

THEMED SECTION

Mediation, identity construction and legitimacy: Reimagining the Syrian nation through third-party peacemaking

Sarah Clowry 

School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, Durham, UK

Correspondence

Sarah Clowry, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University, Durham, UK.

Email: sarah.a.clowry2@durham.ac.uk

Funding information

Economic and Social Research Council, Grant/Award Number: ES/P000762/1

Abstract

This article interrogates whether, and if so how, international mediation might shape the identities of the conflict parties. I examine stages I and II of the Geneva Peace Process, the early United Nations (UN)-led efforts in relation to the Syrian civil war, by thematically analysing 31 semi-structured interviews, 35 press conferences and 68 official documents. I argue that mediators and conflict parties can reimagine the identities of the conflict parties within, and in response to, mediation. Mediation may form a backdrop to processes of identity construction, while the very occurrence of mediation can provoke processes of identity construction. Within the case analysed, the Syrian opposition and members of the international community reconstructed a vision of the Syrian people, depicting the nation as being united by suffering. This, I contend, was driven by a perceived need to legitimise the peace process while the Syrian opposition was simultaneously painted in parallel hues in an attempt to legitimise their aspirations to govern.

KEYWORDS

identity, mediation, Nationhood/National Identity, Syria

The research for this article was completed while the author was an Economic and Social Research Council-funded PhD student at the School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University.

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Author. *Nations and Nationalism* published by Association for the Study of Ethnicity and Nationalism and John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

1 | INTRODUCTION

This article examines stages I and II of the ‘Geneva Peace Process’ (GPP), a period of international mediation ostensibly led by the United Nations (UN) to resolve the Syrian crisis. It does so through the prism of the following research question: *how does mediation shape the identities of the conflict parties?* I begin by outlining the practice of mediation before sketching the events of Geneva I and II (GI and GII). Next, I navigate the concept of identity before surveying existing literature which explores group identities in Syria. I then chart scholarship concerned with the relationship between mediation and identity, extrapolating a hypothesis for investigation, and summarise the methods used to gather and analyse the qualitative data which underpin this article. My findings are then presented, after which I explore their broader ramifications for our understanding of: the relationship between mediation and identity; the manner in which visions of the Syrian identity mutated following the crises of 2011; and how processes of identity construction can affect perceptions of mediator impartiality. I also propose that there is a need to reconfigure our very understanding of mediation.

2 | A CASE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION: THE GENEVA PEACE PROCESS, STAGES I AND II

Mediation is a process which entails the intervention of a third party in either an inter-state or civil war. This third party could be an individual, a group, another nation, an organisation or could involve multiple parties, cooperating in either a formalised or an ad hoc manner (Bercovitch et al., 1991:8; Crocker et al., 2018:81). To qualify as mediation, the intervention should not entail the use of physical force nor should the third party invoke the authority of the law (Bercovitch et al., 1991:8). Mediators can employ a range of strategies: these vary from the more passive, in which a third party may aid communication by sharing information and facilitating discussions, to an increasingly active approach, such as exercising control over or influencing the agenda of negotiations, devising and enforcing timetables or attempting to re-frame the dispute. Lastly, that which has been termed a ‘directive’ strategy involves shaping the content of the settlement and manipulating the willingness of the conflict parties to resolve their differences (Butler, 2009:128–131).

The professed purpose of mediation is to promote a settlement acceptable to the conflict parties and, more contentiously, the mediator (Butler, 2009:120–121; Zartman & Touval, 2007:437–438). The purported aim is to support the parties in reaching a peaceful solution which they are unable, or unwilling, to reach alone. Defined by an absence of force, mediation is thus characterised as a benevolent, pacific intervention with humanitarian intent. However, if mediation *can* provoke identity claims, this demands a reassessment of our understanding of third-party peacemaking. As I will later explore, identities tell us both who we are and that which we seek. Identities constitute interests, conditioning those actions which groups can pursue, and shaping our interactions with others. For identities to be recast within and through mediation necessitates a concomitant recasting of our understanding of third-party peacemaking.

The mediation period under study within this article began with a failed UN Security Council (UNSC) Resolution in February 2012; the text would have called for a ‘Syrian-led political process’ but Russia and China wielded their vetoes, claiming the Resolution threatened Syria’s sovereignty (BBC, 2012). ‘Outraged’, French President Nicolas Sarkozy immediately launched the ‘Friends of Syria’ (FoS), a coalition of Arab and Western states which recognised The Syrian National Council (SNC, 2013) as ‘a legitimate representative of Syrians seeking peaceful change’ (Euractiv, 2012; Mohammed & Lowe, 2012). Having emerged in 2011, the SNC encompassed recent and long-term exiles opposed to al-Asad’s government together with representatives of Local Coordination Committees (LCCs), activist bodies inside Syria which were coordinating protests (Phillips, 2016:106–107). Also in February, Kofi Annan was appointed Joint Special Envoy of the UN and the Arab League on the Syria crisis and, one month later, he unveiled his Six-Point Plan for peace. This scheme gained the backing of the UNSC and advocated for a political

process headed by Syrians. In June 2012, Annan gathered together the Secretaries-General of the UN and the Arab League, and the foreign ministers of China, France, Russia, the UK, the US, Turkey, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar and the European Union (EU), to form an 'Action Group for Syria'. The communiqué released by the group called for a 'Syrian-led transition' and the 'establishment of a transitional governing body'. Although no Syrian representatives attended, this event later came to be known as GI (Phillips, 2016:101).

A 'political process' to promote peace, including Syrian delegates, was not convened until January 2014. In the intervening period, Annan resigned, bemoaning divisions with the UNSC (Black, 2012). The SNC fragmented and fell from favour, while a broader opposition organisation, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (SOC), was formally announced in November 2012 and declared 'the legitimate representative of the Syrian people' during a conference held by the FoS in December 2012 (Al Jazeera, 2012). Lakhdar Brahimi assumed the helm at the UN and the Arab League while the FoS, together with a reduced consort dubbed the 'London 11', continued to assemble, inviting members of SOC to their meetings (Hof, 2013). The conflict in Syria raged on.

In January and February 2014, a Syrian government delegation and a Syrian opposition delegation attended two short rounds of talks in Geneva (GII) mediated by Brahimi and his team. Little was achieved. While an agreement leading to a three-day truce in Homs was thrashed out, Brahimi felt compelled to bring the mediation effort to an abrupt close on 15 February 2014. He told journalists congregated in the Palais des Nations that the Syrian government delegation had refused to discuss the notion of a transitional governing body (TGB) in parallel with their favoured topic of 'terrorism', provoking concerns within the opposition delegation that the government would never relinquish power. He therefore seemed to attribute the collapse of the talks to the intransigence of al-Asad's representatives.

3 | IDENTITY

This article will examine the interplay between international mediation, which has been defined in the previous section, and identity. The analysis will be underpinned by a series of assumptions concerning identity. Firstly, identity is thought of here as the 'character' of groups, as referring to their 'images of individuality and distinctiveness' (Jepperson et al., 1996:33, 59). Crucially, these are shared: 'social identities convey a sense of "we-ness"' (Risse, 2011:25). The second critical assumption is that identities are constructed *by people*. The bonds which fuse individuals together as a collective are formed as actors 'make sense of who they are and what they want' (Risse, 2011:20). The content of identities is thus the outcome of ever-fluctuating processes of 'social contestation within the group' (Abdelal et al., 2006:700). It is also presumed that crises, such as wars and military defeats, may be particularly likely to provoke 'identity conflicts', profound challenges to existing identities and, possibly, rapid change following 'open, political debate' (Telhami & Barnett, 2002:29; see also: Bell, 2006:5; Risse, 2011:9, 32). Relatedly, and particularly relevant to the data gathered here, is the notion that suffering, or collective trauma, can not only cause shifts in identity but, moreover, can come to *define* identity (see, e.g.: Erikson, 1976; Hirschberger, 2018; Renan, 1990:19).

