The Syrian Regime's Strategic Communication:
Practices and Ideology

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This article addresses the Syrian regime's strategic communication as a practice of politics that runs hand in hand with its repressive political, social, and military tactics to control the political sphere, win the ongoing civil war in the country, and violently suppress its opponents since the Syrian uprising began in March 2011. Drawing on primary and secondary sources as well as discourse analysis of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's main speeches since 2011, the article suggests that this strategy is a dynamic practice of politics that combines the mobilization of media and cultural genres as technologies of power with a political language rooted in the Ba'ath Party's ideology to legitimate the regime's war against its opponents, ensure support, and summon citizens as political subjectivities.

Keywords: Syrian civil war, Assad, Ba'th Party, strategic communication, practices, ideology, media, political subjectivities

This article addresses the Syrian regime's strategic communication[1] post-2011 as a dynamic practice of politics that mobilizes media (and cultural genres) as commodities of regime power, and an already existing Ba'thist "culture of communication,"[2] to reproduce regime power; control the political, cultural, and symbolic spheres in Syria; and ensure regime survival particularly during situations of conflict. Drawing on unpublished research that I conducted in Syria[3] before the uprising, primary and secondary sources, and discourse analysis of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's main public speeches since March

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[1] The term *strategic communication* has for the most part been addressed in the literature in terms of causality, policy, and outcomes, particularly in relation to international relations, rather than its significance to domestic or local practices of politics (see, e.g., Farwell, 2013; Holtzhausen & Zerfass, 2013; Simpson, 2012).

[2] The term *culture of communication* underlines the crucial link between language and culture and is proposed by Atef Alshaer (2008) as a concept that refers to the "compendium of religious, historical, literary and mythological references used by any community as valid tropes for all times" (p. 104).

[3] I carried out field research on the cultural and media landscape in Syria over a number of weeks in 2009 and 2010. However, field research could not be continued following the uprising because of safety considerations.

2011, this article suggests that the Syrian regime's strategic communication practices had pervaded social, cultural, and personal spaces since the late president Hafez al-Assad came to power in a military coup in 1970, running hand in hand with other regime practices and measures intended to control the political sphere; ensure regime survival; summon Syrians as political subjects of the nationalist Ba'thist ideology; bind Syria's mosaic of ethnic, religious, and sectarian groups[4] as members of an imagined Arab nation; and set the limits about what can be said in public "about a particular topic at a particular historical moment" (Foucault, cited by Hall, 1997, p. 44).

This proposition draws on two interrelated dynamics. The first is an understanding of culture as discursive (semiotic) practices of meaning-making, an understanding that demands analytical attention to how actors use words, symbols, images, and spectacle for different purposes, including normalizing regime power in different historical contexts; the second sees communication and politics as coconstitutive in constructing consensus, altering public affect, producing political subjectivities, and promoting ideological regimes of representation that become material when "inscribed in practices" (Althusser & Hall, cited in Wedeen, 1999, p. 12). The proposition does not mean that ideological regimes of representations are believable or accepted without resistance—in fact, the Syrian uprising was, in essence, composed of acts of popular resistance to such ideological regimes and power structures—but to address the practices the regime had consistently used to mobilize regimes of representation to cultivate power in ways that are taken for granted.

In his book *Impossible Revolution: Making Sense of the Syrian Tragedy*, Syrian dissident and intellectual al-Haj Saleh (2017) refers to the nationalist Ba'thist ideology, in place since 1963, as the "doctrine of absolute Arabism" (p. 92). Such a doctrine, he writes, envisages that

> Syria is an Arab country that . . . along with the other Arab countries, comprises the Arab homeland. It also claims that the Arab identity of these countries is essential, definite and entirely defines all residents, lands and states. . . . The most prominent feature of Ba'thist Arabism is seen in its project of complete political and intellectual homogenization that was undertaken inside Syria . . . [to] . . . create uniformity among all Syrians and to position Ba'thism as their profound truth, the Ba'th party as the carrier of their eternal message as Arabs. (pp. 92–94)

According to the Ba'th Party doctrine, all Syrians, irrespective of sect, religion, or ethnicity, had to be actively constructed as Syrian Arab nationals, an appellation combining the significant identity markers of Syrian and Arab identities together, and made visible in various symbols and references, such as in the official name for Syria as the Arab Syrian Republic and in the names of state institutions, including the media (e.g., state television is called the Syrian Arab TV and the army the Syrian Arab Army). However, despite these practices, the founding Ba'th project that intended to build a "Syrian Arab Nation" in which sectarianism and tribalism would supposedly cease to exist never materialized. In fact, although the party recruited from all ethnicities and religions, it exploited sectarianism as a political

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[4] As of 2010, Syria's population was roughly 65% Sunni Arab, 15% Kurdish, 10% Alawite, 5% Christian, 3% Druze, 1% Ismaili, and 1% Twelver Shia. For details, see Balanche (2018).

practice that the late President Hafez al-Assad maintained, ensuring that key members of the "Alawite constituency,"[5] to which he belonged, remained in key posts, such as in the army, state institutions, and the secret services, thus establishing a system of power that helped the revival of sectarianism during particular sociohistorical contexts.

