Nationalism, Identity, Social Media and Dominant Discourses in Post-Uprising Syria

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This thesis titled
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ABSTRACT

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Nationalism, Identity, Social Media and Dominant Discourses in Post-Uprising Syria

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This thesis examines the process of sectarinization that challenged the perception of the Syrian national identity within the context of the Syrian-Uprising-Cum-Civil-War. I provide necessary background for understanding the importance of the political and economic dynamics rather than the dominant ethnic/sectarian narrative in instigating the massive protests in Syria. The purpose of this review is to contextualize the Syrian conflict within its socio-political and socio-economic conditions that gave momentum for the emergence of collective identities and the reconfiguration of cultural and religious identities in a society characterized by a weak national identity. I review major theories about causes of war in the Balkans to examine episodes of extreme violence between ethnic, national, or religious groups and to analyze what factors facilitated the emergence of new collective identities that challenged the weak Syrian national identity in the context of war. The visibility of sectarian identities, as a form of collective identity, and the politicization of cultural affiliations were conditioned by the transformation of political and social spheres. I review, discuss, and explain democratization theories and theories of nation and nationalism to bridge the gap between multiple interrelated factors: social movement, state’s institutions, economic development, political entrepreneurs, political violence and processes of shaping collective identities. To understand what forces contributed to the transformation of power relations and the process of sectarian
reconfiguration as well as the production of extreme violence in Syria following the “Arab Spring,” I consider a hybrid approach. This hybrid approach combines critical constructivism, instrumentalism, and symbolic politics as a theoretical framework to analyze the role of social media and mainstream media in promoting sectarian groupness. Methodologically, this research is based on data and discourse analysis of specific statements, videos, slogans, and images disseminated and promoted by both mainstream media, such as Al-Jazeera, and social media, such as the Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011 (SRABA2011) Facebook page. The data and discourse analysis was further supported by 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with Syrian activists and human rights workers, currently residing in Washington D.C, where the interviews were conducted in August 2014 and five follow-up interviews in May 2015.
DEDICATION

To the Syrian People and to those who lost their identities in Civil Wars.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Of utmost importance is that I thank my research key informants and gatekeepers of Syrian activist organizations as well as international non-governmental organizations who now reside in Washington DC and who most generously agreed to share their perspectives and experiences with me.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Abbreviations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: Introduction</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methods</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Literature Review</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of Democratization within Authoritarian Regimes: Syria as a Case Study</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conditions for Achieving a Stable Democratic System</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenges of Democratization within Authoritarian Regimes</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Democratization in Syria</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nation and Nationalism</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What Causes Extreme Violence Between Ethnic, National, or Religious Groups</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria as a Theoretical Case Study</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: The Dominant Discourses Concerning the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On the Road to the Uprising</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Western Dominant Discourses Concerning the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Dominant Discourses Concerning the Syrian Uprising in Syria</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Syrian Regime</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Syrian Opposition: Sponsoring the Narrative</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: The Sectarianization of the Syrian Uprising</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Sectarian Question</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Virtual Sectarization of the Syrian Uprising: “The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” as a Case Study</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Flags</td>
<td>134</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friday’s Slogans</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Conclusion</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1: Interview Protocol ...................................................................................... 169
Appendix 2: List of Slogans of Friday Protests between 2011 and 2013 ....................... 171
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BSS</td>
<td>Building the Syrian State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSA</td>
<td>Free Syrian Army</td>
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<td>GCC</td>
<td>Gulf Cooperation Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>ISIS/ISIL/IS</td>
<td>Islamic State in Iraq and Syria/ Islamic State in Iraq and Levant/Islamic State</td>
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<td>LCC</td>
<td>Local Coordination Committee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MB</td>
<td>Muslim Brotherhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NCB</td>
<td>National Coordination Body for Democratic Change</td>
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<td>NCSROF or Etilaf</td>
<td>National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NTC</td>
<td>National Transitional Council (in Libya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCLSR</td>
<td>Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SNC</td>
<td>Syrian National Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>SRABA2011</td>
<td>(The) Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SRGC</td>
<td>Syrian Revolution General Commission</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SYRCU</td>
<td>Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A picture of the first “martyr” from Dar’a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>A map used by Joshua Landis on CNN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>The “innovative solution to the ongoing Syrian crisis”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Screenshot from video of al-Jiza’s protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Screenshot from video of al-Jiza’s protest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Friday’s slogan of “the National Council represents me”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>The results of Al-Jazeera’s first poll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>The results of Al-Jazeera’s second poll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>The Opposite Direction’s host, Dr. Faisal Al-Qassem, reads the results of Al-Jazeera’s poll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Screenshot from video of al-Asali’s protest near Damascus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Screenshot from video of al-Asali’s protest near Damascus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Screenshot from video of Baba Amr’s protest, a district in Homs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Declassified information report about arms shipments from Libya to Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Map of Syria's Ethno-Religious Composition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Screenshot from video published on May 19, 2013</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Screenshot of the English version of the NCSROF’s press release</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>A slogan posted on a Facebook page called “Towards a Social Movement in Syria- the Day of Rage, February 5, 2011”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Internet Growth and Population Statistics in Syria</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 19: The SRABA2011’s polling question......................................................135
Figure 20: Poster of “Wednesday of the Independent Flag” ..............................135
Figure 21: The official flag of the Syrian Arab Republic......................................137
Figure 22: Screenshot from video published on December 12, 2012..................141
Figure 23: Screenshot from video of Ma’arab’s protest in Dara’a on December 14, 2012 .................................................................142
Figure 24: Friday of the “Majority Protection” (April 26, 2013) ..........................143
Figure 25: The Safavid Project: A Threat to the Umma.....................................145
Figure 26: Hezbollah’s flag ..................................................................................146
Figure 27: The analysis of the SRABA2011 ......................................................147
Figure 28: The distribution of the SRABA2011’ Fans .........................................148
Figure 29: Themes and slogan promoted by SRAB2011 were disseminated by mainstream media, such as Al-Jazeera .....................................................149
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In December 2010, the whole Arab world was changed when a desperate Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, set himself on fire after local police officers in the peripheral rural town of Sidi Bouzid had mistreated him and confiscated his wares. The young man died after a few days, but his act sparked unprecedented popular social movements that have become known as the “Arab Spring”. The contagious social movements swept across Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Morocco, Syria and other Arab countries and toppled, albeit in different ways, authoritarian leaders including Zine El Abidine Bin Ali in Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, Ali Abdullah Saleh in Yemen, and Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya. After the impressive triumph of the Tunisian and the Egyptian revolutions respectively, several Syrian youth and intellectuals were expecting a similar wave of protests in Syria because of the regime’s failed economic policy and the unplanned liberalization of the social economy and the public sector. However, no one was able to further his/her expectation to predict the time or the place of such a momentum, or even whether the assumed social movement would be on a large scale or limited to a few enthusiastic youth and long-standing opposition figures. When the uprising started in the peripheral southern town of Dar’a on March 18, 2011, at that point, I, along with other Syrians, perceived the uprising as a real momentum for achieving actual constitutional and structural reforms. Many Syrians hoped then that the young President Bashar al-Assad would take advantage of the context of the social movement to eliminate the hard-liners in the regime, who are better know as the “Old Guard.” Soon, however, the first speech of President al-Assad in the Syrian Parliament on March 30,
2011 disappointed those had hoped that the President would intervene in Dar’a to hold responsible those who tortured and killed civilians in the city. Instead, this speech framed and coded the official narrative of the uprising from the regime’s perspective as a “foreign conspiracy” against Syria. With the exacerbating and disproportionate violence by the Syrian regime against protesters on the one side, and the early intervention of sectarian and political Syrian entrepreneurs in exile as well as regional actors based in the Arab Gulf monarchies on the other side, a new sectarian discourse arose and increasingly challenged the perception of the Syrian national identity. The emerging sectarian narratives have not only widened the gap between the pro-regime and pro-opposition, but these narratives also divided the opposition itself as well as members of the same family who chose different sides. In spite of this complexity and the convoluted motives of individuals to support one side and oppose the other, Arab TV satellite channels, mainly Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, as well as political pundits constructed dichotomous and simplistic perspectives about the uprising: Arabs vs. Persians, minorities vs. majority, and Sunni vs. Shi’a/Alawites. However, my own positionality in relation to the social movement in Syria as well as my social and personal encounters with pro-regime, pro-opposition, and neutral individuals provided me with the necessary context to analyze the competing narratives of the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War.

Before leaving Syria on July 31, 2012, I was a participant in the social movement in Damascus, and I regularly attended meetings with activists and intellectuals. Moreover, I participated in two major Syrian opposition conferences in Damascus (Semiramis Hotel/ June 27, 2011) and Cairo (Democratic Platform/April 13-15, 2012).
which sharpened my experience and provided me with a unique access to political organizations. During these conferences several fractions of the Syrian opposition were competing to frame and code the Syrian Uprising and to reinforce certain narratives. During the regular meetings with Syrian activists and intellectuals that I attended throughout the early stage of the uprising, the debate among those attending concentrated on four major problematic issues: the transitional period in Syria; the Syrian national identity; the role of social media as a tool for activism; and the danger of sectarian instigation diffused by both the state-led media on the one hand, and the Gulf-based media, on the other.

A flow of images, symbols, and competing political narratives that challenged the perception of the Syria national identity erupted between the opposition and the regime on the one side and among the different strands within the opposition itself on the other side. These visual, rhetorical, symbolic and conceptual conflicts within the context of the armed conflict were transmitted via mainstream media, political debates, and social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube). Inspired by my direct personal experience with social media and my extensive encounters and meetings with Syrians of different backgrounds and attitudes in the context of the Arab Spring, I chose as the topic for my thesis research: nationalism, identity, social media and dominant discourses in post-uprising Syria.

After more than four years since the outset of the Syrian Uprising, major changes have affected the perception of national identity among Syrians: the country became de facto divided between different belligerents, thousands of non-Syrian Jihadists (such as
the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” or ISIS) have been supported by regional actors and succeeded in controlling large swathes in Syria and Iraq, acute demographic changes have taken place with more than four million Syrians fled from their country and roughly estimated 7,632,500 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs\(^1\)) as well as a death toll of more than 210,000 (UNHCR, 2015), and sectarian tension between different segments of the Syrian society have intensified. The main goals of my research are to investigate the major changes that have affected the Syrian national identity during the ongoing uprising and to analyze the dynamics of sectarinization and how the sectarian narrative was constructed. In order to do so, I also intend to identify an accurate understanding of first, the role of political-sectarian Syrian elite who exploited symbolic politics to promote sectarian discourses; second, the role of regional actors in the Arab Gulf monarchies, mainly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as independent sectarian individuals in supporting and funding certain fractions among the Syrian opposition; third, the role of certain grassroots organizations on the ground; and fourth, the interaction between mainstream media and Arab satellite outlets and social media as in the case of the “Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” or SRABA2011.

In order to investigate the identity transformation, I use multiple sources and methodologies in the thesis. Through the data analysis, I first contextualize the Syrian uprising within the broader Arab Spring movements by reviewing the impact on Syria of the mass-protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. I then analyze the pervasive conceptualization of the Syrian Uprising amid politicians (such as Henry

\(^1\) http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e486a76.html
Kissinger), academics (such as Joshua Landis) and journalists (such as Thomas Friedman). Next, I analyze the dominant discourses of the Syrian regime and the opposition regarding the Syrian Uprising during the transformative period between 2011-2013. This discussion is followed by an analysis of the process of sectarianization of the virtual sphere between 2011-2013 through the instrumentalist role of Facebook page the SRABA2011. I further discuss how and why the official Syrian flag was changed into the so called “the revolutionary flag”. Finally, I analyze the crucial role of social media and political entrepreneurs in this process and conclude with an analysis of the role of political entrepreneurs in sponsoring the sectarian and militarized narrative. To support my data analysis and to verify the context of a specific critical juncture during the Syrian Uprising, in August 2014, I conducted 15 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with activists and human rights workers who work with American and international non-governmental organizations as well as Syrian activist organizations. All 15 interviewees were active in Syria during the uprising and left the country to reside in Washington DC following the exacerbated violence. In May 2015, I also conducted additional five in-person follow-up interviews and two via phone that assisted me as I corrected and changed specific interpretations.

This thesis begins with a review and a discussion of major theories of democratization and the main conditions for achieving a stable democratic system as well as the main challenges that confront the process of democratization within authoritarian regimes, as in the Syrian case following the massive public protests, known as the “Arab Spring”. This review provides necessary background for understanding the importance of
the political and economic dynamics in instigating the massive protests in Syria rather than the dominant ethnic/sectarian narrative. The purpose of this review is to contextualize the Syrian conflict within its socio-political and socio-economic conditions that gave momentum for the emergence of collective identities and the reconfiguration of cultural and religious identities in a society characterized by a weak national identity. I then review major theories of nation and nationalism and present a discussion of the causes of war in the Balkans based on multiple approaches that provided different accounts of what explains episodes of extreme violence between ethnic, national, or religious groups. Next, I explain which approach is the most adequate to analyze what factors affected the perception of the Syrian national identity and facilitated the emergence of new collective identities in the context of the ongoing civil war. Such a review, discussion, and explanation of democratization theories and theories of nation and nationalism will bridge the gap between multiple interrelated factors: social movement, state’s institutions, economic development, political entrepreneurs, political violence and the processes of shaping collective identities.

Methods

In this thesis, I used multiple qualitative methods. My primary method is discourse analysis. My secondary methods are in-depth semi-structured interviews and participant observation. I used discourse analysis to examine “the relationship between language and the social and cultural contexts in which it is used and looks at patterns of organization across texts” (Paltridge, 2006, p. 20). This method “considers what people mean by what they say, how they work out what people mean, and the way language
presents different views of the world and different understandings” (Paltridge, 2006, p. 20). In this context, I used discourse analysis to deconstruct the meanings of two sets of data: first, the discourse of the Facebook page “The Syrian Revolution against Bashar al-Assad 2011” or the SRABA2011 and influential oppositional amateur YouTube videos; and second, the discourse of the research participants that I interviewed in Washington DC during the summer of 2014 and 2015. The interviewees are key informants and gatekeepers of Syrian activist organizations as well as American and international non-governmental organizations that operate in the Middle East.

I used discourse analysis to examine the “interrelation of images and written texts” (Rose, 2012, p.16) of the dominant discourse disseminated by the SRABA2011 Facebook page and influential oppositional amateur YouTube videos. I used the semi-official Facebook page of the Syrian opposition (the SRABA2011) as a case study to examine the role of social media in promoting dominant discourses of the Syrian opposition. The selection of this page was not arbitrary but rather it was based on its effectiveness, its strong relations to mainstream media, and the self-awareness of its administrators to the questions of national and sectarian identities. Moreover, the selection of the SRABA2011 was also based on its leading role in promoting certain narratives and symbols used to reinforce Islamist discourse and the sectarinization of the virtual sphere. My choices of the oppositional amateur YouTube videos were representative samples that reflect the role of political entrepreneurs in exile as well as grassroots organizations on the ground in promoting and legitimatizing specific political narratives of the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil-War.
I used discourse analysis during the early stage of this research when I first became interested in researching this subject in October 2013. As Gillian Rose (2012) highlights “it is certainly true that visual images very often work in conjunction with other kinds of representations” (p. 16). By analyzing the discourse of images and written texts in the SRABA2011 Facebook page within the context of how Friday’s slogans for the protests were selected through Facebook polls and how these polls were conducted at times of sectarian tension and strife, I examined the sectarian discourse promoted by the SRABA2011. Thus, I aimed to analyze the ways in which the SRABA2011 and other oppositional amateur YouTube videos have played an instrumental role during the Syrian Uprising by literally constructing the discourse of the opposition and contributing to the changes that affected the perception of national identity.

After I gained IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval (Number 14X157) from Ohio University, I started, in August 2014, to conduct semi-structured interviews, which “combine the flexibility of the unstructured, open-ended interview with the directionality and agenda of the survey instrument to produce focused, qualitative, textual data at the factor level” (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999, p. 149). I aimed to interview, in Washington DC, key informants and gatekeepers of Syrian activist organizations as well as American and international non-governmental organizations that operate in the Middle East. The interviewees were selected based on their involvement with campaigns and activities regarding the Syrian conflict. Any person who participated in campaigns or activities within a non-governmental organization that focuses on Syria fell within the
criteria for selection of subjects. The age of these activists was over 18 years old as a condition to be included in my research.

I had a number of personal contacts through which to identify and recruit participants. I used these contacts to identify initial participants, and subsequently a “Snowball Sampling” method to identify other participants. I started my interviewing process with two pilot interviews to acquire basic knowledge about my topic of study, and then I conducted more in-depth interviews. My key informants expressed their ideas, opinions, and perspectives on the scene without reservation. They made referrals to other potential gatekeepers, who in turn could provide me with access to their organizations and other participants or informants. These pilot interviews contributed to creating “Snowball Sampling” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.114).

Generally, Howard Becker (1998) notes that sampling is one of the most problematic issues in any research since it is difficult to find an appropriate and representative sample. Conveniently, my “opportunity” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p.77) to observe and analyze the factors that apparently affected the perception of the national identity occurred with the onset of the Syrian Uprising. As an active member of the opposition, I had the necessary access to communicate with diverse groups from different social/cultural backgrounds. I had established personal networking and confidential relations with several key informants since the beginning of the uprising, and, in some cases, long before. As a result, I had the ability to contact the gatekeepers who have “…the authority to approve research access” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 98). My interviews were based on open-ended questions that encouraged the participants to
provide spontaneous answers about their underlying ideas, feelings, actions and worldviews about major changes that have affected the conceptualization and perception of national identity during the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil-War (Bauer& Gaskell, 2000). (Please see the appendix 1 including the interview protocol).

Participant observation is considered a research tool in which the researcher learns from the community about the groups’ behavior in daily life (Burawoy, 1991, Jorgensen, 1989, Berger, 1993, DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). My research questions guided my observations in Washington DC; I attended protests, parties and social meetings that my research participants engaged in during my stay in DC. I used participant observation as a way to inform my understanding of the political, social and cultural contexts in which my participants live and work more than as a primary data source like interviews and discourse analysis.

I began collecting my data in the field (Washington DC) in August 2014. My field visits involved ethnographic observation and interviews with activists and human rights workers who work with American and international non-governmental organizations as well as Syrian activist organizations. By the time I left Washington DC, I had conducted 15 in-depth semi-structured interviews. The places where I conducted my interviews and my participant observation included workplaces, homes, public cafes, restaurants, and also buses and cars. Thus my interviews took place not only within Washington DC where most workplaces are located but also in town and cities around DC where my interviewees reside such as Alexandria, Virginia; Fairfax, Virginia; Montgomery,
Maryland; and Arlington, Virginia. I also conducted additional five in-person follow-up interviews and two via phone in May 2015.

