian frame presented *Alone* and alongside the competing frames for government and opposition supporters. Capital letters going up represent the raw p -values taken from the marginal effects for each of the outcomes. Lowercase letters going down represent the corrected p -values (the q -values) after control the false discovery rate.

The corrected p -values confirm the core points we raise in the main text. For the opposition (bottom row), the two stray marginals that attained statistical detectability at $p \leq .10$ disappear after correction. For the government, the core inferences about sectarianism framing in isolation remain, although two of the seven outcomes detectable with the raw p -values drop out after correction (minorities and terrorism).

Interestingly, these data suggest that the anomolous effect of the sectarian frame when presented alongside the *Democracy* frame may be a statistical artifact of the multiple comparisons. As compared to six outcomes with statistically detectable marginals under the raw data, only two retain their detectability after correction. Moreover, neither the battery average nor the variation are included among these two (religion and the economy).

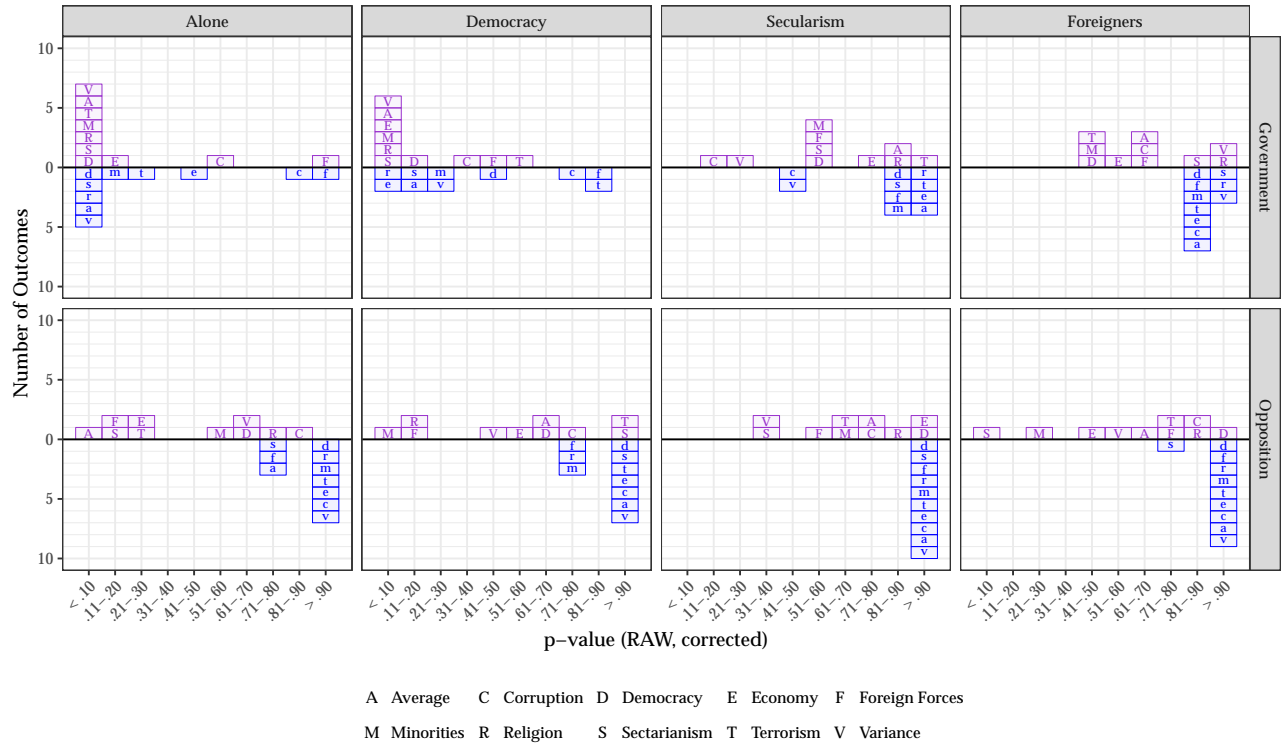


Figure 12: Multiple comparison corrections of the p -values of the marginal effects of the sectarian frame when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. *CAPITAL* letters going up indicate raw p -values, and *lowercase* letters going down indicate false discovery rate-corrected p -values (a.k.a. q -values).