A fourth assumption made is that the 'stories' told by members of a political elite, 'their official texts, rhetoric and symbols' (Bachleitner, 2021b), may, at the very least, provide hints as to the common social characteristics and aims of a group (see also: Lane, 2011:926). Of course, 'the efforts' of members of a political elite 'to create, develop, and ... popularise the idea of the nation and the national community' (Isaacs & Polese, 2015:372) constitute just one means through which collective identities are imagined, and a limitation of this article is that I have not gathered data which can reveal the extent to which the Syrian people have inspired, resisted and/or accepted the elite narratives which I will analyse (Stanley & Jackson, 2016:224). Nevertheless, this weakness is mitigated against when one considers the findings offered here in conjunction with the analyses of Syrian identities developed by other authors, including those featured within this Themed Section.

A further two, intertwined, ideas also underlie the research undertaken. These stem from the notion that identities are not only 'contested, imagined and reimagined, transformed and negotiated' by their members but also 'through their interaction with others' (Jepperson et al., 1996:59; see also: Saideman, 2002:177; Tully, 1995:11). For the purposes of this article, there are two implications: firstly, that 'the producer of an identity is not in control of what it means to others' (Hopf, 1998:175). The meaning of identities are, at least in part, shaped by external groups' shared interpretations of behaviour (Wendt, 1999:176–178). This, in turn, necessitates gaining an appreciation not only of the group members' perceptions of their collective, but also the perceptions of those with whom they interact in the international sphere. Secondly, I assume that interactions with others, and the very existence of a group within particular social structures, can help mould identities (Katzenstein, 1996:23). This is connected to the idea of 'strategic social construction', a phrase intended to capture the process by which 'extremely rational' actors 'maximize their utilities' by influencing others' normative commitments (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998:910) or, conversely, the possibility that groups will tactically reconfigure their identities to gain advantage (Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001:411; Laitin, 1998:20).

The consideration of these latter possibilities is not intended to disempower Syrian identity constructors but merely to add a further prism through which we can understand how identity claims may have developed within, and through, the initial stages of the GPP. In addition, the contemplation of the possibility that identities may be strategically constructed is not intended to imply a purely instrumentalist understanding of identity. As Finnemore and Sikkink (2001:411) have argued, 'if identities are constructed, this implies that actors have choices about identities and might use rational calculations in constructing their identities'; this, in turn, means that identities may 'appear natural to members of groups even as individuals engage in projects of identity construction'.

Finally, it is important to highlight the various levels of collective identity. International Relations (IR) theorists tend to focus on 'national identity'. However, Middle East scholars have pioneered research into the numerous loci around which identities may form, perhaps simultaneously (Valbjørn, 2015:viii–viix). It is accepted that, just as individuals 'possess multiple notions of selfhood' (Maynard, 2015:31), so too might groups. These levels include national identity but, also, state identity, regime identity, and various sub- and supra-state identities. These multiple identities may 'vary in content, affective strength and quality, [and] social prominence' but all hold the potential to be activated (Maynard, 2015:31).

4 | COLLECTIVE IDENTITY IN SYRIA

Traditional readings of Syria prior to 2011 speak of 'a state fragmented on identity lines' (Hinnebusch, 2012:96), 'devoid of any sense of national responsibility' (Beshara, 2011:4), and torn between the persistent power of pan-Arabism (see: Bandak, 2015:118; Hinnebusch, 2001:18–19, 87–28; Hinnebusch, 2012:96; Hinnebusch, 2019:148–149; Khoury, 1987:411; Phillips, 2013:2, 29, 52, 59, 164, 161; Phillips, 2015:364; Salamandra, 2004:9–10) and the similarly relentless, if concealed, pull of sect-based affiliation (see: Hinnebusch, 2001:69–70; Hinnebusch, 2019:149–150; Phillips, 2015:364, 367; Rifai, 2018:243; Salamandra, 2013:305; Saouli, 2018:19, 24–25). However, there is also a nascent body of work which argues for the relevance of a specifically Syrian national identity in the years preceding the protests (see: Al-Doughli, 2019:152, 2021; Ismail, 2011:542; Pinto, 2017:126; Sadowski, 2002:139, 147, 150; Zisser, 2006:184–191, 196).

This apparent tussle, between national and sectarian means of belonging, prevails within scholarly examinations of identity in Syria post-2011. A number have written of the nationalistic strains of the protests which erupted in 2011, the national belonging promoted by the opposition and, moreover, the specifically *civic* national identity of 'ordinary' Syrians following the conflict (see: Bartolomei, 2018:230–232; Ismail, 2011:542–543; Leenders, 2013:258, 256; Phillips, 2015:359; Pinto, 2017:128; Silverstein, 2012). In this Themed Section, two authors make the claim that this civic national identity which emerged during the early months and years of the

protests has persisted and, crucially, has taken root at the level of the 'everyday' (Bachleitner, 2021b; Chevé, 2021; see also: Bachleitner, 2021a).

Nevertheless, scholars have also compellingly explored the sectarianisation of identities within Syria during the uprising and civil conflict. The al-Asad administration, Sunni actors and external parties are all claimed to have fomented sectarian identities in response to the crisis, and it is argued that their discourse and actions—often painted as manipulative—ultimately took hold at the grassroots, painfully dividing Syrians according to sect (see: Bartolomei, 2018:225, 227, 233, 236–237; Hinnebusch, 2019:151; Phillips, 2015:369–370; Pinto, 2017:129, 136; Rifai, 2018:245–246, 255). Therefore, despite the persuasive arguments made that a specifically Syrian national identity, albeit with variable meaning, has served to unify Syrians since the ascendancy of Hafez al-Asad and was reclaimed and then sustained following the 2011 protests, a range of scholars have also compellingly analysed the strength of supra- and sub-state ties within the state. Briefly charting this scholarship will allow me to assess whether, within GI and GII, we appear to be witnessing processes of identity sustainment, construction, reconstruction and/or deconstruction within, and in response to, the peace process.

5 | MEDIATION AND IDENTITY

To what extent has collective identity, understood as socially constructed, been incorporated within the analyses of mediation scholars? There is a cohort of studies which attempts to uncover how the identities, of both the conflict parties and the mediators, among other variables, may serve to shape various aspects of the process of mediation including the outcome, the strategy pursued, and the likelihood of mediation occurring (see: Bercovitch et al., 1991; Bercovitch & Houston, 2000; de Rouen et al., 2011). How identity is captured in these studies varies; for instance, Bercovitch et al. (1991:15) rank mediators 'along a dimension ranging from government leaders to representatives of international organizations'. Bercovitch and Houston (2000:178, 180, 187, 190), however, refer to the identity of both the disputants and the mediator, with the former involving the political and social structures of the parties and the latter the 'rank' of the actor in question. Political systems are divided into four categories (monarchy, democracy, one-party state and military junta), the 'domestic homogeneity' is measured according to the 'size and degree of fragmentation of ethnic, cultural or religious majorities/minorities', while the mediators are distributed across the following identity groups: private individual, representative or leader of a regional or international organisation, or small or large state. We can therefore see that academics have deemed the type or rank of a mediator, and the political and social systems of the disputing parties, to signify identity. Further contributions incorporate similar variables into their analyses but do not use the term 'identity' (see: Bercovitch & Gartner, 2006; Frazier & Dixon, 2009; Greig, 2005; Mitchell et al., 2009; Savun, 2009). An array of, often contradictory, findings has been reached.