There are practically no studies that have specifically addressed the Syrian regime's strategic communication as a practice of politics before and since the uprising. However, since 2011, several studies have discussed the multiple contested mediated narratives that have emerged in the course of the uprising-turned-war (e.g., Crilley, 2017; Matar, 2016) and the deployment of a dominantly sectarian narrative by diverse actors during the course of the conflict (al-Rawi, 2015; Badran & Smets, 2018). Other studies have specifically focused on media use by the Islamic State and other Islamist groups (e.g., Melki & Jabado, 2016), and others have addressed the role of social media platforms in the uprising-turned-civil war (e.g., Ahmed & Hamasaeed, 2015; Shehabat, 2011). Before 2011, a few critical works (although not specifically using the concept of strategic communication) incorporated critical cultural analysis in discussions of the Syrian regime's power and longevity despite various setbacks and challenges, including an uprising by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in 1982 that was violently suppressed by the regime (see, e.g., cooke, 2007; Wedeen, 1999). These studies have provided nuanced analysis of the regime's mobilization of culture, its relationship with elites as well as with media and cultural producers, and the mechanisms through which cultural producers had helped sustain and communicate the regime's power.

In her seminal study of Syria's political system under the late President Hafez al-Assad, Lisa Wedeen (1999) provides an intricate analysis of the sophisticated mechanisms the regime put in place to induce obedience and compliance among the population. In her work, she addresses what she terms the ambiguity, but also powerful reach, of the regime's political project that used market-oriented language and images in newspapers, plays, books, and television shows to promote an Assad personality cult, which served to enforce "obedience, induced complicity, isolated Syrians from one another, and set the guidelines for public speech and behavior" (p. 159).[6] However, Wedeen also makes clear that although Syrians publicly endorsed the regime as a form of dissimulation, they privately pushed the boundaries of compliance and obedience, an argument also advanced by miriam cooke (2007) in her analysis of underground and subversive dissidence in Syria in the late 20th century. In her book *Dissident Syria*, cooke underscores how the Syrian regime actively intervened in culture and sought to mold it, posing dilemmas to an earlier generation of Syrian artists, writers, and intellectuals torn between the desire to criticize power and the obligation to compromise with it. Focusing on Syrian visual cultural production, media anthropologist Christa Salamandra (2008, 2011) provides the first detailed ethnography of Syrian *musalsalat* (television serials) and their producers, and their continued commitment to the regime's *tanwir* (enlightenment) political ideology, an argument taken further by Donna Della Ratta (2017) in her

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[5] The term *Alawite constituency* does not suggest that the community is homogenous as there are different tribes and clans within this consistency.

[6] In her book, Wedeen (1999) suggests that the Assad cult produced a certain internalization of categories or "frames" of thinking that shaped "the way people see themselves as citizens" (p. 19). This was achieved through the regime's use of cult as a disciplinary practice, supplemented by the provision of socioeconomic benefits.

theorization of the relationship between cultural producers and the regime as a whisper strategy that reflects the strategic necessities of both sides and that constructs this accommodation as being part of a homegrown national project.

Broadly speaking, Syrian political elites, like other elites in postcolonial states, saw culture as a potential catalyst for social change and national progress, a view in alignment with the Ba'th Party's desire to centralize all cultural practices under government-controlled apparatuses. This view was also central to former President Hafez al-Assad's "corrective movement," which formed the basis of his rule and which aimed to shape and construct Syrian national identity as an Arab national identity while managing expectations of freedom and upward mobility. Over the period of his rule (1970–2000) and after his death when his son Bashar took over, the concept of *tanwir* (literally meaning enlightenment) would come to inform, and be used interchangeably with, the regime's political language related to economic and political reforms as well as discourses of citizenship (Wedeen, 2013). More recently, Della Ratta (2017) addresses how *tanwir,* as a political ideology, materialized into new forms of regime-sponsored visual cultural output genres, underlining the convergence of the regime's and the cultural producers' needs in the ideological discourse of *tanwir*, a mutual mode of accommodation that cooke (2007) calls "commissioned criticism," a condition in which the work of intellectuals who see themselves as being critical of the regime is appropriated by the regime as a political strategy.

Any analysis of the Syrian regime's strategic communication warrants a detailed study of the interdependency between language and culture and among media, cultural producers, and the regime over time; the role of other institutions (such as the powerful security apparatus and the army) in helping maintain the status quo; the socioeconomic and sociopolitical realities that have informed cultural and social belief; the demographic make-up of Syria; the persistence of a patronage system that gave the minority Alawite community material privileges in exchange for political support; the emergence and rise of the Islamic State and other Islamist groups, international and regional intervention, and geopolitical considerations; as well as continued support from its allies, Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia—complex pursuits beyond the scope of this article. Furthermore, such an analysis must also critically engage with the regime's strategic communication as practiced and produced in diverse cultural platforms and genres: spectacle, film, music, art, symbols, satire, images, performance, novels, and poetry. However, given the complex evolving context of the Syrian conflict, which has involved a variety of actors and has seen an explosion in new cultural genres and media platforms as spaces of war, I limit the analysis to addressing the regime's mobilization of various media spaces as commodities of power and the mobilization by President Bashar al-Assad of a political language that essentially reiterates the key tropes of the long-standing Ba'athist culture of communication. I focus on Assad's political language as a significant discursive practice of meaning-making and as a "site of, and a stake in, struggles for power" (Fairclough, 1989, p. 15) that supplements other sites and practices of struggle in moments of crises. Fundamental to the discussion, however, is Syria's prenetworked media environment and the relationship between the regime and culture, which I briefly attend to next.

