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For or Against War? The Syrian Conflict on the *New York Times* Opinion Pages

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Abstract: This article compares the representation of the Syrian conflict on the opinion pages of the “New York Times” during two periods: the two months covering the beginning of the protests (March–April 2011) and the two months after the expansion of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in July–August 2014. The Syrian conflict is the most reported upon in history and has been the subject of extensive debate in American media. Drawing on the idea of news framing, the article suggests that the “Times” reproduced narratives that converged with the policies undertaken by the Obama administration. Although the newspaper framed the conflict in its outset as a democratic uprising, the emergence of ISIS caused a discursive shift that saw the terrorist group as the center of attention. The article argues that the conversation on the “New York Times” opinion pages during the two periods was embedded in contradictions that hindered a more consistent comprehension of this complex and divisive event.

Keywords: Syrian Conflict, New York Times, Journalism, American Foreign Policy, News Framing, Opinion Pages

Introduction

The Syrian Civil War is the longest and deadliest conflict of the twenty-first century. According to the United Nations (UN), more than 5.6 million Syrians are refugees, and approximately 6.1 million are internally displaced (*UN News* 2017). Since 2011, the death toll has exceeded half a million people and one million injured. The World Bank (2017) estimates cumulative losses of \$226 billion in war damages—four times Syria’s GDP in 2010.

What began as a wave of peaceful demonstrations against the regime of Bashar al-Assad rapidly evolved into a civil war involving both internal and external players. The Syrian conflict has been extraordinarily divisive, generating wide public debate over its nature, causes, and consequences. Phillips (2016, 8) describes this public debate as a war of narratives, as multiple interested parties sought “to manipulate the media and international bodies to present their views.”

The media coverage of such a complex event has been impressive. The Syrian conflict is probably the most reported upon in history. As the uprising escalated into a civil war, most of the international press withdrew from Syria (Gelling 2015), going on to operate from neighboring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey. Since then, media coverage has alternated between saturation and radio silence.

This article compares the representation of the Syrian conflict on the editorial and op-ed pages of the *New York Times* (*NYT*) during two periods: the two months covering the beginning of the protests (March–April 2011) and the two months after the expansion of the so-called Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and into Iraq (July–August 2014). This article applies a qualitative frame analysis in order to identify the main narratives and frames that the editorial board and the columnists of the *Times* used and to compare them to US foreign policy regarding Syria during the two periods.

In order to decode news discourses, identifying broad news frames built by journalists and media outlets is critical. News frames represent—according to Norris, Kern, and Just (2003, 4)—“patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events.” Entman (2010, 336) defines framing as the process of “culling a few

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elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation.”

The question of interest in this article is the extent to which more disunity among elites and more instability in the international arena affect media coverage, and frame building, of the Syrian conflict in general. In particular, the analysis of the *NYT* opinion pages offers valuable information about the shaping and spreading of frames in mainstream media. The findings suggest that in both periods, the *Times* paralleled discourses of the Obama administration and advocated policies similar to those of the US government. Such convergence was not without occasional dissent, mainly expressed in op-ed pieces by politicians conveying different views from those of the administration. Thus, the main hypotheses of this research are as follows.

Firstly, despite framing the conflict in its outset as a democratic uprising and taking on an anti-Assad standpoint, the *New York Times* editorial/op-ed pages supported the US administration’s nonconfrontational policy. Among other justifications for doing so, the contributors uphold that policy by describing part of the anti-Assad movement in sectarian terms.

Secondly, following the emergence of ISIS, a significant discursive shift occurred. Bashar al-Assad became the lesser evil and avoiding a humanitarian disaster justified intervention against ISIS. The terrorist organization became a matter of national security; which Assad’s Syria never was. The *Times* editorial/op-ed pages corroborated this view.

Finally, George W. Bush Jr. coined the “War on Terror” as the rationale for the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, and that narrative remained embedded as part of the frame for the Syrian conflict in the *Times* op-ed pages. The Iraq War took on the identity of a positive enterprise, an “unfinished job,” and a genuine attempt to establish a democratic regime in Iraq.

The next section briefly summarizes the data set and explains the methodology employed to examine it. Before the empirical analysis is a section that lays out the most relevant concepts, models, and theoretical approaches of this article. Finally, the empirical analysis (Results and Discussion) consists of three subsections that discuss the results in detail.

This comparative research contains a limitation that deserves acknowledgment. In a conflict that has lasted more than seven years, a period of four months is not sufficiently representative to support drawing definitive conclusions about the entirety of the *NYT* coverage of the Syrian uprising and civil war. Nevertheless, both the beginning of the uprising and the months immediately after the expansion of ISIS play a key role in identifying first frames the media used. Therefore, the conclusions summarized in the last section apply strictly to these two periods.

Sample and Methodology

The data set comprises thirty-three texts, eleven published in March–April 2011, and twenty-two in July–August 2014. A variety of commentators and *Times* journalists signed the four editorials and twenty-nine op-ed pieces. Only one editorial was published in March–April 2011, and three appeared in July–August 2014. Accordingly, ten op-ed pieces were published in the first period and nineteen in the latter. A search with the key word “Syria” on the newspaper’s web page enabled the compilation of the data set.

Dividing the pieces into two categories—namely, policy-proposing articles (eighteen texts) and contextual articles (fifteen texts)—provides perspective on the newspaper’s engagement in the debate. Policy proposing is defined here as direct suggestions for how the government should proceed. The higher number of these articles indicates that the Syrian conflict generated intense debate among the American political elite.

The analysis continued with more specific text coding, undertaken by identifying topics presented in the texts, players involved, policies proposed, and historical analogies used. Among others, some of the codes included were “American Foreign Policy,” “Roots of the Uprising,” “Comparisons between Iraq and Syria,” “ISIS as the Main Enemy,” and “Assad as the Lesser Evil.”

