

The Syrian Uprising: The Battle between the Regime and Activists over Making Online Narratives

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ABSTRACT

During the Syrian uprising in 2011, the regime as well as opposition activists relied on the Internet to spread their accounts of what Syria was going through and to project their agendas, which transformed the Internet in Syria into a contested political arena.² The regime's old censorship tactics proved unsuccessful in curbing the dominance of national and international media via TV and the Internet. The paper finds substantial differences between the content, rhetoric, and approach to the making and spreading of narratives and propaganda in the Syrian Uprising. While activists used the Internet to inform, the regime and its supporters used it to control and brainwash. Both parties targeted different audiences for completely different purposes. This paper will perform content analysis of online social media content that is produced by the Syrian regime and its supporters to articulate how they promoted their narrative about the uprising. In addition, it will analyze anti-regime content that aimed to counter the regime's version of the uprising. The goal is to identify the target of both narratives and situate online discourse within the larger historical and political contexts. It will address how the regime exploits the Internet as an authoritative, punitive tool not only to control the news about the atrocities it committed but also to maintain and mainstream consistent propaganda that primarily targeted its supporters. While the regime used the Internet and media to influence its loyalists, anti-regime activists posted videos on social media documenting the regime's attacks on Syrian towns as an attempt to humanize the struggle and allow the world to hear their voices. It is as if the two parties spoke different languages in the same society and country.

Key Words: *Propaganda, Uprising, Media, Censorship, Narrative.*

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²The term "activists" is used instead of "opposition" because the latter implied an active, organized political groups that had some presence in the country, which Syria lacked at the beginning of the uprising.

ÖZ

2011’de baş gösteren Suriye ayaklanması esnasında, hem rejim taraftarları hem de muhalif aktivistler Suriye’de neler yaşandığına ilişkin haberleri yaymak ve Suriye’de interneti tartışmalı bir siyasi arenaya dönüştüren gündemlerini yansıtmak üzere internetin varlığına güveniyorlardı. Rejimin, televizyon ve internet aracılığıyla ulusal ve uluslararası medyanın nüfuzunu kontrol altına almakta uyguladığı eski sansür yöntemleri başarısızlıkla sonuçlandı. Bu makalede, Suriye Ayaklanması’na dair anlatıların ve propagandanın yapılmasına ve yayılmasına ilişkin içerik, söylem ve yaklaşımlar arasındaki önemli farklılıklar tespit edilecektir.

İnternet, aktivistler tarafından bilgi sağlama maksadı güdülerek kullanılırken, rejim ve destekçileri tarafından ise onu denetleme ve beyin yıkama amacıyla kullanılmıştır. Her iki grup da büsbütün farklı amaçlar güderek farklı kitleleri hedef almıştır. Bu makalede, Suriye rejimi ve destekçileri tarafından ayaklanma hakkındaki anlatıların nasıl desteklendiğini açıkça belirtmek için üretilen çevrimiçi sosyal medya içeriğinin, içerik analizi yapılacak ve bunun yanı sıra rejimin ayaklanma biçimine karşı koymayı amaçlayan rejim karşıtı içerik de analiz edilecektir. Amaç, her iki anlatının da hedefini belirleyerek çevrimiçi söylemi daha geniş tarihsel ve politik bağlamlar içinde konumlandırmaktır. Rejimin interneti sadece işlediği suçlarla ilgili haberleri kontrol altında tutmak için değil, aynı zamanda öncelikli olarak destekçilerini hedef alan istikrarlı propagandayı sürdürmek ve yaygınlaştırmak için otoriter, cezalandırıcı bir araç olarak nasıl kötüye kullandığı konusu üzerinde durulacaktır. Rejim, yandaşlarını etkilemek amacıyla interneti ve medyayı kullanırken; rejim karşıtı aktivistler ise sosyal medyada rejimin Suriye şehirlerine yönelik saldırılarını belgeleyen videoları, mücadeleyi insanileştirmelerine ve seslerini dünyaya duyurabilmelerine olanak sağlama girişimi maksadıyla yayınladılar. Bu durum adeta iki grubun da aynı toplum ve ülke içerisinde farklı diller konuşmasına benzemektedir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Propaganda, Ayaklanma, Medya, Sansür, Anlatı

INTRODUCTION

Social media has been employed by states and opposition movements as tools for mobilization. The term Cyberactivism has become associated with many social and political movements (McCaughey, 2014). According to Frontlinedefenders.org, cyberactivism refers to:

The process of using Internet-based socializing and communication techniques to create, operate and manage activism of any type. It allows any individual or organization to utilize social networks and other online technologies to reach and gather followers, broadcast messages and progress a cause or movement. (Frontline Defenders, n.d.)³

³<https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/right/cyber-activism>

In 2011 a tornado hit northeast Minneapolis, and the city lost electricity and phone lines. With cellphone as the only way to communicate, a man named Peter Kerre created the North Minneapolis Post Tornado Watch Facebook page to gather information from people around the city and share it to get help to those in need. Soon the page became very popular among the people, even more than the official city resources (Gurak, 2014). Chile witnessed demonstrations to protest multiple social issues in 2011. During these demonstrations, about 60% of Chileans participated in cyberactivism for mobilization (Garcia, 2015).