After I finished conducting all the interviews, I transcribed my data in Athens, Ohio. Then, I used thematic analyses to analyze my data that included interviews as well as visuals and texts from the SRABA2011 Facebook page and oppositional amateur YouTube videos. The thematic analyses helped me to develop an understanding of what themes/issues indicate the main changes that affected the perception of the Syrian national identity and its symbols (such as the national flag). In the following chapter, I provide a detailed analysis of the dominant discourses of main Syrian political actors regarding the Syrian Uprising during the transformative period between 2011-2013. I also discuss the process of sectarinization of the virtual sphere between 2011-2013 and how and why the official Syrian flag was changed into the so-called “revolutionary flag”. Lastly, I analyze the crucial role of social media and political entrepreneurs in sponsoring the sectarian and militarized narrative.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter begins with a review of major theories of democratization and the main conditions proposed by many scholars for achieving a stable democratic system followed by a discussion of the main challenges that confront the process of democratization within authoritarian regimes, as in the Syrian case following the massive public protests known as the “Arab Spring”. Such a review provides the necessary background for understanding the importance of the political and economic dynamics in instigating the massive protests in Syria rather than the ethnic/sectarian narrative. The purpose of this review is to contextualize the Syrian conflict within its socio-political and socio-economic conditions that gave momentum for the emergence of collective identities and the reconfiguration of cultural and religious identities in a society characterized by a weak national identity. I then review major theories of nation and nationalism, and discuss causes of war in the Balkans based on multiple approaches that provided different accounts of what explains episodes of extreme violence between ethnic, national, or religious groups. Next, I will explain which approach is the most suitable to analyze what factors affected the perception of the Syrian national identity and facilitated the emergence of new collective identities in the context of the ongoing civil war. Such a review of democratization theories and theories of nation and nationalism will bridge the gap between multiple interrelated factors: social movement, state’s institutions, economic development, political entrepreneurs, political violence and the processes of shaping collective identities.
Challenges of Democratization within Authoritarian Regimes: Syria as a Case Study

On December 18, 2010, massive street protests erupted in Sidi Bouzid in Tunisia following Mohamed Bouazizi's self-immolation in protest of ill treatment by the local police. The Tunisian protests led to the fall of the Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and inspired other protesters in the Arab World. Between 2011 and mid 2012 major mass protests broke out in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. These protests caused the fall of three more long-lasting autocratic rulers--Hosni Mubarak of Egypt, Muammar Gaddafi of Libya, and Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen--and forced other regimes to introduce limited reforms as in Jordan, Morocco, and Algeria. While the initial demonstrations and protests contributed to the false hope among many scholars that these protests will set off a new wave of democratization, the outcomes of these protests were different and in many cases were tragic as in Libya, Yemen, and Syria. In this section, I, first, review scholarship in relation to the conditions for achieving a stable democratic system. Then, I examine literature that deals with the main challenges of democratization within authoritarian regimes. At the center of all this analysis is Syria as a case study, where I demonstrate how the gradual liberalization of the Syrian economy, without reforms, as well as the economic policies under the rule of President Bashar al-Assad benefited crony elites and impoverished the working classes who later became essential part of the protests. Moreover, I argue that the very nature of the authoritarian regime hindered the achievement of a stable and peaceful democratic transition and had a direct impact on the outcome of the transition process itself.
Conditions for Achieving a Stable Democratic System

In the last seven decades, social and political scientists aimed to explore what the conditions are for achieving a stable democratic system to better understand the processes of modernization, political development and social change. Early scholarship during post WWII conceptualized a direct relationship between economic development and democracy. For example, Seymour Martin Lipset (1959) contends that there is a direct relationship between economic development and democracy. He argues that economic development conditions such as industrialization, wealth, urbanization, and education had a significant causative role in achieving democracy. For Lipset, these conditions provide effectiveness and legitimacy to sustain a stable democratic system. He particularly emphasizes that the availability of an educated elitist bourgeois is a main condition for such democratic stability.

In contrast to Lipset (1959), Samuel Huntington (1965) refutes that economic development conditions like industrialization, wealth, urbanization and education will lead necessarily to achieving political development goals such as democracy and stability because such a connection is limited to the “Western, constitutional, democratic nation-state” (p. 390). According to Huntington, examples from Asia, Africa and Latin America prove that rapid modernization would produce political decay. Similar to Huntington, Adam Przeworski and Fernando Limongi (1997) illustrate that there is no causal relationship between economic development and democratization because case studies such as Syria, Yugoslavia, Gabon, Singapore and Malaysia demonstrate that while these
countries achieved economic growth and a sustained increase in income, they were
governed by authoritarian regimes.

Robert A. Dahl (1971) identifies three necessary conditions for political transition into a democratic system. These conditions concern the willingness of the government to provide its citizens (or at least a large number of them) with transparent opportunities to: first, “formulate their preferences”; second, “signify their preferences to their fellow citizens and the government by individual and collective action”; and third, “have their preferences weighed equally in the conduct of the government, that is, weighted with no discrimination because of the content or source of the preference” (p. 2). Dahl emphasizes that democratization is made up of at least two dimensions: Liberalization (public contestation) and Inclusiveness (the right to participate). Dahl outlines four kinds of changes in regime: 1) Closed hegemonies 2) Competitive oligarchies 3) Inclusive hegemonies and 4) Polyarchies. For Dahl, Polyarchy is the most favorable system as it “increases the opportunities for effective participation and contestation” within hegemonic regimes and competitive oligarchies when they move to this system (p. 14). Similar to Dahl, Adam Przeworski (1991) views democracy as a “devolution of power from a group of people to a set of rules” (p. 14) where competition is a major condition to achieve a stable democratic system. In this view, multiple competitive political forces compete with each other by collectively organizing their forces to realize their interests. Przeworski indicates that institutions and the intertemporal aspect of the democratic system play a significant role in explaining why losers comply with the verdict of democratically processed conflicts and accept their outcomes. What distinguishes such a
competitive political process is that under democratic systems, none of the competing parties can intervene to reverse or change the outcomes of the political process.

Challenges of Democratization within Authoritarian Regimes

While scholars such as Lipset (1959), Huntington (1965), Przeworski and Limongi (1997), Dahl (1971), and Przeworski (1991) provide different perspectives on the effective conditions for achieving a stable democratic system, scholars such as O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986), Huntington (1991), Bermeo (1997), Carothers (2007), and Berman (2013) discuss more explicitly the challenges of democratization within authoritarian regimes. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe C. Schmitter (1986) and Huntington (1991) focused on the role of political elites in the democratization process. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) divide the power structures that affect the process of democratization within authoritarian regimes into hard-liners and soft-liners. While the hard-liners stand against any form of democratic practices and reforms and work to maintain the hierarchal and authoritarian nature of their system, the soft-liners accept the implementation of some forms of democracy as a necessary compromise to achieve a degree of legitimacy for their system. O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) argue that democratization within authoritarian regimes must be a mass-driven process that involves the mobilization of a large number of people. Thus, they do not believe that democratization within authoritarian regimes can be achieved through military operations like the 2003 invasion of Iraq. According to O’Donnell and Schmitter, the political transition from authoritarian rule to democratic one is drastically reduced when violence becomes widespread and recurrent and/or if the mobilization of opponents of a dictatorial
regime went “too far” by threatening “the vertical command structure of the armed forces, the territorial integrity of the nation-state, [and] the country's position international alliances” (p. 27).

Similar to O’Donnell's and Schmitter's division of hard-liners and soft-liners, Huntington (1991) identifies major actors who struggle for power during regime transition: on the side of the government are standpatters (hard-liners), liberal reformers (moderate or soft-liners), and democratic reformers (radical), and on the side of the opposition are the democratic moderate and revolutionary radicals. Huntington assures that the role of soft-liners, like liberalizers and democratizers, within the authoritarian regime creates “a first-order force for political change” (p. 594). Nevertheless, Huntington, in his examination of the third wave of democratization (1974-1990), demonstrates that the main challenge to transitions from authoritarianism to democracy is the very nature of the authoritarian regime which has a direct impact on the outcome of the transition process itself. He further categorizes the transition process from authoritarian regimes to democratic states into three types: 1) Transformation when elites in power lead the process of change towards democracy, 2) Replacement when opposition groups lead the process of change towards democracy, and 3) Transplacement, which is a hybrid type, when the opposition and the government cooperate together to achieve the process. All of these types of processes involve either an implicit or explicit degree of negotiation between the opposition and the government.

In contrast to O’Donnell and Schmitter and Huntington, Nancy Bermeo (1997) focuses on the role of mass-driven social movements in the democratization process.
Bermeo examines the crucial role of social mobilization in political transition as a mass-driven process. She maintains that a main challenge to the transition from an authoritarian rule to a democratic one occurs when the radical popular mobilizations that consist of non-elites fail to moderate the protesters’ demands and exercise too much pressure from below so that they threaten the process of democratic transition. Bermeo indicates, however, that in some cases the path to democracy was paved by bloody popular change. She also did not under-evaluate the role of elites in the process of democratization; rather she maintains that the democratization process might proceed even if there is extremist mobilization. Nevertheless, Bermeo accentuates that the proceeding of the democratization process depends on the pivotal elites’ perception of extremism effects, as in the cases of Portugal and Spain.

Thomas Carothers (2007) suggests “gradualism” as an approach that aims slowly to promote democracy in certain contexts. He identifies five factors (not preconditions though) that either make the democratization process easier or more difficult. These factors are 1) level of economic development, 2) concentration of sources of national wealth, 3) identity-based divisions, 4) historical experience with political pluralism, and 5) nondemocratic neighborhoods. Carothers warns that a main challenge that is associated with a gradualism approach is the possibility of this approach being misused by an autocratic ruler in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian regimes to gain benefits. Similar to Carothers, Sheri Berman (2013) criticizes the pessimistic opinions that attribute the inescapable outcomes that accompanied the “Arab Spring” such as violence, turmoil and corruption to the “inherent dysfunctionality of democracy itself,” or the
“immaturity or irrationality of a particular population, rather than as a sign of the previous dictatorship's pathologies” (p. 65). According to Berman, a previous dictatorship's pathologies as well as the rising power of Islamists resulted from the lack of political and social institutions, such as civil-society associations, which have the ability to organize peacefully and articulate the demands of the protesters. Through examining historical examples from Europe, Berman emphasizes that the main challenge to transitions from authoritarianism to democratization is the “fault of the old authoritarian regimes rather than new democratic actors” (p. 73).

Democratization in Syria

On March 18, 2011, protests against the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad broke out in the southern city of Dera’a. Within a few weeks, the protests expanded to cover major cities like Hama, Lattakia, and Homs, and al-Assad’s regime found confronted a fundamental problem, that is the problem of authoritarian control in which the authoritarian elites in power fight with the masses that are excluded from power (Svolik, 2012). When President Hafez al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited an authoritarian state but he lacked the power to control enough resources that would help him to rule alone. However, before he assumed office, Bashar had an inner circle of loyalists that was already formed by his dying father. This “close circle” was a coalition of the “old guards” and the “new guards” that consisted of business elites, officials from the ruling Baath Party, and high profile commanders in the army and the security forces (Svolik, 2012, p.5). During the first years of the new al-Assad’s rule, he initiated a project that aimed to restructure the regime’s social base and to “modernize authoritarianism” in
Syria (Hinnebusch, 2012, P. 95). Consequently, al-Assad’s domestic policy directed the authoritarian power towards the privatization and liberalization of the social economy as well as creating crony capitalist networks of privilege (Heydemann, 2004). The new policy modernized the state by opening most fields and the public sector to private investment. Private banks and a stock market were allowed for the first time in fifty years, since both public and private economy were nationalized during the short-lived United Arab Republic (1958-1961) and after the coup of al-Baath Party in 1963. By 2005, revenue from oil, which is the source of 60 percent of Syria’s foreign exchange and exports, doubled and Syria’s foreign trade increased significantly with China, Turkey, Iran and the Arab World, and Syria became the largest recipient of Arab investment (Haddad, 2012; Hinnebusch, 2012). In 2006 the economy grew at a rate of 5 per cent, and in 2007 and 2008 it grew at a rate of 4 per cent (Hinnebusch, 2012, pp. 100-101).

However, the modernization of the state’s economy did not lead to political openness or sustain a stable democratic system as Lipset argued, but rather it consolidated the power of the regime and created a neo-liberal version of authoritarianism. Bassam Haddad (2012) analyzes Syria’s political economy from 1970 to 2005 and reveals the fatal effects of economic liberalization policies without reform “at the structural, institutional, and legal levels” under both Assads, which had a tremendous impact on Syria’s development (p. 120). To address persistent financial woes and consolidate its power, the Syrian regime expanded liberalization policies in the late 1980s and early 1990s and forged informal economic networks of capital that bind economic elites to state officials. Furthermore, to assure that the capital accumulation is
secured within regime orbits, the Syrian regime created a new private bourgeoisie, which is a recent social phenomenon that had “the image of the new, more rural, more minoritarian state elites, one that is juxtaposed to a traditionally resilient urban-Sunni bourgeoisie” (p.63). This new economic elite comprises private businessmen and state officials who are either partners with the private businessmen or themselves went into business. Thus, through their political positionality, their connections, and their access to the highest positions in the regime, such state officials wielded tremendous power. Consequently, by building its alliances with big businesses and new economic elites at the expense of the public sector and labor unions, the Syrian regime impoverished workers and the lower middle classes and damaged the productive sectors of the state. With the absence of nongovernmental channels of free expression, and perhaps as a harbinger of the Syrian Uprising in 2011, the “growing army of unemployed workers” found indirect and safe ways to express their discontent and frustration when they took to the street in unprecedented numbers to protest against the Anglo-American military strikes on Iraq (1998), the US invasion of Iraq (2003), and the Danish cartoon (2005). It is noteworthy to mention that these massive protests coincided with a period of a stagnating job market, slow economy, and gradual reduction in state subsidies of basic goods and services (Haddad, 2012, p. 146).

The early optimism that accompanied the massive protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria during the “Arab Spring” misled journalists, activists, and politicians who overestimated the similarities between the Arab countries and expected either a peaceful transition of power or an immediate collapse of the old
regimes. However, a meticulous examination of the very nature of the Syrian regime, which lacks the basic conditions for achieving a stable democratic system, reveals a misunderstanding of the power structure in Syria. All fundamental conditions that facilitate democratic changes or the transition to a stable democratic system are lacking in the Syrian case. That includes Dahl’s two dimensions: Liberalization (public contestation) and Inclusiveness, as well as “competition” as a major condition emphasized by Przeworski. The “authoritarian upgrading” had only benefited regime crony capitalists who developed their partnership with the new bourgeoisie, but it impoverished the masses and middle classes in poor neighborhoods around the cities, especially those who depended on agriculture (Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 102). Thus as Huntington (1965), Przeworski and Limongi (1997) demonstrated in their studies, there is no causal relationship between economic development and democratization. The rapid modernization in Syria did produce a political decay and consolidated the power of the authoritarian regime (Huntington, 1965).

When the Syrian Uprising started to spread across the country, the mass-driven protests, that was dominated by what O’Donnell and Schmitter (1986) called soft-liners, demanded democratic reforms in a way that matches Carothers’ (2007) “gradualism” approach. At the beginning, the Syrian regime responded to the opposition soft-liners’ demands and implemented three main reforms: first, the government issued an amnesty regarding political prisoners (May 31, 2011), second, it lifted the country's 48-year emergency law (April 21, 2011), and third, it amended the constitution (February 26, 2012). However, challenges similar to those described by O’Donnell and Schmitter
(1986) faced the gradual democratic transition in Syria. A widespread violence committed by the regime when opposition hard-liners started to be visible and worked to arm the uprising. This caused the regime hard-liners to push further for abandoning the reforms and instead implementing a violent military repression of the uprising.

Therefore, similar to Huntington (1991), I argue that in the Syrian case the nature of the authoritarian regime has an impact over the nature of the transition process. The Syrian authoritarian regime exploited the regional aspect of the conflict and the influx of the Jihadists into Syria to delegitimize the uprising and the democratic demands of the mass protests. Additionally, a challenge similar to what Bermeo (1997) described added more complexity to the Syrian case because the popular mobilizations of non-elite opposition failed to moderate their demands within the border power structures of the movement in Syria. Further challenges that faced the Syrian case were raised by Berman (2013) and concerned the lack of political and social institutions, such as civil-society organizations, that have the ability to peacefully organize and articulate the demands of the protesters.

Thus the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime and the geopolitical importance of Syria hindered the achievement of a stable and peaceful democratic transition through a mass social movement. The escalation of violence had two major consequences that fundamentally changed the nature of the social movement and the demands of the protestors. One the one hand, the division between hard-liners (Islamists and pro-military intervention) and soft-liners (secular and pro-peaceful transition) was deepening, before the hard-liners eventually managed to successfully eliminate the soft-liners and
consolidate their power with the support of regional powers, mainly Turkey, the Golf Cooperation Council (GCC), and Jordan. On the other hand, the Syrian regime started to emphasize its legitimacy especially after the rise of the Islamist groups as major players in the conflict (as early as January 2012), and to promote itself as a main player in the global “war on terror”. Therefore, in contrast to the reductionist explanation that attributes the underline causes of the Syrian Uprising and the consequent conflict to ethnic/sectarian impulses of the “Sunni” groups who revolted against the “Alawite regime”, I emphasize the importance of the political and economic dynamics in instigating and transforming the massive protests in Syria.

In the next section, I review major theories of nation and nationalism and discuss the causes of war in the Balkans based on multiple approaches that tackle the specific conditions under which cultural differences became politically salient. Next, I explain which approach is the most adequate to study Syrian national identity and the emergence of new collective identities in the context of civil wars.

**Nation and Nationalism**

Since the eighteenth-century, academic debate has pivoted around the nature of the nation and nationalism, which led to the emergence of different approaches for analysis. In this chapter, I review four main approaches (primordialism, constructivism, instrumentalism and modernization) that address the definitions of nation, nationalism and ethnicity. I, then, review theories (the security dilemma, rational choice, symbolic politics, constructivism, Institutionalism and instrumentalism) theories that analyze the underline causes of the ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia as an illustrative example to
understand the types of conditions under which cultural differences can become politically salient. Based on this review, I provide a critique using a selective and modified approach to argue that this hybrid approach—which combines critical constructivism, instrumentalism and Symbolic politics approaches—is the most adequate approach to analyze the question of national and sectarian identities in the Middle East, and I specifically use Syria as a case study.

According to the primordialist or the essentialist approach, which is one of the oldest and most long-standing approaches to study nation and nationalism, nation is an authentic and naturally occurring grouping of people who are united by primordial attachments that stem from a sense of natural affinity. Clifford Geertz (1963), who conducted ethnographic studies in non-Western pre-industrial societies, maintains that ethnic and cultural identities are ancient and less susceptible to change over time. Within traditional society, in which the traditions of civic politics and technical and industrial development are still weak and incomplete, primordial ties become the essential base for “the demarcation of autonomous political units” (Geertz, 1963, p 31). These ties are rooted in the givenness of six actual foci, which an individual naturally acquires by being born into a specific community: 1) assumed blood ties of kinship, 2) race based on phonotypical physical features, 3) language, 4) region, 5) religion and 6) custom. In this sense, nation is held to be a self-standing and natural social unit with fixed characteristics that transfer between generations; it even exists before states, which are seen as modern artificial creations. Thus, states are always susceptible to the threat of primordial discontent and identity change, especially under the impact of political upheaval and the
collapse of state because primordial allegiances would emerge quite spontaneously and have “overpowering coerciveness in and of themselves” which causes conflict (Geertz, 1963, p. 31). In this view, ethnic or sectarian conflicts are “natural” because the very nature of an ethnic or sectarian group produces political demands such as self-determination or self-governance, which would be perceived by other different groups as existential threats. Thus, the primordialist perceives ethnic or sectarian identity as a precondition and an “independent variable that explains ethnic conflict” (Jesse & Williams, 2011, p. 10).