A.7 Opposition Nationalists and Islamists

The main text of the paper reports a long series of null findings about opposition responses to the sectarian frame and its competitors. One reasonable concern is that the Syrian opposition is heterogeneous in composition, and includes both Islamist and non-Islamist elements that may view the conflict in fundamentally different terms. One way this heterogeneity could affect the inferences we draw from the experiment is that the non-findings may not actually reflect true nulls. Rather, the different factions of the opposition could be pulling the pooled average in countervailing directions, thus canceling each other out and producing the illusion of no effect.

We check for this possibility by splitting the opposition into nationalists and Islamists and re-estimating the models on the sub-samples. Figure 13 reports the marginal effects of the sectarian frame when presented *Alone* and alongside the competing frames on the battery average and variation. Rather than qualitative differences between the wings of the opposition, it shows that the framing effects are virtually identical across the nationalist and Islamist sub-samples.

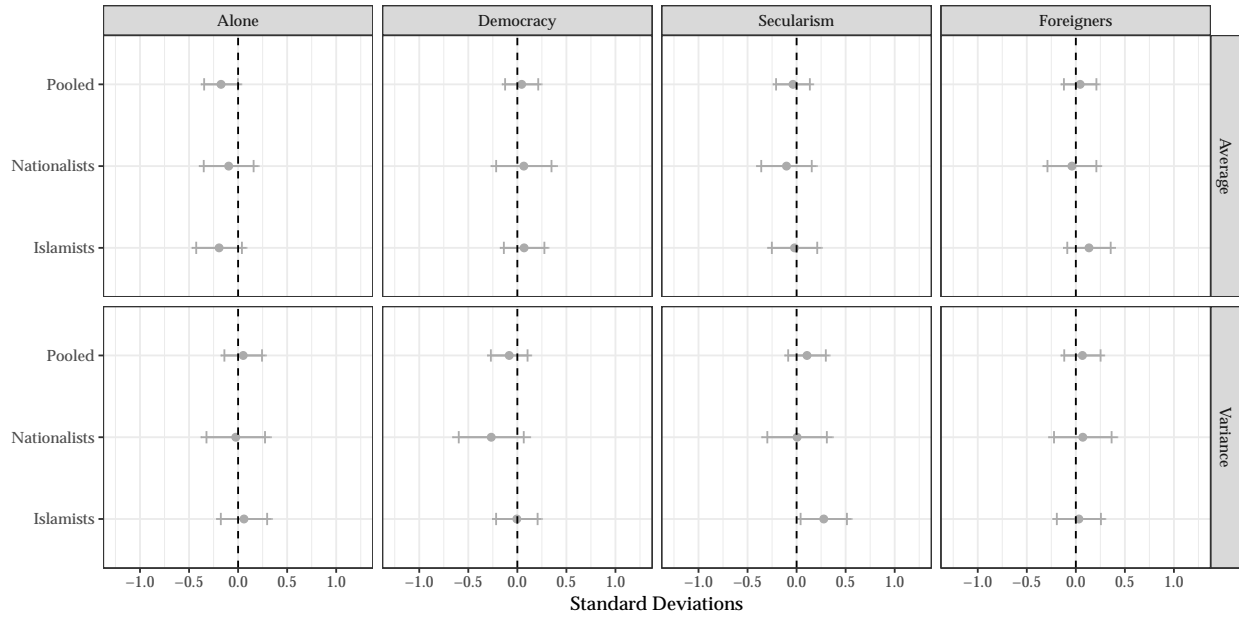


Figure 13: Opposition supporters only: marginal effect of the sectarian frame on the *Fight* battery average and variation when presented *Alone* and alongside competing frames. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.

A.8 Model Estimates

	Government	Opposition
Democracy	-0.03 (0.17)	-0.11 (0.15)
Secularism	0.13 (0.17)	-0.07 (0.16)
Foreigners	0.17 (0.17)	-0.35* (0.15)
Sectarianism	0.37* (0.15)	-0.20 (0.13)
Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.08 (0.21)	0.19 (0.19)
Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.28 (0.21)	0.07 (0.19)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.34 (0.20)	0.42* (0.18)
Age	-0.00 (0.00)	-0.01 (0.00)
Female	0.13 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.06)
Minority	0.15 (0.08)	1.82 (0.98)
Crowding	-0.24** (0.07)	-0.22** (0.06)
Education (Mid)	0.11 (0.09)	0.00 (0.08)
Education (High)	0.46** (0.10)	0.10 (0.09)
Political Engagement (Mid)	0.04 (0.08)	-0.08 (0.08)
Political Engagement (High)	0.06 (0.10)	-0.30** (0.07)
Personal Religiosity (Mid)	0.01 (0.10)	-0.25* (0.11)
Personal Religiosity (High)	-0.51** (0.08)	-0.15 (0.11)
(Intercept)	-0.17 (0.19)	0.71** (0.19)
R ²	0.15	0.05
N	754	1027

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 7: Effect of conflict framing on the importance of sectarian differences. Treatment frames highlighted. Baseline covariates included to provide comparisons of effect magnitude; treatment effects similar without covariate adjustment.

