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## Introduction: Toward a Sociology of Communication and Conflict: Iraq and Syria<sup>1</sup>

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Perhaps one of most urgent debates in public and official political discourse today concerns the role of media in long-term conflicts, particularly, though not exclusively, in the long-term conflicts in Syria and Iraq.<sup>2</sup> These debates have gained urgency since 2012, with the political and military rise and media visibility of the Islamic State<sup>3</sup> and other militant jihadist groups<sup>4</sup> and with the increasing militarization of politics, media spaces and everyday life in Syria and Iraq. As such, research funding has been allocated to address media's role in politics, propaganda, political violence, hate speech, sexual violence, racism, incitement and radicalization, as well as in the use of media for the dissemination of strategic narratives or counter-narratives, public diplomacy, persuasion and influence by diverse actors directly or indirectly involved in these conflicts. In addition, new centers for the study of terrorism and radicalization have been set up specifically to address how militant jihadist groups use social media platforms to construct a narrative about themselves for recruitment and for the dissemination of horrific spectacles of extreme violence.

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<sup>1</sup> This special issue came out of a conference held on 7 May 2016 at SOAS, with generous support from the Faculty of Arts and Humanities at SOAS and from Brill.

<sup>2</sup> The focus on Syria and Iraq is not intended to disregard nor marginalize other conflicts in the Middle East, including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, now entering its 70th year; the devastating, but largely invisible conflict in Yemen, where some 6 million people are living in famine-like conditions; in Libya where violence continues to affect daily lives; and in other countries of the region.

<sup>3</sup> The Islamic State is also known as the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq and by the more common term, Daesh, the acronym for the group's name in Arabic.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion on the rise of jihadist militant groups in Syria, see Lister 2015.

Broadly speaking, debates on the dynamics of communication and conflict have long remained trapped between western-centric orthodox theories of media and power, propaganda theory and studies of news production practices. As such, the field is inundated with studies that discuss the relevance of public spheres, representations, framing, agenda-setting, bias and intentionality in news and public discourses, as well as with work that focuses on the strategic narratives disseminated by diverse actors, including media actors and activists, during conflict. With the visual turn in social theory, scholars have become increasingly interested in the politics of the image (Khatib 2013), distant spectatorship and the politics of suffering (Chouliaraki 2006; Boltanski 1993), audience engagement with distant conflicts and the related, more general phenomenon of compassion fatigue (Cohen 2001; Tester 2001) and how or whether images and visual representations of conflicts and violence provoke empathy (Sontag 2003) among publics and audiences not directly involved in conflict. Other scholarship has been underpinned by discussions of broad processes of mediation and mediatization in reporting conflicts. Mediation, as defined by Silverstone refers to the dialectical ‘processes of communication’—production and reception—as well as their role in changing ‘the social and cultural environments that support them’ (Silverstone 2005: 189), while mediatization, as proposed by Cottle, ‘refers to the complex ways in which media are often implicated within conflicts while disseminating ideas and images about them’ (Cottle 2006: 8). Both theoretical approaches implicitly implicate media in social and political lives, but also tend to cast all media as sharing a common logic and cast all societal units as equally susceptible to the same transformations; thus, these approaches ignore the dynamic and complex contexts in which various conflicts emerge and develop, and how they are responded to, lived through and narrated by diverse actors, including those experiencing it directly.

The narrative turn in social theory, most popularized in studies of new social movements (see, for example, Polletta and Jasper 2001; Polletta 2008), has been incorporated in recent approaches in

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international relations, politics and conflict, opening the door for nuanced approaches to public diplomacy, power and influence. An important contribution to this emerging scholarship has been made in the theorization of strategic narratives proposed by Alister Miskimmon, Ben O’Loughlin and Laura Roselle (2013) as a key term that is relevant to addressing political actors’ strategies and actions intended to reach out to different policy makers and constituencies, particularly in expanding communication environments. Their argument is primarily concerned with the role of strategic narratives in international relations (which, of course, does not exclude conflict) and to the instrumental use of strategic narratives as a means for political actors ‘to construct a shared meaning of the past, present and future of international politics to shape the behavior of domestic and international actors...The point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others’ (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle 2013: 2). Matar and Harb (2013) propose the term ‘narrating’ conflict as being more relevant to addressing the dynamics of communication and conflict, particularly because it shifts attention to the dynamics of media use by diverse actors, including ordinary people, as well as to aesthetic and affective modes of telling, witnessing and remembering conflict; it thus widens the scope of inquiry into the dynamics of communication and conflict beyond instrumentalist and media-centric accounts. Narration, as an analytical tool, can help address the different ways in which conflicts are aesthetically and emotionally experienced, lived, imagined and negotiated in everyday lives. Such an approach is particularly relevant to the discussion of long-term conflicts, including those in Iraq and Syria, where populations have experienced, and continue to experience, diverse contests over space, identity, discourse, image and narrative and whose populations have been subjected to persistent processes of terror, counter-terror, violence and counter-violence.