The Egyptian revolution in 2011 would have not witnessed widespread participation without “We Are All Khaled Said”, a Facebook page named after Said, a young man, who was killed at the hands of the Egyptian police outside an Internet café (Gelvin, 2012, p. 45). Radsch (2012) reports that Asmaa Mahfouz posted a video on YouTube on January 18, 2011, asking Egyptians to participate in demonstrating against the regime of Hosni Mubarak. The video was welcomed by huge number of protestors, and Mahfouz became an icon in the revolution. Esraa Abdel Fattah was also a notable cyberactivist in the Egyptian uprising and later received a lot of local and international media attention. In retaliation, the Egyptian regime turned the Internet into a weapon against the protestors when it shut it down entirely to curb the participation in the protests that called to overthrow the regime (Ali, 2011). The Internet provided a space for cyberactivists in Egypt to avoid state repression and form a community to share information and interests (Tkacheva, O. et al., 2013). Thus, the Internet, especially social media, has become an arena used to spread and contest information and narratives.

Despite years of censorship, Arabs, especially the youth, found in social media a liberating tool through which they can receive, share, and spread narratives that have not been manipulated by the state. In addition, they used it to collectively mobilize for political action such as to organize demonstrations and sit-ins. The rise of citizen journalism and social media, thus, reshaped the media landscape in Arab countries and transformed political action, especially with the large number of youths involved in the protests of the Arab Spring. The scarcity of information provided in addition to banning or restricting the work of international journalists has transformed social media into one of the most reliable sources of information for the people inside and outside the Arab Spring countries (Radsch, 2012; Ezrow & Frantz, 2011).

RESEARCH METHOD AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of this article is to provide an analysis of the conflicting online narratives and propaganda by the pro an anti-Syrian regime about the Syrian uprising. For this reason, qualitative research is the most suitable and informative because analyzing these narratives and where they are published constitute the most useful knowledge about propaganda and the political scene in Syria before and during the uprising. Analyzing such content is imperative to articulate the significance of the use of rhetoric in the propaganda of the regime and its supporters. It provides rhetorical analysis of online content produced by pro-Syrian regime official and unofficial media outlets in the early years of the uprising. The article describes

and analyzes the Internet censorship measures by examining literature on cyber censorship in Syria that explains the regime's monopoly over the Internet at the regime uses and how that impacts the production and access to counter-narratives by anti-regime activists. This includes censoring, filtering, and blocking content on the Internet as well as using pro-regime hackers to attack opposing and Western media outlets that did not adopt the regime's narrative.

Choosing to cover the unofficial social media comes because of two reasons. First, the unofficial social media emerged earlier or at the same time of the official social media of the regime, mainly the Syrian Presidency page on Facebook, which was established in 2013. For example, a notable Facebook page such as Misyaaf Now was established in 2011 during the early days of the uprising. Second, the unofficial pages were created in response to their anti-regime counterparts. Thus, they had a closer interaction and reporting capabilities about the pro-regime base, making sure to debunk the posts, facts, and the news published on the anti-regime social media in order to attract more of Assad's supporters. In doing that, the unofficial, pro-regime social media had an immense influence in shaping the general attitudes of the regime loyalists. In addition, it allows for understanding the mentality of the average, pro-regime supporters who rely heavily on pro-regime media and social media to formulate their positions not only about the protests but also about the regime's violent response against the protestors across the country.

THE REGIME'S MAINSTREAMING PROPAGANDA

The Internet offers a vast land of connectivity for people from all backgrounds, social classes, and ideologies (Druzin & Gordon, 2018). In Arab states, the Internet represented a contradictory sphere. They understand the need to modernize their telecommunication infrastructure in order to attract more investments, but they are still hesitant to develop the Internet and allow it as a censorship-free sphere (Rinnawi, 2011). Media in the past was used almost exclusively by Arab states for mobilization through state TV and radio. For example, Nasser's regime in Egypt used Sawt al-Arab (Voice of the Arabs) radio to spread his regime's calls for socialism and Arabism (Mellor, 2011). In the modern times, the Internet, especially social media, represents a medium that these states do not have that exclusive control.