A number of the operationalisations deployed within the works mentioned in the previous paragraph hint at the content of identity as explored in Section 3. However, these studies do not consider many crucial elements, including the intersubjectivity of identity, the possibility that multiple identities may be simultaneously held by a group, and the manner in which identities may be contested, provoking shifts in shared selfhood. Indeed, it has often been highlighted that mediation scholars tend to rely upon the assumptions of realism without justifying, nor making explicit, this decision (Duursma, 2020:295, 297; Hellman, 2012:597; Hellmüller et al., 2020:347; Kaufman, 2006:201; Kleiboer & Hart, 1995:314–315). It is thus unsurprising that identity has tended to be treated in a relatively static manner within mediation studies.

Therefore, it is the work of Aggestam (2015) which will guide the hypothesis to be explored in this article. For Aggestam, identity is thought of as mutable and as being infused with narratives of past trauma. Accompanied by illustrations drawn from the Palestine-Israel dispute and former US Secretary of State John Kerry's efforts to mediate a resolution between 2013 and 2014, Aggestam (2015:495, 501, 503–505, 510) makes a series of nuanced observations. Firstly, she acknowledges that 'conflicting parties' preferences and interests are infused with identity politics' which, in turn, 'include claims for recognition and legitimacy'. Recognition, for Aggestam, is intertwined with 'how

the past, present and future are perceived by the parties'; groups seek acceptance, from their adversaries, of their narratives surrounding the conflict, narratives which form constituent elements of their identities. Aggestam claims that 'peace negotiations may' form the backdrop to 'severe contestations where the parties strive to achieve recognition and international legitimacy first, and compromise and conflict resolution second'. Indeed, Aggestam argues that disputants must be encouraged to 'reflect upon the diversity of historical experiences, [and] to re-evaluate national myths'. Her further claim is that, unless mediators are able to support conflict parties in listening to, and understanding, the experiences of one another, peace processes may be manipulated by the disputants and used as a space in which their oppositional identities, and antagonism towards their adversary, become entrenched.

She thus draws an intriguing image in which third-party peacemaking may be viewed and targeted as an arena in which groups demand the legitimisation of their identity and its attendant narratives. She also suggests, therefore, that mediation may serve to mould identity. This is apparent through her implication that the identities of the conflict parties may be recognised, or undermined, through the process of mediation but, also, through her counsel that identities must be confronted and reflected upon within negotiations. I will therefore assess the following hypothesis in this article: *conflict parties may seek to legitimise their identities through participating in mediation*.¹ By offering a response, I will build upon the suggestions of Aggestam, proposing two further ways in which mediation, attempts at identity construction, and legitimacy can be said to intertwine.

6 | METHODS

I have gathered, and thematically analysed, three bodies of qualitative data. Firstly, I conducted 31 semi-structured interviews with those who participated in the UN-led mediation of the Syrian crisis between the years 2012 and 2014. The interlocutors comprise current and former members of the Syrian opposition, UN officials, consultants employed by the UN, diplomats and politicians, and staff of both international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs).² The interviews were conducted either in-person, in Istanbul, Amman, Geneva, Washington DC and London, or remotely, and adopted a semi-structured format. Consent was secured from each participant prior to the interview; interlocutors were also provided with the opportunity to review and edit/approve the notes taken during the interviews. Entering into conversations surrounding the interview notes represented an attempt to ensure the participants meaningfully agreed to contributing to the research. The decision was taken to allocate each interviewee a randomised number to offer further protection.

The second group of sources encompasses 35 press conferences delivered at the UN both by members of the Syrian opposition and UN officials together with diplomats and politicians. Lastly, I have examined 68 official documents, including UN resolutions and draft resolutions published in the years 2012–2014 relating to the Syrian crisis, 'peace plans', SNC and SOC press releases, and UK government statements concerning FoS and London 11 meetings, and regarding the Syrian peace process. These sources form a unique and substantial dataset and provide a glimpse into the world of the mediation attempt through the eyes of the actors involved (Lebow, 2016:2). The sources do not comprehensively represent all individuals implicated in the mediation attempt but are nevertheless sufficient for this exploration of the possible connections between mediation and identity.

It is worth briefly reflecting, here, on the Syrian 'opposition'. Prior to the 2011 uprisings, political opposition in Syria had been described as deeply divided and plagued by state repression (Landis & Pace, 2007:47–48). The groups which came to represent the opposition in the mediation period under study gradually emerged during the course of the early years of the protests (Spyer, 2013:53–56). During the latter half of 2011 and the majority of 2012, the SNC functioned as 'the main point of reference for countries backing the opposition' (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013). However, while it brought together the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, individuals instrumental in the Damascus Declaration, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the LCCs, tribal leaders and a number of Kurdish parties, it was criticised for its under-representation of Syria's minority communities (Spyer, 2013:56). The SNC was also troubled by 'splits and schisms' (Carnegie Middle East Center, 2013). The SNC fairly rapidly gave way to a new

confederation. At a meeting held in Doha in November 2012, Syrian opposition groups and influential figures announced the formation of SOC. A second umbrella group, SOC replaced the SNC, although the SNC was subsumed within it (Daher, 2019). My Syrian interview participants largely comprise members of SOC (many of whom were also involved in the SNC and other earlier bodies); those who were members of the earlier bodies but who did not join SOC; and a limited number of opposition ‘activists’ who did not find a place within the formal opposition bodies.

Earlier in this article, I claimed that the rhetoric of members of a political elite represents one data source which can be examined to understand identity claims. To what extent can members of the SNC and SOC be considered to be members of the political elite? Several interviewees appeared, according to my interpretation of the interview data, to harbour an insecurity surrounding their position. There is not the space to explore this theme in detail here but international actors consulted, too, both implicitly and explicitly alluded to the disconnect between the opposition delegation and Syria. Nevertheless, SOC was elevated to an equal footing with the Syrian government at GII. They were deemed, by the mediator, to be a political class, albeit one in waiting. This article explores the reconstruction of identities—images of a collective—propagated within, and provoked by, mediation. SOC functioned as a political elite within the mediation process even if their status as (future) Syrian leaders can be challenged, and their views thus constitute a valid data source upon which to draw.

Thematic analysis can be defined as ‘a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006:79) and, in this study, entailed the following steps: firstly, I immersed myself within the primary data.³ I then generated an initial set of codes, ‘a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of ... data’ (Saldaña, 2014:4). Having explored the data once, I then reviewed the codes generated, organising these into broader categories and then themes, the latter of which capture ‘something important about the data in relation to the research question’ and represent ‘some level of patterned response or meaning within the dataset’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006:82). I then refined the themes created through returning to the dataset. Lastly, I named each theme; due to space limits, just one will be explored in this article: Suffering. The categories and codes contained within this theme are listed in the table below:

Theme	Categories	Codes
Suffering	Terror	Fear, threat, flee
	Agony	Hurt, anger, injustice, neglect, poverty
	Courage	Bravery, sacrifice
	Defenceless	Vulnerability, fragility, weakness, innocence
	Brutality	Destruction, force, attack, violence, terrorism, massacre, humanitarian needs, victimhood
	Oppression	Repression, regime, dictatorship, tyranny, silenced, detained, trapped

I attempted to limit my own biases by prioritising the generation of data-driven codes. I also devoted considerable time to immersion within the data in a bid to enhance my ‘sensitivity to [their] meanings’ and to ensure I remained cognisant of the data as a whole (Rivas, 2012:372, 368).