	Religion	Democracy	Sectarianism	Minorities	Terrorism	Corruption	Foreigners	Economy
Democracy	0.02 (0.17)	0.09 (0.17)	-0.03 (0.17)	-0.02 (0.17)	0.27* (0.11)	0.18 (0.19)	-0.10 (0.14)	-0.38* (0.19)
Secularism	0.24 (0.17)	0.23 (0.17)	0.13 (0.17)	0.05 (0.17)	0.16 (0.11)	0.15 (0.20)	-0.09 (0.14)	-0.05 (0.19)
Foreigners	0.41* (0.17)	0.25 (0.17)	0.17 (0.17)	0.25 (0.17)	0.20 (0.11)	0.21 (0.19)	-0.08 (0.14)	-0.11 (0.19)
Sectarianism	0.47** (0.15)	0.42** (0.15)	0.37* (0.15)	0.32* (0.15)	0.17 (0.09)	0.09 (0.17)	0.01 (0.12)	-0.23 (0.17)
Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.12 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.21)	-0.08 (0.21)	-0.05 (0.21)	-0.23 (0.13)	-0.25 (0.24)	0.08 (0.17)	0.64** (0.23)
Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.50* (0.21)	-0.50* (0.21)	-0.28 (0.21)	-0.24 (0.21)	-0.17 (0.13)	-0.33 (0.24)	0.05 (0.17)	0.19 (0.23)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.47* (0.21)	-0.52* (0.21)	-0.34 (0.20)	-0.44* (0.20)	-0.23 (0.13)	-0.17 (0.23)	-0.07 (0.17)	0.33 (0.23)
(Intercept)	-0.36 (0.20)	-0.64** (0.20)	-0.17 (0.19)	0.08 (0.19)	0.49** (0.12)	0.09 (0.22)	0.06 (0.16)	0.24 (0.22)
Covariates Included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.17	0.07	0.15	0.13	0.08	0.10	0.11	0.09
N	754	754	754	754	754	754	754	754

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 8: Effect of conflict framing on the importance factors in the *Fight* battery among government supporters.

	Religion	Democracy	Sectarianism	Minorities	Terrorism	Corruption	Foreigners	Economy
Democracy	0.16 (0.15)	0.06 (0.07)	-0.11 (0.15)	0.00 (0.15)	-0.13 (0.11)	-0.02 (0.13)	-0.09 (0.14)	-0.00 (0.11)
Secularism	-0.04 (0.15)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.07 (0.16)	0.20 (0.15)	-0.17 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.05 (0.15)	-0.02 (0.11)
Foreigners	0.02 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.07)	-0.35* (0.15)	0.23 (0.15)	-0.04 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.12)	-0.20 (0.14)	-0.11 (0.11)
Sectarianism	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.03 (0.06)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.08 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.11)	-0.20 (0.13)	-0.12 (0.10)
Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.17 (0.18)	-0.00 (0.09)	0.19 (0.19)	0.16 (0.18)	0.12 (0.14)	0.05 (0.15)	0.39* (0.17)	0.06 (0.14)
Sectarianism × Secularism	0.02 (0.18)	0.02 (0.09)	0.07 (0.19)	-0.02 (0.18)	0.16 (0.14)	-0.02 (0.15)	0.12 (0.18)	0.13 (0.14)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	0.05 (0.18)	0.02 (0.09)	0.42* (0.18)	-0.23 (0.18)	0.08 (0.13)	0.04 (0.15)	0.23 (0.17)	0.19 (0.14)
(Intercept)	0.37* (0.18)	0.54** (0.09)	0.71** (0.19)	0.62** (0.18)	-0.46** (0.14)	0.14 (0.15)	-0.08 (0.17)	0.53** (0.14)
Covariates Included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.07	0.04	0.05	0.10	0.15	0.05	0.09	0.05
N	1027	1027	1027	1027	1027	1027	1027	1027

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 9: Effect of conflict framing on the importance factors in the *Fight* battery among opposition supporters.