In contrast to the primordialist, the constructivist holds that nations are not real, naturally occurring entities but rather are socially constructed and products of human social interaction. According to Benedict Anderson (2006), “nation is an imagined political community . . . It is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” (p. 6). Anderson underlines the crucial role of print-capitalism and the invention of commercial book-printing in the process of imagination. This new invention broadened the scope of language and led to a rapidly growing number of people who started to perceive themselves and others in fundamentally new ways. Thus, nations and nationalism are modern phenomena, and the perception of identity is changeable and becomes politicized within a specific social, economic and political context. In opposition to Geertz, Anderson criticizes nationalists who emphasize the “primordial fatality of particular languages and their association with particular territorial units” (p. 43). It is noteworthy that the process of fixing new print-languages and the
consequent creation of new imagined community that prepared the road for the emergence of modern nations was unself-conscious. Such a process resulted from the interaction between capitalism, technology and the fatal diversity of human language (Anderson, 2006). In terms of conflict or tension between competing groups, constructivists posit that ethnicity “is not inherently conflictual” and does not cause conflict by itself, but rather conflict is caused by “pathological social systems, which individuals do not control” (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 7).

Generally considered as a variant of constructivism, the instrumentalist approach was articulated by the prominent Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm, who argues that nations with their associated phenomena are invented/constructed traditions by political elites to legitimize their power and serve particular interests (Hobsbawm & Range, 1983, p. 13). Importantly, however, Hobsbawm recognizes the agency of people in this process, and he asserts that nations are “dual phenomena, constructed essentially from above, but which cannot be understood unless also analyzed from below, that is in terms of the assumptions, hopes, needs, longings and interests of ordinary people” (1990, p.10). Paul Brass defines the instrumentalist approach as “a perspective that emphasizes the uses to which cultural symbols are put by élites seeking instrumental advantage for themselves or the group they claim to represent” (1991, p. 102). Brass (2004) uses to exemplify an instrumentalist approach, an analysis of the elements of riot production and interpretation in the systematic pogrom acts in Gujarat, India (from February 27 through June 2002), which erupted right after the Godhra massacre (on February 27) to reach the point of a “zone of genocide.” According to Brass, towns and cities in northern and western India
were sites of endemic riots, which were produced through three phases: 1) preparation/rehearsal 2) activation/enactment, and 3) explanation/interpretation. Within these sites, Hindu elites, who were members of organizations in the institutionalized riot system, enacted these pogroms and were prepared and well organized by identifying the targeted Muslim figures. The consequences of Godhra and the polarized election contest were utilized by Hindu politicians, mainly leaders of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who benefited from the consolidated Hindus and the weak position of Muslims to achieve electoral gains. Critics of the instrumentalism approach counter that instrumentalists overestimate the role of manipulative leaders in instigating ethnic/sectarian conflicts and overlook the historical and situational conditions under which these leaders manage to provoke hostility and sectarian or ethnic violence. Furthermore, instrumentalists provide a one-size-fits-all theory by treating ethnicity or sectarianism like other political affiliations, which glosses over the already existing grievances and prejudices on which political leaders play (Kaufman, 2001, p. 7; Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 7).

The modernization theory, which shares similar basic ideas with constructivism about how nations emerged and how we should study nationalism, maintains that nations are completely modern constructions. Ernest Gellner provides the best-known modernist explanatory theory of the emergence of nations and nationalism. Gellner (1964) maintains that literacy is an essential requirement for the process of creating nationhood. Such literacy is generated by nation-sized educational systems that operate through some particular language and utilize all available resources to produce full citizens. According to Gellner, two conditions made nationalism as a natural form of political loyalty: 1)
everyman is a clerk and 2) clerks cannot horizontally move between what later become ‘national’ boundaries because their moves and even their jobs are limited and bounded within the geographical linguistic-area. (1964, p. 56.) The newly-made boundaries had to be large enough to create modern loyalty-invoking units, which are also cultural units with the ability to sustain functioning educational systems. Gellner provides an insightful example in the unrestricted clerkly mobility and substitutability within the frontiers of the scripts and faith of medieval Christendom or Islam. Here, literacy in Latin and classical Arabic was sufficient to provide freedom of trade and mobility within the religious zones.

In contrast to the primordialist emphasis on the unchangeable nature of nations and identity, this example demonstrates that the perception of nation and the phenomenon of nationalism are indeed changeable over time. Gellner explains the divisive nature of nationalism and why wider political entities, such as the pre-industrial empires of the ancien régime, had been fractured when they were modernized. He maintains that the early stages of the successive waves of industrialization and modernization create disruption and also changing loyalties because these waves have an uneven impact on society that causes sharp stratifications between peoples. When intelligentsia and proletariat are mobilized within a heterogeneous and fundamentally culturally different society, such stratifications jeopardize and practically destroy traditional societies and old relations of production leading to revolutionary national demands. Thus, the phenomenon of nationalism is connected with this uneven diffusion of industrialization and modernization. Nevertheless, Gellner emphasizes that a nation can emerge only thanks to nationalism, “nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents
nations where they do not exist – but it does need some pre-existing differentiating marks to work on, even if, as indicated, these are purely negative” (Gellner, 1964, p. 62).

Furthermore, Hobsbawm agrees with Gellner and echoes a similar argument by emphasizing that “[n]ations do not make states and nationalism but the other way round” (1990, p.10). Thus, according to the modernization theorists, national identity is linked to socioeconomic conditions, therefore, when the society is modernized, traditional forms of loyalties and ascriptive identities such as tribalism, sectarianism and ethnic affiliation would gradually lose their salience and would be seen as “anachronistic remnant[s] of a previous age.” (Patel, 2013, p. 158; Esman, 2004). Moreover, in terms of conflict, Samuel Huntington (2006), in his book *Political Order in Changing Societies*, associates ethnic conflicts with the effects of the modernization process that engenders a gap between the expected benefits of modernity and the uneven distribution of resources and wealth among ethnic groups leading to rising frustration by a specific ethnicity or sect of the populous.

Critics of modernization theory point to the fact that this theory is more Eurocentric and, therefore, provides an apt approach to explaining the processes of industrialization and modernization that generated nationalism. Such nationalism, as defined by both Gellner and Hobsbawm, thus led to the invention of nations in Europe as well as the empires of the ancien régime since the Reformation. In strong contrast, most of the Middle Eastern states, including Syria, were agricultural regions that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century during the colonial era, and, given this, their identities were largely influenced by top-down policies and colonial compromises. Harith
Al-Qarawee (2012) maintains that the emergence of European nations was partly independent from the state which promoted already existing trends. The rise of nationalism in Europe responded to fundamental changes in the socio-cultural structure; however, in the Middle East such trends had to be invented because of the unavailability of the European conditions of modernity (p. 31-32). For instance, the national identities of Jordan and Israel were the products of immigrants and paramilitary groups who settled in a pre-industrial region during the British Mandate (1920-1948). Joseph Massad (2001), who studied the creation of the Jordanian national identity, emphasizes the role of state institutions, law and the military, in the production of the Jordanian nation-state, “…the colonial state, through its institutions, is, in fact, instrumental in the production of national culture” (p. 7). Furthermore, modernization theory overlooks the availability of other forms of pre-modern nations with autocratic dynasties such as the oil-rich authoritarian dynasties of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) whose boundaries roughly overlapped with Arabic as a language and tribalism as a culture. In point of fact, despite the successful process of modernization in these monarchies, tribalism as a traditional form of loyalty is still as concrete as it was in the past.

In terms of defining conflict, Donald L. Horowitz (1985) criticizes modernization theories of ethnic conflict that postulated, in its earlier version, ethnic conflict as a vestige that would disappear when societies are modernized, or, as in its recent version, ethnic conflict is the by-product of modernization. Thus, according to Horowitz, modernization theories of ethnic conflict overlook the “potential heterogeneity of conflict motives” (p. 105).
What Causes Extreme Violence between Ethnic, National, or Religious Groups

The factors behind the occurrence of extreme violence, such as communal or sectarian violence, national or ethnic or ethno-national conflicts, vary from one case to another. Scholars apply different theoretical approaches to understand what might push different groups at a certain time to resort to violence. Some scholars explain episodes of ethnic/sectarian violence as an extreme, yet predictable, illustrative example of “ancient-hatred”; others attribute its causes to “economic rivalry”, or “security dilemma” because of the collapse of the system, or “manipulative politicians”. However, in order to understand episodes of extreme violence, we need to deconstruct the underlying causes of certain cases and outline each conflict within its context. Scholars have made frequent references to Yugoslavia because it has been seen as a paradigmatic example of contemporary ethnic conflict. The case of former Yugoslavia provides an arresting example that demonstrates how different approaches provide different interpretations of the causes of the war in the Balkans, in which different ethnic, national, and religious groups resorted to war following the collapse of Yugoslavia.

The purpose of this review, however, is not to compare the Syrian case with the Yugoslavian case because of at least three major differences. First of all, whereas the conflict in Yugoslavia was between various ethnic/linguistic groups, the Syrian conflict cannot be analyzed as an ethnic conflict because of the relative homogeneity of the Syrian population in the ethnic context. Second, the context of the disintegration of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, as multinational federations, is fundamentally different from the context of the so-called “Arab Spring” that spawned a series of social
movements in the Arab World. Third, ethnic and national groups in Yugoslavia fought each other for regional independence after the collapse of the central government, whereas the Syrian regime did not fully collapse yet, despite the fact that the Syrian state has been gravely weakened. Furthermore, other than ISIS (The Islamic State in Syrian and Iraq) there are no indications that each sect in Syria is fighting for a regional independence. In fact, significant numbers\(^2\) of people who fled from conflict zones did not seek a safe haven amid their assumed co-religionists. In addition, unlike Yugoslavia, in Syria (and Iraq) the dynamics of sectarinization were largely intensified because of the interference of regional powers, the fatal consequences of the destruction of Iraq, and the sectarian polarization propagated through Arab media outlets and social media. Thus, the aim of this review is to understand when and how cultural affiliations became politically salient and how collective identities can be re-produced, instrumentalized and mobilized in times of socio-political upheavals.

From the Realist school, Barry R. Posen (1993) applies the concept of “the security dilemma” to analyze causes of ethnic conflict with main concentration on two case studies: Yugoslavia and Russia/Ukraine. According to the Realist school, the international system is anarchic and states, within this anarchic system, are striving units to achieve their self-help and self-preservation. Similarly, with the absence of a sovereign, proximate groups of people, who used to live within the same state, will strive to achieve their self-help following the collapse of central authority in multi-ethnic

\(^2\) The UNHCR estimated that as of the end of 2014 at least 40% of Syria's population, 7.6 million are internally displaced people (IDPs). Retrieved from http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49c3646c23.html
empires, which Posen referred to as “emerging anarchy”. In this absence of a central
government in Yugoslavia, ethnic groups became doubly vulnerable because they had
confronted conditions that forced them to protect themselves and increase their security
on the one hand, and they had to rebuild new state structures on the other hand. Such a
drive for security will engender “the security dilemma” because of the inability of one
group to observe or trust the intentions of other groups.

According to Posen, “[W]hat one does to enhance one’s own security causes
reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure” (1993, p. 104). Posen maintains that
the security dilemma would help to predict future ethnic conflicts, and thus they might
even be prevented. David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (1996) provide a rationalist
perspective: they contend that it is not anarchy per se that causes the security dilemma, as
Posen assumes, but rather the “emerging anarchy“ and the subsequent ethnic violence is
the result of the “strategic interactions between and within groups.” (p. 9). On the one
hand, violence between groups erupts because of three strategic dilemmas: 1) lack of
accurate information available for one (or more) groups about the intentions and
strategies of the other groups, 2) problems of credible commitment, and 3) incentive to
resort to pre-emptive use of force. On the other hand, violence within groups erupts when
political entrepreneurs and activists outbid moderate politicians to maintain or gain power
(p. 9).

Stuart J. Kaufman (2001) also criticizes Posen’s logic because it does not explain
why the security dilemma emerges but rather how the conflict escalates and the
consequent results of the security dilemma. Kaufman reverses Posen’s argument and
contends that anarchy in Yugoslavia resulted when the Yugoslav republics armed themselves and the central government lost its control over their behavior; therefore, “anarchy was not the cause of the run-up to war, but the result of the run-up to war” (p.10). In his book “Modern Hatreds”, Kaufman analyzes the preconditions of ethnic conflict in Yugoslavia and provides a useful framework that combines multiple interrelated factors: as Kaufman contends, “ethnic myths and fears and the opportunity to act upon them politically” (p. 12). Such an approach is very useful to understanding the process in which opportunities for political elites arise. It demonstrates the crucial role of ethnic symbolism and hostile myths in fomenting fears and insecurity among belligerent groups.

Brubaker (1995) studied the first phase of the break up of Yugoslavia during which Croatia and Slovenia were striving for autonomy and independence. In contrast, Serbia was determined to reassert centralized authority and Serbian hegemony over all Yugoslavia or to rule an enlarged Serbia. Croatian claims to self-determination and independence were met by similar claims by Serbs and nationalist leaders who capitalized on the intensifying and competing nationalistic discourse.

Brubaker provides an insightful approach to study the dynamics that led to the collapse of Yugoslavia and the subsequent bloody wars. To do so, Brubaker applies the concept of “triadic nexus” to explain the relationships among three relational fields: 1) national minorities, 2) external national homelands, and 3) nationalizing states, which each seek to become a nation-state following the disintegration of multiethnic empires into fragmentized pieces. These three fields have an intertwined and reciprocal interfield
relation. Thus, actors in each field are closely monitoring and contesting the acts of actors in other fields. As Brubaker further illustrates, in the following example of Serbs and Croats, how the contesting representations and perceptions of an external field would directly affect other stances and inevitably lead to struggle between competing stances and representations within the given field. In this vein, Brubaker points to how the efforts of Serbian nationalist to mobilize the Serbian minority in Croatia capitalized on representing Croatia as an aggressive nationalizing state that aims to exterminate the Serbian minority in Croatia. Simultaneously, nationalizing Croatian elites and political entrepreneurs accused the Serbian minority of being a suspicious and disloyal group. Thus, this mutual distorted perception and selective representation reshaped the way both Serbs and Croats perceived and represented the other. Consequently, even Serbs and Croats who were indifferent to the question of nationalism, or even those who did not perceive themselves in the way both nationalizing Serbian and Croatians elites and politicians represented, could not help but adopt nationalist stances in these threatening conditions.

Such stances were reinforced during the campaign of Tudjman, the strong nationalist Croatian émigré, who won the election in 1990. Tudjman then emphasized the deep cultural differences between Serbs and Croats, aimed to relegate the Serbian minority to the status of second-class citizens, and started to replace Croats in key positions in Croatia with Serbs. Furthermore, Tudjman fomented ethnic resentment through the symbolic act of kissing the traditional Croatian flag—the World War II-era Ustasha Flag—and thus, he re-introduced and revived the collective memory of previous
historical ethnic violence. Under the banner of this flag, Ustasha fascists, with the help of Albanian collaborators and the Axis occupying forces, had exterminated over 500,000 Serbs. Such acts by Tudjman that instigated ethnic tension and emphasized cultural cleavage between the Serbs and the Croats helped Milosevic, who frequently denounced Croats as an equivalent of Ustasha, to charge ethnic chauvinism and to mobilize Serbs for war (Kaufman, 2001). Brubaker’s model provides an alternative “constructivist” approach to the reconfiguration of new identities with the breakup of Yugoslavia which refutes the primordial interpretation of the conflict based on long-standing ancient hatreds. Thus, this model demonstrates that the outbreak of this ethnic conflict between Serbs and Croats resulted from interaction between the Serb minority in Croatia, the Croatian nationalizing state, and the Serbian homeland with an ever-intensifying influx of mutual fear, misrepresentation, and distorted perceptions.

Although Bunce (1999) shares basic ideas of constructivism, he provides an institutionalist approach to understand the most important factors that led to the outbreak of violence in Yugoslavia. Bunce focuses on institutional differences during the socialist era between three multicultural empires that disintegrated in a short span of time between 1991-1992: Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union. In his comparison, Yugoslavia represented one model that ended violently, and both Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union represented another model that ended peacefully. Bunce’s institutionalist approach emphasizes the role of institutional configurations in shaping individual identities and these individuals’ perceptions of their interests and also the best way to achieve them, which generally, was by politically mobilizing along ethnic lines. Bunce
identifies three major institutional factors to explain why Yugoslavia ended violently: 1) the degree of decentralization of the Yugoslavian federation, 2) the power of the dominant republic versus its institutional endowments (while Serbs were overrepresented in military and secret police, they were underrepresented in all other institutions), and 3) the politicization of the Yugoslav military (the Yugoslav National Army, or JNA) which had long been involved in domestic affairs as a political actor. Moreover, Serbia had experienced a tradition of independent statehood and historical connections with the military, which contributed to the construction of a Serbian national identity. Following the adoption of the 1974 constitution, Serbs became resentful because of their limited access to power and their declining status within Yugoslav (Bunce 1999, 224). Similar to Brubaker’s analysis, Bunce finds this breakup of Yugoslavia was predictable because of the interaction between three factors: 1) the intensifying Serbian nationalism, which reproduced a similar form of nationalism in Croatia; 2) the role Yugoslav National Army as an extension of Serbian nationalism; and 3) the presence of large Serbian minorities in both Croatia and Bosnia that couldn’t escape the overlapping interrelation between all these factors and even cooperated with the JNA.

In his book *The Myth of Ethnic War: Serbia and Croatia in the 1990s*, V.P. Gagnon (2004) tackles the historical and conceptual background of the Balkans and provides different examples that challenge the dominant understanding and the primordial view of what caused the series of violent conflicts between ethnic groups in the Balkans. Gagnon agrees with Bunce and Brubaker in attributing causes of violence in Yugoslavia to modern factors. Despite the fact he said in the preface of his book that he
would look at ethnic identity from a social constructivist perspective, Gagnon uses an instrumentalist approach to deconstruct the dominant political discourses of ethnic conflict. He posits that violence in the Yugoslav wars was a strategic policy conducted by elites who provoked conflict in ethnic terms to change the nature of “ethnic groupness” and also change ethnic identities and the meanings attributed to them. This manipulative strategy changed the social realities on the ground and demobilized elite challengers.

Thus, according to Gagnon, violence should be understood as part of a broad strategy that was utilized by ethnic entrepreneurs and political elites who reconceptualize the political space to “demobilize” those who had been politically mobilized for changes in the structures of economic and political power. In order to impose political homogeneity, those elites even targeted moderate intellectuals of the “same” group who dared to criticize nationalists or challenged their interests. Lake & Rothchild (1996) agree with Gagnon and contend that within groups political entrepreneurs uses ethnic appeals as a strategy to outbid moderate politicians. Those elites evoke and exploit myths, historical memories and emotions that “can exacerbate the violent implications of these within-group interactions.” (p. 9). Muller (2000) criticizes the depiction of conflicts in Hobbesian terms in which all-against-all upheaval and focuses on the background of the actors, the perpetrators of violence in Yugoslavia (and Rwanda). According to Muller violence in both countries was carried out chiefly by small numbers of thugs and opportunistic criminals. In contrast to Bunce’s emphasis on militant nationalism in Yugoslavia, Muller posits that militant nationalism was not that deep and the that the rise of nationalists in elections resulted from their ability to manipulate the system where they
took advantage of the weakness of their opponents rather than a successful appeal for nationalistic chauvinism. According to Muller, violence in Yugoslavia resulted from “the actions of recently empowered and unpoliced thugs” and hooligans who were recruited and encouraged by manipulative politicians (Muller, 2000, p. 47).