I am ‘located and shifting’ (Leavy, 2020:4) within this study. England (1994:86–87) has suggested ‘that we approach the unequal power relations in the research encounter’ by locating ‘ourselves in our work’ and by reflecting ‘on how our location influences the questions we ask, how we conduct our research, and how we write our research’. My (perceived) views and values, linked, of course, to my (perceived) gender, race, class, socioeconomic status and educational background, inevitably shaped the evolution of this study and my interactions with my interlocutors. During interviews, I attempted to reduce the effect of my presence as far as possible, revealing little about myself and my own views and allowing the participants to lead the conversations. I attempted to mitigate against my own preconceptions, continuously reflecting on the possible ways in which my own personal identity

might be guiding me towards certain findings. I also sought to maintain a strong connection with the data, returning to the primary sources multiple times. Nevertheless, I would describe this 'limitation' as inescapable, despite the steps taken to reduce its effect.

7 | MEDIATION, IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND LEGITIMACY

I will now forge a series of claims which, I propose, demonstrate that mediation can form an arena in which mediators and conflict parties engage in processes of identity construction and, furthermore, that the very occurrence of mediation can induce these processes. Earlier in this article, I extrapolated the following hypothesis for investigation: *conflict parties may seek to legitimise their identities through participating in mediation*. In response, I firstly argue that, in stages I and II of the GPP, the Syrian opposition, in partnership with the official mediator and members of the international community, co-constructed a fresh facet of the Syrian national identity. This facet presents the Syrian national experience as being distinguished by suffering. My argument is that, having reimagined the Syrian people in this manner, the Syrian opposition not only demonstrated their compassion for, and understanding of, the Syrian people but also then aligned their movement with this vision of the Syrian nation, emphasising that their members had, likewise, faced persecution. This indicates that, in the context of mediation, conflict parties and mediators can wield processes of identity construction as a means to legitimise a particular conflict party and to justify its claims of representation. In turn, this fortifies my fundamental argument that identity can be shaped within mediation. Secondly, I claim that mediators and conflict parties can reimagine the identities of the nations in civil conflict in a bid to legitimise the intervention of a third party. I draw, once more, on the presentation of victimhood, by both the Syrian opposition and the international mediators, as being the unifying experience of the Syrian people; I then argue that this construction may have served to rationalise and defend both consenting to, and launching, a process of third-party mediation. The perceived need for third-party involvement may have therefore, at least in part, inspired the shape of one facet of the national identity imagined during the peace process. Again, this argument therefore upholds my overall claim that mediation can shape identity.

In Section 8, I outline the broader implications of these arguments. It is also worth mentioning that, here, I examine narratives surrounding the victimhood of the Syrian people and the Syrian opposition movement. The intention is not to deny the suffering of these two groups. The Syrians have, unquestionably, endured brutality. However, we must nevertheless examine why it is this facet of the Syrian national experience which was emphasised, within the data gathered, to the exclusion of other possible strands within the context of the mediation effort under examination in this article.

7.1 | Who are the Syrian people? A nation held hostage

In Section 3, I operationalised the concept of collective identity; following Risse (2011:20, 25–26), I suggested that identities are constructed as actors 'make sense of who they are and what they want', and as their peers contribute to such debates. I also proposed that collective trauma may be particularly likely to inspire a sense of commonality. Building upon these claims, here, I assess the theme of suffering. I argue that, within the dataset, those voices represented sought to portray the Syrian people as being bound together in victimhood, and that this national experience was depicted both in the context of, and in later reflections on, the mediation process. To begin, according to the members of the Syrian opposition interviewed, the bond which unites the 'Syrian people' is suffering at the hands of the al-Asad government. In their words, the Syrian people, imagined as a unified collective, are 'refugees' and 'detainees' (I10; I23). They have been 'kidnapped', 'killed', starved, abandoned, 'tortured' and 'slaughtered'; they are 'wounded', and they have 'lost everything' (I10; I16; I23; I29). They have been exiled, driven from their homes, and they have faced 'atrocities', 'massacres', chemical weapons attacks, 'repression' and 'violence' (I9; I11; I13; I17;

I27; I29). Moreover, they have endured this 'injustice' and 'tyranny' for decades (I5; I17; I23; I29). They are, it is emphasised, 'victims' (I12; I23). In the statements, press conferences and speeches released and delivered by the SNC and SOC during these years, the Syrians, once more invoked as one, are characterised in a similar fashion. Much of the same imagery and terminology are deployed but, additionally, the nation is also characterised as an 'unarmed' and 'innocent' people in need of 'protection', 'under siege', 'humiliated' by a 'military dictatorship' and facing a 'murderous onslaught' (SNC, n.d.; SNC, 2012; SOC 2013b⁴; SOC 2013f; SOC, 2013i; SOC 2013o; SOC, 2014c; UN Live, 2014 g). Indeed, many of the SOC official statements conclude with the phrase, 'We ask for mercy for our martyrs, health for our wounded, and freedom for our detainees'.⁵

Furthermore, during the interviews, Syrian participants would recount instances in which they sought to emphasise this alleged strand of the Syrian character during the negotiations. For instance, one described to me how they were 'asking, all the time ... appealing to the regime to just discuss humanitarian needs, detainees, those who had been kidnapped, ceasefires' (I10). A further interviewee deemed it particularly significant that 'the official representatives of Bashar al-Asad were listening to us talking about state-sponsored terrorism, detainees, killings and the criminal nature of the security apparatus ... the experiences of the Syrian people under the regime since the Bath party took over in 1963', later remarking on the way in which Ahmad al-Jarba [SOC President, 2013–2014], in a speech delivered in Montreux, 'showed images of the massacres', commenting that 'we used it [GII] to raise awareness' (I29). Indeed, one interlocutor claimed that it was this facet of the Syrian national identity, the suffering of those who remained in Syria, which motivated the very participation of SOC in the peace process: 'we did not feel we [had] the luxury to say no to sitting with these criminals, if I say no then I should be one of the ones inside Syria, under these attacks' (I13).

Within the interviews I held with international mediators and officials involved in the peace talks during these years, and with close observers of the mediation efforts, I detected far fewer occasions on which my participants would feel able to characterise the entire Syrian people. Nevertheless, of those who did, a number did tell, once more, a narrative of suffering: they would mention the brutality experienced by Syrians, the deaths, hurt, political repression, torture, displacement and destruction witnessed, together with the chemical weapons attacks inflicted (I2; I18; I21; I24; I25). More overtly, one participant mentioned that they had once been asked by UN Development Programme (UNDP) officials, 'what unifies Syrians?' This interlocutor told me that their response was: 'the legacy of pain, victimhood, the legacy of conflict' (I15). Furthermore, one official recalled how they attempted to persuade members of SOC to attend the peace talks by reminding them that, 'regardless of the result, you would have all the international community descend, the whole world would be watching, and you can highlight the plight of the Syrians' (I18). It would seem to have been a strategy, then, encouraged by at least one official, for members of SOC to characterise the Syrians as 'suffering' specifically in the international arena of the negotiations.

Moreover, within press conferences delivered by international actors at the UN involved in the mediation attempt, these officials and politicians seem far more willing to depict the Syrian nation as a whole, and their portrayal overwhelmingly overlaps with that of members of the Syrian opposition. The word 'suffering',⁶ often accompanied by the qualifiers 'immense' and 'unspeakable', are uttered over and over, and it is stressed that the Syrians are 'innocent', 'defenceless' 'civilians' (UN Live, 2012a; UN Live, 2012d; UN Live, 2012 h; UN Live, 2013a; UN Live, 2014b; UN Live, 2014d; UN Live, 2014 m; UN Live, 2014q). The historical nature of the abuse faced is mentioned on one occasion by Brahimi (UN Live, 2013a), while the unity of the population, their connection with Syria, and their collective trauma, is alluded to by the then-US Secretary of State, John Kerry, who describes the 'entire nation' as being 'held hostage' (UN Live, 2014b). Brahimi, too, feels able to speak on behalf of the internal thoughts of Syrians as a whole: 'I think we know a little bit what the people of Syria are thinking, the people of Syria are thinking, please get something going that will stop this nightmare and, and this injustice that is inflicted on the Syrian people' (UN Live, 2014n). By framing the characterisation in this way, Brahimi removes himself as a constructor, and appears to be merely repeating the Syrians' own conception of themselves.