### **Why Syria and Iraq**

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The conflicts in Iraq and Syria have seen, without doubt, the highest level of violence, death, destruction of places and homes, displacement and humanitarian crisis in the twenty-first century. The conflicts have also been described as the most socially mediated conflicts in the twenty-first century (see Lynch, Freelon and Aday 2014), thanks to intense local and international media attention to the conflicts, a rapidly expanding media and technological environment and the exponential rise in user-generated content created by diverse, marginalized populations intent on telling their stories and narratives of living conflicts. These populations thus challenge the totalizing dominant narratives propagated by the main protagonists in these conflicts.

It is beyond the scope of this introduction to fully address the roots and history of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, let alone the various parties involved in them or the different media spaces these diverse and complex parties have created to mobilize support, recruit followers, spread fear and legitimize ideologies and practices. However, broadly speaking, the history of the two neighboring Arab countries has been interlocked for most of the twentieth century, not least because both countries espoused the broad ideology of the Arab Baath party, though they were ruled by rival factions of the party. Furthermore, state-sanctioned violence and oppression have characterized both Syria's and Iraq's post-independence histories, as hostile relations between the two were rooted in competition between the Iraqi and Syrian Baath parties. During the 1990s and under the reign of the late deposed Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, Syria was home to much of the Iraqi opposition to his rule—it hosted one of the first major opposition conferences following the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, a conference that was attended by Iraqi Islamist, Kurdish, secular, nationalist and leftist opposition groups. Both countries were controlled by highly personalized regimes, in Iraq under Saddam Hussein, who was deposed following the 2003 US-led invasion, and in Syria under the late Hafez al-Assad and his son, the current president Bashar al-Assad. Both regimes have sought to develop a Baathist-focused national narrative

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that emphasizes pan-Arabism as the state ideology in order to consolidate their control over their populations and extend their power (see Tripp 2013; Haddad 2011). In Syria, the late president Hafez al-Assad replaced pan-Arabism with an ideology of civic nationalism and presented himself as a popular leader; he expressed this through a succession of (closely supervised) elections and plebiscites (Lesch 2012; Wedeen 1999). In Iraq, Saddam Hussein built Iraqi nationalism on the notion of cultural nationalism and constructed his own image as the embodiment of the nation (see Haddad 2011).

While intermittent violence and armed hostilities delineate the contemporary history of Iraq and Syria, the roots of the current conflicts are complex and diverse. This said, recent turmoil across the neighboring states can be traced to the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, which Syria opposed—indeed, like it had done before the war, Syria continued its open-door policy for Iraqi opposition groups, ultimately facilitating the transit of militant jihadists into Iraq.<sup>5</sup> In addition to the invasion, Iraq's current conflict has some roots in the persistent oppression of the country's Shii population under Baath rule and in the unrest that bubbled to the surface as the Sunni minority population, dislodged from power by the invasion, felt increasingly disenfranchised under the government of former Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki. Syria's conflict, too, can be located in the long history of the Syrian regime's oppression of its opponents, the Assad family's brutal monopoly of power and the regime's escalating crackdown on the fledgling insurgency that began in March 2011 against state oppression. Within a year, as Lister (2015) argues, militant jihadist groups established a foothold in the country and integrated themselves into a broader cause: fighting to protect Sunni civilians facing brutal repression. With time, however, both conflicts developed into persistent violence as political dissent and grievances against participation,

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<sup>5</sup> See Hayder al-Khoei, "Syria, Iraq and the Struggle for Power: Intertwined Futures," available online: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/publications/research/2016-11-24-syria-iraq-struggle-for-power-intertwined-futures-al-khoei.pdf>, accessed 20 March 2017.

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human rights, representation and sectarianization morphed into armed conflict and as militant jihadist groups, such as the Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, seized the opportunity to contest power and strengthen their control and presence. Finally, and importantly, both conflicts saw the involvement of international actors (such as the United States and Russia), regional state actors (such as Saudi Arabia, Iran and Turkey) and non-state actors, such as Hizbullah and Kurdish militias, intent on gaining legitimacy and control as part of their ongoing geopolitical and strategic struggles.