In the Results and Discussion section, a selection of quotations from the texts is analyzed and contrasted with part of the academic literature on the Syrian conflict. This selection was based on a criterion of occurrence—a large number of similar ideas could be found throughout the texts—and how representative a quotation was of the main argument in an article. The software NVivo was used to code and analyze the texts.

Codes	Occurrence	Codes	Occurrence
Actors		Discourses	
Assad		Orientalist Discourse	10
Assad as Lesser Evil	3	Humanitarian Tragedy	3
Praise of Assad	1	Sunni-Shiite Divide	7
Obama	5	Assad-Iran-Russia against the West	4
ISIS		Policies	
ISIS as main enemy	16	American Foreign Policy	29
Origins of ISIS	6	Differences within the American Establishment	4
Syrian Opposition	12	Reforms in Syria	4
Analysis of the Uprising			
Comparisons 89-90	1		
Consequences of Arab Spring	2		
Comparisons Iraq and Syria	6		
Roots of the Uprising	13		

Source: Huland

Twenty-three authors (nineteen men and four women, all either regular or sporadic contributors) signed articles about Syria in the two periods. Two authors signed one piece, and two pieces were comments on interviews with politicians. *NYT* journalists signed fifteen, including six authored by Thomas Friedman, the most of any single author represented in the data set. Ross Douthat wrote three and seven texts were written by experts in international relations or on the Middle East, such as Vali R. Nasr and Volker Perthes.

Three top members of the Obama administration wrote pieces or gave interviews.² On the Republican side, Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham signed one text. European journalists signed two, and Syrians only two, one by a human-rights activist (Mustafa Nur) and one by a political activist (Yassin al-Haj Saleh).

Foreign Policy and Media Power

Entman (2003, 5) argues that since the end of the Cold War, dissent among elites over foreign policy has increased, affecting the way the media portrays international affairs. The Syrian conflict confirms this hypothesis. Not only was the American establishment divided, but also the international community. At least six international and regional players became involved—United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, and Iran—each pursuing a different agenda (Phillips 2016, 8). Thus, conflicting narratives permeate the media coverage of the Syrian crisis, creating a sense of confusion in public opinion already saturated with wars and other international crises. In the US, the main debates revolved around the extent to which the country should get involved and how important Syria was to American interests in the Middle East.

Wiarda (2009, 2–14) claims that the divisions currently pervading the United States are part of a systemic crisis that affects the entire American society and institutional landscape. Thus, according to him, an incoherent foreign policy is nothing but an expression of an inefficient

² President Obama and Secretaries of State John Kerry and Hilary Clinton. When the interview with Clinton was published, she was no longer Secretary of State.

system in need of reform. In turn, Smith (2012, 92–110) notes that in the aftermath of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars, when the US acted as a dominant superpower, the world system returned to a multilateral order. In his view, American hegemony was currently decreasing, as the US was having to share power and influence with other international players such as Russia and China. Similarly, experts on the Middle East, including Achcar (2013, 234), Bacevich (2017, 363), and Smith (2012, 92), point out that since the Iraq War, US influence in the region has never been so weak.

Consequently, media narratives cannot be understood outside the relations of power shaping contemporary societies. As this research suggests, the media not only report elite debates, but actively participate in them. Freedman (2014, 15) explains that understanding media power calls for “focus on ownership patterns, resource allocations, governance arrangements and policy and regulatory regimes in conjunction with an analysis of the means by which these embodiments of media power work to naturalize their own status and legitimize their own interpretations.”

In the last two decades, the media landscape has gone through substantial transformations, of which two stand out: the changes in media ownership and the increasing influence of the internet. On one hand, the emergence of the internet results in a greater number of news outlets and more news content available to the public. This, however, does not necessarily mean a more pluralistic media landscape, as the formation of new media conglomerates paves the way to a greater influence of hegemonic discourses (Bagdikian 2004, 11–17). Especially in the mainstream press, this is achieved by the exclusion of critical voices (Freedman 2014, 50–59). For example, the *Washington Post* is now owned by Jeff Bezos, the *Wall Street Journal* by Rupert Murdoch, and the *Times*, although still controlled by the Sulzberger family, sold approximately 17 percent of its shares to Mexican billionaire Carlos Slim. Each media conglomerate owns several newspapers, apart from a presence in other media sectors. In addition, from 2005 to 2015, newspapers lost half of their print circulation, and newsroom staffs were reduced by 40 percent (Anderson, Downie, and Schudson 2016, 54), which largely affects the quality of the journalism produced. These trends lead to growing partisanship in American journalism (Wiarda 2009, 11), as mainstream news organizations must highlight their political and ideological affinities in order to build readership loyalty and maintain market share.

This turmoil changes the coverage of international conflicts. Extensive and fertile debate surrounds it. The most important question that scholars, journalists, and politicians address deals with how governments influence media, and vice versa. The cascading activation model theorized by Entman (2003, 9) depicts this process as a cascade in which the White House, as the point of origin, spreads the narratives. These then spill over to the rest of the system, influencing the way the media build frames and the public perceives them. Nonetheless, the relationship is not one-sided, as different media distil official narratives in different ways. Entman (2003, 147) adds, “The cascade model attempts to illuminate the increasingly complicated process of framing foreign affairs, explaining how and why some views activate and spread from the president to other elites, to the media, and to the public.”

For Entman (2003, 5), framing in the post-Cold War period has become extremely complicated because the previous foreign-policy consensus has eroded. However, in moments of crisis, the lack of consensus in the long term has not hindered the elites from diffusing their agendas into the press, even if only for a short period. In this respect, Schudson (2011, 41) argues that on three occasions, journalists abandon the “effort to report from a neutral stance”: in moments of tragedy, fear, and threat to national security. Academic research has shed light upon this issue. Studies conducted on the coverage of the Vietnam and Iraq Wars suggest that in both cases, a significant number of media outlets misrepresented American foreign policy, omitting evidence that contradicted official narratives and highlighting aspects that supported them.