Finally, within official documents and statements released by the UN and the FoS, it should be noted that there are fewer attempts to depict the Syrian experience as cohesive, and as being marked by victimhood. UN resolutions

and the Six-Point Plan do lament and condemn the violence and bloodshed within Syria, and call for urgent humanitarian assistance, thus painting a similarly bleak impression of life in the country. However, the documents, statements and speeches of the FoS and its members tend to be more direct in framing this suffering as a distinctive characteristic of all Syrians. For instance, William Hague, the then-UK Foreign Secretary, at the FoS meeting in Tunis in February 2012, claimed that, ‘today, we must show that we will not abandon the Syrian people in their darkest hour’ (UK Government, 2012b); moreover, the statements of FoS are also more explicit in their apportioning of blame: this is ‘suffering at the hands of the regime’, maintained Hague in 2013 at a London 11 gathering (UK Government, 2013c). My initial argument, therefore, is that a particular strand of the Syrian collective identity seems to have been envisioned, propagated, and quite possibly believed in, within stages I and II of the GPP, and within reflections on this mediation attempt, by members of the opposition and the international community. The thread constructed characterises the Syrian people as being joined together in suffering, and there are indications that the mediation environment was targeted as an arena in which this vision of the Syrian identity should be emphasised.

7.2 | The Syrian opposition and the Syrian people: discursively united as one

We have seen how the members of the Syrian opposition and those involved in mediating the conflict represented within my dataset persistently painted the Syrian people as suffering. This sub-section will show that, simultaneously, the members of the Syrian opposition captured within this study sought to associate their movement with this reimagined version of the Syrian national identity: suffering was claimed to be central to the opposition and, in particular, their experiences within the mediation efforts.

However, firstly, I would like to suggest that the previous sub-sections have demonstrated the frequency with which members of the Syrian opposition would feel able to make statements purportedly on behalf of the Syrian people as a nation within the mediation efforts and within reflections on the peace talks. My interview participants and the members of the opposition represented in the other data sources analysed seem to be communicating their alleged capacity to understand, and speak on behalf of, all Syrians, a rhetorical move which associated their organisations with the Syrian nation. Thus, this represented an attempt to legitimise the SNC’s and SOC’s aspirations to govern. My interpretation is that the opposition was keen to cement an image of its movement as being responsible for highlighting, and alleviating, the suffering of the Syrian people; in turn, this placed the Syrian nation and its people seemingly at the forefront of the opposition’s strategy and narrative, a clear attempt to claim an association with this reworked version of the Syrian national identity. Supporting my analysis is the portrayal by one of my participants of a particularly moving moment within the talks at GII:

... for example, at one point – there was an incident with Yarmouk refugee camp – it was under siege – we brought a photo of a new-born baby – he was dead because of the famine – you could see his ribs, he was really thin ... we printed out the picture and handed it to him [Bashar al-Jaafari, Permanent Representative of the Syrian Arab Republic to the UN] ... when we took the picture out, we were trying to get a glimpse of their humanity, *to see if they were still Syrian, still one of us* – but there was nothing – they put their heads down to avoid looking at the picture [emphasis added] (I13).

The same interlocutor later elaborated on this point, linking this moment even more specifically to the notion of a Syrian national identity: ‘that’s why I told you, we showed the baby, from the camp, from Yarmouk—we were aware of the Syrian identity—we were looking for a glimmer of that light—they [members of the government delegation] failed, they did not have the feeling’ (I13). My interviewee thus connected compassion with ‘Syrian-ness’ in a bid, I argue, to deploy identity construction as a means of legitimisation within the peace negotiations.

Secondly, my interlocutors would frequently recount their own personal suffering, and that of their activist colleagues, within their reflections on the peace talks. Thus, a participant described to me, in graphic detail, the treatment of their (sing.) friend and colleague: 'they detained the peacemakers, the activists—and then they used to put cigarettes on their bodies while torturing them. I had a friend, I will show you a picture of his body, what they did to him' (I28). Other interviewees mentioned their own arrests, and how the al-Asad government began to target them and their families, particularly following the 2011 uprisings: 'I was detained, of course—it was mentioned that they [the Syrian government] would kill me' (I13); 'and then I had to hide, to lay low—people in the regime, they started to create websites, pushing for my killing' (I13); 'I had to flee with my two children—they said they wanted to kill me' (I10), and, for one Syrian opposition member, who had long been forced to leave Syria, 'they jailed, detained my brother and tortured him' (I16). Indeed, many emphasised the personal sacrifices they had made by even participating in the opposition, and in the negotiations. 'I want to put in your mind how difficult it is to have our role' (I28), commented one of my participants, while one evocatively claimed that, 'when you come out of these negotiations, me and many others—our stomachs, our guts, felt like they were shredded and punished' (I13). Al-Jarba, in a speech delivered at the end of the first round, affirmed that participating in the mediation efforts 'was not an easy task', that sitting across from the regime was akin to 'drinking from a poisoned chalice while the criminal was killing our women, children, young men and women, and elderly' (SOC, 2014d).

7.3 | Legitimising conflict parties and legitimising mediation by reimagining the nation

Therefore, I would like to propose that, within the early stages of the GPP, having co-created a newly imagined vision of the Syrian nation, an image distinguished by suffering, the members of the Syrian opposition then sought to align their movement with this construction, and to emphasise their compassion for the Syrian people. My first suggestion is that this represented an attempt to legitimise one particular conflict party: the delegates representing the Syrian opposition. My conclusion therefore differs from that of Aggestam, suggesting a further way in which a search for legitimacy may drive identity construction within mediation. While Aggestam finds that conflict parties may seek recognition from their opponents of the narratives which constitute their identities, I have found that conflict parties may seek legitimacy by reconstructing the identity of the nation they wish to represent and then associating their movement with this construction. I have also found that mediators, and implicated members of the international community, may contribute to this identity building, and legitimisation, process. More fundamentally, this initial claim supports my overall contention that identity can be shaped within mediation.

I would also like to suggest that constructing the Syrian people as being bound together by victimhood within the GPP may have served further forms of legitimisation. Firstly, this construction may have operated as a means for the Syrian opposition to legitimise consenting to third-party mediation. Secondly, this construction may have served to legitimise the international community launching, and expending a great deal of effort upon, the peace process. Indeed, I would propose that, within stages I and II of the GPP, it is possible to perceive a process of identity construction functioning as 'subjectification'. Mac Ginty (2012:168–169) has defined 'subjectification' as 'the perceptual construction and discursive framing of individuals and societies to suit wider goals', arguing that, 'in a liberal peace context, political actors will construct a narrative or narratives that justifies a particular set of actions'. He highlights that, through subjectification, citizens of a given state may be rendered 'mono-dimensional' and cast in roles 'subordinate to those engaged in the recasting: victims, grateful beneficiaries, innocent bystanders'. Subjectification is not a process reserved for external actors: as Mac Ginty claims, 'virtually all actors—internal and external—engage in some form of subjectification in order to understand their social environment and to legitimize their role in it'. Based upon the evidence explored in this section, the Syrian people, and the Syrian opposition, appear to have been cast as disempowered victims, in desperate need of rescue. Notably, this construction arose as the result of harmonious refrains, taken up by both the mediators and the Syrian opposition: by both 'internal' and 'external' players.