Media as Technologies of Regime Power

Syria gained its independence from France in 1947, beginning a period of leadership change and unrest that lasted until the 1963 takeover by the Ba'th Party and the imposition of a state of emergency. Like many of its neighbors, Syria began its independent existence as an artificial entity with few resources. Within 20 years, it was transformed under Hafez al-Assad into a regional power, supported by a powerful security-based (*mukhabarat*) institutional structure and strong state institutions. As in any authoritarian context, the media—newspapers, radio, and television—effectively served as technologies of power in the service of the regime. In the case of Syria, the media, I suggest, served as tools in what Ismail (2018) calls a "civil war regime developed as a form of government . . . [that] . . . rests on and creates the condition of a latent permanent war between rulers and ruled" (p. 189).

For more than 40 years, Syrian media spaces were largely closed and driven top-down to secure support, help build an effective state structure, and promote the ruling Ba'thist ideology as a force of national unity and modernization opposed to feudalists, the bourgeoisie, and bureaucrats co-opted by international capitalism. Modernization and reform, according to the Ba'thist discourse, envisaged the transformation of the ordinary Syrian citizen into an agent of progress that could neither be enforced nor imposed by law or government decree; rather, it could be achieved through the work of institutions of the modern state—the school, the army, the party, and the media. As such, since the takeover by the Ba'th Party of power, the three main state-controlled daily newspapers, *Tishreen*, *Al-Ba'ath*, and *Al-Thawra*, along with the Syrian Arab News Agency, state radio, and television, were all entrusted with promoting the Ba'th ideology and communicating high expectations pertaining to developmentalist aims as well as to the production of Syrian citizens as Arab nationalists and patriots who believe in the goals of the party and in Syria's Arab identity.[7]

Satellite television, introduced in 1994, was placed under regime control, and Internet access was carefully monitored and regularly blocked. In the 1990s, when the Internet became available in the region and exposed Syrians, like other Arabs, to diverse opinions and information, the regime allowed some private ventures into audiovisual production, enabling private TV companies to officially operate inside the country with limited autonomy as part of a process defined as "selective liberalization" (Heydemann, 1993, p. 88), under which state institutions began to loosen their control over key economic sectors, but retained their leveraging power over media and culture. Although this move offered some space for cultural interventions in the public sphere, cultural producers remained committed to the regime's solid ideological platform as a basis for an agreement over "a shared commitment in the name of progress, development and modernism" (Della Ratta, 2018, p. 19).

The first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule after he became president in 2000 ushered in a period of some reforms amid a new atmosphere of trust and hope fueled by talk about democracy and political rights, the establishment of civil society forums in Damascus and other places across the country, and some liberalization in the financial sectors. The period, known as the Damascus Spring, was also marked by the

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[7] The narrative I offer does not deny that dissidents and dissident cultural production existed. In fact, several underground media operated over the years and different forms of transgression and opposition were to be found in novels, artwork, and satire.

increasing popularity of Syrian cultural production in the Gulf markets (see Della Ratta, 2018, for details), and the emergence of a new crop of dramas and documentaries known for their daring discussions of political and other taboo topics, including religion and sex as well as corruption and abuse of power.[8] Although these new products seemed to reflect a new sense of freedom and openness in the country, the state-controlled media continued to mobilize support for the regime and create legitimacy for the young Western-educated president, promoting his image as an enlightened leader committed to reform and tackling corruption and clientelism.[9] At the same time, however, the regime slowly opened the door for independent media outfits. Much of the newly launched private media were controlled by wealthy businessmen with close connections to the regime, including Rami Makhlouf, who established the *al-Watan* newspaper; Majd Bahjat Sulayman, owner of Syria's largest media empire and executive director of the Alwaseet Group; and other Syrian businessmen who established the independent television channel Dounia TV,[10] which proved to be one of the most faithful allies to the regime since 2011.

Communication Challenges of the Uprising

It was not until the Syrian uprising, which began as a fledgling popular protest against regime power, repression, and economic deprivation in March 2011 in the wake of the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, that the Syrian media and cultural landscape underwent a radical transformation because of the phenomenal growth in alternative and protest media genres and spaces that followed the regime's decision to allow Facebook access in February 2011. The explosion in alternative media and cultural spaces[11] and the emergence of new networks pulling activists from inside and outside Syria disrupted the regime's attempts to engineer seemingly reformist media content directed at educating the public on issues related to political rights and citizenship.