Gitlin (2003) observes that the *Washington Post* “echo-chambered” the White House in the months previous to the Iraq War. It published thirty-nine “hawkish” pieces and only twelve “dovish” ones on its op-ed pages. He adds, “When your editorials read like direct transcriptions

from the West Wing, it's all the more imperative to instigate robust debate. Editorial pages should shy away from the Vince Lombardi theory that winning is the only thing that counts.”

On the other hand, the elite press is becoming more analytical and contextual (Anderson, Downie, and Schudson 2016, 54), and the line between analysis and opinion is more blurred than ever (Hoyt 2008). In spite of that, on controversial topics and especially in decisive moments, when political decisions affect a large number of people, a so-called newspaper of record has the responsibility to present an accurate and thorough debate. This is the only way to act in the public interest.

The *NYT* has a record of misreporting American foreign policy, especially in moments when American strategic interests are considered to be at stake. In such moments, public opinion is most dependent on and attentive to quality journalism. Friel and Falk (2004, 95) argue that “the Times aided and abetted the administration’s deception efforts by reporting without challenge the claims about Iraqi [Weapons of Mass Destruction], and by not challenging on international law grounds the illegal unilateralism of the president.”

As for the Vietnam War, Hallin (1986, 61) argues that the *NYT* editorial line, even when critical toward the US government, “never broke with the assumption that the cause of the war was Communist aggression” and that the consequences of defeat would be negative to the “free world.” Zelizer, Park, and Gudelunas (2002, 302), analyzing the *NYT* coverage of the second Intifada, conclude that it was “slanted in a pro-Israeli direction.” Bias is often obtained with the use of frame devices, such as lexical choices, sourcing practices, headlines, photographs, graphics, and lead paragraphs, in ways that emphasize certain ideas at the expense of others. The aforementioned study also suggests that “the Times seems to possess a disproportionate role in influencing evaluations of the American press in general” (303) which, in fact, increases its responsibility when covering international crises such as the Syrian conflict.

In general, the representation of Arab countries in American media is inseparable from the broader political, economic, and social relations between the United States and the Middle East. Said (2003, 284–286) analyzed this relationship when discussing the manifestations of the Orientalist discourse today. According to him, since the end of the Second World War, when the USA became the dominant imperial power, the stereotypical Arab was portrayed mostly as an antizionist and a provider of oil. The mainstream press largely reproduced this new dimension of the Orientalist discourse, conveyed to a great extent by so-called experts. Most popular topics in coverage of the Middle East include the Arab-Israeli conflict, oil, and, more recently, Islam as a global threat. Ibrahim (2009, 518–519) reveals that Arabs are depicted in mostly negative terms and, particularly from the 1990s onward, in the context of the Gulf War and the collapse of Communism, Islam became a threat in the eyes of the American establishment. In that respect, Said (1997, 44) notes, “Such representations of Islam have regularly testified to a penchant for dividing the world into pro- and anti-American (or pro- and anti-Communist), an unwillingness to report political processes, an imposition of patterns and values that are ethnocentric or irrelevant or both, pure misinformation, repetition, an avoidance of detail, an absence of genuine perspective.”

As this article indicates, Said’s views are still relevant to understanding media approaches to the Middle East, Arabs, and Islam. Turning back to the Syrian conflict, with the emergence of ISIS in July–August 2014, “Islamic terrorism” gained the spotlight. Discourses resembling the War on Terror narrative surfaced once again. If in March–April 2011 the uprising was depicted as a democratic struggle, after ISIS arose, the dominating frame highlighted its sectarian dimension.

The last point before proceeding to the empirical analysis is that editorials and opinion columns differ from straight news, in that they are not necessarily balanced. Reading an editorial creates the expectation that the reader will find a clear definition of the problem or issue, the actors involved, the possible solutions at hand, and how the newspaper positions itself. Schwarz (2012) suggests that in part, the *NYT* has acquired credibility and status for “pursuing a liberal-to-

moderate agenda on national issues” and urging the “United States to be a strong presence in world affairs” (xvi). The coverage of the Syrian conflict was in accordance with the *Times*’s charter of principles, but not exempt from contradictions and a certain bias, as the following pages will demonstrate. In a way, framing is also about “defining an issue, making causal assertions about it, and suggesting remedies for social problems it entails” (Bruggemann and D’Angelo 2018, 93). Therefore, analyzing a newspaper’s opinion columns provides insightful information about the whole of the coverage, including hard news and other journalistic genres (e.g. investigative, analytical, and feature writing).

Results and Discussion

Beginning of the Uprising: The Times against an American Intervention

First frames play a pivotal role in setting coverage dynamics. After a first frame is built and reproduced, it tends to resonate to other media and “spread congruent thoughts and feelings in individual’s knowledge networks” (Entman 2003, 7). In the case of the Syrian uprising, a tension between frames produced nationally and internationally is noticeable, due to the strict control the Syrian regime exerts over the press (Yassin-Kassab and al-Shami 2016, 18). Thus, international media primarily set first frames.