This analysis represents a second deviation from the arguments of Aggestam. I have suggested that, rather than seeking legitimacy for their identities from their adversaries, conflict parties, together with mediators, may engage in processes of subjectification, possibly in a bid to justify third-party intervention. Fresh identities can be imagined in which the nations at war are defined by suffering. Identities can therefore be built in order to legitimise the very intervention of a third party. This argument provides fortification to my over-arching claim, demonstrating that mediation can provoke identity mutations: in the case under investigation, according to my analysis, a perceived need to legitimise the peace processes induced a reimagining of the Syrian identity.

8 | DISCUSSION

In this article, I have shown that mediators and conflict parties, either in partnership or in opposition, can reshape the identities of the conflict parties both within and in reaction to mediation. Mediation can provide the stage on which identities are reimagined while its very occurrence can also spark the reimagining of identities. In addition to these arguments surrounding mediation, identity construction, and legitimacy, the analysis here also has a number of broader implications.

Firstly, I would like to note that it is the Syrian national identity which is characterised, as opposed to any other level of identity: the notion of the Syrian people, as a unified collective, is repeatedly invoked by the voices represented within the dataset. Secondly, it is a *new* facet of the Syrian national identity which is imagined, a strand which deviates from those analysed within existing academic literature on collective identification in Syria both preceding and following the 2011 uprisings. The role of victimhood as the central, unifying experience of Syrians represents a fresh imagining of the national identity.

Why were the collective experiences and aspirations of Syria's multiple supra- and sub-state groups *not* imagined within the context of the mediation attempt? What might this reveal about the level and nature of identity which was viewed as being conceivable in the context of this UN-led mediation effort? What might this reveal, in turn, about the extent to which the peace process allowed for frank considerations of the identities of relevance to Syria? This article is unable to decisively answer these questions, but it is possible to speculate that the mediator and the Syrian opposition, either consciously or unconsciously, preferred to think of Syria at the level of the nation.

Nevertheless, a bleak tale can be told in the years since the collapse of the GII talks; while Syria, now, is almost entirely 'reunited' under al-Asad, this has not been the case for the majority of the years following GI and GII. The state fractured following the uprising. The insistence that there exists a cohesive Syrian people, claims made by both the members of the Syrian opposition and the international peacemakers represented within my dataset, would seem to challenge the fragmented depictions which dominate academic scholarship on collective identification in Syria. Nevertheless, there is also the possibility that their adamant refrains represent attempts to mask the reverse: a concern at the perceived disintegration of Syria, and are an attempt, therefore, to rhetorically hold the state together.

More broadly, my suggestion is that the findings of this article also demonstrate the need to better incorporate ideational concepts, such as identity, within the traditional debates contained within mediation studies. As an example, an analysis of identity construction processes could contribute to our understanding of whether a mediator may have been viewed as impartial⁷; in turn, this may have influenced both the shape of the mediation attempt and possibly its outcome. The mediator, together with the Syrian opposition, constructed a particular vision of the Syrian national identity which framed the second conflict party, the Syrian government delegation, as the antithesis to 'Syrian-ness': they argued that the collective experience of Syrians was cruelty and viciousness at the hands of the al-Asad regime. This construction process, which happened in partnership with the Syrian opposition, could have affected the perceived partiality of the mediator: it could have seemed as though the UN and the international officials represented within the dataset were closer, in views, values and aims, to the Syrian opposition than the Syrian government delegation. The talks collapsed, with the two delegations unable to even agree on an agenda.

I do not wish to suggest that there is a causal relationship between the apparent bias of the mediator and the failure of the mediation efforts. It may be the case that the depictions of the Syrian people offered by the mediators and an array of international officials, and their alignment with the depictions offered by the Syrian opposition, discouraged the Syrian government delegation from meaningfully engaging with the peace talks. The identity claims made may have presented the mediator as partisan, as being allied with the Syrian opposition delegation, and this may explain the failure of the negotiations. However, there may also be many more factors which contributed to the breakdown of GI and GII, factors which may have intersected with one another and with the social dynamics analysed in this article. As a mere example, at the time at which GII was initiated, al-Asad was in the ascendancy militarily, which is likely to have reduced the prospect of his delegation making concessions. My suggestion, simply, is that identity construction processes may contribute to the perceived impartiality of mediators. My further suggestion is that identity may also be able to intervene in additional debates central to mediation studies. I will briefly return to this idea in Section 9.

Finally, if mediation and mediators possess the power to sculpt the identities of the conflict parties, or to trigger reimaginings of identities by the conflict parties, this necessitates a reconfiguration of our understanding of mediation. Earlier in this article, I argued that traditional definitions of mediation proclaim the practice to be defined by an absence of force and a desire to assist conflict parties and alleviate violence. Mediation is therefore presented as benign, as seeking to facilitate peaceful societies. Nevertheless, Kostić (2007:16; 2013:24) has contended that the *imposition* of a fresh identity is an integral part of the 'liberal peace' and that this practice is frequently concealed beneath a veneer of humanitarian impulses. The crux of the social constructivist focus on identities concerns the assertion that 'identities both generate and shape interests' (Jepperson et al., 1996:60): 'identities condition which actions government leaders can entertain, and that which is considered legitimate by their societies' (Telhami & Barnett, 2002:2). Identities constitute who we are and that which we seek: identities are thus fundamental to individuals, groups, societies, nations and transnational communities. For identities to, potentially, be remoulded within mediation constitutes a significant and far-reaching form of influence, a force with which mediators and conflict parties must reckon.

9 | CONCLUSION

There remains scope for further research regarding the interplay between mediation and identity, both within the context of the GPP and more broadly. Firstly, an analysis of the rhetoric, and identity claims, made by representatives of the al-Asad regime within the context of GI and GII would be illuminating. For example, examining the extent to which the regime engaged in identity construction in the peace process, and whether the identities imagined by these individuals aligned with those conjured by the mediators and international officials involved, would offer further weight to my contention that the propagation of identity claims can shape perceptions of mediators' impartiality. It would also reveal whether the GPP contained within it, and even provoked, an identity conflict: competing views regarding the character of the nation. Furthermore, an investigation into the identity claims made during parallel peace processes launched to resolve the Syrian civil war, such as those initiated by Russia and Saudi Arabia, could also support, or perhaps challenge, my findings. Such an investigation may further reveal whether particular mediators are more likely to engage in processes of identity construction through mediation. More broadly, arguments surrounding the interplay between mediation and identity could be deployed to intervene in further debates which are central to mediation such as 'ripeness' and the meaning of 'success'. Finally, attention must also be paid to the identities of mediators and the extent to which perceptions of these develop alongside those of disputants as a result of the dynamics of the mediation efforts.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author would like to thank Kathrin Bachleitner, Adélie Chevé, Stefanie Kappler, Roger Mac Ginty, the anonymous reviewers and the editors for their very helpful feedback on earlier drafts of this article. This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number: ES/P000762/1].

ORCID

Sarah Clowry  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2555-9893>

ENDNOTES

- ¹ This argument has, however, received consideration in the field of peacebuilding (see, e.g., Kostić, 2007:16–9; 2008:385; 2013:24, and Kappler, 2012:260; 2015:875–89).
- ² As noted in Section 2, multiple actors may work in concert to mediate a conflict. While the UN ostensibly led GI and GII, several states and organisations were also closely involved in preparing and indeed shaping the delegations and in defining the scope of the peace process. This speaks to the complexity of mediators and mediation and explains my decision to interview international officials beyond those employed by the Office of the Special Envoy.
- ³ Primary data: a list of interviewees (anonymised where requested by interlocutors), recordings of the press conferences, and copies of the official documents are available from the author upon request.
- ⁴ Lettering following primary sources refers to their chronology within the dataset. The official documents are provided with different citations according to their source: press conferences are entitled ‘UN Live[date, letter]’, documents produced by the UN ‘UN[date, letter]’, by the SNC ‘SNC [date, letter]’, by SOC ‘SOC [date, letter]’, and by the UK Government ‘UK Government[date, letter]’.
- ⁵ This phrase features in 12 press releases included in the dataset.
- ⁶ This term is used 25 times in press conferences included in the dataset.
- ⁷ Mediation scholars persist in questioning the merits and shortcomings of the perceived neutrality of mediators; however, the manner in which processes of identity construction may affect the apparent impartiality of a third party has yet to be theorised.