Also challenged were the regime's strategic communication practices as several large nodes of news curation and creative oppositional content emerged on Facebook and YouTube, including the "Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011" and "Creative Memory of the Syrian Revolution" Facebook

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[8] The argument is based on fieldwork I carried out in Syria in 2010, which included interviews with diverse cultural producers, journalists, and writers, including well-known novelist Khaled Khalifa.

[9] There is no space here to engage fully with these practices, but in the first decade of President Bashar al-Assad's rule, his image as a benevolent, quiet, and man-of-the-people was heavily mediated in the Syrian media. Pictures of him visiting markets, ostensibly without any guards, along with his British-born charismatic wife Asma were displayed in different spaces, including public space. Regime supporters were keen to tell stories of his humbleness and quiet approach to politics, according to interviews during my fieldwork.

[10] I conducted interviews with the chief executive of Dounia TV, Fuad Sharbaji, in 2010 in which he confirmed that, although the new television station had dubbed itself the "Voice of the People," it remained committed to working in line with regime directives.

[11] Roughly 100 new Syrian media projects were established after March 2011, according to Syrian journalists working in them. There were as many as 298 newspapers being circulated in different parts of the country during various periods of the uprising, in addition to 17 state-run or regime-affiliated newspapers (see "Syria's New Media Landscape," 2016).

pages, and in diverse cultural genres, satire, comedy, film, and music.[12] New newspapers and television channels were established in diverse spaces while Syrian activists harnessed different communication technologies—including social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Skype, Twitter, and mobile phones—to expose the regime's brutality, communicate with various revolutionaries across the country, coordinate military attacks, disseminate news and information about the revolution, and mobilize support through the use of diverse techniques and creative affective content.

The challenge to the regime's control of the mediated public sphere was publicly acknowledged in a speech that President Bashar al-Assad gave to the Syrian National Assembly on March 30, 2011, two weeks after the uprising began, in which he claimed that

> Syria had been subjected to a virtual war in the media and the Internet. . . . They wanted us to feel that things were over, and that our only choice was to surrender without putting up any fight . . . things are obviously more difficult because the Internet is more widespread and because the [communication] instruments are more modern. But the popular awareness we have seen was sufficient to respond very quickly. We need to strengthen this national patriotic awareness because it is the real force which protects Syria at every juncture.[13]

Within a few weeks of his speech, the regime mobilized state media, newspapers, television, radio, and the ostensibly independent media channels, social media platforms, and online spaces to communicate images of spectacular violence, information warfare, propaganda, and false news about the uprising, as well as website defacement, denial of service attacks, and spying malware delivered via spear phishing e-mails against opponents. New media outfits (such as Sama TV and Sham FM radio), blogs, Twitter, and Facebook accounts, along with already existing proregime channels, such as Dounia TV established in 2010, intensified already-existing practices including that of changing or omitting facts[14] while spreading the regime's narrative that Syria was facing a foreign conspiracy, a narrative that could not be objectively refuted given the regime-enforced ban on international and regional media. This informal ban excluded the Iranian Press TV; Lebanese Hezbollah's al-Manar TV; and RT, the Russian television channel, which had complete access and freedom of operation since the military involvement of Russia in the conflict.

A month after the uprising, the hacker group the Syrian Electronic Army was set up to carry out cyber warfare campaigns against regime opponents. It used a variety of techniques, such as jamming online portals with messages and hacking tactics (for details on the Syrian Electronic Army tactics, see Zambelis, 2012). Concurrently, a diverse range of activists and ordinary people calling

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[12] See cooke (2016) for details of innovative creative oppositional content.

[13] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117:2011&Itemid=496

[14] http://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2011/04/05-4

themselves grassroots journalists began circulating fake news about the conflict, a practice that soon defined coverage of the Syrian conflict and that, as Omar al-Ghazzi (2017) writes,

> should be recognized as part of our political reality, as it influences the choices of political players involved in Syria. . . . On Syrian official media, such stories served as a pillar of a strategy to cast doubt on media representations of the conflict and enable the dissemination of outlandish claims about a universal conspiracy against the country. (p. 13)

These various individuals and groups included UK-based blogger Vanessa Beeley; self-proclaimed Lebanese journalist Samira Abdallah, who tweets under the hashtag @sahouraxo and has more than 125,000 followers; and a crop of right-wing Facebook groups, such as the European Solidarity Front for Syria.[15] One of the tactics these self-styled regime supporters deployed was the circulation in digital platforms of misinformation about major events in the civil war, such as the chemical attack on Eastern Ghoutta on April 7, 2018, and repeating claims by the regime media that the attack was fabricated while circulating a YouTube video[16] claiming that the victims of the attacks were actors who pretended they that had been wounded or killed. As part of their tactics, these pro-regime supporters also launched smear campaigns against antiregime groups, aid groups, and journalists seen as supporting the opposition, such as the White Helmets, a volunteer rescue organization twice nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize that was accused by Assad of being a "'facelift' for a *jihadi* group."[17] One of the most talked about smear campaigns, carried out by these individuals as well as regime supporters, was Beeley's circulation of a video claiming that the White Helmets had faked rescue operations and that it had cooperated with *takfiri* (nonbeliever) militants in staging a chemical attack in Idlib Province.[18] Such practices, also circulated widely in regime media, helped nurture multiple narratives of digital suspicion while generating a feeling of anxiety among Syrian and other publics,[19] an anxiety accentuated by the fragmentation of the media in Syria and by the proliferation of multiple visual representations of violence circulated by diverse actors in the conflict and enabled by the participatory nature of networked media (see Della Ratta, 2017, 2018).[20]

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[15] https://www.facebook.com/European-Solidarity-Front-for-Syria-280123615449307/

[16] See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7zZmXDctmE released April 7, 2017, and circulated on proregime media.