Studies on social media in Syria during the uprising such as Seo & Ebrahim (2016) covered the contents of the Syrian Presidency Facebook page and the Syrian National Coalition Facebook page. Other studies such as (Bezreh, 2016) addressed Syria's counter cyberactivism strategies and mechanism. These studies did not pay much attention to the unofficial, pro-regime social media, which, in fact, offer a close examination of the attitudes of the social base that supports the regime. The Syrian state imposes strict censorship on the press, media, and the Internet. Many books, TV shows, and websites are not allowed, especially those of opposing political groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood (York, 2011; Middle East Watch, 1991). During the time of the former president Hafez al-Assad, the Syrian state had transformed into a cult-like state that orbits around the character

of the president. The proliferation of Assad's photos in public spaces as well as the rhetorical idealization of his character by calling him the savior, comrade, combatant, etc. imposed a culture of complicity and obedience in Syria (Wedeen, 1999).

Changes in time did not change much of the regime's approach to freedom of expression. With the arrival of the Internet in Syria arrived new censorship measures. In an interview in 2018, Cybersecurity expert Dlshad Uthmān said that in Syria, "Censorship capabilities have been in place since Syria got internet" (Clark, 2018). The Internet was available in Syria in 1997, and the regime gave access to the public in 2002 (Warf & Vincent, 2016). Because "the Internet is a contested space in which hegemonic and counter-hegemonic forces play out contingently and unevenly," the regime militarized the Internet through surveillance and censorship taking advantage of resources that the protestors lacked (Warf & Vincent, 2016, p. 91). According to Open Net Initiative (2009), the regime owns and operates the Internet infrastructure through the Syrian Telecommunication Establishment and imposes strict rules on the private providers regarding filtering and/or blocking content. During the 2011 uprising, Syrian activists utilized online platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc. to spread news and inform the outside world about the regime's violence. The regime, in contrast, employed similar steps to mainstream its version of news. It claimed that it was fighting a conspiracy carried out by armed terrorists. Later, in cases where the regime was unable disapprove of viral online stories depicting its violence, the regime would question the credibility of that story, hoping to leave the audience in a limbo.

To understand how and for what purposes the regime created its claims of conspiracy, it is imperative to define what propaganda means. According to Garth S. Jowett and Victoria O'Donnell (2019), "Propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist" (p. 1). Randal Marlin (2002) defines propaganda as "the organized attempt through communication to affect belief or action or inculcate attitudes in a large audience in ways that circumvent or suppress an individual's adequately informed, rational, reflective judgment" (p. 22). Anthony R. Pratkanis and Elliot Aronson (2001) argue that propaganda is:

Mass 'suggestion' or 'influence' through the manipulation of symbols and the psychology of the individual. Propaganda involves the dexterous use of images, slogans, and symbols that play on our prejudices and emotions; it is the communication of a point of view with the ultimate goal of having the recipient of the appeal come to 'voluntarily' accept this position as if it were his or her own. (p. 11)

One of the common features of these definitions is the desire to influence the masses targeted by the propagandist to act. Therefore, propaganda aims to provoke the targeted people by invoking feelings, thoughts, and beliefs that encourage them to act and take a well-defined attitude towards a case, opinion, movement, etc.

The regime based its propaganda on two main foundations. First, it claimed that Syria was facing a conspiracy and was targeted because it supports resistance movements against Israel (Al-Jazeera English, 2011). Seven months into the uprising and the regime still denied the existence of a revolution; instead, it tainted the uprising as a conspiracy (Amos, 2011). Moreover, President Bashar al-Assad claimed that what Syria had been witnessing in February and March 2011 was a test for Syria's unity. Assad talked in the parliament on 30 March 2011 and called the country's unrest a test of the country's unity caused by conspiracies against Syria.⁴ Second, that conspiracy aimed at destabilizing the country's unity and diversity by igniting sectarian sentiments. The regime's media, officials, and its online platforms held tightly to that narrative. These two foundations aimed to project a danger that Syrians were facing to convince them to remain in support of the regime. Fabricating such narratives was based on pretentious promises for reform that targeted world media. For example, the President's media adviser Buthaynah Sha'bān said in March 2011 that the regime was studying the termination of the Emergency Law, one of the early demands of the uprising. Despite other similar promises, human rights situations witnessed no advancement Sha'bān warned that "If there is a legitimate demand by the people, the authorities will take it seriously, but if somebody wants to just cause trouble then it is a different story" (Al-Jazeera English, 2011). Such a promise was meant to address worldly concerns about the way the regime has been suppressing the uprising. In fact, Sha'bān repeated the doubts of the regime about the legitimacy of the uprising. Shortly after that announcement, the regime raised salaries and released some prisoners of the Dar'ā incidents.

The structure of the regime and the dominance of intelligence departments in the daily lives meant that terminating the Emergency Law would carry no real improvement of human rights conditions on the ground (Al-Jazeera English, 2011). Sha'bān manipulated language by lumping the protestors as "somebody" and the demands for reform as causing trouble. She opened the door for a vague interpretation by the regime about the uprising, aiming to eliminate it in the first place. After thousands of videos surfaced online documenting its violence, the regime was not interested in denying them, except for a handful of cases that went viral such as the killing of Ḥamza al-Khaṭīb and al-Ḥūlah Massacre (Flamand, A. & Macleod, H., 2011). For example, the regime accused "terrorists" of committing al-Ḥūlah Massacre on 25th of May 2012. Jihād Maqdisī, the foreign ministry spokesperson commented, "Women, children and old men were shot dead. This is not the hallmark of the heroic Syrian army" (BBC, 2012). Maqdisī even said that the army did not leave its positions or send tanks to the town.