### **Communication and Conflict**

Without doubt, the conflicts in Syria and Iraq have challenged mainstream theories of communication and conflict, not least because of the seemingly countless images and stories about the conflicts which compete with the totalizing narratives of the conflicts. Such totalizing narratives tend to merge warfare with terrorism and to normalize a binary discourse of the conflicts as a battle between good and evil, between regime forces and their militant jihadist opponents, or between the West and Islam, thus largely excluding a multiplicity of voices and actors.

This special issue does not propose an overarching theory about the dynamics of communication and conflict in Iraq and Syria—indeed, as the papers and other studies on both conflicts show, it has been impossible to do so, particularly given the dynamic nature of the conflicts themselves, the ever-changing military and political contexts and the changing alliances and ideologies of those involved in the conflict. However, as all of these papers emphasize, the dynamics of communication and conflict cannot be understood outside specific sociopolitical contexts, or, in other words, without taking into account the question of temporality, understood in the broad Foucauldian sense, as subjective experiences of time. That is, temporality provides an analytical and methodological tool to address the diverse aesthetic, emotional and agentic responses to the conflicts and allows for a critical

investigation of the dynamics of media use and media creation in the contexts of the ongoing breakdown of norms and practices, as well as legitimacy.

While such an approach underscores the intrinsic relationship between structure and agency, it allows for a critical and nuanced investigation of the different experiences and imaginations of subjects in conflict (subjective experiences of time). While the various papers approach the dynamics of communication and conflict by focusing on particular case studies, they show that it is by engaging with media (by creating or consuming media) that individuals, groups, actors and entities tend to generate their own understandings of what is happening, what narratives they engage in and what narratives emerge, and, as such, they mark a stake in the ongoing conflicts. Marking a stake in any conflict is an old strategy that diverse entities have used to make claims—in this sense, contemporary Syria and Iraq are not different, as the conflicts have been marked by an ongoing struggle over particular temporal registers constructed and communicated by diverse actors with real stakes in the conflict. What is different is that more and more actors are also marking their stake in the ongoing conflicts, as witnessed by the exponential rise in user-generated material about these conflicts.

The majority of papers in this issue are concerned with the various aesthetic and agentive aspects of the use of images, videos and other modes of visual representation in Syria and Iraq. In her article tracing the life history of the image in contemporary Syria, Donnatella della Ratta considers what happens to images that are produced amid changing contexts and shifting understandings of what the image can and should do and amid what she calls an excess of image production by Syrian image makers. Della Ratta begins by discussing the aesthetic, political and material implications of filming as a continuous life activity in Syria since the uprising began in March 2011; she suggests that the blurry and pixelated aesthetics of Syrian user-generated videos aim to construct an ethical discourse around the images produced and to shape a political commitment to the image as evidence of continuous suffering

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and violence. However, in her study of the evolution of the visuals produced by handheld cameras since the uprising began, she shows that while the images produce powerful representations of temporality during the moments of crisis in which they are made, they fail to articulate their intention (that is, subvert hegemonic power) because of the nature of new technologies and the role they play in shaping a new understanding of the image as a networked, multiple object connected with the living archive of history, in a permanent dialogue with the seemingly endless flow of data nurtured by the web 2.0. In making her argument, Della Ratta challenges the theorization of the image and conflict and the assumptions about the power of the image in conflicts.

Rhys Crilly also focuses on the production of images in his discussion of the narratives and images uploaded by the National Coalition of Syrian Revolution to its English-language Facebook page. Situating his discussion in the context of recent literature in international relations on strategic narratives and on critical readings of visual images, he examines the narrative themes of 1,174 posts published by the coalition between November 2012 and March 2015. He argues, somehow contra Della Ratta, that visual media are crucial to the projection of particular narratives of conflict, especially in the construction of a visuality that focuses on the pain of others and that renders those affected, uprooted, injured, and killed by the conflict in Syria highly visible. In the third paper in this volume, Josepha Wessels continues the focus on the compulsion to produce images as evidence of the ongoing conflict in Syria. In her paper, she discusses image production by ordinary Syrians-turned-filmmakers, people who have turned to social media platforms to disseminate news and reports of the conflict as it happens, in order to bypass government control. Wessels suggests that this form of activism and film production is similar to the filmmaking efforts of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov, who pioneered social realism in Soviet film and aimed at recording reality as it is.