[17] Assad interview with Swiss SRF1 TV, October 19, 2018. Retrieved from www.SRF1TV.com.

[18] See https://21stcenturywire.com/2017/10/09/white-helmets-state-sanctioned-terrorism-hollywood-poster-boys-war/

[19] This argument is relevant in the case of Syria; however, it was not possible to conduct an audience study in the current conditions.

[20] The networked nature of the Syrian conflict cannot be ignored and neither can the proliferation of what Della Ratta (2018) calls the networked image or its implications. Such a discussion is relevant and important, but it is beyond the scope of this article, which focuses on the regime's strategic communication as a practice of politics.

Mobilizing the Ba'thist Culture of Communication

Running hand in hand with the mobilization of media as commodities of power, the regime deployed a political language rooted in the existing Ba'thist culture of communication, which functioned as "a mode of ambivalent interpellation, a way of 'hailing' spectators that is effective even if its claims are not taken literally" (Wedeen, 1999, p. 32). Although prevalent in much of the regime's media content and public discourses, this political language was particularly prominent in Bashar al-Assad's[21] few public speeches addressed to Syrian publics, and delivered in Arabic to institutional (parliament) or populist (Damascus University)[22] settings. In most of Assad's speeches between April 2011 and December 2017, he repeated dominant discursive tropes that had underpinned the Ba'ath culture of communication for more than four decades: Arab nationalism and Syrian national unity; a conspiracy discourse drawing on an "us and them" binary language, and a discourse of reform and citizenship. It is important to note that during his first 10 years in power, Assad's political language was dominated by the discourse of good citizenship and reform, reflecting the country's embrace of neoliberalism and the slow liberalization of politics, and underlining some pragmatism and adaptation in the regime's strategic communication to diverse sociopolitical contexts. However, when the uprising began and escalated, Assad consistently mobilized the political language underpinning the Ba'th culture of communication, underlining the role of political language as a site of struggle over power.

Indeed, in all the speeches addressed in this article, Assad persistently used a political language that sought to construct an image of Syria as the "Arab nationalist" regime par excellence, or a regime committed to the defense of Arab nationalism (Arabism) to elicit support for the founding Ba'th project of building a Syrian Arab nation irrespective of its diverse constituencies. In reiterating these tropes, Assad sought to lay claim to a united Syrian Arab identity as an *imagined homogenous* Arab identity that glossed over all different forms of identifications—religious, minority, ethnic, or sectarian.[23] This language, in which he sought to summon Syrians as the "true Arabs," was particularly evident in his speech to the new Syrian government on April 16, 2011, a month after the uprising, in which he described Syria as the "throbbing heart of the Arab nation . . . I hope you and I . . . will be able to speak for Syria, glorious Syria which is at the heart of the Arab nation [and] truly represents what our country stands for."[24]

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[21] I do not use Assad's interviews, mainly because these are mostly aimed at outside political actors, his supporters abroad, and international publics.

[22] Assad did not make many public speeches and those he made often marked particular occasions, such as Army Day and meetings of government. However, he also gave several speeches at Damascus University and the Opera House, addressing young Syrians and economic elites.

[23] The question regarding Syria's Arab identity is complex given the diversity of its population and divisions along ethnic, religious, and sectarian lines and because the regime is controlled by the Alawi minority sect, to which the president belongs.

[24] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496

Furthermore, Assad consistently used the pronoun *you* (in the plural) as an inclusive move of address intended to summon his intended audiences both as symbolic and real participants in the formation and maintenance of the nation as a unity. This was apparent in his reinauguration speech on July 16, 2014, in which he stated,

> You [Syrians] have proven to the entire world that pressures and conspiracies only increase your determination to counter the challenges because . . . Syria has the interests of the Syrian Arab people and their national and pan-Arab objectives in mind.[25]

Assad's mobilization of an Arab nationalist political language was particularly evident in another speech he gave to the Arab Forum in Damascus on November 14, 2017, in which he said,

> Arab heritage and culture is the accumulation of the heritage and cultures of all the peoples who lived in this region throughout ancient and modern history. . . . Arabism is not a slogan . . . it is an inclusive civilized concept that includes everyone . . . all ethnicities, religions, and sects. It is a civilized status open to all . . . without exceptions.[26]

Interestingly, in that same speech, Assad also sought to lay claim to another inclusive and powerful collective identity in the Arab world: that of the nation of Islam, making links between Islam and Arab nationalism and constructing them as complementary and mutually constitutive rather than oppositional. As he stated in the same speech,