Syria as a Theoretical Case Study

Following the outbreak of violence in Syria, mainstream media and Western politicians and pundits frequently described the conflict as a sectarian one by using a binary and reductionist perception that simplifies the conflict in Syria into a mere conflict between the “Alawite regime” and the “Sunni” rebels or “minority-led” regime against Sunni-Arab “majority.” (Landis, 2012; Ajami, 2012).

The primordialist approach overpredicts conflict and cannot explain why intergroup coexistence is more common than intergroup conflicts. In other words, it fails to account for variations in the levels of conflict over time and place and ignores the political and socio-economic dynamics of the conflict in the Middle East, which vary from one country to another. In the context of studying the Middle East, and also in Yugoslavia, primordialism is not an adequate approach and it does not help us in understanding how cultural differences became politically salient because it treats collective identities as substantial and thus real entities in the world. Gagnon provides multiple examples that cast doubt on the importance of blood-ties. For instance, when ethnically “correct” refugees fled to Zagreb (Croats), Belgrade (Serbs), and Sarajevo (Bosnian Muslims), locals complained and expressed bitter resentment towards the rural
nature of newcomers (supposedly worst victims of the “evil others”), and thus ethnic solidarity did not overcome cultural differences in this case (2006, p. 4).

In response to the assumption that ethnic/sectarian identities are fixed, the constructivism approach “denaturalizes” the concept of ethnic identity and posits that “ethnic identities can be multiple, fluid, and endogenous” (Chandra, 2012, pp. 139-40). As a “social phenomenon” constructed from social interactions, ethnicity can lead to conflict when violence is possible within a social system (Lake & Rothchild, 1996, p. 6).

At the individual level, when violence breaks out, leaders of ethnic/sectarian communities provoke ethnic/sectarian war in pursuit of their own interests. Depending on how serious the threats potentially imposed by changes in power structure are and whether these changes would threaten their interests, political elites tend to either 1) guard the status quo by demobilizing the population who had been politically mobilized through the reconceptualization of political space or 2) join the new order (Gagnon, 2006).

In his book, *Ethnicity Without Groups*, Rogers Brubaker (2004) provides a critical constructivist approach that moves beyond the traditional constructivist’s assertion that nationhood, ethnicity, race, and sects are socially constructed to tackle the processes though which they are constructed. In doing so, Brubaker problematizes the very concept of “group” by shifting the analytical focus from ethnic and cultural groups, who are perceived according to conventional wisdom as de-contextualized and substantial entities, to the processes of groups-making. Brubaker criticizes the tendency to “reify” groups as if they were “internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective
actors with common purposes.” (p. 8). According to Brubaker, identity categories (ethnicity, sect, race, and nationhood) are cognitive perspectives on the world rather than entities or real things in the world (p. 17). Brubaker criticizes “groupism” which is the tendency to analyze sectarian/ethnic groups, races and nations as if they are substantial entities. Accordingly, he proposes the analytical category of “groupness” as a contingent and “contextually fluctuating conceptual variable” rather than constant, fixed and given (p. 11). Thus, Brubaker de-essentializes identity categories by treating “groupness” as an “event”, as something that happens, but it also may not happen when groupness fails to crystalize (p.12). Furthermore, Brubaker problematizes the very interpretation of ethnic/sectarian conflicts as such. Such an interpretation is based upon and propagated by participants’ rhetoric and commonsense accounts. Brubaker instead maintains that organizations (e.g. paramilitary groups, terrorist groups, social movement organizations, sectarian associations, etc.) are the chief protagonists of ethnic/sectarian violence and they cannot be equated with ethnic/sectarian groups since levels of “groupness” vary within groups as well as across putative groups (pp. 14-15).

A similar analytical approach is expressed by Charles King (2007), who criticizes labeling social conflicts as “ethnic conflicts” which depicts the entire membership of a certain group as waging a war against other groups. However, in point of fact, these conflicts are generally executed by small fractions of militants. In King’s words, “[n]o violent conflict ever involves all, or even most, members of one ethnic group suddenly rising up and deciding to kill all the members of another group.” (p. 69). King provides three main problems with the term “ethnic conflicts” and how they are generally
perceived. The first problem is “the peril of misplaced historicism”, which means the propagandist interpretation of the present by making reference to incidents in the past. In this vein, the context of history is served as an instrumental tool for politicians who manipulate it in order to gain more power and achieve some benefits (p. 70). The second problem is “uncritical ‘groupism’”, and King bases this conceptual problem on Brubaker’s framework. King criticizes the uncritical description of the world as if it consists of a collection of “groups”. Consequently, when any given conflict erupts, analysts tend to describe the involved belligerents as “groups”, such as Serb or Sunni or Kurd, rather than a conflict between violent entrepreneurs and mobilized individuals. Thus, by framing the conflict as such they participate in the ethnicization processes by reaffirming the claims of purveyors of violent mobilization as if they were acting on behalf of their respective group (p. 71). The third problem is “the danger of poor governance”, which means the mobilization of ethnicity by ethnic leaders following the collapse of state institutions. In an environment of insecurity and uncertainty, people might seek security by identifying themselves with their putative cultural group. King emphasizes that mobilized ethnicity “is generally a product, not a cause, of state breakdown.” (p. 71). Therefore, King warns that when analysts uncritically adopt the claims of violent entrepreneurs, which are propagated through misreading history, groupism, and governance, they amplify these claims and eventually become involved in the conflict itself (p. 72).

In the context of the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War, sectarian violence was, and is still, one of the multi-faceted dynamics of the conflict in Syria. However, it is not the
only operating dynamic, and neither is it, in many cases, the most prominent one. For instance, such multi-faceted dynamics were manifested in the city of Aleppo even before the intensified conflict. Factors such as class struggle and urban-rural division as well as the proximity of the city to the Turkish border overweighed the sectarian factor and shaped the political positions of those who opposed the Uprising (the urbans in the city) and those who supported it (the disfranchised in the peripheral rural areas). The sectarian factor had no role in shaping the urban-rural relations on the one hand, and these individuals’ political positionality toward the Syrian regime as well as the Syrian Uprising, on the other hand. For instance, during the peaceful stage of the uprising in Aleppo, which has predominantly Sunni communities, the Syrian regime used staunch regime supporters, the local and notorious criminal organization, Berri clan, who are Sunni, to crack down on protesters, who also were mainly of Sunni background. On July 13, 2012, fourteen members of the Berri, including the head of the clan, were publicly executed by al-Tawhid Brigade (Sunni fighters) of the so-called “Free Syrian Army” (FSA), who then uploaded the execution video on social media (Amnesty International, 2012). By framing the Syrian conflict as a sectarian conflict between ethnic/sectarian groups, analysts tend to overlook other dynamics, and the participants in the conflict could take advantage of such framing to conceal other cultural and structural incentives. Thus, sectarinization should be understood and studied as political, cultural, and psychological processes. However, this is not to say that sectarianism in Syria never existed or that it is not an important dynamic. It did and does. Nevertheless, before the uprising, its manifestation in the socio-political arenas was constrained legally and
socially, partly thanks to the power of Arab nationalism in post-independent Syria. The visibility of sectarian identities, as a form of collective identity, and the politicization of cultural affiliations were conditioned by the transformation of political and social spheres in the context of the Syrian Uprising, which gave momentum to the instrumentalization of such affiliations to serve as an ideological motive and a source of political legitimacy.

To understand what forces contributed to the transformation of power relations and the process of sectarian reconfiguration as well as the production of extreme violence in Syria following the “Arab Spring”, as a pivotal event, I consider a hybrid approach. This hybrid approach combines critical constructivism, instrumentalism, and Symbolic politics as a theoretical framework to analyze the role of social media and mainstream media in promoting sectarian groupness. The critical constructivism approach based on Brubaker’s analysis, on the one hand, provides an analytical framework to understanding 1) how social media and mainstream media, along with violence, were effective strategies of group-making, 2) how framing and coding the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War as a sectarian conflict constructed groupness through the process of sectarinization, and 3) how national identity can be changed in the course of extreme violence. The instrumentalism approach, on the other hand, contributes to our understanding of how and when manipulative elites have the power to manipulate ethnic, sectarian, national, or religious fears and reshape the meaning attributed to these categories. A symbolic politics approach demonstrates the crucial role of cultural and/or nationalistic symbols, myths, grievances, biases, and prejudices in mobilizing people when the conditions are favorable, as in cases of political violence. Therefore, symbolic politics theory is the
bridge between critical constructivism and instrumentalism approaches because it reveals
the power of symbols and the emotional attachment to myths that serve as instrumental
means for political and sectarian elites as well as instrumental means aimed at increasing
levels of groupness. Accordingly, following the reconceptualization of ethnic, or
religious, or national identity, such a hybrid approach recognizes that violence is not only
produced by top-down manipulation but also is produced from the bottom up.
CHAPTER 3: THE DOMINANT DISCOURSES CONCERNING OF THE SYRIAN UPRISING-CUM-CIVIL-WAR

In this section, I contextualize the Syrian uprising within the broader Arab Spring movements by reviewing the impact on Syria of the mass-protests in Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya. Then, I analyze the pervasive conceptualization of the Syrian Uprising amid politicians (such as Henry Kissinger), academics (such as Joshua Landis) and journalists (such as Thomas Friedman). Next, I analyze the dominant discourses of the Syrian regime and the opposition regarding the Syrian Uprising during the transformative period between 2011-2013.

On the Road to the Uprising

After a few weeks of the contagious waves of popular discontent that struck Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya, President Bashar al-Assad became aware of the threat and the crucial importance of these movements in the aforementioned countries; nonetheless, he confidently asserted in an interview with The Wall Street Journal on January 31, 2011, that Syria is in a different situation:

We have more difficult circumstances than most of the Arab countries but in spite of that Syria is stable. Why? Because you have to be very closely linked to the beliefs of the people. This is the core issue. When there is divergence between your policy and the people's beliefs and interests, you will have this vacuum that creates disturbance. So people do not only live on interests; they also live on beliefs, especially in very ideological areas (para. 10).
In this interview, al-Assad emphasized the urgent necessity to launch reform plans that will meet the needs of the Syrian people. In his view, it was too late for the Tunisian and Egyptian regimes to do so, but ironically, time would also pass for his regime sooner than he thought.

After the successful role of social media in mobilizing youth in Egypt on January 25, 2011, Syrian activists in exile launched a similar campaign, the so-called “Day of Rage”,³ on Facebook that called for Syrians to protest in front of the Parliament in Damascus on February 4 and 5, 2011. These calls merged with the message of the Islamic Democratic Current leader, Ghassan al-Najjar, in Aleppo who urged the people in his city to demand more freedoms in Syria (HWR, 2011). However, no one protested on the “Day of Rage”, primarily because of the pervasive fear of al-Assad’s notorious security apparatus and the inability to identify those who called for this anti-al-Assad⁴ (NY Times, 2011).

On February 8, 2011, feeling confident that “Syria is stable” (WSJ, 2011) after these failed calls for mobilization against the Syrian regime, the authorities decided to lift bans on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, which had been blocked in Syria since the end of 2007 (D Press News, 2011; The Economist, 2011). This surprising step had a dual purpose. On the one hand, it seemed as if the regime had granted a concession to the

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³ The “Day of Rage” was the name of the day that was chosen by Egyptian activists to protest against the rule of Hosni Mubarak on January 25, 2011 (Lynch, 2013, p. 91).
⁴ During these two days (February 4-5, 2011), I walked towards the Syrian Parliament in Damascus, but on each corner and throughout, as-Salhiyeh Street was filled with plainclothesmen waiting for any protesters, so I continued on my way to the well-known gathering place for Syrian intellectuals al-Rawda Coffee Shop on al-Abed Street less than a block away.
Syrian people who sympathized with the Arab Spring, and it signaled an intention to initiate serious reforms. On the other hand, the regime hoped, it would facilitate tracking and entrapping potential activists (Howard and Hussain, 2013). However, activists had access to the blocked sites through proxies and various circumvention software such as Tor and Ultra Surf, outlets the Syrian regime did not take into account at the time.

Shortly after lifting bans on websites, an unexpected incident happened on February 17, 2011, in Souq al-Hariqa, Damascus, when a police officer brutally assaulted the son of a shop owner in the market. Within minutes, hundreds of Syrians gathered to protest against the security forces and shouted together, “Thieves Thieves/Haramieh Haramieh” and “The Syrian people will not be humiliated/al-Sha’ab al-Souri ma Biiyenthal”, a slogan that would be popular later (al-Ahram Weekly, 2011, para. 2). The Minister of the Interior contained the protest by promising that the offending officer would be punished. Nevertheless, within hours, the video of the demonstration went viral on YouTube⁵ and Facebook. This incident and its slogan reflected the influence on Syria of the movements in the other Arab countries. A semi-governmental newspaper, al-Watan, even interviewed the shop owner’s son who was beaten. He denied any relation to or knowledge of Bouazizi, whose aforementioned death triggered the revolution in Tunisia. On February 22 and 23, 2011, some youth groups held vigils near the Libyan Embassy to show solidarity with the Libyan people who were protesting against Qaddafi. As these protests were dispersed by the security forces, the Syrian protesters chanted

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⁵ The video of the protest of Souq al-Hariqa is available on the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NykGjlKn3TU
against the security forces, “*He who kills his people is a traitor/ Yalli Bieqtul Sha’bo Khayin*” (Al-Abdeh, 2011, para. 5).

Unlike these demonstrations that indirectly protested against authoritarian regimes, the first demonstration with a direct political message addressed to the Syrian regime erupted on March 15, 2011. A group of young activists organized a demonstration in the historical district of Souq al-Hamidiyeh, Damascus, and chanted “*God, Syria, Freedom and that’s enough/ Allah, Souriya, Houriya w Bas***”, a slogan that defied the Baathist slogan: “*God, Syria, Bashar and that's enough/ Allah, Souriya, Bashar w Bas***” (FP, 2011, para. 2). The escalation continued the following day when families of political prisoners organized a sit-in in front of the Ministry of the Interior, but the security forces violently dispersed the protest (FP, 2011; Trombetta, 2012). The Syrian Uprising took momentum two days later on March 18, 2011, in an unexpected place, the peripheral southern town of Dar’a. In this long-standing stronghold of the Baath Party, the security forces arrested and tortured fifteen schoolboys who had imitated the famous slogan of Tunisian and Egyptian protesters, “*The people want to topple the regime/ al-Sha’ab Youreed Isqat al-Nizam***” and scrawled anti-regime graffiti on their school wall (Ismail, 2011; Leenders, 2012, p. 423). The children’s families took to the street on March 18 when the Political Security Chief, Atef Najeeb, a cousin of President al-Assad, allegedly

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6 This slogan will become popular among Syrian protesters after al-Assad’s decision to deploy the army to crack down on the protests in Dar’a. On May 2011, Syrian activists composed a song out of this slogan with the same phrase as a title: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0EKB3ZCCg6g

On August 24, 2011, the song was played in the *Théâtre municipal de Tunis* (Municipal Theater of Tunis) by the Tunisian band “Orchestra AlMarhala” who dedicated it for the “Syrian Revolution”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4SuWrmvgyJI
humiliated the families and refused to release their children. The security forces used live rounds against protesters causing the death of the first “martyrs,” whose photos were circulated on Facebook (Figure 1). Videos of the protests were immediately uploaded to the Internet. This news from Dar’a generated more outrage and protests in other localities as will as in towns and cities across Syria such as Douma, Salamiyah, Banias, Daraya, Deir el-Zor, and Homs. Thus, what began with a number of disparate events coalesced into broad and organized social movements. These nationwide demonstrations aimed to build solidarity with Dar’a as well as called for political and institutional reforms, and the release of all political prisoners and detainees (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012; Lynch, 2013). By the fifteenth week of the mobilization, news report estimated the number of participants at more than four million out of the Syrian populations of twenty-three million (Ismail, 2011, p. 539).

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7 In this video of Dar’a’s first protest on March 18, 2013, one could clearly hear the first demands of the protesters: “Bedna wladna men el sjoon” – “We want our children back from prisons”, “Yasqot, Yasqot Atef Najeeb – “Down with Atef Najeeb”, “Allah, Souriya, Houriya w Bas” – “God, Syria, freedom and that’s enough”, “Kathabeen Kathabeen” – “Liers Liers”: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rnCJ5K1tKXE
Figure 1. A picture of the first “martyr” from Dar’a. The first “martyr,” Hussam Abdulwali Ayyash was killed by the security forces during the protest of March 18, 2011. The black Arabic script above the picture reads “you sacrificed your life for it [the revolution], and for you we will proceed”. The red Arabic script symbolizes the blood of the “martyr” and reads, “The people want to topple the regime/ al-Sha’ab Youreed Isqat al-Nizam”. To defy the regime and show solidarity with protesters in Dar’a, many Syrian activists switched their profile pictures on Facebook to Ayyash’s picture.⁸

Although the uprising began as a peaceful demonstration with democratic demands, the hardliners in the Syrian regime responded by granting unrestricted authority to the security forces to quash the protests and to arrest the participants (Ismail, 2011; Leenders & Heydemann, 2012). Accordingly, the demonstrators were gradually radicalized and the hard-liners outnumbered the soft-liners on the side of the opposition. Over time, such intensely entrenched oppositional positions transformed the essence of the uprising into an armed conflict. This entrenched and contentious positioning created favorable conditions for regional actors and political entrepreneurs to step in and attempt to ignite and manipulate people’s emotions by exploiting mythical grievances for their own gains. Regional actors like Turkey, Iran, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and wealthy

⁸ http://www.syriauntold.com/ar/media/
patrons from throughout the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) monarchies took advantage of the uprising and became directly involved in a proxy war by explicitly supporting armed groups. Furthermore, just as Arab media outlets previously did in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam Hussein, Arab media and politicians constructed binary perspectives: Arabs vs. Persians and Sunni vs. Shi’a. They did so by framing and coding uprisings in the case of Syria and later in Yemen (as well as the Islamists insurgency in Iraq) as Sunni revolutions against the Iranian/Shi’a dominance, and in the case of Bahrain as an Iranian/ Shi’a conspiracy against the Sunni communities (not only in Bahrain but also in the rest of GCC monarchies). These media representation served to conceal the strategic interests of regional actors and fomented sectarian tensions within Syrian society. Thus, in this context, Arab media like the Gulf-based *Al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya*, alongside dozens of Salafist satellite channels, played, and continue to play, a significant role in shaping sectarian views as well as politicizing cultural differences within Arab societies.

The Western Dominant Discourses Concerning the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War

In this section, I provide a discourse analysis of three main examples that reflect the dominant narrative and how some influential Western politicians, academics, and journalists perceive the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War. Thus, I analyze Henry Kissinger’s, Joshua Landis’s and Thomas Friedman’s views as the three main examples.

In 2013, at the Ford School, former secretary of state Henry Kissinger commented on the situation in Syria:
In the American press it’s described as a conflict between democracy and a dictator- and the dictator is killing his own people, and we’ve got to punish him. But that’s not what’s going on. It may have been started by a few democrats. But on the whole it’s an ethnic and sectarian conflict. And I want to add another thing, the Alawites are Shi’a. So, that’s enmeshed in the historic Shi’a-Sunni conflict. It is now a civil war between sectarian groups. (Ford School, 2013, 25:35- 26:00).