SYRIAN ELECTRONIC ARMY (SEA)

It defines itself as a non-official group of Syrian youths who do not belong to a

⁴Assad's talk on YouTube: https://youtu.be/0_K0P4zN53g

party and aim to defend Syria after the latter has been attacked on the Internet.⁵ The group is made up of pro-Assad hackers who target online platforms of opposition, international media, activists and websites that adopt counter narratives to those of the regime. For example, “by jamming an online portal with messages, the group keeps regular visitors out and forces institutions to remove content unfavorable to the Syrian regime” (Fisher, M. & Keller, J., 2011). There is no clear connection between the group and the regime, nor are there enough information about the number of their recruits, funding, or from where it operates (Tkacheva, O. et al., 2013).

In his speech at Damascus University in 2011, President Assad praised the efforts of the SEA and the fact that they established a real army in a virtual reality.⁶ The group spreads the regime’s narrative and monitors online activity in order to track down dissidents and share their information with the regime (Reuters, 2011). When faced with a variety of opposing voices, the regime classifies them as one, homogenous group in order to lump all of these voices as one threatening entity. Also, it is a strategy to eradicate individualism; it is an affirmation that the regime does not listen to its people. Instead, it looks at its people from a binary perspective, either supporters or opponents. In this way, the regime recreates the grouping it has always done since the 1980s when it is faced with opposition. For Assad, militarization through the SEA is a clear indication about the mentality the regime deals with its opposing citizens. It directly or indirectly treats them as enemies and seeks to disempower them through online attacks on their social media and websites. This is the same strategy that the regime adopted on the ground, and by a simple comparison, one knows that the regime’s physical and electronic armies sought to destroy, suppress and silence opposing voices. The increasing numbers of anti-regime activists using social media for mobilization, exposing, and documenting the crimes proved that the regime no longer had the upper hand in containing dissidents on the ground. Indeed, the militarization of the Internet reflects how desperate the regime, as many other Arab Spring authoritarian governments, was in containing online opposing voices (Druzin & Gordon, 2018).

“DAMASCUS NOW” AND OTHER FACEBOOK PAGES

The uprising faced a surge in the pro-regime social media, online news, and other websites the adopted the regime’s narratives.⁷ It is one of the most influential pro-regime Facebook pages in Syria. It was established in July 2012 by Wisām Ismā‘īl, aka Wisām al-Ṭayr, a former soldier.⁸ In an interview with the Syrian National News channel, al-Ṭayr said that he thought of establishing an online news

⁵https://twitter.com/Official_SEA16

⁶<https://youtu.be/f3dNMienjX8?t=2256>

⁷For example: Syria News Station <http://sns.sy/ar>, Shaam Times: <https://shaamtimes.net/>, Dam Press: <http://www.dampress.net/>, Syria Steps: <http://www.syriasteps.com/>, Hashtag Syria: <https://www.hashtagsyria.com/>, Diaries of a Mortar Shell: https://www.facebook.com/YomyatKzefeh/?ref=page_internal.

⁸As of 9/9/2020, the page nearly 3 million members.

platform on Facebook to mirror and aid the Syrian army on the ground. The page, added al-Ṭayr, relied on a network on volunteers, civilians, military personnel, government employees, etc. all over Syria.⁹

The page reflects one of the earliest instances where unofficial, semi-independent establishment aided the regime in spreading its propaganda. It was clear that the regime was unable to match the online efforts of the uprising, and the introduction of al-Ṭayr as a young soldier was indeed a successful step towards empowering the regime's propaganda. As time went by, the page had more visibility, reaching about two million likes by late 2018. The team that manages the page even visited the Grand Mufti of Syria Aḥmad Badr al-Dīn Ḥassūn in 2016.¹⁰ The visit highlights the regime's attempts to take advantage of young, tech-savvy individuals to spread its narratives. In addition, it is a step to acknowledge and legitimize the regime's support of such unofficial pages that regime backers had established. The Mufti spoke about going back to the roots and abolishing sectarian differences, projecting himself and Damascus Now team as advocates for peace and the true messengers of Islam. Al-Ṭayr was very successful in that he was honored by the president's wife Asmā' in 2015, by the Syrian Journalists Union in 2018, and was selected as a member of the National Online Media Committee (Al- Shuwaykī, 2018; Al-Arabiya, 2019). Such development meant that the regime not only acknowledged his online activities but also supported them.