The first phase of the Syrian uprising lasted approximately four months, from March 2011 to the militarization of the conflict in the summer of 2011 (Perthes 2015, 27). For this reason, analyzing the coverage of its two initial months sheds light upon the first frames that were disseminated on the *NYT* editorial/op-ed pages. The Arab Spring as a whole was characterized as democratic, spontaneous, and leaderless uprisings (Friedman 2011a), and the Syrian protests were framed in this context. From the beginning, direct US participation was viewed with concern. In three articles (one editorial and two op-ed articles), the idea that the United States should avoid “boots on the ground” was categorically expressed (Friedman 2011a; *New York Times* 2011; Lesch 2011). Nonetheless, one author asserted that “limited airpower” could be used: “We should protect innocent lives when we can—with limited airpower, not boots on the ground. We must analyze which countries matter to us strategically, and after the Facebook party dies down and the students exit the streets, figure out who is really controlling events in the places important to us” (Montefiore 2011).

The texts were mostly critical of the Syrian president. He was mentioned directly in seven texts and the word “Assad” appeared approximately fifty times. He was criticized for his refusal both to undertake democratic reforms and to adopt a more inclusive attitude toward the opposition. The editorial board (*New York Times* 2011) adopted a strong stance against him, affirming, “Now Mr. Assad appears determined to join his father in the ranks of history’s blood-stained dictators, sending his troops and thugs to murder anyone who has the courage to demand political freedom.”

However, Perthes (2011) described the Syrian president as a modernizer in the economic sphere, and Lesch (2011) praised him for his pro-market reforms. Whereas the editorial board (*New York Times* 2011) stated that the United States had attempted to improve relations with Syria before the uprising, Lesch (2011) and Friedman (2011c) noted that although disagreeing with his policies, the US wanted Assad to remain in power. In the second period (July–August 2014), an anti-ISIS narrative replaced the anti-Assad one.

The tone of the anti-Assad movement was much more ambiguous. Three authors referred to it as “pro-democracy groups;”³ but one text used the label “Sunni rebels.” According to Friedman (2011a), the US “should be cautious of intervening in places where it [didn’t] know the opposition.” The concern about the lack of leadership of the Syrian revolt was present in three of

³ Montefiore; Friedman and the editorial board

the texts published in March–April 2011 (Friedman 2011a, 2011b; Montefiore 2011). In fact, one of them had the suggestive title: “Hoping for Arab Mandelas.”

In two texts, the Arab Spring was compared with the 1989–1990 revolutions in Eastern Europe that overthrew the dictatorial regimes led by Communist parties. For Friedman (2011d), for instance, “without extraordinary leadership, the Arab transitions are going to be much harder than in Eastern Europe.” The comparison could have been appropriate if it had been part of a more thorough sociological analysis. Instead, it ended up implying that Arabs lacked the capacity to generate “extraordinary leadership.”

In March–April 2011, only two Syrians received space on the *Times* op-ed pages. Both criticized Assad’s economic reforms, suggesting that they negatively affected the majority of the population (al-Haj Saleh 2011; Nur 2011). In their view, the socioeconomic setbacks in the years previous to 2011 were an essential cause of the uprising.

From the outset, the depiction of the conflict as a democratic revolution intertwined with the idea that it had its roots in sectarian tensions. Both notions coexisted at this stage of the coverage. The democratic uprising frame, which stood out in the beginning, was gradually replaced by a narrative emphasizing sectarian and ethnic divisions. For example, words such as “Sunni,” “Shia,” “sect,” and “extremism” came up more frequently than “secular,” “democratic,” and “moderate.” Friedman (2011c), referring to the anti-Assad movement, wrote, “And this is a lot like our dilemma in Syria where a regime we don’t like [...] could be toppled by people who say what we like, but we’re not sure they all really believe what we like because among them could be Sunni fundamentalists, who, if they seize power, could suppress all those minorities in Syria whom they don’t like.”

Montefiore (2011) pointed to the tensions between a “twitter revolution” and a Sunni-Shia split. Field (2011) went in the same direction, presaging the possibility of Assad playing one “religious faction against the other.” Moreover, Lesch (2011) warned against the “explosion of Syria,” in the event that a “central authority” dissolved. One can infer from this argument that the continuity of a central government would be preferable. Friedman (2011d) suggested that the Syrian society was fractured by tribal, ethnic, and religious conflicts.

The editorial board (*New York Times* 2011) opposed a direct US intervention, proposing instead the application of sanctions and diplomatic pressure to counter Bashar al-Assad. The majority of the columnists supported the newspaper’s official line. The editorial board wrote in April 2011, “Let’s be clear: Another war would be a disaster. Syria has one of the more capable armies in the region. And while there is no love for Assad, he is no Qaddafi, and the backlash in the Arab world would be enormous” (*New York Times* 2011).

On March 19, 2011, after the approval of Resolution 1973 by the United Nations, NATO began a military operation in support of the rebels fighting Muammar al-Qaddafi. At that point, the debates about the intervention in Libya interfered with the conversation on Syria. Friedman (2011c) and Lesch (2011) argued that considering that the latter is a much more complex country than the former, an intervention in Syria should be ruled out.

President Obama himself, in an interview with Friedman (2014a), used the same reasoning to justify his nonconfrontational Syria policy. He added that the intervention in Libya had been correct and, had it not taken place, Libya would have become “a Syria.” This train of thought is delicate. To avoid a “Syrianization” of Libya (meaning a humanitarian disaster) had required a military intervention. In 2014, a similar rationale justified the use of military force against ISIS. Then why refuse to support the anti-Assad movement in a decisive way? President Obama answers the question in the same interview: “When you have a unique circumstance in which genocide is threatened [in reference to ISIS in Iraq], and a country is willing to have us in there, you have a strong international consensus that these people need to be protected and we have a capacity to do so, then we have an obligation to do so” (Friedman 2014a).

The US President then subordinated military (humanitarian) intervention to the existence of an “international consensus.” He suggested that in Syria, after Assad crossed the “red lines” and

used chemical weapons against civilians in 2013, the lack of such a consensus was the reason for his nonconfrontational policy.⁴ On the contrary, in Libya (in 2011) and Iraq (in 2014), consensuses had been achieved, supporting interventions in both cases. This contradiction is the result of one of Obama’s main foreign-policy principles in Syria: the priority on cooperating with Russia, the main sponsor of the Assad regime (Phillips 2016, 180–81).