Kissinger described Syria and Iraq as a-historical and artificial states attributing the reason behind the sectarian violence in the Syrian conflict to the very presence of sects and ethnic groups. Syria, in Kissinger’s view:

> Is divided into many ethnic groups, a multiplicity of ethnic groups, and that means that …an election doesn’t give you the same results as in the United States because every ethnic group votes for its own people… You don’t get a national consensus... Moreover, these ethnic groups [are] very antagonistic to each other. You have Kurds, Druzes, Alawites, Sunni and 10 to 12 Christian ethnic groups. (Ford School, 2013, 21:07- 23:00).

Consequently, similar to the outcomes in the Balkans, Kissinger suggests as the “best possible outcome”, the balkanization and breaking up of Syria into “more or less autonomous regions” (Ford School, 2013, 27:50- 28:14). Such a prevailing interpretation in the everyday news reports and analyses, however, is not new or surprising. For many “Westerners”, the conflict in the Middle East is “natural” because of the multiplicity of different ethnic groups and religions in the region. Kissinger’s analysis reflects a contradicted perception that confuses sects with ethnicity on the one hand, and, on the
other, it perceives states in the Middle East as artificial and a-historical entities; nevertheless, ethnic and sectarian conflict are perceived by Kissinger as natural and historical.

In contrast to Kissinger’s argument about the lack of sense of national identity among the people in the Middle East because of the nature of the “artificial states,” Syria expert and the vice president of Applied Research on Conflict at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Steven Heydemann addressed this issue when I interviewed him in Washington D.C. Heydemann explains:

>You know, I am someone who has argued for years and years against the idea that these states in the Middle East were artificial and that national identities in the Middle East were very thin and could easily be pushed aside as other identities rose to the surface. I think that national identities are meaningful in the Middle East… that even if people think of themselves as Kurds, or Sunni, or as… you know… Halabi [from Halab, i.e. the city of Aleppo in English] or something else, they also think of themselves as Syrians. And I don’t think this is artificial. I think this is part of people’s identity. For me at the moment [of conflict], it is difficult to think of Syrian identity as something that can group people together, but I don’t give up on the possibility that it could play that role in the future.

Heydemann maintains that “states in the Middle East, which have now existed for a century, have created enormous incentives around their preservation.” He further accentuates that despite the exacerbated violence and sectarian strife in Syria and Iraq, national identity is still a significant factor in the way people think of themselves and has
proven resilient among many Syrians. However, it has undoubtedly suffered a great deal of damage in the last four years, and the longer the conflict continues, the more erosion of national identity will be. Thus, Heydemann contends that the process of reconstructing a positive sense of national identity among Syrians, and among others, would be a huge challenge in post-conflict Syria. Although the outcomes of the ongoing conflict cannot be predicted, Heydemann perceives decentralized Syrian governance as a possible solution that leaves an open space for a future reconsolidation of national identity rather than the partitioning of Syria into sectarian states. Heydemann states that

> It may require that the people who would govern—in post-conflict Syria—that they accept political formulas that are less centralized, that are more de-centralized which give people more autonomy. The way to reshape national identity, perhaps ironically, is by loosening the control of the center.

Thus, Heydemann also contends that a de-centralized Syria could be a possible outcome; however, in contrast to Kissinger and others, he does not promote the partitioning of Syria across ethno-sectarian fault-lines and does believe that the sense of a national identity among Syrians is real rather than artificial.

The sweeping concept of Balkanization of the Levant into ethno-sectarian states, which is manifested in Kissinger’s perceptions, is not limited to Western politicians, but it also gained popularity among academics. In an interview with CNN’s Fareed Zakaria on November 7, 2014, Syria expert and the director of the University of Oklahoma Center for Middle East studies, Joshua Landis provided a map that shows the “military balance of power in Syria” (Figure 2) and suggested the partition of Syria into a “Sunni
Northern Syria” and a “Southern Syria” to stabilize the country (Figure 3). According to Landis, there is no possibility for Syrians to avoid being divided along sectarian fault lines. When Zakaria commented that the map “recognizes that the forces who support Syria [under al-Assad] are simply not going to live under that Sunni north and the Sunni north is not going to live under Assad,” Landis affirmed Zakaria’s perception by claiming that:

> What people are talking about now and [what] are emerging is autonomous regions with a political solution where the Alawites and Assad sit down with rebels who are very Islamist and come up with some agreement. That's just never going to happen. These different groups have radically different visions of where Syria should be. (Zakaria, F. 2014, 3:53- 4:12).

Zakaria applauded Landis’s proposal as “the single best solution to the Syria problem I have heard.” Zakaria further commented on the map, “So, finally, the map of 1919 that the British and French drew was wrong. This is a map that reflects the realities of sectarianism and is possibly more stable” (Zakaria, F. 2014, 4:57- 5:08).

![Figure 2. A map used by Joshua Landis on CNN showing areas controlled by ISIS, Syrian opposition including the FSA (Rebel), government forces (Loyalists), and Kurds. (Screenshot from the video “Zakaria, 2014”)](image-url)
Figure 3. The “innovative solution to the ongoing Syrian crisis” proposed by Joshua Landis on November 7, 2014. (Screenshot from the video “Zakaria, 2014”)

The problem with this prevailing proposal is that it does not interpret or explain the ongoing conflict and its sectarian dynamic nor does it “reflect the realities” on the ground. Rather it constitutes the narratives about the conflict as sectarian realities. Furthermore, this analysis takes for granted that the conflict zones in Syria are homogeneous and that people have no agency, and thus they would blindly follow their religious leaders. In fact, Landis applies a top-down approach by limiting his analysis to armed groups (military organizations) rather than to people’s views on their future country. Therefore, Landis predicts the future outcome based on the balance of power between belligerent parties as if the whole Syrian civilian population has been militarized. By contrast, Brubaker (2004) warns that such framing is misleading insofar as “organizations cannot be equated with ethnic groups” (p. 15). In point of fact, although all 15 Syrian activists, whom I interviewed in Washington DC on July 2014, recognized that Syria today is informally divided into multiple, yet constantly changing, entities
between multiple belligerent parties. However, all 15 interviewees, perceived such partitioning as ephemeral and confidently assure that Syria will be united again once current violence ebbs. For instance, Salma (26, a female Syrian humanitarian activist and architect, Damascus) explained:

> Syria is de facto divided between different actors, so maybe Syria is facing the danger of being divided but I don’t think it will be stabilized if it is formally partitioned. They [the imagined new mini-states] will keep fighting each other. Partitioning Syria would not solve any problem, but rather it will engender a protracted conflict between these new segments--whatever they would be. No one will accept the partitioning.

The ethnological vision of the Syrian and Iraqi societies is very problematic and, as I will subsequently demonstrate, a similar ethnological vision was imposed by the French Mandate that failed to maintain, and sustain, the autonomous mini-states that they had created in Syria.

Although, on the map (Figure 2), the armed opposition groups are represented in blue as one group and ISIS in red as another group, Landis mentioned in his interview that there are more than a thousand armed groups among the opposition who have fundamentally different visions and competing ideologies, which hindered their effectiveness and unity. In fact, this is true but it also contradicts Landis’s proposal to promote “imagined” monolithic regions. Hence, one might wonder that if we assumed that the “rebel groups” in the would-be imagined “Sunni Northern Syria” are religiously homogeneous, why, based on the “realities” on the ground, are they fighting each other
instead of uniting their efforts to establish their desired state? Is not the intra-opposition fighting on the one hand, and the fighting between the opposition armed groups and the Syrian government forces on the other hand, primarily waged for hegemony and political dominance? Is not sectarianism only one significant factor among multiple dynamics and manifestations in the ongoing conflict?

By promoting balkanization and partitioning of Syria as the “best possible outcome,” Western politicians and academics negate the historical fact that such a perception was already purveyed and unsuccessfully imposed by the French Mandate (1920-1946), which divided Syria into smaller and separate political segments under the control of a high commissioner based on what they claimed to be a “natural” sectarian homogeneity (Fildis, 2011; Khoury, 1987; Neeb, 2012). In order to obstruct the processes of constructing Syrian or Arab national identity amid Syrians who lived in the short-lived independent Kingdom of Syria (1918-1920) under the role of King Faisal I of the Hashemite family, who later became the King of Iraq, the French Mandate followed a strategy of divide-and-rule based on their colonial experience in Morocco and Algeria (Neeb, 2012). According to Philip S. Khoury (1987), “French policy was clear: if the mandate authority could not break the back of the nationalist movement, the next best alternative was to contain it in its heartland” (p. 59). Consequently, in an attempt to induce a strain of separatism among the Druze, Alawites, and the Maronite Christians, the French translated their colonial ethnological visions of the Levantine society into institutional reality to prevent the possibility of creating a unified Syrian state that might promote a sense of national identity and patriotism (Neeb, 2012, p. 31).
Therefore, after forcing King Faisal to leave the country, General Gouraud proclaimed Le Grand Liban, (Greater Lebanon) as a separate state along with the autonomous mini-states of Damascus (which included the districts of Homs and Hama), Aleppo, and the Alawite in 1920. In 1921, the former Ottoman territory of Jabal al-Druze in the south was proclaimed as an autonomous state known as the State of Jabal al-Druze. Within two years, these “imagined communities” defied the French administrators who were obliged in 1922 to federate the states of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite, with the exception of Jabal al-Druze. By the end of 1924, the configuration shifted again and the states of Damascus, Aleppo and the separate Sanjak of Alexandretta (modern-day Hatay), which became then administratively distinct from Aleppo, were dissolved and replaced by a Syrian State. The Alawite State, however, was excluded from this new administrative and political permutation. Both the Alawite State and the State Jabal al-Druze remained in political insulation and separated from the Syrian State until 1936 when they were re-incorporated into Syria as a concession by the French to the nationalist movement represented by the ruling party, the Nationalist Bloc. In September 1938, France again separated the Sanjak of Alexandretta and created the Republic of Hatay. In 1939, France violated the Charter of the Mandate when it conceded the Sanjak of Alexandretta to Turkey to secure Turkish neutrality in the event of war.

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9 According to Article 4 of the “French Mandate for Syria and [the] Lebanon”: “The Mandatory shall be responsible for seeing that no part of the territory of Syria and [the] Lebanon is ceded or leased or in any way placed under the control of a foreign Power.” (French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon, 1923, p. 178).
In a final hopeless effort to stress the distinctiveness of the Alawites and Druze and to re-foster separatism and sectarianism among them, in 1939, the French Mandate detached again the Alawite State and the State of Jabal al-Druze from Syria before they had been forced in 1942 by the nationalists and the British to reunite them again. The Syrian Desert, however, was the only Syrian territory that remained subject to direct French military rule until Syria gained its independence in 1946 (Khoury, 1987, pp. 58-59; Neeb, 2012, pp. 31-32). From this brief historical background of the aborted colonial efforts of the French Mandate to “balkanize” Syria at a time when the sense of national identity was even nascent, one could question the very logic of border demarcation based upon ethnological visions and to ask why such a failed policy in the past might be considered as an optimal conflict resolution strategy for today's conflict in the Middle East, or, in Kissinger’s words, the “best possible outcome”?

Resonating a similar journalistic oversimplification of the complex history of the Middle East, the well-known American journalist Thomas Friedman wrote an article about Syria entitled, “Same War, Different Country”, which condones the availability of multiple identities. Friedman’s title alone reveals a primordial perception by distorting the causes and dynamics of the Syrian conflict and frames the conflict as if it were a mere replica of the sectarian war in Iraq. According to Friedman, all the Middle Eastern states are “pluralistic societies — mixtures of tribes and religious sects, namely Shi’a, Sunni, Christians, Kurds, Druze and Turkmen — but they lack any sense of citizenship or deep ethic of pluralism. That is, tolerance, cooperation and compromise” (Friedman, 2013, para. 8). Primordialists tend to interpret the current sectarian strife in Syria and Iraq as
resulting from continuous intra-Muslim conflicts between Sunni and Shi’a. This frequent depiction ignores the contexts that politicized sectarian affiliations such as: the destruction of the state of Iraq, the process of de-Ba’athification and the institutionalization of sectarian categories that follows in post-Saddam Iraq, the influx of Jihadists from Syria to Iraq after the American occupation, and the later vortex of proxy war in Syria (Al-Qarawee, 2013). In addition, Friedman ignores the American role in fomenting sectarian strife claiming that the American forces “policed the lines between sects and eliminated a lot of the worst jihadists in the Shiite and Sunni ranks” (Friedman, 2013, para. 5). In Friedman’s response to the demands for humanitarian intervention in Syria following the Ghouta chemical attack (August 21, 2013), he concludes:

But, please do spare me the lecture that America’s credibility is at stake here. Really? Sunnis and Shiites have been fighting since the 7th century over who is the rightful heir to the Prophet Muhammad’s spiritual and political leadership, and our credibility is on the line? Really? Their civilization has missed every big modern global trend—the religious Reformation, democratization, feminism, and entrepreneurial and innovative capitalism—and our credibility is on the line? I don’t think so. (Friedman, 2013, para. 11).

Even before the sectarian conflict in Iraq after the Anglo-American occupation and the conflict in the Middle East following the wave of the Arab Spring, Friedman’s views reflected a passive perception of the Levantine and Arab societies that denies people’s agency.
In his book, *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Friedman (1989) attributes authoritarianism in the Middle East to the “primordial, tribe-like loyalties [that] governed men’s identities and political attitudes so deeply”; therefore, as a result of such loyalties, he concludes that “the peoples of the Middle East (as elsewhere in the world for many centuries) rarely created nation-states of their own through which they could rule themselves and be strong enough to withstand foreign invaders” (1989, p. 91).

Friedman’s claims echo an orientalist perspective that mirrors the colonial claims of the British and French that people in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire lacked the ability to rule themselves; thus, they needed the help of the “Civilized World”. France even called the colonization of territories beyond its boarders a “mission civilisatrice” or “civilizing mission”. Furthermore, the League of Nations and the Mandate System legalized the division of the region into a French “sphere of influence” and a British “sphere of influence” to enforce multiple notorious agreements between the French and British colonizers, which were finalized in the 1919 Paris Peace Conference (Barr, 2013, p. 2; Neep, 2012, p. 24). According to Article 22 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, under which The Mandate System was established:

> The best method of giving practical effect to this principle (i.e. the principle of self-determination) is that the tutelage of such peoples should be entrusted to advanced nations who by reason of their resources, their experience or their geographical position can best undertake this responsibility, and who are willing to accept it, and that this tutelage should be exercised by them as Mandatories on behalf of the League. (Neep, 2012, p. 24)
In this context, Friedman’s argument relies on uninformative reasoning that de-contextualizes the convoluted history of Middle East and perceives it as a monotonic, passive, and homogenous unit.

Even nearly a century after the emergence of what became known as the Middle East, Western media/journalists, academics, and politicians tend to simplify the complex dynamics of the Syrian conflict by attributing causes of the current conflict to the pre-existence of “ethnic groups” and the “artificial” nature of the Middle Eastern states. In contrast to the dominant narrative, Elyse Semerdjian (2014) criticizes such an anachronistic account of the history of the Middle East and the Syrian conflict. She debunks primordialist myths such as Friedman proposes by providing examples from The Arab Renaissance era (‘asr al-Nahda al-‘Arabiyya). During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Ottoman Empire went through a modernization process during the Tanzimat (Ottoman reform) that led to the emergence of new cultural and social formations. Semerdjian provides only a few examples of that era: intellectual communities, a nascent feminist movement, Arab press, and even Western-style colleges such as The Syrian Protestant College (1866), now The American University of Beirut. Additionally, even before the emergence of nation-states in the Middle East, the Arab Renaissance was of extreme importance because it gave birth to the early national movements in the Levant (Greater Syria) and Egypt (Magnusson, 2015).

In addition, Ussama Makdisi provides a critical examination of the history of sectarianism in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon that refutes the primordialist claims. Makdisi dispels the reductionist and simplistic interpretations of inter-communal
violence in Lebanon and Syria between 1840 and 1860, which was frequently framed as timeless and naturally inherent to the society. Instead, Makdisi contends that sectarianism has a modern history, and it was produced through the interaction of multiple factors involving colonialism, Ottoman reforms, modernity, and local elites whose power were challenged by the subaltern revolution that threatened the old social order. Sectarianism, in the words of Makdisi, “is an expression of modernity. Its origins lay at the intersection of 19th-century European colonialism and Ottoman modernization. These two forces were locked in a struggle to define the face of the modern Middle East; the ultimate outcome of this struggle was the redrawing of the cultural and political map of the region.” (2000, p. xi). Similarly, Al-Qarawee (2012) accentuates that sectarianism in Iraq, as well as in Syria, is a phenomenon caused by “the incomplete modernization in the Middle East” and the failure of the ruling elites to develop an inclusive and homogenous national identity that overcomes subnational and transitional identities (pp. 30, 34).

In sum, the discourse analysis of the views of Kissinger, Landis and Friedman, reveals how the Western dominant discourses of the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil War contributed in shaping the pervasive de-contextualized and culturalist approach to the conflict. Thus, as Brubaker (2004) contends “[t]o impose a label or prevailing interpretive frame—to cause an event to be seen as a ‘pogrom’ or a ‘riot’ or a ‘rebellion’—is no mere matter of external interpretation, but a constitutive act of social definition that can have important consequences” (p. 174).
The Dominant Discourses Concerning the Syrian Uprising in Syria

The discourses of the Syrian regime and of the dominant Syrian opposition groups are highly ideological and dichotomous. On the one hand, the Syrian regime denounced the uprising as a “Western conspiracy” against the Syrian state and the “Axis of Resistance” which comprises Iran, Syria and Lebanon's Hezbollah. On the other hand, the Syrian opposition romanticized the uprising as a peaceful and democratic social movement that seeks to bring about freedom, dignity, justice, and the rule of law (Athamneh & Sayej, 2013; Ismail, 2011; Kilo, 2012; Leenders, 2012; Lundgren-Jörum, 2012; Nahar, 2014). Later, however, with the establishment of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in July 2011, the escalated violence in 2012, and the flow of private donations from gulf-based networks to rebel groups, the opposition became increasingly fractured and divided over issues of foreign interventions, militarization, and sectarianism (Lund, 2012, p. 32) A distinct sectarian and Islamist discourse started to emerge alongside the nationalist and revolutionary discourses. (Dickinson, 2013; Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014).

The Syrian Regime

Prior to the uprising, the Syrian regime under Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad’s leadership, utilized pan–Arabism as a suprastate identity that supersedes the Syrian national identity and calls for a comprehensive unity of all Arabs. For the ruling Ba’ath Party, pan-Arabism was a primary source of legitimacy and an instrumental tool to suppress sub-national identities (religious, sectarian, tribal, ethnic). However, since the beginning of the uprising, the Syrian regime has gradually altered its rhetorical strategies
by consistently utilizing, to frame its discourse, a discursive repertoire of Syrian nationalism and patriotism instead of the suprastate identity. To legitimize the oppression of the protests and de-legitimize the uprising, the Syrian regime framed and coded the Syrian uprising as a Western and Imperial conspiracy against the Syrian state and the Axis of Resistance (Athamneh & Sayej, 2013; Nahar, 2014). Simultaneously, the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA), the official state news, and Addounia TV, a Syrian private TV Channel, served as platforms to promote the narrative presented by the Syrian President and his regime. Following the protests in Dar’a, President Bashar al-Assad delivered his first speech in the Syrian Parliament, on March 30, 2011. The analysis of this speech is of significance for two reasons: 1) it reveals how the regime conceptualized the uprising during the peaceful phase before the proliferation of armed opposition groups and Islamist groups and 2) it demonstrates how this opening speech constituted a polemic and rhetorical repertoire that framed the official and would-be consistent narrative of the regime for the next years.