Damascus Now, Latakia Now, Latakia New Network (LNN), Misyaaf News, and Salamiyya Now are among the first and most popular social media platforms on Facebook that had supported the army, the president, and their propaganda.¹¹ They share some common features and strategies in creating their content and adopting an anti-uprising attitude. For example, they bestowed a divine aura around the army soldiers calling them "the men of God" and "saints", two terms that dominated other pro-regime social media discourse.¹² In addition, they adopted certain terminology that aimed to ridicule the uprising and the people's calls for freedom, which reflects the attitudes of the regime's official media. For example, in a post from 2015, Latakia Now played on words when it described the Syrian

⁹Interviews with "Damascus Now" manager Wisām al-Ṭayr on 5/7/2015: <https://youtu.be/chxLQObCXIE> and on 4/25/2015: https://youtu.be/dw_Yd7RrX20. Interview with Dampress: <https://www.dampress.net/PrintArticle.php?id=787695>

¹⁰<https://www.facebook.com/dimashq.now/photos/a.210318489093771/845653582226922/>

¹¹Wisām al-Ṭayr and Ali al-Nuqri who founded the Facebook pages Damascus Now in July 2012 and Homs News Network in August 2013, were soldiers in Assad's army at the time. See: <https://www.facebook.com/dimashq.now> and <https://www.facebook.com/Homs.News.Network.2/>.

¹²"The men of God" and "saints" are common descriptions of Assad's army that pro-regime Facebook pages use. The links below are samples from four of the most popular pro-regime Facebook pages in Syria (Damascus Now, Latakia Now, Salamiyah Now, and Misyaaf News) from 2013-17 that describe Assad's army using the aforementioned religious terms.

<https://www.facebook.com/latakia.now/photos/a.346542148874843/367310033464721/>

<https://www.facebook.com/210312382427715/photos/a.210318489093771/694897200635895/>

<https://www.facebook.com/msyaf.news/photos/a.243269115683188/1656013687742050/>

<https://www.facebook.com/salamiahnow.24/photos/a.1471555836465850/1518520178436082/>

uprising as “fawra of the donkeys,” when allegedly the flag of the rebels was shown in one of the episodes of the Simpsons.¹³ In Arabic, the word revolution means “thawra,” so the pro-Assad pages used “fawra (bubble) a word that rhymes with “thawra” to taunt the uprising as a weak, insignificant movement just like a water bubble. In a post from 2017, Misyaf Now calls the uprising “the revolution of destruction” and a “curse fawra.” The post blames the inflation in Syria on the uprising by comparing prices of daily goods such as bread, gas, milk, and other services before and after the uprising.¹⁴ These and similar posts came to support claims of the Syrian Presidency, the official page of President Bashar al-Assad, that the uprising is nothing but an act of terrorism against the state.

HISTORICAL PARALLELS

In July 2013, the Syrian Presidency Facebook page posed parts of an interview that Assad did with the local al-Thawra Newspaper. He said, “If what is happening in Syria is a revolution, we should then accept that the Israeli acts against Palestinians constitute an Israeli revolution against Palestinian oppression, or that the American invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan was a revolution.”¹⁵ Later in December 2013, the Syrian Presidency posted parts of Assad’s speech in a meeting with an academic Australian envoy in which Assad said, “The fundamentalist, takfiri ideology that Syria has been facing is terrorism without limits that does not belong in Syria. It is an international disease that can strike anytime and anywhere.”¹⁶ In this instance, he hints at Islamist movements, such as the Muslim Brotherhood its struggle against the regime in the late 1970s and early 1980s. He used the violent clashes with the Brotherhood to justify his current attitude toward the uprising, lumping all anti-regime movements and protests as Islamist. In addition, Assad’s use of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as an example underscores his vision to the uprising and the Syrian people as enemies. Such a binary attitude creates two opposing forces in which Assad claims to be the righteous party. That claim allowed the regime to have the excuse that it needs to justify the use of violence against the “enemy.” Assad’s many appearances on state media serve as a strategy where he could set and advance state propaganda.

In June 2014, Assad repeats his claims when he met the North Korean minister of foreign affairs. Assad placed his regime as the victim of an international conspiracy carried out by local terrorists. He says, “The West has been seeking multiple ways to weaken and divide the countries that it does not control in order to subjugate those countries... Today the terrorist gangs are in charge of that task.”¹⁷ These online posts came to reflect the decision of the Syrian president to vilify the uprising by associating it with terrorism and other fundamentalist ideology. Such a

¹³<https://www.facebook.com/latakia.now/photos/a.349699478559110/382609588601432/>

¹⁴<https://www.facebook.com/misyaf.news/posts/1522509954425758>

¹⁵<https://www.facebook.com/SyrianPresidency/posts/570517436325426>

¹⁶<https://www.facebook.com/SyrianPresidency/photos/a.535716253138878/654680014575834/>

¹⁷<https://www.facebook.com/SyrianPresidency/photos/a.535716253138878/746216252088876/>

depiction came after Assad's forces had been attacking civilian protestors in many Syrian towns and cities. Assad and his loyalists used social media to justify the use of violence against anti-regime protestors and to exonerate the regime from responsibility. Assad's claims created further divisions among Syrians, with one party accepting, if not hailing, the use of force against the other party.