In conclusion, according to the *Times* editorial/op-ed pages, the reasons for not intervening in Syria in March–April 2011 were that the uprising had no clear leaders; the anti-Assad movement was not to be trusted; Syria had too many sectarian divisions; the Syrian army was powerful; and no international consensus was achieved for a military action against Assad.

July–August 2014: The Times Supports Military Action against ISIS

The formation of ISIS in Syria and its subsequent expansion into Iraq in 2014 attracted a great deal of media coverage. By mid-2014, it occupied a territory inhabited by nearly eight million people. The combination of an aggressive discourse against the West and spectacular actions—such as decapitating prisoners—placed ISIS in the spotlight of media attention.

The *Times* editorial/op-ed pages were no exception to the interest in ISIS. In July–August 2014, twenty-two articles (twice more than in the March–April 2011 period) dealt with the Syrian-Iraqi conflict,⁵ all of them addressing ISIS in one way or another. Of these, three were editorials and nineteen were op-ed articles. The word “ISIS” appeared 159 times in the texts; “Assad” appeared twenty-five times, and “moderate opposition” showed up in nineteen cases.

When compared to the coverage in March–April 2011, a discursive shift followed the emergence of ISIS that marked the second period. It consisted of four main aspects: ISIS became the center of attention; the description of the conflict in sectarian terms increased; Assad became the lesser evil; and the *NYT* went on to support the use of military action against the group.

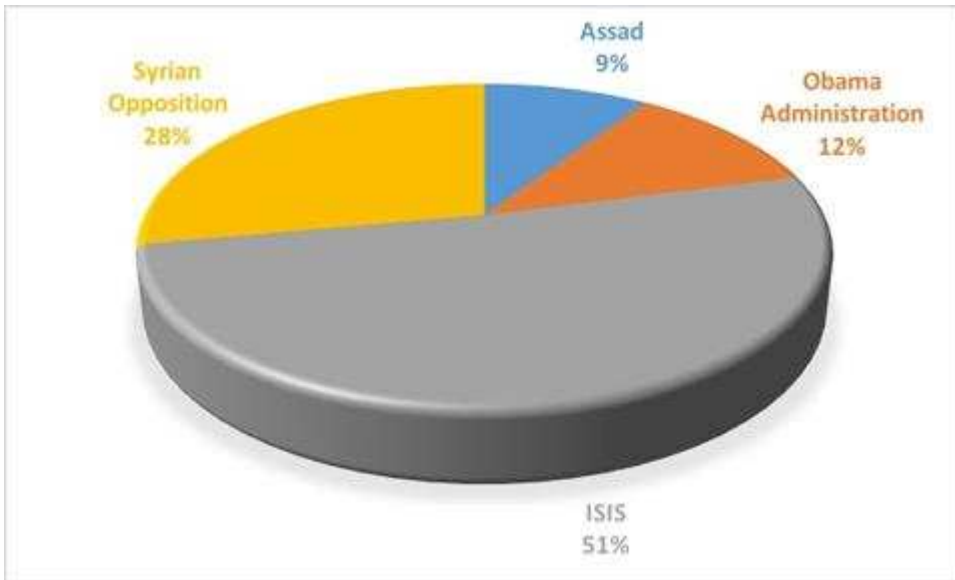


Figure 1: Frequency of these four players in texts from both analyzed periods
 Source: Huland

⁴ In September 2013, after the Assad regime used chemical weapons against civilians in Ghouta, the US struck a deal with Russia according to which Syria’s chemical arsenal should be completely destroyed by 2014. The use of such weapons by the Syrian regime was verified by the United Nations and multiple NGOs.

⁵ Most editorials in this period made no distinction between both conflicts.

ISIS had become a matter of national security. Their brutal actions, undertaken to a great extent to attract the media, were one source of concern to politicians and commentators writing for the *Times*. President Obama (quoted in Giacomo 2014), defined them in very strong terms, calling for a “common effort to extract this cancer so that it does not spread.”

Conversely, words such as “uprising” or “revolution” nearly disappeared. They were used by only one author (Nasr 2014a) in this phase of the coverage, in reference to a “Sunni rebellion.” This lexical choice reflected a preference (already incubated back in 2011) for narratives highlighting the sectarian dynamics of the Syria-Iraq crisis. For example, Nasr (2014b) blamed the “ferocity of the Sunni-Shiite split” for the chaos in which Iraq and Syria were immersed. He added in another article that “the Shiite-Sunni divide [had] grown too wide for Iraqis to reconcile their differences by themselves, and Iraq’s neighboring powers [were] in no position to be honest brokers” (Nasr 2014a).

Flanagin (2014) argued that a possible solution for the Iraq crisis would be its partition into three subregions based on ethnicity. By doing that, he treated the Middle East as an amalgam of sects and ethnic groups, as if this aspect prevailed over all others. As in the first period, also now the sectarian divide became a reason for not helping the moderate opposition. Friedman (2014b) maintained that the secular opposition should not be supported because it had never been in a position to defeat both Assad and the “fundamentalists.” Speaking to Friedman, President Obama used a similar argument, saying: “What we have is a disaffected Sunni minority in the case of Iraq, a majority in the case of Syria, stretching from essentially Baghdad to Damascus [and] unless we can give them a formula that speaks to the aspirations of that population, we are inevitably going to have problems” (Friedman 2014a).