	Government Supporters		Opposition Supporters	
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance
Democracy	0.01 (0.20)	-0.05 (0.17)	-0.04 (0.12)	0.17 (0.13)
Secularism	0.21 (0.20)	-0.18 (0.18)	-0.05 (0.12)	0.09 (0.14)
Foreigners	0.34 (0.20)	-0.28 (0.17)	-0.14 (0.12)	0.10 (0.13)
Sectarianism	0.43* (0.18)	-0.45** (0.15)	-0.17 (0.11)	0.05 (0.12)
Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.07 (0.25)	0.19 (0.22)	0.22 (0.15)	-0.13 (0.16)
Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.46 (0.25)	0.26 (0.22)	0.14 (0.15)	0.05 (0.17)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.51* (0.24)	0.44* (0.21)	0.22 (0.15)	0.01 (0.16)
(Intercept)	-0.05 (0.23)	0.26 (0.20)	0.58** (0.15)	-0.12 (0.16)
Covariates Included?	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
R ²	0.16	0.13	0.04	0.10
N	754	754	1027	1027

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 10: Effect of conflict framing on the mean and variance of the *Fight* battery.

	Sunni Arabs		Minorities	
	Mean	Variance	Mean	Variance
Democracy	-0.04 (0.23)	0.06 (0.21)	-0.06 (0.39)	-0.10 (0.32)
Secularism	0.35 (0.24)	-0.16 (0.22)	-0.01 (0.37)	-0.28 (0.30)
Foreigners	0.28 (0.24)	-0.14 (0.22)	0.38 (0.35)	-0.50 (0.28)
Sectarianism	0.43* (0.21)	-0.38* (0.19)	0.46 (0.32)	-0.58* (0.26)
Sectarianism × Democracy	0.11 (0.29)	-0.04 (0.26)	-0.52 (0.50)	0.69 (0.40)
Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.64* (0.29)	0.21 (0.26)	-0.31 (0.46)	0.55 (0.37)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.45 (0.29)	0.34 (0.26)	-0.62 (0.43)	0.66 (0.35)
(Intercept)	-0.17 (0.28)	0.24 (0.25)	0.88* (0.41)	-0.04 (0.34)
Covariates Included?	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Yes</i>
R ²	0.17	0.13	0.26	0.25
N	542	542	212	212

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 11: Effect of conflict framing on the mean and variance of the *Fight* battery, government supporters only.