Arab regimes of the Arab Spring did not accept the fact that their people rebelled against them. Many Arab regimes relied heavily on rhetoric to threaten their populations. For example, Qaddafi labelled the Libyan protestors as agents of the West who were high on drugs. He called to "purify the country from dirt and filth," referencing the Libya protestors (SLOBoc, 2011). Similarly, the regime pictured a demonic image of the protestors, calling them terrorists and infiltrators. For example, in 2011, the Ministry of the Interior called the protestors "Mundassīn" (infiltrators) and blamed them for the unrest that swept Syria (Ghadbian, 2011). The ministry projected a false assumption that the Syrian people are obedient by nature to the regime and will not rebel or protest; only the infiltrators rebel. Defectors from the army told Human Rights Watch that they received orders to shoot at infiltrators, Salafists, and terrorists (HRW, 2011). By inciting violence through false accusations, the regime applies Hannah Arendt's argument that "whenever totalitarianism possesses absolute control, it replaces propaganda with indoctrination and uses violence not so much to frighten people... as to realize constantly its ideological doctrines and its practical lies" (Arendt, 1958, p. 333).

The army and pro-regime social media adopted the term of infiltrators, which became the epitome of Assad's supporters. The use of "infiltrators" uncovers a strong fear among the regime and its supporters because it implies ambiguity, deception, danger, and lack of control. The term dominated pro-Assad discourse and paved the way to the use of brutal violence against protestors. That feature was behind the regime's strict censorship over social media, especially Facebook. Rami Jarrah, an online activist was arrested in 2011 for three days and tortured. The first question that the interrogators asked him was about his Facebook account to know the people who helped him and their locations (Ruhfus, 2015). Amr Sadek, a Syrian activist, told the National Public Radio (NPR) that the security forces stole his Facebook account and used it to get information on other activists (Amos, 2011). In fact, one of the earliest demands of the uprising was the freedom of Tal al- Mallūhī, a young blogger who was arrested on December 27, 2009, for writing on her blog material that the regime considered offensive and political. Because of that, she was accused of spying.¹⁸

Indeed, it was not the first time that the regime demonized an opposing group. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, and after clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood, the regime spread propaganda about the Brotherhood being terrorists and infiltrators

¹⁸Arabic Network for Human Rights Information: <http://anhri.net/?p=11504>, <https://talmallohi.blogspot.com/>, Syrian Stories: <https://bit.ly/3hJjdTi>, <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/article/18340/>.

working for imperialism and radicalism (Fārūq, 2015).¹⁹ The regime used its public schools to dictate and influence the society's political ideologies by mobilizing and militarizing the society, at least ideologically, to stand collectively against a political opponent. The strategy of lumping all members of an opposing group as terrorists and infiltrators, then, was also used to justify the persecution against that group, any sympathizers, and would-be sympathizers. That took place also after 1982 when the Muslim Brotherhood:

Suffered severe reputational damage in Ba'athist Syria. The regime had controlled the narrative on the Brotherhood for the 30 years of its exile, meaning that most Syrians' only exposure to the group came through anti-Brotherhood content in the Syrian state media. (Conduit, 2019, p. 179)

Through careful use of rhetoric, the Syrian regime was not only able to control the narratives about the clashes with the Muslim Brotherhood but also could erase events and censor facts that took place such as the Hama Massacre of 1982. When that happens, the state leaves no room for public discussions about such events because they "did not exist" in the first place (Wedeen 1999).

In 2011, the regime "responded to the uprising by constructing security in terms of combatting terror, which entailed the fashioning of vulnerabilities in sectarian terms" (Wedeen 2019, p. 143). Moreover, it labelled the uprising as a:

Fundamental Islamic [movement] because that would strengthen the connection of the minorities and secularists with the regime and present the movement as Muslim-brotherhood-based, fundamental. Then, it would push to transform the revolution into a 'sectarian struggle' or a [struggle] between fighting parties. In the end, what is happening would be labelled as a 'civil conflict' that requires an international intervention to solve it. (Kela, 2015, p. 224)⁸

The desperate attempts to stop the "infiltrators" mean that the protestors on the ground had the upper hand in exposing the regime's violence.²⁰ Activists mobilized through the Internet for Friday protests such as "The Good Friday."²¹ Rasha Salti comments on this saying:

¹⁹During the mandatory pledge of allegiance in Syria's public middle and high schools, this line was added to the intermediate and high school morning pledge of allegiance:

(Student leader): *Our pledge!*

(Students): *To stand against Imperialism, Zionism, and Radicalism, and to crush their criminal instrument, the treacherous Muslim Brotherhood gang!*

²⁰The regime ended the Emergency Law and the Supreme State Security Court on April 20, 2011 in an attempt to end the protests. See France 24: <https://www.france24.com/ar/20110419-syria-bashar-assad-emergency-law-government-lift-passes-legislation>.