In the same interview, he qualified as “fantasy” the idea that arming the anti-Assad movement in Syria could have made a difference.⁶ This reasoning of generalizing the Sunni-Shia split and associating it implicitly with the rise of ISIS was also used by the *NYT* editorial board, who wrote: “The prospects of defeating ISIS would be greatly improved if other Muslim nations could see ISIS for the threat it is. But, like Iraq, they are mired in petty competitions and Sunni-Shiite religious divisions and many have their own relations with extremists of one kind or another” (*New York Times* 2014b).

Scholars agree that the sectarian tensions in Syria increased from 2012 onward. However, Phillips (2016, 21) notes, “Sunni-Shia divide had not been the defining, perennial struggle within Middle Eastern communities that some contemporary commentators argue.” According to him, the 2003 Iraq War was the main reason for the proliferation of sectarianism in the Middle East. America’s support for the *mujahedeen* fighting the Soviet occupation in Afghanistan in the 1980s is also mentioned as a factor that propelled sectarian tendencies in the region (Bacevich 2017, 55).

In turn, Achcar (2016, 31) relates the rise of ISIS in Syria to “the lack of US support to the mainstream Syrian opposition.” Abboud (2016, 137–40) argues that the dichotomy between moderate and extremist rebels has always been a false one. For him, there was an immense “fluidity” on the ground between moderate and extremist groups, the country or individual donor financing them determining their ideology to a great extent.

Hence, the US administration’s refusal to support oppositional groups meaningfully allowed other players, such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey, to fill the void. Some of the groups fighting the Assad regime adopted several ultrareactionary ideologies propagated by Riyadh, Doha, and Istanbul. The rise of ISIS relates to a complex combination of factors. For example, Weiss and Hassan (2015, 97) note that despite Assad’s extended use of a secular narrative, he has in fact developed a long-standing relationship with Islamic fundamentalism. They add that the

⁶ A CIA covert program, called Timber Sycamore, was put into effect in 2013 by the Obama administration to arm moderate Syrian rebels. President Trump ended it in 2017. The program included ammunition, small arms, and salaries for commanders and fighters. An important debate about its scope and functionality has taken place since its beginning.

expansion of ISIS had only been possible in light of Assad's collaboration with al-Qaeda by "facilitating foreign fighters' movement into Iraq to destabilize the [American] occupation" (98).

In this respect, some of the commentators and politicians sought to explain the origins of ISIS. Clinton (quoted in Brooks 2014), stated that "the failure to build a credible fighting force of people who were the originators of the protests against Assad...left a big vacuum." For Boyle (2014), ISIS was born "out of the chaos of Syria's civil war." Nasr (2014b) argued that it had to do with "the failure of the Arab Spring." Wergin (2014) claimed that Obama's nonconfrontational Syrian strategy was to blame for the growth of the Sunni terrorist group.

The editorial board (*New York Times* 2014b) criticized several countries for contributing, by action or inaction, to the rise of ISIS. Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Qatar, and even Saudi Arabia were among the countries mentioned. Two countries, however, were never included on the list—the United States and Assad's Syria. As Achcar (2016, 26) notes, "when [the US] started bombing the 'Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham,' with official approval from Baghdad and tacit approval from Damascus, the United States took special care not to hit any target related to the Assad regime." The change of US priorities converting ISIS into the main enemy became clear, reflected by the majority of the *NYT* commentators.

On one hand, if the use of a sectarian logic to analyze the conflict increased, then, on the other, Assad was turned into the lesser evil. The Syrian dictator was hardly mentioned on the *NYT* op-ed pages. Gelb (2014) asserted that "the greatest threat to American interests in the region [was] ISIS, not Mr. Assad." He also criticized Obama for not "capitalizing Mr. Assad's anti-jihad instincts."

Douthat (2014b) affirmed that "the Assad regime has never been a threat to American interests in anything like the way that Soviet Russia once was." Such a comparison would require a detailed explanation that was not provided. In two days, Douthat wrote two pieces, one advocating the use of force against ISIS (2014a) and another discrediting an intervention in Syria against Assad (2014b).

Assad was still depicted as a tyrant, although the tone was now different. No demands to undertake democratic reforms were made and no direct action against him was deemed necessary. McCain and Graham (2014) were exceptions, stating that the Syrian dictator was not a "reliable partner against ISIS" and was actually responsible for most of the deaths in Syria.

Clinton, McCain, and Graham expressed critical views of Obama's Syria policy. They argued that the US should have armed the moderate Syrian opposition in the beginning of the uprising (Brooks 2014; McCain and Graham 2014). This standpoint, however, was residual on the *NYT* op-ed pages, and it was explicitly refuted by Friedman (2014b) and Douthat (2014b).

The expansion of ISIS was framed by most *NYT* commentators as a potential humanitarian disaster. They used the same rhetoric as President Obama had to justify the need to defeat the terrorist organization as soon as possible. For example, the humanitarian crisis frame was used by Douthat (2014a) and Kerry (2014), both claiming that ISIS represented a threat beyond the region.

Douthat (2014c) went as far as comparing the ideology of ISIS to Communism and fascism, although he did not elaborate on this analogy. It simply functioned as a justification for immediate action against the terrorist group. In "Preventing a Slaughter in Iraq," the *NYT* editorial board supported the policy of airstrikes against ISIS, on the condition that no "boots on the ground" be used: "Mr. Obama made a wise policy call [dropped food for civilians and targeted airstrikes against ISIS], and showed proper caution, by keeping his commitment not to reintroduce American ground troops in Iraq, but humanitarian assistance for the imperiled civilians was necessary" (*New York Times* 2014a).⁷

Moreover, the alliance between the US and the Iraqi Kurds served as another reason to confront ISIS (Douthat 2014a). In 2005, in the context of the Iraq War and the Post-Saddam era, the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) was formed after the then-recently approved Iraqi

⁷ In mid-2015, US troops started to be deployed to Syria.