	Religion	Democracy	Sectarianism	Minorities	Terrorism	Corruption	Foreigners	Economy	Mean	Variance
Democracy	0.16 (0.15)	0.05 (0.11)	-0.11 (0.15)	-0.01 (0.15)	-0.15 (0.11)	0.03 (0.14)	-0.10 (0.14)	0.02 (0.14)	-0.03 (0.14)	0.18 (0.14)
Secularism	-0.04 (0.15)	0.01 (0.11)	-0.07 (0.15)	0.18 (0.15)	-0.18 (0.11)	0.02 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.14)	-0.01 (0.14)	-0.05 (0.15)	0.11 (0.15)
Foreigners	0.04 (0.15)	-0.07 (0.11)	-0.31* (0.15)	0.20 (0.15)	-0.05 (0.10)	-0.00 (0.14)	-0.18 (0.13)	-0.10 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.14)	0.09 (0.14)
Sectarianism	-0.03 (0.13)	-0.04 (0.10)	-0.20 (0.13)	0.08 (0.13)	-0.11 (0.09)	0.01 (0.13)	-0.20 (0.12)	-0.09 (0.12)	-0.16 (0.13)	0.06 (0.13)
Sectarianism × Democracy	-0.16 (0.18)	0.01 (0.14)	0.19 (0.18)	0.14 (0.18)	0.12 (0.13)	0.01 (0.18)	0.40* (0.17)	0.04 (0.17)	0.21 (0.18)	-0.13 (0.18)
Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.00 (0.18)	0.02 (0.14)	0.06 (0.18)	0.00 (0.18)	0.19 (0.13)	-0.06 (0.17)	0.14 (0.17)	0.10 (0.17)	0.13 (0.18)	0.01 (0.18)
Sectarianism × Foreigners	0.03 (0.18)	0.05 (0.13)	0.40* (0.18)	-0.20 (0.18)	0.09 (0.13)	0.02 (0.17)	0.19 (0.16)	0.18 (0.16)	0.21 (0.18)	0.01 (0.17)
Government	-0.43* (0.17)	-1.65** (0.13)	-0.56** (0.17)	-0.10 (0.17)	1.06** (0.12)	-0.71** (0.16)	0.75** (0.15)	-0.86** (0.15)	-0.53** (0.16)	0.07 (0.16)
Government × Democracy	-0.10 (0.23)	0.03 (0.17)	0.12 (0.23)	0.03 (0.23)	0.40* (0.16)	0.12 (0.22)	-0.01 (0.21)	-0.41* (0.21)	0.06 (0.22)	-0.29 (0.22)
Government × Secularism	0.35 (0.23)	0.22 (0.17)	0.21 (0.23)	-0.09 (0.23)	0.30 (0.17)	0.11 (0.23)	-0.09 (0.21)	-0.03 (0.21)	0.27 (0.23)	-0.30 (0.23)
Government × Foreigners	0.42 (0.23)	0.31 (0.17)	0.52* (0.23)	0.09 (0.23)	0.24 (0.16)	0.16 (0.22)	0.10 (0.21)	-0.02 (0.21)	0.49* (0.22)	-0.42 (0.22)
Government × Sectarianism	0.54** (0.20)	0.46** (0.15)	0.61** (0.20)	0.27 (0.20)	0.28 (0.14)	0.08 (0.19)	0.22 (0.18)	-0.14 (0.18)	0.62** (0.20)	-0.56** (0.20)
Government × Sectarianism × Democracy	0.01 (0.28)	-0.24 (0.21)	-0.33 (0.28)	-0.23 (0.28)	-0.35 (0.20)	-0.25 (0.27)	-0.36 (0.26)	0.62* (0.26)	-0.31 (0.28)	0.42 (0.27)
Government × Sectarianism × Secularism	-0.61* (0.28)	-0.54* (0.21)	-0.40 (0.28)	-0.31 (0.28)	-0.35 (0.20)	-0.24 (0.27)	-0.09 (0.26)	0.07 (0.26)	-0.65* (0.28)	0.35 (0.27)
Government × Sectarianism × Foreigners	-0.52 (0.28)	-0.57** (0.21)	-0.78** (0.28)	-0.24 (0.28)	-0.36 (0.20)	-0.17 (0.27)	-0.31 (0.25)	0.17 (0.25)	-0.75** (0.27)	0.49 (0.27)
(Intercept)	0.33* (0.15)	0.81** (0.11)	0.60** (0.15)	0.51** (0.15)	-0.51** (0.11)	0.43** (0.14)	-0.37** (0.14)	0.80** (0.13)	0.61** (0.15)	-0.09 (0.14)
Covariates Included?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
R ²	0.08	0.49	0.06	0.08	0.53	0.14	0.22	0.24	0.09	0.10
N	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800	1800

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 12: Effect of conflict framing on the importance factors in the *Fight* battery in the full sample.

A.9 Self-Identification Outcome

In addition to the main outcomes of interest — the importance of factors behind the fighting — we measured one more outcome of interest: self-identification. After answering the questions in the *Fight* battery, subjects answered the following open-response question, adapted from the Afrobarometer:

We have spoken to many Syrians and they have all described themselves in different ways. Some people describe themselves in terms of their origins, such as being Arab or Kurdish, their religion, such as being Christian or Druze, or in economic terms, such as being from the middle class or a farmer. *Besides being a citizen of Syria*, which specific group do you feel you belong to first and foremost?

Despite our explicit request that subjects give us an identity *other than* being a Syrian citizen, a supermajority answered as some variant of “Syrian only.” In the control group, 70 percent of subjects answer this way, with 76 percent of opposition supporters so answering against 62 percent of government sympathizers.

We model this binary outcome — self-identifying as “Syrian only” or not — according to the frames and the same background covariates as before. Table 13 reports the probit coefficients, and Figure 14 plots the first differences of *Sectarianism* when framed *Alone*, alongside the other frames, and when all variants of the frame are *Pooled* together.

In brief, we find that the sectarian frame affects government supporters, but not their counterparts in the opposition — a dynamic familiar from the two constituencies’ responses on the *Fight* battery. These results suggest, however, that the competitive framing dynamic is less important than the presence or absence of the sectarian frame. For government supporters in the interactive specification (Model 2), *Sectarianism* is jointly significant at $p < .10$ ($p < .05$ for minority supporters). When we pool all treatments that invoke the sectarian frame, government supporters become detectably more likely to self-identify as “Syrian only” by nearly 10 percentage points — closing most of the gap between government and opposition as found in the control group.