²¹Middle East Online: <https://bit.ly/33nWW7B>

The media produced by insurgents are at war with the media produced by those in power; the first speaks the language of emancipation (speaking, doing, and recording what the regime has prohibited), and the second speaks the language of fear (uninhibited administration of violence, and the threat of social collapse and chaos. (Salti, 2012, p. 169)

This emphasizes the idea that the regime used the Internet to control unlike its opponents who used it to inform. Before attacking Hama in 1982, the regime cut all supplies and surrounded the city. About thirty years later, the army also cut all supplies including Internet and telephone lines, replicating its old tactics (Amnesty, 2012). An activist from Hama told Amnesty that:

The biggest difference is that in 1982 Hama was totally destroyed and the villages nearby found out only a week later... The media is the regime's greatest fear; that is why the biggest crime in Syria now in the regime's opinion is supplying information to foreign media. (Amnesty, 2012)

In addition, Foreign Policy reports that:

The Internet has also been a vital tool for rallying attention to the events in Hama. The hashtag #RamadanMassacre was created on July 31 [of 2011], at the start of the Islamic holy month of Ramadan and Assad's crackdown in the city. (Kenner, 2011)

The media and online attention that Hama received curbed the regime's violence compared to 1982. Based on the infiltrator's claim, the regime shifted into making drastic changes in its structure such as ending the Emergency Law and suspending the State Security Court. The Syrian TV along with its pro-Assad media and social media celebrated such steps claiming that Assad was listening to his people.²²

FABRICATING NARRATIVES; CENSORSHIP AND INFRASTRUCTURE

The regime was aware of the popularity of social media among political activists and the youth, especially after the Egyptian uprising.²³ For example, it lifted the ban on Facebook on Feb 8th, 2011, but it censored selected content such as famous anti-regime pages.²⁴ Many Syrians believed that lifting the ban was a maneuver to collect data and monitor online activity. Instant messaging services such as Skype

²²In his talk at Damascus University in June, 2011, Assad manipulated the Syrian and international public about lifting of the Emergency Law, the Political Parties Law, and passing of the Peaceful Protesting Law. Talk on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/f3dNMienjX8?t=350>

²³The Egyptian authorities blocked social media in Egypt for five days in 2011 to hinder any potential organized protest, but that backfired when people took to the streets after the blockage. See (Gohdes, 2015).

²⁴The regime learned from the mistakes of Egyptian regime during the Egyptian Revolution and allowed Facebook, which became the second most visited website just two weeks after being available (Mustafá 2012). Some of the most censored pages were ShaamNews, Syrian.Revolution, syria.news.F.N.N and others (Chaabane, A., et al., 2014: 9-13)

as well as video sharing websites like Metacafe were heavily censored (Chaabane, A., et al., 2014). In fact, Facebook, Metacafe, Skype, Live, and Google were among the most censored domains in the period of late July and early August 2011 (Chaabane, A., et al., 2014). The regime limited access to the Internet not only through censoring, filtering, or blocking content, but also through shutting down the Internet as well as phone lines and wireless networks whenever it launched an attack on certain areas. The regime's tactic was to shut down the internet and phone networks right before its attack. The shutdown was the most accurate sign that the regime was about to attack a town, area, etc. More outages meant more fatalities (Muṣṭafā, 2012). For example, in May 2011 the regime forces attacked the town of Talkalakh, 35 miles to the west of Homs. All communications were shut down by noon and my family fled the town around sunset. By early night, my town was attacked using hundreds of soldiers and tens of tanks (Al-Saleh, 2015).

In other instances, especially on Fridays, the day with the major demonstrations, the regime slowed the Internet considerably in order to hinder communication mainly uploading visual material especially on Fridays (Tkacheva, O. et al., 2013). This enabled the regime to gain more advantage on the ground against armed resistance and/or blocking the flow of information about such attacks to the outside world (Gohdes, 2015). In order to limit information sharing about the uprising, the regime used "7 Blue Coat SG-9000 proxies, which were deployed to monitor, filter and block traffic of Syrian users" (Chaabane, A., et al., 2014, p. 1).²⁵ A new months into the uprising, the regime blocked Bambuser, a live streaming video service (Devereaux, 2012). It also spread malware through fake files that gave the regime access to the activists' webcams and passwords, and it disabled anti-virus alerts. The regime spread malware disguised as encryption software and pdf lists of individuals wanted by the regime. Upon the download, a program called Dark Comet RAT is activated and accesses the webcam, passwords, and anti-virus alerts (Galperin & Marquis-Boire, 2012). The awareness of the dangers that come with the sudden permission of some social media echoes years of the public's fear of the state even when it took so-called positive steps.