> there is no contradiction between belongingness to Arabism and belongingness to Islam as they enhance each other. . . . Some have tried to undermine the relationship between Islam and Arabism [and] . . . some have accused Arabist ideology of being secular and atheist, but there *is* [emphasis added] an organic connection between Arabism and Islam. It is wrong to believe that one can be either Arab or Muslim.[27]

Although his rhetoric was intended to respond to the crisis and the context of the evolving uprising, which saw Islamist groups, such as the Islamic State, use regular symbolic and visual references to Islam[28] to mobilize support, Assad's mobilization of a political language linking Arab nationalism with

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[25] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1181:president-assad-2014-inauguration-speech-july-16-2014&catid=311&Itemid=496
[26] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=326&Itemid=496
[27] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=category&id=326&Itemid=496
[28] The Syrian uprising was marked by the widespread use of religious spaces, symbols, and vocabulary by the protestors. For example, in the demonstrations, political slogans demanding freedom, justice, or the end of the Assad regime were combined with the chants of "Allahu Akbar" ("God is great") and other

Islam was not new, but had been mobilized by the regime as a discursive strategy to ensure support. Indeed, Nicolas van Dam (1996/2011) writes in his book *The Struggle for Power in Syria* that although the Ba'th Party had sought to construct a united secular Arab society with a socialist system, this "did not imply that Islam was of secondary importance to Ba'thist Arabism. In the Ba'thist view, Islam constituted an essential and inseparable part of Arab national culture" (p. 17).

Following the 1979–1982 uprising led by the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, the regime began to promote a form of religious Arab nationalism to gain the support of pious Muslims, while former President Hafez al-Assad used religious references and symbols to mobilize the majority Sunni population especially following his repression of the Brotherhood revolt (Hilu Pinto, 2017). Since 2000, when Bashar al-Assad took over following the death of his father, the regime sought to construct an image of the Syrian president as a pious persona: Images of Assad praying and holding and kissing the Qur'an pervaded the media and everyday spaces (Hilu Pinto, 2017).

Conspiracy Imagery, Conspiracy, and "Us and Them" Discourse

From the beginning of the uprising, Assad also mobilized a binary political language of "us versus them" to differentiate between regime supporters as "loyalists" fighting "oppositionists" involved in a foreign-aided conspiracy against the nation and its unity. This language, intended to discredit opponents as terrorists funded by the West, by "enemies of the homeland," or by "conspirators" who are clever, organized, and methodical was evident in a speech Assad gave to the People's Assembly on March 29, 2011, in which he stated,

> Syria today is being exposed to a big conspiracy, the threads of which stretch from far and close countries as it also has some threads inside the country . . . the conspiracy depends, as far as its timing not form, on what is going on in the Arab countries. . . . This is natural. Even we, in the government, did not know, like everybody else, and did not understand what was happening until acts of sabotage started to emerge. Then, things started to become clearer. They will say that we believe in the conspiracy theory. In fact, there is no conspiracy theory. There is a conspiracy.[29]

The language of conspiracy has been a persistent discursive practice of politics that the regime has consistently used to legitimize its power and to justify the use of excessive violence against opponents, particularly during situations of flux. During the uprising-turned-war, Assad used it to mobilize support among young Syrians in the struggle for power. For example, in a speech at Damascus University

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references, reflecting the importance of Islam as a moral framework for society. Later on, Islamist jihadist groups would also use the same slogans in their mediated representations of spectacular violence and oppression.

[29] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=305:president-bashar-al-assad-s-a-speech-at-the-people-s-assembly-march-30-2011&catid=117&Itemid=496

on June 20, 2011,[30] Assad claimed that Syria had been facing "foreign" conspiracies that aimed at undermining national unit:

> What is going on in the street has several components: The first one are the people who have needs and they want the state to fulfill them; the second component is represented by those outlaws and wanted and who have targeted institutions who oppose them and the third component is the most dangerous despite of being small and it is represented through those who have the *takfiri* extremist ideology which we have experienced for decades when it tried to sneak to Syria and it could get rid of it due to its people's awareness and wisdom.[31]

Assad's rhetoric, although adapted to the context of the uprising, conforms to the main discursive practices underpinning the Ba'th Party's culture of communication that sought to use a binary language to construct an image of Syria as being in a constant war with outside forces, including extremist Islamists, and to depict every form of internal opposition as an attempt to collude with the enemy against the nation (see al-Haj Saleh, 2017). It also conforms to the Syrian regime's practice of mobilizing an "us versus them" discourse (those with us and those against us) to construct regime opponents as mortal enemies that deserve to be banished or eliminated. The use of such discursive practices as modalities of politics not only serve to provoke polarization and the entrenchment of divisions in the country, but also importantly contribute to, as al-Haj Saleh (2017) writes, "widespread paranoia . . . [where] every outsider [is] as an evil conspirator and every insider as a good friend" (p. 107).[32] In reality, this language is intended to provide legitimacy to the practice of literally eliminating opponents by killing them through upholding perceptions of threats that can come from Israel or the West or from civil strife based on sectarianism and ideological discrepancies that were evident in the coup-ridden years before 1970.