REFERENCES

- Abdelal, R., Herrera, Y. M., Johnston, A. I., & McDermott, R. (2006). Identity as a variable. *Perspectives on Politics*, 4(4), 695–711.
- Aggestam, K. (2015). Peace mediation and the minefield of international recognition games. *International Negotiation*, 20(3), 494–514. <https://doi.org/10.1163/15718069-12341318>
- Al Jazeera. (2012). Friends of Syria recognise opposition. [online], available from: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2012/12/12/friends-of-syria-recognise-opposition> [last accessed: 5 October 2021]
- Al-Doughli, R. (2019). The symbolic construction of national identity and belonging in Syrian nationalist songs (from 1970 to 2007). *Contemporary Levant*, 4(2), 141–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/20581831.2018.1554233>
- Al-Doughli, R. (2021). What is Syrian nationalism? Primordialism and romanticism in official Baath discourse. *Nations and Nationalism*. Online first
- Bachleitner, K. (2021a). Legacies of war: Syrian narratives of conflict and visions of peace’. *Cooperation and Conflict*. Online first
- Bachleitner, K. (2021b). Collective identities amid war and displacement: Syrians and Syrian refugees re-imagine their country. *Nations and Nationalism*. Online first
- Bandak, A. (2015). Performing the nation: Syrian Christians on the national stage. In C. Salamandra & L. Stenberg (Eds.), *Syria from reform to revolt Vol. II: Culture, society, and religion* (pp. 110–129). Syracuse University Press.
- Bartolomei, C. (2018). Sectarianism and the battle of narratives in the context of the Syrian uprising. In R. Hinnebusch & O. Imady (Eds.), *The Syrian uprising: Domestic origins and early trajectory* (pp. 223–241). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315143798-15>
- BBC. (2012). Russia and China Veto Resolution on Syria at UN. [online], available from: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-16890107> [last accessed: 5 October 2021].
- Bell, D. (2006). Introduction. In D. Bell (Ed.), *Memory, trauma and world politics* (pp. 1–29). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230627482_1
- Bercovitch, J., Anagnoson, J. T., & Wille, D. L. (1991). Some conceptual issues and empirical trends in the study of successful mediation in international relations. *Journal of Peace Research*, 28(1), 7–17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343391028001003>
- Bercovitch, J., & Gartner, S. S. (2006). Overcoming obstacles to peace: The contribution of mediation to short-lived conflict settlements. *International Studies Quarterly*, 50(4), 819–840.
- Bercovitch, J., & Houston, A. (2000). Why do they do it like this? An analysis of the factors influencing mediation behaviour in international conflicts. *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, 44(2), 170–202.

- Beshara, A. (2011). Introduction. In A. Beshara (Ed.), *The origins of Syrian nationhood: Histories, pioneers and identity* (pp. 1–14). Routledge.
- Black, I. (2012). Kofi Annan resigns as Syria envoy. *The Guardian*. Online: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/aug/02/kofi-annan-resigns-syria-envoy> (last accessed: 5 October 2021).
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Butler, M. J. (2009). *International conflict management*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203879153>
- Carnegie Middle East Center. (2013). The Syrian National Council. Carnegie Middle East Center [online]. Available from: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48334?lang=en> [last accessed: 5 October 2021].
- Chev  e, A. (2021). From *Suriyya al-‘Asad* to *Suryatuna*: Civic nationalism in the Syrian revolutionary press. *Nations and Nationalism*. Online first
- Crocker, C. A., Hampson, F. O., & Aall, P. (2018). *International negotiation and mediation in violent conflicts: The changing context of peacemaking*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315202426>
- Daher, J. (2019). Pluralism lost in Syria’s uprising: How the opposition strayed from its inclusive roots. *The Century Foundation* [online], available from: <https://tcf.org/content/report/pluralism-lost-syrias-uprising/> [last accessed: 5 October 2021]
- de Rouen, K. Jr., Bercovitch, J., & Pospieszna, P. (2011). Introducing the civil wars mediation (CWM) dataset. *Journal of Peace Research*, 48(5), 663–672.
- Duursma, A. (2020). African solutions to African challenges: The role of legitimacy in mediating civil wars in Africa. *International Organization*, 74(2), 295–330. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818320000041>
- England, K. (1994). Getting personal: Reflexivity, positionality, and feminist research. *The Professional Geographer*, 46(1), 80–89. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0033-0124.1994.00080.x>
- Erikson, K. (1976). *Everything in its path*. Pocket.
- Euractiv. (2012). Sarkozy pushes “friends of Syria” Group at UN. Online: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/sarkozy-pushes-friends-of-syria-group-at-un/> (last accessed: 5 October 2021).
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (1998). International norm dynamics and political change. *International Organization*, 52(4), 887–917. <https://doi.org/10.1162/002081898550789>
- Finnemore, M., & Sikkink, K. (2001). Taking stock: The constructivist research program in international relations and comparative politics. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 4, 391–416. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.polisci.4.1.391>
- Frazier, D., & Dixon, W. (2009). Third-party intermediaries and negotiated settlements, 1946–2000. In J. Bercovitch & S. S. Gartner (Eds.), *International conflict mediation: New approaches and findings* (pp. 43–66). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203885130.ch3>
- Greig, J. M. (2005). Stepping into the fray: When do mediators mediate? *American Journal of Political Science*, 49(2), 249–266. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0092-5853.2005.00121.x>
- Hellman, J. (2012). The occurrence of mediation: A critical evaluation of the current debate. *International Studies Review*, 14(4), 591–603. <https://doi.org/10.1111/misr.12015>
- Hellm  ller, S., Pring, J., & Richmond, O. (2020). How norms matter in mediation: An introduction. *Swiss Political Science Review*, 26(4), 345–363. <https://doi.org/10.1111/spsr.12425>
- Hinnebusch, R. (2012). Syria: From ‘authoritarian upgrading’ to revolution? *International Affairs*, 88(1), 95–113. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2012.01059.x>
- Hinnebusch, R. (2019). Identity and state formation in multi-sectarian societies: Between nationalism and sectarianism in Syria. *Nations and Nationalism*, 26(1), 138–154.
- Hinnebusch, R. (2001). *Syria: Revolution from above*. Routledge.
- Hirschberger, G. (2018). Collective trauma and the social construction of meaning. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 9(1441), 1–9.
- Hof, F. C. (2013). Syria: The London 11 on Geneva. *Atlantic Council*. [Online], available from: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/syria-the-london-11-on-geneva/> [last accessed: 5 October 2021].
- Hopf, T. (1998). The promise of constructivism in international relations theory. *International Security*, 23(1), 171–200. <https://doi.org/10.1162/isec.23.1.171>
- Isaacs, R., & Polese, A. (2015). Between “imagined” and “real” nation-building: Identities and nationhood in post-soviet Central Asia. *The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 43(3), 371–382. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00905992.2015.1029044>
- Ismail, S. (2011). The Syrian uprising: Imagining and performing the nation. *Studies in Ethnicity and Nationalism*, 11(3), 538–549. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9469.2011.01136.x>
- Jepperson, R., et al. (1996). Norms, identity, and culture in national security. In P. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics* (pp. 33–75). Columbia University Press.
- Kappler, S. (2012). Liberal peacebuilding’s representation of ‘the local’: The case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. In O. Richmond & A. Mitchell (Eds.), *Hybrid forms of peace: From everyday agency to post-liberalism* (pp. 260–276). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230354234_14