Syrian activists documented hundreds of incidents where the regime used violence against the peaceful protestors. This sprung from the social and historical awareness among the people, especially the activists, when the memories of the Massacre of Hama in 1982 began to loom over Syria as the regime used military action to suppress the protests. The most famous Facebook page of the uprising "The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011" benefitted from the growing numbers of its followers after the success of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. It amplified the calls to topple the regime especially after the failure of the president Bashar al-Assad to respond to calls for reform and political freedoms. He addressed the Syrians twice in March and April 2011 from the parliament. He was showered

²⁵When using Blue Coat SG-9000 proxies, the content can be observed, denied, or proxied (Chaabane, A., et al., 2014).

with praise from the members of the parliament, the vast majority of whom were loyal to him. Moreover, he appeared insensitive about the crimes against civilians in the city of Dar‘ā.

Shortly after his speech and with introducing military action, the protestors gave up their earlier demands and called to topple the regime. The aforementioned page also aided in such calls and concentrated its efforts to spread such calls through spreading polls about the names of the Fridays, for example. It enabled the people for the first time in decades to voice their opinions and express themselves freely; although most accounts used fake names (Muṣṭafá, 2012).²⁶ After the military action, the activists did not only target their fellow Syrians but also rather the outside world. They assumed that the outside world is not fully aware of the crimes of the regime, so they documented every protest, attack, and crimes against the civilians hoping that the outside world might know. The political situation before the uprising and the authoritarian nature of the regime left them with few choices. They posted videos and photos on websites such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Metacafe, and others. But that did not deter the regime, which tirelessly tried to win the public back in any means possible. This goal means that the regime paid little attention to the outside world that the activists addressed. The Facebook page “The Syrian Revolution against Bashar al-Assad 2011” decided the names for the protests on Fridays and formed a network to gather videos and news about the uprising. It adopted a centralist, quasi-secular discourse that appealed to the majority of Syrians and hoped to unit them. It aimed to reach the average Syrian (Muṣṭafá, 2012). The regime has long been oppressive, and the fact that protests started from the mosques mirrors historical, anti-colonial movements where the mosque was an arena for political action (Tkacheva, O. et al., 2013). In addition, some terms such as Assad’ thugs and “liberated areas” become very common online (Muṣṭafá, 2012).

Early in the uprising, the activists aimed at collecting evidence-based videos, images and testimonies, while the regime focused on propaganda directed to its loyalists. The activists aimed to offer a counter-discourse to that of the regime. Indeed, “Videos of protesters killed by regime snipers, dissidents tortured by state security, and conscripts declaring their allegiance to the Free Syrian Army provide a visceral counterpoint to the state media’s portrayal of the conflict” (Tkacheva, O. et al., 2013, p. 80). Such efforts were carried out through a number of Facebook pages, opposition, and human rights websites as well as YouTube.²⁷ By comparing the two approaches of the regime and the activists, it is no surprise that the videos and images circulating the Internet did inform the world. However, they but did

²⁶ Assad gave a speech on March 30th 2011 in the parliament. It was a much-expected speech in which Syrians expected some reforms and action, especially after the killing of innocent people. <https://youtu.be/LUkrS5d23JE>.

²⁷ Many Facebook pages were established and dedicated to exposing the regime’s crimes and fabrications such as “Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” which was established in January 18th 2011 and was initially named “The Syrian Revolution.” Another page is “Local Coordination Committees,” and “Sham News”, Enab Baladi established in January 29th 2012. See (Mustafá, 2012. P. 22-40); <https://www.facebook.com/enab.baladi>

little to no action to mobilize the supporters of the regime because they would not be convinced in the first place. The activists and the regime addressed two polarized audiences and contributed to a deeper division between the supporters and opponents of the regime.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian regime's use of propaganda through state media and social media aimed to undermine the uprising of 2011. Through constant allegations of terrorism and fundamentalism, Assad and his pro-regime social media appealed to his supporters. The regime reproduced its 1980s rhetoric about the fear of sectarianism and the potential violence of the Muslim Brotherhood. It used social media to fabricate lies about the protests, which paved the way for his armed forces to use violence on a wide range. Cyberactivism enabled the anti-regime protestors to create censorship-free content that communicated news about the uprising and helped mobilize for the Friday protests. Cyberactivism and uprising news social media became sources of news for notable news channels such as Al-Jazeera and al-Arabiya. They allowed people to regain their agency that has long been lost for more than 45 years. The online space was parallel to the movement on the ground and boosted its momentum. Assad's militarization of the Internet did nothing but increase the polarization fear of sectarianism among his supporters. Social media empowered the Syrian protests and gave them unity and freedom from state media to report freely about the uprising. The Syrian regime and the protestors used social media to communicate content and narratives for different audiences using different strategies. After more than ten years since the beginning of the uprising, the online rift between the two remains strong.

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