In this speech, al-Assad avoided any reference to the uprising as such, but rather he referred to it as “al-Ahdath/ the events” or “al-Azamah/ the crisis”. Furthermore, he mocked the portrayal of the mass protests as “revolutions,” dubbing that description as “a new fashion” (al-Assad, 2011, para. 16). Al-Assad did not deny the fact that there were protests in Syria, as SANA and Addounia later did, but he framed them as a plot by foreign conspirators who “started in the governorate of Dar’a” and manipulated legitimate needs of the people (al-Assad, 2011, para. 22). Al-Assad further explained the conspirator’s tactics:
[T]hey [the conspirators] mixed up three elements: sedition, reform, and daily needs. Most of the Syrian people call for reform, and you are all reformers. Most of the Syrian people have unmet needs; and we all discuss, criticize, and have our disagreements because we have not met many of the needs of the Syrian people. But sedition has become part of the issue and started to lead the other two factors and take cover under them. That is why it was easy to mislead many people who demonstrated in the beginning with good intentions. (para. 16).

To emphasize his claims, in this nearly hour-long speech, al-Assad utilized the word “conspiracy/ Mo’amara” 15 times to address the situation in Syria and he persistently referred to the “conspirators” inside and outside Syria as “they”. Such a rhetorical distinction entails a division between “us”, the imagined loyal and authentic Syrians, and “them”, the imagined conspirators and traitors. Scholar Anna Triandafyllidou (1998) accentuates the importance of contrasting with “significant others” as a functional element to re-define the national identity, which leads to the transformation of the identity of the in-group. Thus, “for the nation to exist there must be some out-group against which the unity and homogeneity of the in-group is tested” (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 598).

The concept of “significant others” involves a distinction between internal significant others and external significant others; “internal significant others are (perceived as) a threat to the purity and authenticity of the nation, whereas external significant others (supposedly) threaten its very existence, that is, they threaten to annihilate it” (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 609). When the national identity is contested
during the times of social, political or economic crisis, as in the Syrian case, the significant other becomes “the lever for the transition toward a new identity” as well as a scapegoat for regimes. As Triandafyllidou further explains, if “the nation undergoes a period of general economic or socio-political crisis, the significant other provides for a ‘distraction’ from the real causes of the crisis. Moreover, it is a means for reasserting the positive identity of the nation against the odds” (Triandafyllidou, 1998, p. 603). Indeed, when President al-Assad addressed the protests in Dar’a, he sought to contain them by exploiting national rhetoric to reassert “positive identity”. Therefore, he referred to Dar’a’s position on the “frontline with the Israeli enemy”, and emphasized that “[n]o one can be in a position defending the homeland and at the same time conspiring against it. This is impossible and is unacceptable” (al-Assad, 2011, para. 22). Consequently, al-Assad made a rhetorical distinction between the “conspirator” or the “significant others”, who could be internal or external others, and the authentic Syrians. In point of fact, President al-Assad’s choice of words in his speech reflect such rhetorical distinctions:

The people of Dar’a have no responsibility for what happened, but with us, they share the responsibility of putting an end to sedition. In that, we and the whole Syrian population are with Dar’a. The people of Dar’a are people of genuine patriotism, magnanimity, and dignity. They will get hold of the few people who wanted to stir chaos and destroy the national fabric. (para. 22)

The social, political, and cultural re-configuration, re-categorization and re-definition of who is “in” and who is “out” of the imagined nation were essential group-making
strategies for the regime to increase levels of groupness and to mobilize pro-regime social movements against the “others” (Brubaker, 2004).

President al-Assad was aware of the crucial role of social media and satellite T.V stations during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions, which facilitated the emergence of citizen-journalists and eyewitnesses who defied the government censorship and the monopolization of the narrative by the regime. Therefore, in his speech, al-Assad considered the Internet and satellite T.V stations as conspiratorial tools in “the virtual war” that targeted Syria several weeks before the uprising. These tools, according to al-Assad, were instrumental for producing fabricated stories to incite Syrians. Later, he added, the “conspirators” started to send SMSs with sectarian content to spread fear and distrust between different sects. Al-Assad further explained the conspiratorial plan by stating that in order to make their stories sound credible, “they sent masked people to neighborhoods with different sects living in them, knocking on people’s doors and telling each that the other sect has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction.” (al-Assad, 2011, para. 19, 25). President al-Assad’s first speech disappointed many Syrians who had hoped that, at that very critical juncture, he would fulfill real reforms or at least lift Syria’s longstanding emergency law especially knowing that a week before he delivered his speech, his advisor Bouthaina Sha’aban said that the abolishment was in the works (Abouzeid, 2011). Soon after this speech, SANA and Addounia started to call the protesters terrorists and extremists. On May 9, 2011, Sha’aban commented on the protestors in Dara’a and told The New York Times that the Syrian government is battling “a combination of fundamentalists, extremists, smugglers,
people who are ex-convicts and are being used to make trouble” (Shadid, 2011, para. 11). Consequently, the pro-regime groups internalized the conspiracy theory as the only legitimate explanation/framing, which shaped their subsequent experience, and through which the Syrian Uprising had been understood. The power of the Syrian regime to forge a specific interpretive framing exemplifies what Brubaker (2004) meant when he argued that we should extend the Weberian sociology of the state, since “the state monopolizes, or seeks to monopolize, not only legitimate physical force but also legitimate symbolic force . . . This includes the power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who.” (Brubaker, p. 42)

The Syrian Opposition: Sponsoring the Narrative

Although the main active groups among the opposition shared the goal of toppling al-Assad’s regime, their contradictory views of how to achieve such a goal were reflected in the discourse of the fragmented opposition organizations. Among these organizations are: the National Coordination Body (NCB); the Syrian National Council (SNC), which was superseded by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF/ or Etilaf); the Building the Syrian State (BSS); the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC); the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SYRCU); the Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution (SCLSR); and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC). The SRGC, the SYRCU, SCLSR and the LCC are large alliances of the so-called tansiqiya (coordination) groups, who were mainly involved in organizing protests and media activism (Lund, 2012). The analysis in this section is limited to the NCB and the SNC, the most important and competing political
organizations among the opposition organizations during the period 2011-2013. The aim of this focused analysis within this section is to reveal how the political discourse of the opposition was coded and framed through the interactions between multiple dynamics such as, political entrepreneurs in exile (elite level), grassroots and on ground (mass level), mainstream media and social media, and regional actors. Moreover, it reveals how regional actors sponsored and shaped the discourse of the opposition.

The National Coordination Body (Hay’at al- Tansiq al-Watania, NCB) -- or the Committee for Coordination of Democratic Change (Hay’at al- Tansīq al-Watania lil-Taghyir al-Dimuqrati, CCDC) -- was founded in June 2011 and represented the internal opposition which was comprised of long-standing leftist and Marxist parties, Arab Nationalist parties, Kurdish political parties, and a number of independent individuals and political activists (the majority of whom were based in Syria between 2011-2013). The NCB is perceived by both the pro-regime and pro-opposition actors as an organization of soft-liners who adhered to a political transition and advocated for maintaining of the nonviolent character of the social movements. Therefore, the NCB strongly rejected the militarization and sectarianization of the uprising. Sharing similar stances, but refusing to join the SNC and the NCB, is the Building the Syrian State (BSS). The BSS, which is a current but not a conventional political party that was established in Damascus on September 10, 2011, insisted that any resolution of the Syrian crisis must be achieved by Syrians without any foreign involvement. The BSS was even less radical than the NCB regarding the departure of the al-Assad regime, which affected its popularity among activists on the ground (BBC, 2013; Khan, 2011; Lund,
In stark contrast to the NCB’s and the BSS’s views regarding the militarization of the uprising and the foreign military intervention, younger bodies of political organizations, which were comprised of political dissidents in exile and youth activists, were involved in organizing demonstrations, uploading videos as well as sending photos, and reporting on and documenting the number of causalities. These younger organizations were represented by the Syrian National Council (SNC) and its successor the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF or Etilaf), the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SYRCU), the Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution (SCLSR), and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC).

The Syrian National Council (al- Majlis al- Watani as-Souri, SNC) was founded in Istanbul (Turkey) in August 2011 as an alternative to the Syrian government and represented the hard-liners. It was comprised of exiled Syrian dissidents and organizations including the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood (al-Ikhwan al-Muslimin, MB), the Damascus Declaration, various Kurdish fractions, the National Bloc (predominated by Sunni conservatives), representatives of the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the Assyrian Bloc, and individuals from minority background (BBC, 2013; Lund, 2012). At the outset, the SNC gained the recognition and support of grassroots organizations inside Syria represented by the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC), the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SYRCU), and the Local Coordination Committees (LCC), which on October 7, 2011 had organized Friday demonstrations.
under the slogan, “al-Majlis al-Watani Yumathiluni/The [Syrian] National Council represents me” (Figures 4 and 5). Figures 4 and 5 are screenshots from one of several videos that were uploaded on YouTube during the Friday protest of “The National Council represents me” on October 7, 2011. These two figures show protestors in the southern town of al-Jiza in Dar’a dancing and singing anti-government slogans and pro-SNC slogans.

Figure 4. Screenshot from video of al-Jiza’s protest. An activist holds a paper that shows the date of the protest (10/7/2011), the place (al-Jiza), and the slogan of the protest in Arabic, written using the colors of the official Syrian flag, (“al-Majlis/the council” in black, “al-Watani/the national” in white with green stars, and “Yumathiluna/represents us”, in red) before the opposition later changed the flag.

10 The video of the al-Jiza’s protests during the Friday of “The National Council represents me” can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W67oezNEgms
Children and youth activists from al-Jiza in Dar’a hold banners that support the Syrian National Council (SNC) and the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The red arrow in the center points to the name of Al-Jazeera on one of the banners. This banner was intended to thank media outlets including Al-Jazeera, Souria al-Sha’ab, al-Arabiya and the Orient for their support of the “Syrian Revolution”.

This slogan, as all other Friday’s slogans, was promoted by the Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011 (SRABA2011) Facebook page on October 2, 2011, and had been incorporated by the demonstrators on their banners (Figure 6). At the bottom of Figure 6, the SRABA2011 suggested Thursday (October, 6), the day prior to Friday’s protest, to be the “Day of the Fraternization Between the Sects” (in black), followed by a slogan “the Syrian People are One Hand” -- means united-- (in red). This slogan reflects the SRABA2011’s conceptualization of the Syrian citizenry as a cluster of sects who need to be reminded that they are brothers. Furthermore, it presupposes that the relationship between the Syrian sects is antagonized, and that Syrians are interacting with
each other as well as with the power structure in the context of the uprising according to their ascriptive identities represented by their sects of birth rather than by their individual agency or attitudes.

Figure 6. Friday’s slogan of “the National Council represents me” (October 7, 2011)\textsuperscript{11}.

Simultaneously, these demonstrations were then aired live on \textit{Al-Jazeera} to assure the visual legitimization and promotion of the SNC at the expense of the NCB, which was relegated to second place. This media promotion combined with grassroots campaigns on

\textsuperscript{11} http://www.asharqalarabi.org.uk/2011/10/07/fig-6-fridays-slogan-of-the-national-council-represents-me-october-7-2011/
the ground granted NCB with all necessary means to declare itself as the legitimate representative of the “Syrian people” claiming that it was “endorsed by the revolutionary masses” (Lund, 2012, p. 52). Furthermore, to boost the credibility of the SNC, Al-Jazeera conducted two polls (October 3-6 and October 6-13) on the TV channel’s Arabic-language website. The first poll\(^\text{12}\) was posted on Al-Jazeera’s website on October 3 and ran through October 6, 2011. The poll asked in Arabic, “Do you support the formation of the Syrian National Council similar to the Transitional Council in Libya.” According to the results, of the 19014 total voters, respondents overwhelmingly supported the formation of the SNC with 82.2% voted “yes” to the question, whereas only 17.8% voted “no” (Figure 7).

\[\text{Figure 7. The results of Al-Jazeera’s first poll “Do you support the formation of the Syrian National Council similar to the Transitional Council in Libya.”}\]

\(^{12}\) http://www.aljazeera.net/votes/pages?voteid=3521
On October 6, the very closing date of the first poll, Al-Jazeera conducted a second poll,\textsuperscript{13} which ran through October 13, 2011 (Figure 8). This poll was conducted as a part of an episode of one of Al-Jazeera’s most popular live shows, The Opposite Direction\textsuperscript{14} (El-Itidjah el-Mouakass), which was broadcast on October 16, 2011 to discuss the legitimacy of the SNC: whether it “represents the Syrian people” or “represents foreign agendas.”

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{figure8.png}
\caption{The results of Al-Jazeera’s second poll “Do the Syrian National Council represents: 1) foreign agendas 2) the Syrian people”}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{13} http://www.aljazeera.net/votes/pages?voteid=3523
\textsuperscript{14} The full episode of Opposite Direction titled “the Syrian National Council”, can be found on the following link: http://www.aljazeera.net/programs/opposite-direction/2011/10/16/-الوطني-المجلس/السوري
According to *The Opposite Direction*’s polling, of the 21410 total voters, 90.8% voted for the SNC as “represents the Syrian people” whereas only 9.2% of the voters believed that the SNC represents “foreign agendas” (Figure 9). The aforementioned results were announced by *The Opposite Direction*’s host, Dr. Faisal Al-Qassem during the broadcast. These results, however, were even slightly different from the results that appeared on *Al-Jazeera*’s website (Figure 8). According to the website, of the 25589 total voters, 88.9% voted for the SNC as “represents the Syrian people” whereas only 11.1% of the voters believed that the SNC represents “foreign agendas.” Although the difference between the two results is insignificant, the most important question is not how many poll respondents or how they voted, but rather how many Syrians were among the respondents?

*Figure 9. The Opposite Direction*’s host, Dr. Faisal Al-Qassem, reads the results of *Al-Jazeera*’s poll (October 16, 2011). (Screenshot from video of the episode of the Opposite Direction).*
According to the *Alexa* webpage analytics site, *Al-Jazeera.net* is most popular in Saudi Arabia, the United States, Egypt, Morocco, and Germany, which could explain how non-Syrian respondents might affect the results of these polls (Alexa, 2013).

In order to understand why *Al-Jazeera* framed the first polling question by referring to the Transitional Council in Libya (or the National Transitional Council NTC) and why the SNC was mimicking the Libyan model in both its name and political discourse, we should contextualize these questions within the broader Qatari foreign policy towards the Arab Spring countries. Under Qatar’s previous ruler, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, Qatar had pronounced support of the Muslim Brotherhood in exile, which dominated the SNC, and supported competing Islamist groups with funding and weaponry in both Syria and Libya (Neubauer, 2014; Ulrichsen, 2012). The Qatari elites sought to challenge the Saudi leadership and dominance in the Middle East in an ambitious attempt to become an independent key regional actor (Khatib, 2014). Thus, throughout the tumultuous period of 2011 and 2012, Qatar played a major role in manipulating and shaping the balance of power in Syria and Libya by taking an aggressive stance against al-Assad and Colonel Gaddafi. Qatar also generously supported and backed the formation of political organizations (the SNC and the NTC) and military groups in both countries (Barakat, 2012; Figenschou, 2013). Consequently, Qatar was the first Arab country, and the second internationally, after France, to officially recognize the NTC, which was formed in Benghazi on February 27, 2011, as the “only legitimate representative of the Libyan people.” It also played an instrumental role in lobbying for the imposition of a no-fly zone and the NATO-led military intervention in Libya.
(Barakat, 2012, p. 26). Similarly, the SNC was formed as an organization for hard-liners who sought a “Libyan Path” for Syria and had intimate ties with both Qatar and Turkey. Furthermore, Qatar’s Hamad and Turkey’s Erdoğan explicitly promoted and supported the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, and Syria (Lund, 2012, p 50). Hassan Hassan (2013) explains Qatar’s foreign policy towards the MB, “Qatar intends to use the influence of the Brotherhood to steer the transitional period, which is why it has consistently opposed any compromise or dialogue with the regime that might sideline Islamist forces and sought to ensure continued Brotherhood domination of opposition bodies.” (p. 21). The influence of the Qatari elites, mainly the Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Hamad bin Jassim Al Thani, and the members of the MB in the SNC was exemplified in the rapid collapse of the agreement of December 30, 2011 between the SNC and NCB in Cairo. This agreement was signed by Burhan Ghalioun, President of the SNC, and Haytham Manna, Head of the NCB in Exile, who both agreed to unify the efforts of the opposition inside and outside Syria in order to lead the country during the transitional phase (after the fall of the regime). The first article in the draft agreement stated that both sides reject “any foreign military intervention that affects the sovereignty and independence of the country.” (Syrianncb, 2012, para. 3). This agreement threatened the Qatari ambitions and the Islamist members in the SNC who strived to push the uprising toward armed confrontation with the regime. Hence, possibly with the help of the SRGC and/or SCLSR, they mobilized protesters in different areas (Figures 10 and 11) to denounce “the betrayal of the revolution,” and call for a No-Fly Zone and

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15 The video of the al-Isali’s protests against the NCB and the agreement with the SNC
military intervention in Syria. Within a few days, the SNC Executive Board disowned the deal (Lund, 2012, p 56). Qaisar (32, political activist and professional journalist, Dar’a) provided an insight into how Islamist political entrepreneurs and Gulf-based elites manipulated the political discourse to delegitimize the NCB, on the one hand, by mobilizing protesters and, on the other hand, by exploiting both mainstream media and social media to promote their narrative. According to Qaisar, who was an ex-political prisoner under both Presidents Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad and participated in the first protests in his home-town Dar’a,

There were systematic and funded campaigns on media as well as on the ground to attack the NCB and the Syrian State and its institutions by equating them with the Syrian regime… I know for sure that some members in SNC paid for activists to consistently post anti-NCB and anti-Manna slogans on Facebook. For some activists, it was a full time job with a simple task: demonize those who oppose the military intervention and sectarianism in Syria.

Such a manipulative strategy was well detailed and analyzed by Gagnon (2004) in his study of the dynamics of the Yugoslavian war. The hard-liners in the NCB were eager to impose political homogeneity by targeting moderate intellectuals (soft-liners) of the “same” group, as being anti-regime, because the latter dared to criticize Islamist and sectarian elites, and thus challenged their own interests.

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can be found on the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eXuZTfAMkjg
Figure 10. Screenshot from video of al-Asali’s protest near Damascus. An activist holds a paper that shows the date of the protest (1/2/2012), the place (al-Asali), and an Arabic script that scorns Haitham Manna, Head of the NCB in Exile, and ridicules the agreement of December 30, 2011. The first line in the Arabic script reads, “Let’s move away from the Great Ghalioun and the Little Mann’a”. The second and third lines read, “The alliance of Addounia and al-Ekhbariya al-Soriyah TV outlets [the official Syrian TV channels] announces al-Assad’s competition for international lying.”