	Government		Opposition	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Democracy	0.04 (0.15)	0.21 (0.24)	-0.03 (0.13)	0.07 (0.22)
Secularism	0.22 (0.15)	0.11 (0.24)	0.20 (0.13)	0.22 (0.23)
Foreigners	0.13 (0.14)	0.02 (0.24)	-0.00 (0.13)	0.02 (0.22)
Sectarianism	0.23* (0.11)	0.22 (0.21)	0.02 (0.10)	0.08 (0.19)
Sectarianism × Democracy		-0.30 (0.30)		-0.15 (0.27)
Sectarianism × Secularism		0.18 (0.31)		-0.03 (0.28)
Sectarianism × Foreigners		0.16 (0.30)		-0.04 (0.27)
Age	0.01* (0.01)	0.01* (0.01)	0.01* (0.00)	0.01* (0.00)
Female	0.06 (0.11)	0.07 (0.11)	0.11 (0.09)	0.10 (0.09)
Minority	-0.60** (0.12)	-0.60** (0.12)	-5.61 (92.13)	-5.58 (92.13)
Crowding	0.30** (0.11)	0.29** (0.11)	0.46** (0.09)	0.46** (0.09)
Education (Mid)	0.79** (0.14)	0.78** (0.14)	0.31* (0.12)	0.31* (0.12)
Education (High)	0.64** (0.15)	0.64** (0.15)	0.39** (0.14)	0.39** (0.14)
Political Engagement (Mid)	0.41** (0.12)	0.41** (0.12)	-0.03 (0.11)	-0.03 (0.11)
Political Engagement (High)	0.38* (0.16)	0.38* (0.16)	0.19 (0.11)	0.19 (0.11)
Personal Religiosity (Mid)	-0.50** (0.14)	-0.50** (0.14)	0.32 (0.17)	0.32* (0.17)
Personal Religiosity (High)	-0.12 (0.13)	-0.13 (0.13)	0.05 (0.15)	0.06 (0.15)
(Intercept)	-0.35 (0.25)	-0.35 (0.28)	-0.19 (0.24)	-0.22 (0.27)
Log Likelihood	-399.12	-397.50	-507.47	-507.29
<i>N</i>	776	776	1028	1028

** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

Table 13: Effect of conflict framing on self-identification as “Syrian only” (open-ended response after explicitly requesting identities *other than* being “Syrian”). Treatment frames highlighted. *Sectarianism* coefficients jointly significant at $p < .10$ in Model 2, and jointly insignificant at $p > .90$ in Model 4.

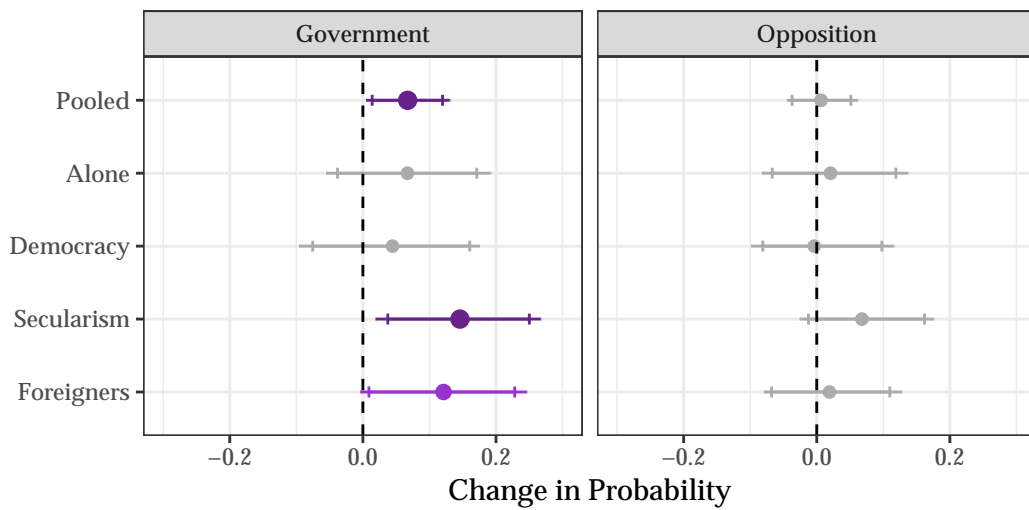


Figure 14: First difference of the sectarian frame on self-identification as “Syrian only” when presented *Alone*, alongside competing frames, and with all variants of the frame *Pooled* together. Plots depict point estimates with 90- and 95-percent confidence intervals.