Constitution recognized Iraqi Kurdistan as an autonomous region. The KRG became an important US ally in the region (Gunter 2016, 151–54).

Lastly, the five politicians⁸ who wrote for the *Times* in July–August 2014 converged on the necessity to use military power against ISIS. Yet again, differences came to light regarding the extent of such an action and whether or not the US should have supported the moderate Syrian opposition.

Syria, Iraq, and the War on Terror

After 9/11, the War on Terror narrative became the hegemonic paradigm in American foreign policy—a set of policies whose main objective was to combat terrorism on a global scale. These policies assumed that “Western values” were under threat from a global network of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaida. Hence, terrorism had become the main enemy of the so-called civilized world (White House 2003, 1).

The most vocal advocates of the War on Terror narrative were “leading conservative Republican politicians along with neoconservative activists, intellectuals, and journalists with overlapping strategic objectives” (Lustick 2006, 49). Without a doubt, the diffusion of its core ideas to a variety of institutions and broad segments of the American public was successful.

To a large degree, the mass media adopted it as its own narrative, especially in the years that followed the 9/11 attacks (Reese 2010, 29). Norris, Kern, and Just (2003, 3–4) argue that “the events of 9/11 symbolized a critical culture shift in the predominant *news frame* [emphasis in original].” Different scholars have demonstrated that several mass media—among them, the *NYT*—misreported the 2003 Iraq War. In this respect, Richardson (2006, 187–88), analyzing the *British Guardian*, notes: “A search of the *Guardian* website, for instance, shows that there were only 13 articles that contained the phrase ‘weapons of mass destruction’ in 1998 [...] This number rose to 75 articles in 1999, 204 in 2001, 2070 in 2003 and then dropped off to only 251 in 2005.”

This illustrates the power emanating from the political establishment to influence the agenda of some of the most influential news organizations. Friel and Falk (2004, 3) add that the *New York Times* “[failed] to raise in its news, editorial, and op-ed pages the major objections under international law to the Iraq war in the months leading up to its initiation.”

The high human and financial costs of the Iraq War gradually undermined the popular support for invading Iraq the US government had once enjoyed. The misinformation campaigns, led by the Bush administration and part of the media, became public knowledge and aggravated the situation. Since then, US public opinion has become progressively suspicious of military interventions. For instance, in 2012, more than 60 percent of the American population rejected the use of military power in Syria (Pew Research Center 2012).

Disregarding the growing opposition to foreign interventions, the US government continued to use the War on Terror paradigm as a central ideological framework to formulate foreign policy (Schmidle 2018). The analysis of the *NYT* op-ed pages on Syria suggests that the same occurred with the *Times*. In the case of Syria, this narrative was put into effect through the adoption of three reasoning devices: the use of references to the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars when analyzing Syria and Iraq (in 2014); the description of the 2003 Iraq War and occupation as a positive enterprise; and the omission of the role played by both the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars in the inception of ISIS.

References to Afghanistan or Iraq appear in six of the thirty-three analyzed texts. Five were positive and one negative. The narrative of War on Terror is still deeply rooted in the American psyche (Reese 2010, 25), and therefore underestimating this rather low rate of occurrence would be a mistake. Three concepts are most striking: “democratization,” “liberal experiment,” and

⁸ President Obama, Secretaries of State Hillary Clinton and John Kerry, and Senators John McCain and Lindsey Graham.

“unfinished job.” No references were found in editorials, only in op-ed texts, indicating that the use of such a narrative did not form part of the *Times* editorial line.

According to Friedman (2011a), “Iraq teaches what it takes to democratize a big tribalized Arab country once the iron-fisted leader is removed (in that case by us).” He added that the American occupation of Iraq was the “most important liberal experiment in modern Arab history because it showed that even tribes with flags can, possibly, transition through sectarianism into a modern democracy.” The references to the Iraq War were generally used to argue against arming the Syrian rebels: “The United States invaded Iraq with more than 100,000 troops, replaced its government with a new one, suppressed its Islamist extremists and trained a ‘moderate’ Iraqi army, but, the moment we left, Iraq’s ‘moderate’ prime minister turned sectarian. Yet, in Syria, Iraq’s twin, we’re supposed to believe that the moderate insurgents could have toppled Assad and governed Syria without any American boots on the ground, only arming the good rebels. Really?” (Friedman 2014b)

This reasoning leads to an unequivocal conclusion: “American boots” would have been an indispensable condition to topple Assad in Syria. It underestimates the moderate, mainstream Syrian opposition and, by inference, overemphasizes the sectarian divide in both Iraq and Syria. The same logic of stressing the sectarian component of the Syrian/Iraqi crisis, and omitting the role of the United States, was applied by President Obama. He stated in an interview with Friedman (2014a) that the crisis in Iraq was caused by an opportunity missed by the Shiite majority to include the Sunni minority in the political regime and share power with them.

Two authors, Nasr (2014b) and Friedman (2014b), implied that the American intervention in Iraq was an “unfinished job.” Nasr argued that “America’s past efforts to forcibly plant a pluralistic democracy” were being reversed by sectarianism. The idea of forcibly planting a pluralistic democracy is in itself an oxymoron that defies logic. One can infer from this reasoning, just as in the previous example, that the responsibility for the expansion of ISIS lies solely in the hands of the Iraqi people. Similar inferences were a constant: “American can use its military power to contain, but not to resolve, paroxysms of violence in the Arab world as it is now drawn” (Nasr 2014b).

The only slightly critical voice directed toward the Obama administration came from Boyle (2014), who compared the “moralistic language” used to describe ISIS to that used after 9/11 in regard to Saddam Hussein and al-Qaida. According to Boyle, such language could blind one to the consequences of one’s actions. He was referring to the use of words like “bad” or “evil” to describe ISIS. Boyle did not question the overall policy of fighting the terrorist group, or even the use of military force against it. He argued instead that in order to confront ISIS, a formal and systematic analysis was necessary.