Figure 11. Screenshot from video of al-Asali’s protest near Damascus. An activist holds a paper that shows the date of the protest (1/2/2012), the place (al-Asali), and an Arabic script that reads “We [the people] say to Ghalioun, we had enough of one dictator, beware of making decisions without consulting the Majority’s opinion.”
The rapid collapse of this important agreement of December 30, 2011 to unify the opposition’s efforts reflects the influence of the Islamists and their regional backers as well as the power of the mobilized people in shaping the political discourse and the decision-making process. Although Syrian political entrepreneurs and the hard-liners in exile manipulated and influenced the slogans and demands of mobilized grassroots groups on the ground following the expansion of the protests; however, they did not have control over the people since the uprising started to engender its own dynamics at an early stage. Riyadh al-Shaqfeh, secretary general of the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood, and a prominent member and a founder of the SNC admitted that “It is true that sometimes the SNC seems to follow the street rather than defining a policy and trying to orient the masses. This is a result of Syria’s recent history. For 50 years, political activity was banned” (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 1). Scholar Stathis N. Kalyvas (2003) analyzed the disjunction between the center and the periphery and the interaction between identities and actions at the central (elite level) and the local (mass level). In his study, “The Ontology of "Political Violence": Action and Identity in Civil Wars”, Kalyvas emphasizes the importance of the locus of agency and the ability of individuals to even manipulate central actors, “[t]he locus of agency is as likely to be at the bottom as at the top, so civilians cannot be treated as passive, manipulated, or invisible actors; indeed, they often manipulate central actors to settle their own conflicts” (p. 481). Therefore, in order to guard their legitimacy in the eyes of the protesters, Syrian political entrepreneurs at the elite level followed the street’s demands regardless of their feasibility or rationality.
Many Syrian protesters, eager to topple al-Assad’s regime by all possible means, were inspired by the “Libyan Path,” which influenced the very wording of the slogan for the October 28, 2011 Friday protest that translated into the provocative slogan, “No-Fly Zone”. During this Friday, grassroots organizations on the ground mobilized Syrian activists who waved the flag of the “Libyan Revolution,” which was adopted by the NTC, alongside the new Syrian “revolutionary flag” that followed the Libyan example (Figure 12).  

Figure 12. Screenshot from video of Baba Amr’s protest, a district in Homs. During the Friday protest under the slogan of “No-Fly Zone,” protesters in many parts of Syria, as in Homs, waved the Libyan Flag of the rebels alongside the newly adopted Syrian flag (October 28, 2011).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TBQihK_GB7A
In this context, after the “successful” military intervention in Libya that ousted Gaddafi, the interests of protesters, Syrian political entrepreneurs, and regional actors were converging. Qatari elites found another opportunity in Syria and invested in Syrian political elites in exile as carriers of change and potential agents of influence in post-Assad Syria. In both cases *Al-Jazeera*, which is owned and financed by the Qatari royal family, served as an instrument for Qatari influence as well as a means to legitimize selected political elites to serve Qatar’s ambitions to expand its clout. Most of these political elites were affiliated with Islamists stances and were granted a prominent place at the forefront of media platforms and Arab TV satellite channels. Syrian blogger Bassel al-Hamwi noted that the “SNC members are given near exclusive attention on *Al-Jazeera*, *Al-Arabiya* and are favored by most international media outlets.” (Lund, 2012, p. 95). Thus, for “Qatar *Al-Jazeera* is both the messenger and the ‘message’” (Figenschou, 2013, p. 23).

In March 2012, Guardian journalist Martin Chulov reported that following the announcement of the establishment of the Military Council by the SNC, to demonstrate its support of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and the military option, Qatar used the Libyan coffers to provide a covert $100 million dollar as a “donation” to the Syrian rebels. The NTC claimed that the money was for “humanitarian aid” (Chulov, 2012, para. 4). Newly-declassified secret US government documents confirmed the connections between the Syrian opposition and the NTC. Figure 13 is an information report¹⁷ (dated October 12, 2016). 

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2012) that reveals that the U.S. Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) was aware of an arms shipments taken from the former Libya military stockpiles after the toppling of Gaddafi (October 2011) and shipped from the Libyan port of Benghazi to the Syrian ports of Banias and Burj Islam.

Figure 13. Declassified information report about arms shipments from Libya to Syria after the toppling of General Gaddafi. Date of information: May 1, 2012 - September 1 2012.

During the second conference of the “Group of Friends of the Syria People” in Istanbul (April 1st, 2012), with the support of Qatar and Turkey, more than seventy countries recognized the SNC as a “legitimate representative of all Syrians”. Despite this
nominal recognition, the SNC was not, as it had hoped, recognized as the sole and rightful representative (Carnegie-mec, 2013, para. 2; Lund, 2012). Soon, however, the SNC failed to fulfill its promises to unify the efforts of the anti-regime factions or to control disorganized and highly fragmented groups in the (FSA) because of structural obstacles. This was due, in part, to the prominence of the MB and the affiliations of the SNC’s members as well as armed groups with their backers in the region (mainly Qatar, Turkey and Saudi Arabia). Furthermore, merely a few examples of how external factors affected the regional policy towards Syria as well as the discourse of Syrian political elites who became dependent on their patrons were: the revival of the Saudi-Qatari rift, the failure of Sheikh Hamad to foresee the determination of Iran and Russia to support the Syrian regime, the Saudi-backed coup in Egypt against the Qatari-backed president Mohamed Morsi, and the backlash of the Libyan intervention.

Consequently, by November 2012, and following the Saudi-American pressures on Qatar, the SNC became a burden and was incorporated in the “National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces” (NCSROF/ or Etilaf), especially after claims of corruption and complains of the dysfunctionality and the overrepresentation of Islamists. The NCSROF reflected the shifting policy of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) towards Syria as in the case of the election, as the leader of the NCSROF, of the Saudi-backed Ahmad Jabra who had defeated the Qatari-backed candidates (Neubauer, 2014; Khatib, 2014). Furthermore, with the resumption of Iran-U.S. talks, Qatar’s new emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, backtracked from his father’s policy and reduced his support for Sunni Islamist fighters. Meanwhile the Saudi doubled down their
support for armed groups on the ground and, in November 2013, formed the “Islamic Front” as a fusion of Salafist jihadist Islamist groups to have supremacy over the Qatari-backed armed groups (Dark, 2013). It was within this context, some reluctant Islamist SNC members were compelled to attend what proved to be the fruitless “The Geneva II Conference on Syria,” the first face-to-face meeting between the NCSROF and the Syrian regime since the outset of the Syrian Uprising (Khatib, 2014; Neubauer, 2014). The participation of these members further weakened the Qatari’s stance and their ability to influence developments in Syria. The SNC’s participation in the conference, as a member of the NCSROF/ Etilaf, eventually led to the withdrawal of the Muslim Brotherhood from the SNC in protest of the SNC’s participation in this conference because they perceived their political role as diminishing (Khatib, 2014). Until the time of writing this thesis (2015), the hindering dynamics generated by the Saudi-Qatari rivalry over who has the upper hand in Syria and the political as well as the armed opposition groups still affect the credibility and effectiveness of these organizations in the eyes of Syrians on the ground.
CHAPTER 4: THE SECTARIANIZATION OF THE SYRIAN UPRISING

In this section, I provide a background to Syria's ethno-religious composition and the sectarian question in Syria. This is followed by an analysis of the process of sectarinization of the virtual sphere between 2011-2013 through the instrumentalist role of Facebook page of “The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011”. I further discuss how and why the official Syrian flag was changed into the so called “the revolutionary flag”. Finally, I analyze the crucial role of social media and political entrepreneurs in this process and conclude with an analysis of the role of political entrepreneurs in sponsoring the sectarian and militarized narrative.

The Sectarian Question

Syria is an ethnically and religiously diverse country with nearly two dozen different religions and sects. Before the conflict, both Syrian people and the Syrian regime used to brag about this cultural diversity. However, this diversity cannot be tracked in statistics or official documentation after the 1960s. After the census of 1960, the successive Syrian governments deliberately stopped including questions about religions, sects, and ethnicity in the Syrian census (Samman, 1978, p. 9). Therefore, with the lack of official records and statistics, scholars and analysts were obliged to estimate the size of Syria’s religious and ethnic communities. According to the estimated statistics of multiple Syria scholars before the conflict, (Carsten Wieland, 2016, pp. 32-33; Hanna Batatu, 1999, p. 14; Joseph Holliday, 2011, p. 10; Nikolaos Van Dam, 2011, p. 1; Raymond Hinnebusch, 2004, p. 19; Voker Perthes, 1997, 12), the Sunni Muslim represents the majority (69%) concentrated in the urban cities and the rural peripheries;
the Alawites (12%) who represents the largest heterodox Islamic minority in the country are concentrated on the western coast as well as in pockets around Homs, Hama, and Damascus; the Druze (3%) in Jabal al-Arab (or Jabal al-Druze) to the south; the Isma’ilis (1.5%) are concentrated around their original center of Salamiyah and in Tartous and Masyaf. Other smaller communities (1.5%) consist of many other groups, of which a few are the Twelver Shi’a near the Shi’a pilgrimage sites in Damascus, al-Murshidyah in Lattakia and Homs, Yazidis in al-Jazira area closer to the Iraqi borders; and a few scores of Jews in Damascus, Aleppo and Qamishli. Christians (14.5%) represents a significant population with a majority of Greek Orthodox (4.7%) and several splinters of Protestants, Catholics, Syriacs, Maronites, Nestorians, Chaldeans, Latiners, Assyrians, and Armenians inhabit urban quarters in the cities and villages all around Syria. Religious affiliations are crosscut with ethnicity with an overwhelming (82.5%) Arabs (including Christians, Muslims and Jews), Kurds (9%) (including Sunni Majority, Shi’a, and Yazidis), Armenian Chrisitians (4%), and Turcomans, Circassians, Assyrians, Palestinians and Greek (4.5%) (Figure 14).
Figure 14. Map of Syria's Ethno-Religious Composition. (Holliday, 2011, p. 11)

These statistics should be tentatively used only for the purpose of understanding the complexity of the Syrian conflict and the changing demography in post-conflict Syria. However, there are three caveats. First, these figures are merely estimations as there are no official statistical data on ethnic or religious affiliations, and many Syrians, especially Christians, emigrated but they were still registered as residents (Wieland, 2016, p. 33). Second, these figures do not represent secular groups or individuals who refuse to be represented as members of ethnic or sectarian communities or do not perceive themselves as such. Furthermore, such statistics do not represent families of mixed marriages. And third, in the context of the current conflict in Syria, the percentage of each sect and ethnic group does not necessarily reflect political stances. In contrast to the simplistic
assumptions of some analysts who cling to primordialism, being born into a Sunni family, for instance, does not make someone’s political stance be pre-defined. As a stark example, although the majority of the Kurds are Sunni, they were for decades involved in leftist and communist parties and have nothing in common with Islamists groups. Therefore, when the Kurdish villages in Syria were attacked by the Islamists fighters they were not perceived by these fighter as Muslim/Sunni. According to an official report by “The Independent Commission of Inquiry”, in July 2013, “anti-government armed groups, including ISIS, JAN, Ahrar Ash-Sham and FSA-affiliated groups, deliberately displaced Kurdish civilians from localities in Tal Hasel and Tal Aran (Aleppo) and Tal Abyad (Raqqa) in the context of clashes with Kurdish armed groups” (UNHCR, 2014. p. 7). Azad (29, digital security expert and human rights activist, Qamishli) provides an insight into the multifaceted interactions during the uprising between the Kurds, the Syrian regime, and Arab/Islamists organizations in his hometown, Qamishli, and other Kurdish villages. According to Azad, the Kurds were enthusiastic and actively protested against the Syrian Ba’athist regime because of the long history of discrimination as well as policies of Arabization. What Azad refers to is the 1962 census in the region of al-Jazira, which was authorized by a decree (No. 93) during the “secessionist period,” after the collapse of the union between Syria and Egypt. This notorious 1962 census stripped 120,000 Kurds (20% of the Syrian Kurds) of their Syrian nationality because they were perceived by the Damascus government as not being “true” Syrians (Tejel, 2008, pp. 50-51; Lowe, 2006, p. 3). Nevertheless, because the Kurdish collective memories were still nourished by this long history of discrimination and distrust, when in April 2011
President Bashar al-Assad tried to mollify the Kurds by issuing a decree (No. 49) to grant citizenship to the roughly estimated 120,000 stateless Kurds, they did not change their anti-regime stance. Azad further adds that during the early stage of the uprising, the Kurds, as other protesters, hold the official Syrian flag, and when the opposition decided to change it, they also adopted the revolutionary flag “as a representative of the revolution,” but alongside the Kurdish flag “as a representative of the Kurdish identity.” However, the Kurds, as Azad specifically notes,

… felt betrayed by the revolution and stabbed in the back when the Free Syrian Army attacked the Kurdish-village of Ras Al-Ain first between November and December 2012 and later in January 2013 through the Syrian-Turkish border. At that time, the Syrian political opposition remained silent because they follow Erdoğan’s orders. They even called us separatists! The FSA and the Islamists groups attacked my family, expelled civilians and looted their properties! And yet I was a member of this opposition…. Can you imagine! When the Syrian revolution stared I was very enthusiastic, and I felt for the first time [as a Kurdish person] that I am proud to be Syrian. However, the Islamists destroyed the very foundation of the Syrian national identity. Thus, I am strongly opposing the Islamists as much as I am opposing the Syrian regime. I blame Syrian intellectuals, including the leftists, for covering up the rising of Islamists and praising them as great fighters against the regime.
Like Azad, Muhammad (36, Journalist and political activist, Daraya/Damascus) expressed similar fear of the emergence of radical Islamists, particularly non-Syrian Jihadists, and pointed out the source of their influence in Syria.

I am a liberal Sunni, but I fear these Islamists who are well-funded and have combat experience and access to weapons; whereas we [the political opposition] have nothing to offer but slogans and nonsense! I left Syria in 2012 because of the regime and also because I have been declared madhur el dam [those whose blood must be shed] by the Islamists. The main problem that we face [as activists] is primarily related to finance. If you want to establish an influential organization to support and gain the people’s hearts, you have to offer them social services. But you need money! We have critical financial problems, but no one will grant you money without asking for something in return! The financial support always comes with a political agenda. I mean, Saudi Arabia asks for something and Qatar asks for something else, and these are the main donors. Therefore, you can understand why the Islamists groups have the upper hand in the opposition-held areas. They gain their power not only by terrorizing the people, but also by offering social services. The emergence of the Islamists in Syria imposed serious challenges that impedes our efforts for a diverse Syria. They are causing acute demographic changes by waging systematic religious and ethnic cleansing campaigns that targeted Christians, Yazidis, and Assyrians. They are creating a country with a monotone and exclusionary structure that endangers the cultural diversity in the country…. They are destroying the cultural and humanitarian
heritage in Syria, burning to ashes invaluable documents and blowing down historical monuments! More important is the fact that many Islamists and Jihadists are non-Syrians…. They came accompanied by their families to settle the liberated areas! How will you get rid of them? Syria has undergone a serious demographic change!

Therefore, in order to understand the dynamics of sectarianism and the current conflict in Syria, one cannot discount either the socio-political conditions under which cultural differences became politically salient or the differences between Syrian Muslims and non-Syrian Islamists.

The mere existence of ethnic or communal groups does not entail ethnic or sectarian conflict. Therefore numbers and figures could be misleading in the context of the Syrian conflict if they are used to “reify” categories as if they were “internally homogeneous, externally bounded groups, even unitary collective actors with common purposes” (Brubaker, 2004, p. 8). Brubaker’s critique of groupism and reification can be further supported by this example of multiple research based on fieldwork interviews with Syrian refugees (at the mass-level) in Syria’s neighboring countries that also challenge the simplistic, dichotomous sectarian narratives. By documenting Syrian refugee women's stories in Jordan, scholars such as Katty Alhayek (2015) used interviews to challenge the dominant sectarian narratives of the Syrian conflict. These stories from Alhayek’s research reveal how in many cases, such as in Karima’s story, military officials from Alawite backgrounds, such as First Lieutenant Zaidon, helped Sunni women from opposition neighborhoods and protected them against the harassment
of other Alawite officers, such as Lieutenant Samer. The following quote from Karima’s story, in Alhayek’s article, demonstrates such experiences:

First Lt. Zaidon asked me to forgive them [referring to those officers who harassed her]. He had his six-year-old son with him, and he asked me to pray for his son. First Lt. Zaidon is a good man not like Samer. But, I could not trust him and I did not open my heart. When he kept asking me to tell him my wishes, and he will try to make them come true. I told him my only wish right now is to leave Homs and go to Damascus. He said that I can leave and that he wishes me to meet good people on my way for the sake of my orphaned children. (p. 12-13)

The dominant analysis of the structure of the Syrian regime, as well as the dynamic of sectarinization in the Middle East in general, was affected by the practices of reification and groupism. The Syrian regime was frequently described as an Alawite regime that confronts a Sunni revolution. However, multiple scholars (Nazih Ayubi, 1996; Hanna Batatu, 1999, Bassam Haddad, 2012, Raymond Hinnebusch, 2004, 2012; Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, 2013; Elyse Semerdjian, 2014; Elizabeth Thompson, 2013) rejected such reductionist and culturalist analysis without downplaying the importance of sectarianism to understand the modern history of Syria. As a context within which we could understand the ascendance of Alawites to power, the aforementioned scholars emphasize the importance of understanding the class struggle in Syria after the independence from France (1946). Following the independence, Syria was dominated by urban oligarchs who inherited the residues of the divisive French policies and found themselves accountable for state-building as well as homogenizing the numerous
competing identities. The post-colonial Syrian society was characterized as a fragmented society with the prevalence of numerous contesting identities such as national/state identity (pan-Syrianism), Suprastate/transnational identities (pan-Arabism, and Islamism), and sub-national/sub-state identities (sect, clan, tribe, ethnic). Cross-cutting with these identities, the country was also divided across class lines between urban-ruling oligarchy, aggrieved peasantry, and a rising radical middle class (Batatu, 1999; Hinnebusch, 2008; Mufti, 1996; Tibi, 1997).

Initially, Syria’s urban elite had instrumental attitudes towards nationalism as they exploited anti-colonial sentiment to perpetuate their role as “indispensable middlemen between colonial power and local society” (Mufti, 1996, p. 46). Soon, however, those elite found the suprastate identity (pan-Arabism) to be an instrumental tool to homogenize the divided society and to create a basic foundation for socio-political cohesion. Therefore, pan-Arabism became increasingly more than an ideology; it became a legitimation of the secular nation-states in the Middle East that helped the ruling elite “in bridging communal cleavages between the Sunni Arab majority and the mosaic of Arab minorities.” (Hinnebusch, 2008, p. 96; Tibi, 1997, p. 220). Arab nationalists gradually avoided the use of the antiquated geographical labels that referred to minority-dominated areas, such as Jabal al-Druze (Mountain of the Druze) which was renamed Jabal al-Arab (Mountain of the Arabs), Wadi al-Nasara (Valley of the Christians) which was renamed Wadi al-Nadara (the Blooming Valley), and Jibal al-‘Alawiyin or Jabal an-Nusayriyah (The Mountains of the Alawites or Nusayris), which in 1976 was officially renamed as al-Jibal al-Sahiliyah (the Costal Mountains) (Van Dam, 2011, p.7).
Nevertheless, multiple factors paved the path for the 1963 Ba‘athist revolution and the ascendance of the radicalized middle class to power. Of these factors, the most relevant were: the failure of the Arab forces to recover Palestine, the exclusionary nature of the power structure that remained in the post-colonial period and excluded minorities from politics, the continued oppression of peasantry, the disproportionate recruitment of the minorities (especially among the Alawites) into the Ba’ath party as well as the army, and the regional and class divisions among the Sunni landowning and merchant elites (particularly between those of Aleppo and Damascus) (Hinnebusch, 2008, p. 268; Thompson, 2013, p. 12; Haddad, 2012, pp. 54-55; Ayubi, 1996, p. 256). Hinnebusch (1990), explains the conditions under which the Alawites have been politicized: 

[The] modest origins [of the Alawites] and [their] closeness to village grievances made them much more antagonistic to the traditional urban establishment and determined to carry out a radical revolution than the party’s middle class leaders. Their attitudes reflected a long gestating rejection of traditional society and a powerful longing for the overthrow of a social order they blamed for their lack of personal opportunities and for all Syria’s ills—its backwardness and inequalities, its weakness in face of Israel and the West. (p. 122)

Therefore, we cannot separate the Sunni-Alawi sectarian dynamic from the class conflict between the elites in both communities (Ayubi, 1996). Even within the current conflict in Syria, this dynamic is still salient. For instance, when I interviewed Suleiman (24, political activist and a researcher associate at the SNC and the NCSROF, Damascus) he consistently used class-based words to describe the Alawites calling them “settlers” and
referring to specific Alawite-dominated districts in Homs (al-Zahra) and Damascus (Mouadamiya, Sumariya, Mezzah 86, al-Assad suburb, Qudseyya/Masakin al-Haras, the slum of Ish al Warwar) as “settlements” founded by al-Assad after the ruralization of the city. Suleiman contends that

The Sunni resentment is against the Alawites in Homs and Damascus not against those who are in Latakia. The problem in Homs and Rif Dimashq was with those who flowed to these cities and “settled” these areas. We have six “settlements” that encircle Damascus. They occupied lands that belonged to others. Therefore, I do not describe the current conflict as a sectarian one because it is more complex than this.