- Kappler, S. (2015). The dynamic local: Delocalisation and (re-)localisation in the search for peacebuilding identity. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(5), 875–889. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1025740>
- Katzenstein, P. (1996). Introduction: Alternative perspectives on national security. In P. Katzenstein (Ed.), *The culture of national security: Norms and identity in world politics* (pp. 1–32). Columbia University Press.
- Kaufman, S. J. (2006). Escaping the symbolic politics trap: Reconciliation initiatives and conflict resolution in ethnic wars. *Journal of Peace Research*, 43(2), 201–218. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343306060622>
- Khoury, P. S. (1987). *Syria and the French mandate*. Princeton University Press.
- Kleiboer, M., & Hart, P. (1995). Time to talk?: Multiple perspectives on timing of international mediation. *Cooperation and Conflict*, 30(4), 307–348. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0010836795030004001>
- Kostić, R. (2007). Ambivalent peace: External Peacebuilding: Threatened identity and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Department of Peace and Conflict Research, Uppsala University, Sweden, report no. 78. Uppsala: Uppsala Universitetsstryckeriet.
- Kostić, R. (2008). Nationbuilding as an instrument of peace? Exploring local attitudes towards international nationbuilding and reconciliation in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Civil Wars*, 10(4), 384–412. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698240802354482>
- Kostić, R. (2013). American nation-building abroad: Exceptional powers, broken promises and the making of “Bosnia”. In M. Eriksson & R. Kostić (Eds.), *Mediation and Liberal peacebuilding: Peace from the ashes of war?* (pp. 22–39). Routledge.
- Laitin, D. (1998). *Identity in formation: The Russian-speaking populations in the near abroad*. Cornell University Press.
- Landis, J., & Pace, J. (2007). The Syrian opposition. *The Washington Quarterly*, 30(1), 45–68. <https://doi.org/10.1162/wash.2006-07.30.1.45>
- Lane, D. (2011). Identity formation and political elites in the post-socialist states. *Europe-Asia Studies*, 63(5), 925–934. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2011.585747>
- Leavy, P. (2020). Introduction. In P. Leavy (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of qualitative research* (Second ed., pp. 1–24). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780190847388.001.0001>
- Lebow, R. (2016). *National identities and international relations*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316710982>
- Leenders, R. (2013). “Oh Buthaina, Oh Sha’ban—The Hawrani is not hungry, we want freedom!”: Revolutionary framing and mobilization at the onset of the Syrian uprising. In K. Beinín & F. Vairel (Eds.), *Social movements, mobilization, and contestation in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 246–261). Stanford University Press.
- Mac Ginty, R. (2012). Between resistance and compliance: Non-participation and the Liberal peace. *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, 6(2), 167–187. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17502977.2012.655601>
- Maynard, J. L. (2015). ‘Identity and ideology in political violence and conflict’. *St. Antony’s International Review*, 10(2), 18–52.
- Mitchell, S., et al. (2009). Practicing democratic community norms: Third-party conflict management and successful settlements. In J. Bercovitch & S. S. Gartner (Eds.), *International conflict mediation: New approaches and findings* (pp. 243–264). Routledge.
- Mohammed, A., & Lowe, C. (2012). ‘Friends of Syria’ condemn Assad but see more killing. Reuters. Online: <https://www.reuters.com/article/syria-meeting-tunis/friends-of-syria-condemn-assad-but-see-more-killing-idINDEE81N0I320120224> (last accessed: 5 October 2021).
- Phillips, C. (2013). *Everyday Arab identity: The daily reproduction of the Arab world*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203096741>
- Phillips, C. (2015). Sectarianism and conflict in Syria. *Third World Quarterly*, 36(2), 357–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2015.1015788>
- Phillips, C. (2016). *The battle for Syria: International rivalry in the new Middle East*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/yale/9780300217179.001.0001>
- Pinto, P. (2017). The shattered nation: The sectarianization of the Syrian conflict. In N. Hashemi & D. Postel (Eds.), *Sectarianisation: Mapping the new politics of the Middle East* (pp. 123–142). Hurst Publishers.
- Renan, E. translated by Martin Thom(1990). What is a nation? In H. K. Bhabha (Ed.), *Nation and narration* (pp. 8–22). Routledge.
- Rifai, O. (2018). Sunni/Alawi identity clashes during the Syrian uprising: A continuous reproduction? In R. Hinnebusch & O. Imady (Eds.), *The Syrian uprising: Domestic origins and early trajectory* (pp. 242–259). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315143798-16>
- Risse, T. (2011). *A community of Europeans? Transnational identities and public spheres*. Cornell University Press.
- Rivas, C. (2012). Coding and analysing qualitative data. In C. Seale (Ed.), *Researching society and culture* (pp. 366–392). SAGE.
- Sadowski, Y. (2002). The evolution of political identity in Syria. In S. Telhami & M. Barnett (Eds.), *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East* (pp. 137–154). Cornell University Press.
- Saideman, S. (2002). Conclusion: Thinking Theoretically about Identity and Foreign Policy. In S. Telhami & M. Barnett (Eds.), *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East* (pp. 169–200). Cornell University Press.

- Salamandra, C. (2004). *A new old Damascus: Authenticity and distinction in urban Syria*. Indiana University Press.
- Salamandra, C. (2013). Sectarianism in Syria: Anthropological reflections. *Middle East Critique*, 22(3), 303–306. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2013.818195>
- Saldaña, J. (2014). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. SAGE.
- Saouli, A. (2018). The tragedy of Ba'thist state-building. In R. Hinnebusch & O. Imady (Eds.), *The Syrian uprising: Domestic origins and early trajectory* (pp. 12–29). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315143798-2>
- Savun, B. (2009). Mediator types and the effectiveness of information-provision strategies in the resolution of international conflict. In J. Bercovitch & S. S. Gartner (Eds.), *International conflict mediation: New approaches and findings* (pp. 96–114). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203885130.ch5>
- Silverstein, S. (2012). Syria's radical Dabka. *Middle East Report*, 263, 33–37.
- Spyer, J. (2013). The Syrian opposition before and after the outbreak of the 2011 uprising. *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, 15(3), 1–13.
- Stanley, L., & Jackson, R. (2016). Introduction: Everyday narratives in world politics. *Politics*, 36(3), 223–235. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263395716653423>
- Telhami, S., & Barnett, M. (2002). Introduction: Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East. In S. Telhami & M. Barnett (Eds.), *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East* (pp. 1–25). Cornell University Press.
- The Syrian National Council. (2013). The Syrian National Council. *Carnegie Middle East Center* [Online], available from: <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/48334?lang=en> [last accessed: 5 October 2021]
- Tully, J. (1995). *Strange multiplicity: Constitutionalism in an age of diversity*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139170888>
- Valbjørn, M. (2015). Introduction: The role of ideas and identities in Middle East international relations. In M. Valbjørn & F. H. Lawson (Eds.), *International relations of the Middle East* (Vol. III, pp. vii–xxiii). SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511612183>
- Zartman, W. I., & Touval, S. (2007). International mediation. In C. A. Crocker, F. O. Hampson, & P. Aall (Eds.), *Leashing the dogs of war: Conflict management in a divided world* (pp. 437–454). United States Institute of Peace.
- Zisser, E. (2006). Who's afraid of Syrian nationalism? National and state identity in Syria. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 42(2), 179–198. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200500417512>

How to cite this article: Clowry, S. (2021). Mediation, identity construction and legitimacy: Reimagining the Syrian nation through third-party peacemaking. *Nations and Nationalism*, 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12789>