Salwa Ismail (2018) takes the argument further, suggesting that the regime had actively sought to create the conditions of

> a permanent war between rulers and ruled and between different components of society differentiated along various lines of division; sectarian, tribal, ethnic, regional, urban– rural and class . . . in Syria, these divisions along an overarching political divide between two camps that, for simplicity, I refer to as loyalists and oppositionists . . . through a constellation of practices and techniques, a division of the population into "us" and

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[30] Before the uprising, Assad had nurtured the young elite generation of Syrians as a new class of entrepreneurs and actors involved in his *tanwir* project.

[31] Retrieved from http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496

[32] Al-Haj Saleh (2017) notes that another technique mobilized to divide people was the spread of the belief that if we do not kill them, they will kill us, a phobia that has become one of the basis for sectarian uniformity and making distinctions between us and them.

"them" was enacted—"us" to be read as the Assad regime and its loyalists and "them" as opponents or the opposition constituted as expendable. (p. 189)

The analysis of the speeches shows that Assad consistently sought to delegitimize the uprising by framing it as a "foreign insurgency" or a "terrorist plot" rather than a popular uprising. This language was evident in his speech at Damascus University on June 4, 2012, a year after the uprising and at a time when the popular protests were gaining support, in which Assad claimed that

there is no such a thing as an armed resistance movement—these are terrorist cells aided and funded by the West. Things were clear to us from the early days of the aggression. We all remember the reactions of those who did not believe or were not convinced of what I said at the beginning of the crisis. At the time, many people rejected terms like plot and aggression . . . [but] . . . conspiracies are natural around us. That's why we shouldn't give this component a lot of attention. What's important for us is to focus our attention on strengthening our internal immunity inside Syria.[33]

In other speeches, Assad used the label *takfiri* (nonbeliever) in referring to opponents, describing them as allies of Islamist extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda. For example, in a speech to the National Assembly on January 6, 2012, he claimed that

Takfiris, terrorists, al-Qaeda members calling themselves *Jihadis* streamed from everywhere to command the combat operations on the ground. . . . We are fighting those, most of whom are non-Syrians, who came for twisted concepts and fake terms they call Jihad, but nothing can be farther from Jihad and Islam. Most of them are terrorists instilled with al-Qaeda thought, and I believe that most of you know how this kind of terrorism was fostered three decades ago in Afghanistan by the West and with Arab money.[34]

In addition to labeling regime opponents as *takfiris*, Assad consistently sought to construct links between opponents and members of the Muslim Brotherhood, claiming that all were "terrorists taking cover under Islam. . . . If we go back to the 1970s and 1980s when the devil's brothers [Muslim Brothers] carried out their terrorist acts, we find ourselves facing a race between terrorism and reform."[35] His invocation of the Muslim Brotherhood and their revolt in Hama in 1982, which was violently crushed by the regime, was intended to call to memory past episodes of regime mass violence against its people and

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[33] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=276:speech-delivered&catid=118&Itemid=496
[34] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=273:president-bashar-al-assad-s-january-6th-2013-speech&catid=119&Itemid=496
[35] Retrieved from www.Syrian-freepress.wordpress.com

to invoke mediated narratives of fear, which were accentuated by fear of the Islamic State and other Islamist groups' violent practices in Syria.

In constructing the battle with regime opponents along an "us and them" binary and the uprising as a conspiracy against the nation, Assad sought both to exploit existing sectarian identifications and maintain sectarian solidarity among the minority Alawite sect to maintain power, underlining how, as Hilu Pinto (2017) argues, the inscription of sectarian frames is as an intentional political practice aimed at a "sectarian distribution of violence to deepen the sectarian fault lines among the protestors, dividing and isolating them" (p. 135).[36] Such discursive practices are central to what some scholars have termed the *sectarianization* of the conflict, understood as intentional political practices by actors pursuing political goals that involve mobilization around religious identity markers (Hashemi & Postel, 2017), a practice that was omnipresent in regime practices and structures for decades before 2011 and has been at odds with the public regime narrative that sought to dissolve individual communities under a broader Syrian Arab identity.

Reform and the Good Citizen Discourse

In many of his speeches, Assad sought to reiterate his commitment to *tanwir* (reform) as a political ideology underpinning his reformist agenda that he espoused when he took power in 2000. However, in his speeches since the uprising, Assad consistently articulated reform as a process that could not be implemented without waging war against regime opponents or without the support of "mindful" or "good" citizens, effectively using the political language of reform to legitimize his regime's violence and to invite Syrians to collaborate with the regime and, as such, ensure their obedience and complicity.[37]

Assad's mobilization of reform as a political language came across clearly in his first speech at Damascus University after the uprising in which he said that

> achieving reforms and development is not an internal need only, but it is a vital necessity for confronting these schemes; therefore, we have no choice but to succeed in the internal project as to succeed in our external one. Reform without security is like security without reform. Neither will be successful without the other. Those who keep parroting that Syria has opted for a security solution do not see or hear. We have repeatedly said that reforms and politics go in one hand and eliminating terrorism in the other.[38]

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[36] It is worth noting that within a year of the uprising, the totalizing narrative that the conflict was sectarian with roots in a long-standing broader Sunni–Shiite struggle for dominance in the Middle East became a dominant narrative in interpretations and readings of the conflict.