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Ben O’Loughlin, Cristian Vaccari, Billur Aslan and James Dennis address public responses on social media to the 13 November 2015 attacks by the Islamic State in Paris. In their paper, they consider over two million tweets containing the hashtags #PrayforParis and #PrayforSyria in the days after the attack. While initial analysis shows a tendency to conflate discourses around migration, violence and the media, systematic analysis demonstrates a different picture. Building on previous research that explores how social media affordances encourage certain communication behavior, particularly during global crises, the authors show that rather than conflating discourses, the discussions in the tweets analyzed revolved around Syria, foreign policy, justice and fairness. The authors argue that while discussions of Syria contain much greater antagonism than those around Paris, Twitter conversations around #PrayforParis and #PrayforSyria cannot be reduced to the contestation of global attention or to a media-driven cycle of insecurity. Rather, the high degree of agonistic and non-visual tweets, particularly about Syria, suggests a robust exchange of claims and counter-claims. The paper, thus, refutes pessimistic depictions of Twitter as a space of superficial memes and anonymous hate; instead Twitter opens pathways to research productive engagements across borders and cultures as various groups seek to make the suffering of some the concern of others. Vittoria Sacco and Valerie Gorin also address a much-neglected aspect of the mediatization of images of conflict and representations of war. Using an empirically-based study that combines quantitative and qualitative methods, they assess how Swiss audiences react to crisis reporting and visual news framing in French-speaking Swiss media. Although it focuses on a small sample, the study provides an understanding of the emotions that people not directly involved in conflict talk about when exposed to images of the conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The paper shows that the emotional responses of audiences shift according to how the images and narratives around them portray actors in conflict.

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The two papers on Iraq in this issue begin with an article by Aida Kaisy examining journalistic practices at the Iraqi state television station Iraqiya during the current conflict in Iraq. Based on fieldwork undertaken at the channel's headquarters in Baghdad and interviews with media practitioners in the news department, Kaisy demonstrates how Iraqiya employees themselves redefine media professionalism and ethics in the context of the ongoing conflict, and she suggests that these news practitioners exist in a liminal state that is born out of their lived experience of ongoing conflict. Her paper addresses how ongoing contexts of violence and war have become normalized in these journalists' everyday practices and lives. In the second paper related to Iraq, Nathaniel Greenberg turns to a popular form of cultural production in media spaces in the Arab world, the wave of satire that makes fun of the Islamic State following its territorial gains in the summer of 2014. In his analysis, Greenberg shows that while seemingly spontaneous in some instances and tightly measured in others, the Arab comedy offensive parallels strategic efforts by the United States and its allies to 'take back the Internet' from IS propagandists. In this broad context, he provides an original and insightful analysis of the role of aesthetics and satire in particular, in the creation and execution of 'counter-narratives' in the war against the Islamic State and argues that in the age of digital reproduction, truth-based messaging campaigns underestimate the power of myth in swaying hearts and minds. As he shows, satire, as a modus of expression conceived as an act of fabrication, is poised to counter myth with myth. But artists must balance a very fine line.

Finally, Jack Joy considers the communication practices of one of the most important non-state actors in the Syrian conflict: the Lebanese political party Hizbullah. Drawing on theorization of the role of 'affective' states of insecurity in sustaining power inequalities, he shows how these landscapes have been instrumentalized by Hizbullah in order to legitimize previously illegitimate forms of political action and rationalize heightened forms of collective sacrifice. Joy uses critical discourse analysis to address

what he calls Hizbullah's mobilization of a specific 'crisis imaginary' as part of its efforts to legitimize its involvement in the Syrian civil war—one that works to uphold a 'state of exception' for Hizbullah, sustain the practice of martyrdom as a form of Girardian 'mimetic desire' and structure a wider moral universe that continues to bind his audience to the resistance society while maintaining their continued submission. In his analysis, Joy focuses on the eulogies of high-profile martyrs delivered by the group's leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah, in order to show how the use of a conflict narrative enables Nasrallah to undertake the discursive manipulation of these martyr commemorations as specific situational configurations through which to sustain the practice as a form of 'mimetic desire', but also as the basis of a moral obligation for wider collective sacrifice. Joy argues that in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of Hizbullah's relationship with the notion of crisis, and how the movement mobilizes other forms of affect in a range of comparable discursive repertoires, a closer analysis of other modes of social performance is necessary, and with it consideration of how these also work toward the sacralization of resistance and its disciplinary power across diverse settings and through a variety of media.

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