McCain and Graham (2014), on the other hand, compared the fight against ISIS to the Afghanistan War. In their view, the US should participate with airstrikes and advisers, not with “boots on the ground,” which would be provided by so-called “partners” (Kurdish militias and Iraqi army).

In conclusion, five authors⁹ used notions belonging to the War on Terror narrative to assess the 2014 Syria/Iraq crisis. The Iraq War was assessed as a genuine attempt at democratization. Also, it was implied that Iraq and Syria were not capable of self-rule without the interference of external brokers. And finally, the overemphasis on sectarian tensions and the high amount of ISIS coverage, which resulted in less coverage of other key aspects, can be understood as a replication of the War on Terror narrative.

Final Comments

The three hypotheses summarized earlier are strongly confirmed, despite the disclaimer made in the introduction about the limitations of this research. First, at the beginning of the conflict, the

⁹ John Kerry, John McCain, Michael Boyle, Thomas Friedman, and Vali R. Nasr.

NYT editorial/op-ed columns opposed American direct involvement with “boots on the ground,” while adopting an “anti-Assad” standpoint. Second, with the emergence of ISIS, a discursive shift came about, and the terrorist organization became the main focus of attention. This discursive shift is partly attributable to the changing dynamics on the ground, as the rise of ISIS compelled both the international community and internal players to take on new approaches to the Syrian civil war. And third, the War on Terror narrative functioned as a backdrop for interpretations and policies suggested on the *NYT* op-ed pages, but not in editorials. This was done by comparing the Syrian conflict with the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars and analyzing it in largely sectarian terms.

Editorials disclose the institutional opinion of a newspaper, being frequently signed by a board of experienced and distinguished journalists. Therefore, they tend to be more homogenous—it is rare to see editorials contradicting each other—and cautious when undertaking historical analysis and suggesting policies. Conversely, op-ed pieces are the work of individuals with a reputation on a particular area of interest. They tend to be less restrained and more susceptible to minute changes “on the ground.”

In addition, the data analysis suggests that, in the periods analyzed, the cascade activation model appropriately explains the way frames are spread by governments and other segments of the political elite to the rest of the system, including the media and the audience. By carefully selecting who the paper allowed to write on its op-ed pages, the *NYT* ensured the dissemination of ideas that did not contradict its main editorial line, which in the case of the two periods analyzed was mostly aligned with government narratives. The majority of journalists, politicians, and experts who participated in the conversation about the Syrian conflict did not question the Obama administration’s main policies. Dissonant opinions came mostly through the voice of politicians who opposed official policies. This lack of diversity is further illustrated by the practical absence of Syrian voices amongst the myriad of commentators.

The American political establishment was divided (and continues to be) on the Syrian conflict, as fractures in both major American parties and institutions became public knowledge on several occasions. Hence, an interesting topic for further research could encompass the coverage of the same periods in different mainstream media, not only in the US. If partisan tendencies in American journalism are on the rise (and so they seem), different newspapers have most likely produced different narratives on this issue.

Additionally, the fact that a large-scale deployment of American troops was never on the table influenced the building and propagation of frames. Although most Americans opposed an intervention in Syria in 2012, a sense of indifference hovered in the American popular imagination, making the coverage of the Syrian conflict unlike other major international crises. In the case of Vietnam and the Iraq Wars, for example, a large number of American lives were at stake.

Nevertheless, even if at first the Syrian crisis was not considered a matter of national security, the *NYT* op-ed pages legitimized the Obama administration by defending its foreign policy and reproducing traits of the War on Terror narrative. This was the case in at least the two periods analyzed. Thus, as part of the effort to shield the administration from detractors, the *NYT* coverage was not free of contradictions.

The humanitarian crisis frame, for example, functioned as a justification to act against ISIS in 2014, but was not given the same importance in the debate about whether or not to support the anti-Assad movement. According to the Syrian Networks for Human Rights (2017), in 2016 the Syrian regime and Russia were responsible for approximately 75 percent of the deaths, whereas ISIS could be responsible for around 10 percent of victims. The crimes that can be attributed to the Syrian president were mentioned in a number of texts, but only John McCain and Hillary Clinton clearly argued that that was a sufficiently strong reason to justify more decisive actions against the Syrian dictator.

A second category of contradictions stems from a train of thought that overemphasizes the sectarian component of the Syrian and Iraqi societies, which hampers a fuller understanding of social phenomena such as the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. The belief that several Middle Eastern countries are predominantly shaped by sectarian and ethnic divisions stands as a basic dimension of the Orientalist discourse (Hashemi and Postel 2017, 3–4). Undeniably, they played a role in both events, but an important number of authors implied that this aspect stood out above all others. Highlighting specific aspects of a given reality and neglecting others belong to the most relevant procedures of frame-building. Far from being randomly selected, they are highly influenced by the values and views that journalists and news organizations bring to the issues being covered.

This research methodology (qualitative frame analysis) can be applied to analyze the coverage of other events and issues. Finding out whether a newspaper is observing the core values of journalism (e.g., independence, reliability, verifiability, power monitoring) plays an essential role for preserving and enhancing media pluralism.

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The Journal of Communication and Media Studies offers an interdisciplinary forum for the discussion of the role of the media and communications in society. The journal explores everyday experiences of media cultures, the forms and effects of technologies of media and communications, and the dynamics of media business. It also addresses media literacies, including capacities to “read” and “use” the media, and the role of media as a key component in formal and informal learning. Contributions to the journal range from broad, theoretical conceptualizations of media, to detailed empirical examinations and case studies of media practices.

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