[37] As discussed above, the Syrian regime's reform project in the first decade of Bashar al-Assad's rule saw an implicit collaboration among emerging economic elites, cultural producers, and the regime.

[38] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496

In his January 6, 2013, speech to the National Assembly, almost two years after the uprising started, Assad deployed the language of reform to justify the war against his opponents as a war to defend reform and Syria's national unity:

Syria is in a state of war in the full sense of the word. We are repelling a fierce outside aggression in a new disguise, which is more lethal and dangerous than a traditional war, because they do not employ their tools to strike us; instead, they have us implement their projects, and target Syria using a bunch of Syrians and a lot of foreigners. . . . We are defending the homeland . . . and a reform that is necessary to all of us . . . [reform] . . . may not change the reality of war, yet it strengthens us and reinforces our unity in the face of the war.[39]

In other speeches, Assad talked about reform as a process to improve citizens' lives that demanded constant communication with citizens. As he stated, "If the Syrian citizen is our target, then he should be our starting point . . . and if our objective is to serve the citizen's interests, then the citizen's views should be our guiding light."[40]

In speaking about reforms as a series of initiatives to improve conditions for ordinary people, Assad invoked the language of what it means to be a good citizen underpinning the dominant Ba'thist culture of communication, which associated good citizenship with Arab nationalism and national unity. For example, in his speech at Damascus University on June 20, 2011, Assad argued that

each citizen is responsible and able to provide something even if it is simple or limited in his/her view, because the homeland is for everyone; we all defend it, each according to his/her capacity and capability. Since the attack is launched against the homeland with all its human and material constituents, the mindful citizen has certainly known that passivity, waiting for time or others to solve the problem is a sort of pushing the country towards the abyss, and not contributing solutions is a kind of taking the homeland backwards with no progress towards overcoming what the homeland is going through.[41]

In using this language, Assad sought to call on Syrians to join the regime's battle against opponents, interpellating those "good citizens" whose duty was to defend the country against plotters and to embrace reform to enhance economic gains and individual progress, and thus effectively legitimize the regime's

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[39] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=273:president-bashar-al-assad-s-january-6th-2013-speech&catid=119&Itemid=496

[40] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=276:speech-delivered&catid=118&Itemid=496

[41] Retrieved from
http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=359:president-al-assad-2011-damascus-university-speech&catid=117&Itemid=496

vision of what it means to be a good Syrian. Indeed, in many of his speeches, Assad reiterated that reform would not progress without waging a war against regime opponents or without the support of those who were willing to engage in reform, a discourse, as Wedeen (2013) writes, "entailed fantasies of multi-cultural accommodation, domestic security and a sovereign national identity" (p. 842), thus cultivating an aspirational consciousness among the young generation as part of neoliberal plans[42] on the one hand, while continuing to tether possibilities for advancement to citizen obedience and coercive control on the other.

Conclusion

The Syrian conflict has been described as the most documented and most violent war in modern times. It has also been described as the first networked conflict of the 21st century. Compared with other Arab uprisings and long-term conflicts in the Middle East, the conflict has featured spectacular forms of violence mediated through a wide range of digital and social media practices created by a variety of content by a host of political activists, witnesses, rebels, state agents, and soldiers, underlining how media are part of social and political processes and are fundamentally implicated in practices of war as well as the battle over ideologies, image, rhetoric, and politics.

The Syrian conflict, at the time of writing this conclusion at the beginning of 2019, had entered a phase marked by a broad consensus that the Assad regime had practically defeated its opponents, regained control of most opposition-held areas, and managed to sustain its long-standing mediated regime of representation. Although it is difficult to offer any conclusive cause-and-effect reading of the conflict, given the complex endogenous and exogenous factors surrounding it, the conflict provides a productive context through which to address the regime's strategic communication as a persistent regime practice of politics intended to sustain control, enforce obedience, and ensure the regime's survival. This article acknowledges that such a reading of the regime's strategic communication does not tell us how it is received, negotiated, and contested; nor does it conclusively suggest that it had been effective—in fact, different factors and variables, external and internal, played an important role in the direction of the eight-year-old conflict and its outcome, as did the "ambiguities" surrounding digital technologies particularly in contexts of excessive mediation of violence, flux, and the abundance of digital voices and practices during the conflict.

However, this article suggests that such a reading can help us understand how authoritarian regimes, such as Syria's, continuously seek to produce their power through different practices, including discursive ones. Although these practices may not be evident, in conflict situations, they serve to underline that the "material reality of war" can no longer be separated from the "representational regimes through which [they] operate and which rationalize its own operation" (Butler, 2009, p. 29).

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[42] There is no space here to discuss the implementation of this strategy in detail.

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