The 1963 Ba’athist revolution, through what Hinnebusch (2004) called a “revolution from above”, fundamentally changed the power structure and the old relations of productions, which produced new social hierarchies as well as new classes. The Ba’athists followed a radicalized policy based on the nationalization of the private sector, the ruralization of the city through the employment of major segments of the working and middle classes, which broke the oligarchy's monopoly of the economic hold (Al-Qarawee, 2013, p. 4; Ayubi, 1996, p. 265; Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 96).

Following another social-class conflict (1966-1970) but this time within the Ba’ath Party against the radical socialists (led by the “Alawite” general Salah Jadid) and with the ascendance of the late President Hafiz al-Assad to power in 1970, pan-Arabism as a supra-state identity was subordinated to reason of state, which consolidated state’s sovereignty. President Hafiz al-Assad (1970-2000) concentrated on building his
draconian security apparatus and increasing the efficiency of the bureaucratic and party institutions to sustain his thirty-year “Presidential Monarchy” (Ayubi, 1996, p. 268; Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 96; Mufti, 1996, p. 231). Although these bureaucratic and party institutions incorporated significant segments of the peasantry and middle class and cut across sectarian and rural-urban divides, al-Assad sought to preserve a decisional autonomy, in a highly fractious environment, by pursuing patterns of “recruitment and promotion that reinforced the confinement of most high posts to ‘Alawis, thereby exacerbating the dissonance between officials and capitalists” (Haddad, 2012, p. 57).

The increasing role of the rural-based Alawites provoked a sociocultural opposition consisting of the “urban merchant-clerical complex represented by the Muslim Brotherhood.” In 1976, shortly after the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon, the Muslim Brotherhood launched their sectarian-based offensive leading the country to a near civil war between 1976-1982 (Batatu, 1982, p. 20; Hinnebusch, 2012, p. 97; Perthes, 1997, 137). This Islamist insurgency was brutally crushed by the Syrian regime. The cruel reprisals were particularly evident in Hama (1982) when the special forces and the Syrian army stormed the city and killed at least 10,000 civilians (Mufti, 1996, p. 244; Perthes, 1997, 137). It was during these bloody years that al-Assad’s regime became more dependent on his kinsmen and on the Alawite community as an associative mechanism to confront future threats (Batatu 1999; Haddad, 2012). However, according to Hanna Batatu (1999) although al-Assad became increasingly reliant on members of his own community after 1975, “there is at the same time little evidence that in his economic policies Asad gave a marked preference to the interests of the ‘Alawī community, or that
the majority of the ‘Alawīs enjoy more of the amenities of life than the majority of the Syrian people” (pp. 228-229). After these turbulent years, Hafiz al-Assad succeeded in stabilizing the country and consolidated his power by creating a populist-authoritarian regime with pragmatic policies that assured the hegemony of the Syrian state with rhetorical pan-Arabism tendencies.

When Hafiz al-Assad died in 2000, his son, Bashar, inherited his father’s structures, but he pushed further for economic liberalization policies and gradually privatized the public sector. The new al-Assad created a new crony economic elite that was responsive to the regime’s security concerns. This new cross-sectarian ruling elite was comprised of private businessmen and state officials, who were either partners with the private businessmen or they themselves went into business and accumulated their fortune at the expense of the public sector (Haddad, 2012). This is why the protest in Dar’a was significant. Dar’a was historically a pro-regime city and a stronghold of the Ba’ath Party because it’s population is peasantry; therefore, their protest reflected the accumulation of at least a decade of both failed economic policies, which widened the gap between rich and poor, and the impact of the dire four years of drought that affected Syria (Schwahn, 2015). When the protests erupted in Dar’a, Damascus, and other cities and towns, protesters were aware of the regime’s discourse. Consequently, they predicted the ways through which the regime would attempt to distort their movement and accuse them of being fundamentalist sectarian and radical Islamists. Indeed, after the very first week of the uprising (March 18, 2011), Buthaina Sha’aban, President al-Assad’s senior political advisor, told *BBC Arabic* on March 26, 2011, that there is “a plan to stir up
sectarian strife inside Syria.” However, there was no evidence that sectarian conflict existed back then (Shamyatru, 2011, 4:31-4:35). Sha’aban further accused the Muslim Brotherhood of being behind this plan to target Syria’s position and its attitude. In the BBC interview, she stated that:

this is how the Muslim Brotherhood began [the sectarian strife] in 1979 in Latakia. They killed a Sunni sheikh [religious cleric]….And I am sorry to say these words [referring to sects], we do not use these words in Syria….And [they] killed an Alawite sheikh and incited the [sectarian] strife amid the Sunni….we in Syria… the coexistence, the conviviality is our identity and we will defeat this crisis.” (Shamyatru, 2011, 7:05-7:30)

Thus, during the peaceful phase of the Syrian Uprising, “the movement has explicitly rejected sectarianism, and developed a discourse that interpellates ‘Syrians’ of all backgrounds and religious affiliation” (Ismail, 2011, p. 543).

Consequently, the protesters raised resistance slogans such as “the Syrian people are one”; “the Syrian people will not be humiliated”; “Not Sunni and not Alawi, we want freedom” (Ismail, 2011, p. 543). These slogans were used by the protesters as a rhetorical strategy to counter the regime’s discourse that accused them of executing sectarian plans. At the same time, protestors were using these slogans to promote the unity of the Syrian national identity. However, as Dahi and Munif (2012) warn, the “internalization of the sectarian discourse and the repression has been deeply ingrained into the minds of many Syrians” (p. 330). After decades of personalistic-authoritarian rule during which the al-Assad's regime, in order to homogenize the political-social spheres, not only
systematically manipulated and oppressed the Syrian opposition--including leftists and communists--but also impeded the emergence and sustainability of independent civil and social organizations. As a result, many Syrians share the belief that there is an absence of political alternatives to the al-Assad regime.

In response to the regime’s violence, the dynamics of sectarianism were set in motion at the mass-level and were manipulated at the local-level by the new local elite who sought to produce a sense of “groupism” and a re-imagining of a new “homogenous community.” Simultaneously, the Syrian opposition on the elite-level (mostly in exile) tended to downplay the sectarian dilemma because they feared the loss of legitimacy. Thus, beginning in 2012, when the brutal sectarian violence erupted on a large-scale, the majority of the political opposition organizations, except the NCB, chose to ignore such collective violence, or to explicitly support such violence, or to produce vague statements accusing the Syrian regime and the Shabbiha, (loosely translated as "ghosts") which are groups of pro-regime armed militias.

For instance, on August 4, 2013, three months after the massacres of Bayda and Baniyas that were committed by pro-regime paramilitary groups on May 2, 2013, several different armed opposition groups, including FSA-affiliated groups, launched a large scale offensive against 10 Alawite villages in the Latakia countryside. During the “Battle of the Descendants of Aisha Mother of Believers,” as the armed opposition called the operation, at least 190 civilians were killed, including 57 women, 18 children, and 14 elderly men. The armed opposition groups were comprised of at least 20 groups, including foreign Jihadist (Muhajereen), the Islamic State in Iraq and Levant (ISIS),
Jabhat al-Nusra, Ahrar al-Sham, Sheikh Qahtan Battalion, Hassan al-Azhari Battalion, Suqour al-Izz, and Sham al-Islam. The opposition fighters kidnapped over 200 civilians, the vast majority of whom were women and children (HRW, 2013, pp. 1-2, 77). Until the time of writing this thesis (July, 2015), they remain hostages. Human Rights Watch was able to identify several individuals in Gulf countries, such as Sheikhs Hajjej al-Ajami and Shafi al-Ajami, who are both prominent Kuwaiti donors and actively fundraised for the operation (HRW, 2013, P. 87). Sheikh Hajjej al-Ajami even accompanied the armed groups during the offensive in Latakia (Figure 15).
Figure 15. Screenshot from video published on May 19, 2013. The Arabic text reads “the Popular Committee's campaign to Support the Syrian Revolution”, “Rescue the [Syrian] Coast.” This is followed by Sheikh Hajjej al-Ajami’s contact information and his picture to the right (alhayahalshabyh YouTube channel). \(^\text{18}\)

In fact, the very name the “Battle of the Descendants of Aisha Mother of Believers,” has a sectarian-based connotation as it refers to the animosity between A’ishah bint Abi Bakr, the third and youngest wife of Prophet Muhammad, and his cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first imam for the Shi’a and the fourth and final of the Rashidun Caliphate. This symbolic title reveals a sectarian incentive behind the operation since it provoked the Sunni

\(^\text{18}\) This Video was uploaded by alhayahalshabyh YouTube channel to document “the visit of the Popular Committee to Support the Syrian Revolution” and to promote potential fundraisers in the Gulf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=72juxQNMt7k
grievances against the Shi’a, including the Alawites as an offshoot of the Shi’a, and revived grievances related to the myth of the “Battle of the Camel” between Ali and A’ishah near Basra (Iraq) in 656 AD. Syrian activists and political entrepreneurs, however, disguised the sectarian-based offensive by calling this military offensive, the “Operation to Liberate the Coast.” Stuart J. Kaufman (2001) emphasizes the importance of symbolic politics and argues that in cases of political violence and when the conditions are favorable, that cultural, religious, and/or nationalistic symbols, myths, grievances, biases, and prejudices become instrumental tools for political entrepreneurs to mobilize people along cultural cleavages. Hence, the symbolic connotation embedded within the very name, “Battle of the Descendants of Aisha Mother of Believers,” during the offensive against the Alawite villages cannot be isolated from the subsequent physical violence. People, according to Kaufman, in times of conflict respond to ethnic or sectarian symbols and mobilize for war “only if a widely known and accepted ethnic [or sectarian] myth-symbol complex justifies hostility to another group” (p. 30). Harith al-Qarawee tackles similar dynamics of sectarinization in Iraq after the toppling of Saddam and the emergence of al-Qaeda, particularly under the leadership of Abu Mus’ab al-Zarqawi (1966-2006). According to al-Qarawee (2013) “Physical violence is usually accompanied and incited by symbolic violence that aims at degrading and dehumanizing the ‘other’. Brutality on the ground is backed, justified and even celebrated in rhetoric produced by clerics and sectarian media” (p. 7). Thus, al-Qarawee accentuates that “[t]he new Islamism is not a return to the past; it is the return of the past to serve the present’s conditions” (p. 5).
The re-politicization of Islam, however, began in the aftermath of the Six-Day War (1967), which was a humiliating defeat for the Arab states, and pan-Arabism in general, by Israel (Tibi, 1997, p. 219). Moreover, this transformation was further triggered by the rivalry among Islamist groups who competed for legitimacy. According to Monica Duffy Toft (2007), “religious outbidding” is utilized by political elites to increase their legitimacy and to enhance their religious credentials as well as to mobilize people across cultural frontlines. In this vein, one can understand the “revolutionary outbidding” by the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF/Etilaf), when they released an official press release (in Arabic and English) that explicitly praised and supported the offensive in Latakia. In this press release, the NCSROF applauded the Islamist offensive, which they called a “liberation,” and they praised the several armed opposition groups, whom they identified as the “Free Syrian Army fighters” and “their fellow fighters,” which includes ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda-official branch in Syria (Figure 16).\footnote{This press release is available on the official website of the Etilaf (NCSROF): http://en.etilaf.org/press/fsa-advances-in-syrian-coast.html}
Such groupist language in the political discourse of the Turkish/Gulf-backed Syrian opposition and the ways through which they framed and coded the involvement of Jihadist groups in other similar offensives, which targeted minority-areas, reflect what Brubaker called the reification as a social process. This social process is “central to the practice of politicized ethnicity” as well as, in the case of Syria and Iraq, of politicized sectarian identity (Brubaker, 2004, p. 10). Reifying groups is what ethnopolitical and
sectarian entrepreneurs are practicing within the context of civil wars because these entrepreneurs live "off" as well as "for" ethnicity and sectarianism. Brubaker notes, When they are successful, the political fiction of the unified group can be momentarily yet powerfully realized in practice. As analysts, we should certainly try to account for the ways in which-and conditions under which-this practice of reification, this powerful crystallization of group feeling, can work. But we should avoid unintentionally doubling or reinforcing the reification of ethnic groups in ethnopolitical practice with a reification of such groups in social analysis. (2004, p. 10)

In the context of the Syria Uprising and with regard to the “sectarian dilemma,” my interviews with Syrian activists are relevant given the fact that they all did participate in the social movements in Syria and fled to Washington DC in the aftermath of the exacerbating violence. I asked my 15 interviewees, “Who is responsible for promoting the sectarian discourse?” They all accused the regime by referring to Buthaina Sha’aban’s interview with BBC as an ominous sign. Then I followed up with a question, “The regime, alone?” The answers varied. Some of them (Muhammad, Qaissar, Maya, Azad, Reem, Ghassan) blamed both sides, particularly the regime and the MB and contended that sectarianism is “being constructed” as a reality. Thus, from their perspective, sectarianism has become an instrumental weapon to call more Jihadists to fight against “the Alawites and the Shi’a.” According to Maya (27, Syrian activist, Deir ez-Zor), who was very active in the anti-regime protests and currently operates two elementary schools on the periphery of Deir ez-Zor, which is under the control of ISIS,
The regime sported the old game [referring to the troubled period of 1976-1982] with the Muslim Brotherhood who joyfully responded to this call and came back this time with the support of the Gulf and Turkey. Sectarianism is a “reality” now…It is a profitable investment for the competing parties as well as for regional powers to sustain and consolidate their power. It was already a tested prescription in Iraq with enduring results. Only civilians are paying the highest price for our aborted dream in a democratic Syria.

Other participants (Suleiman, Salma) were more optimistic about the future. Salma (26, a female Syrian humanitarian activist and architect, Damascus) participated in several early protests in the Syrian capital and shared her experience that refutes the binary narrative. Salma states:

Let me tell you something, I am from Damascus and my family is Sunni, yet half of my family and my relatives are Muslim and still support Bashar. Meanwhile, many of my friends [who] are Christians and Alawites protested with me in many demonstrations in Damascus against the regime. Honestly, from my personal experience, the Sunnis, whom I know as pro-al-Assad, outnumbered the Christians and Alawites, who supported al-Assad. Again, this is my personal experience in the revolution.

Suleiman (24, political activist and research associate at the SNC and the NCSROF, Damascus) describes a different binary conflict than that of the Alawites vs. Sunni. He maintains that the current sectarian tension is ephemeral and the real sectarian cleavage is Sunni-Shi’a rather than Sunni-Alawites:
The current sectarian cleavage between Syrians is temporary and conditioned by the political context of the revolution. This social rupture is reconcilable when the conflict ebbs because it is a political struggle not a religious one. However, I exclude the Shi’a from any future reconciliation with the Sunni. The Sunni-Alawite conflict is related to the revolution, whereas the Sunni-Shi’a conflict preceded it. It is a protracted conflict stemming from a doctrine on the one hand, and, on the other hand, from the anti-Shi’a resentment among Sunni because of the “Shi’atization” (tashayyu‘) campaigns in the Sunni areas before the revolution. You might find many Alawites against the regime who support the revolution. But I do not think there is a single Shi’a who supports the revolution. However, this is not my personal opinion. I am telling you how ordinary people in the peripheral areas think. I noticed such resentment in Idlib, Homs, and Damascus.

When I asked my interviewees about how they now perceive their Syrian national identity, it was striking that all of them insisted, in varied but very similar ways of expression, that they still have deep attachment to the country. Most responses to my question resemble Azad’s response: “We don’t have national identity.” Others responded: “What do you mean? I never felt I am Syrian before the revolution,” as Suleiman and Salma did. All 15 interviewees did express a strong sense of state-level identity (pan-Syrianism), which challenges the claims that “artificial states” engender artificial and ephemeral national identities. Nevertheless, all 15 interviewees rejected sub-national identities (ethnic, sectarian, tribal) as well as supra-identities (Islamism, Pan-Arabism).
None of my interviewees demonstrated any support for “non-Syrian” Islamists. However, some interviewees reflected similar views to how Muhammad analyzed the impulses of Jihadists to join the fighting against the Syrian regime in Syria. Muhammad blamed the regime and, to a lesser extent, the Muslim Brotherhood and the Arab Gulf monarchies for giving the Islamists “legitimate excuses to help their putative Muslims brothers who are being slaughtered by the Shi’a and Alawites”. In this context, social media and Arab-satellite media provided the necessary platform to construct and shape the narrative of the Syrian Uprising as a sectarian conflict depicted as simply between Sunni vs. Shi’a and Sunni vs. Alawites. Such virtual sectarianization was already set in motion in Iraq following the emergence of al-Qaeda.

The Virtual Sectarization of the Syrian Uprising: “The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” as a Case Study

The regime's violent response to the massive protests created a momentum for political and sectarian entrepreneurs who took advantage of the situation and exploited sectarian and symbolic politics to reinforce the social divisions among Syrians by utilizing preexisting hostile myths, such as the cliché of the 1400-year-old conflict between Sunni and Shi’a. In this section, I outline how political and sectarian entrepreneurs sought to construct a sense of groupness among the Sunni by utilizing social media. Thus, I analyze the role of “The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” Facebook page, or “SRABA2011,” as a case study to tackle how this page framed the Syrian Uprising as a “Sunni Revolution” against an “Alawite/Shi’a regime,” and by
promoting the myth of domination of the Sunni by the Shi’a and the Syrian minorities in Syria.

During the early phase of the Arab Spring, social media became an instrumental tool for activists to mobilize people and to challenge the official narrative of the events that was propagated by state-controlled T.V channels. Similarly, several Syrian online activists attempted to mimic the online strategies and methods used by other activists during the Tunisian and Egyptian revolutions. Thus, they adopted the exact same slogan “*The people want to topple the regime/ al-Sha’ab Youreed Isqat al-Nizam*” and utilized social media (mainly Facebook and YouTube in the Syrian case) as effective means 1) to organize protests against the regime, 2) to document the numbers and names of victims and casualties, and 3) given the limited access available for professional journalists on the ground, to provide mainstream media with video and visual content (Cottle, 2011; Howard & Hussain, 2013; Lynch, Freelon & Aday, 2014; Youmans and York, 2012, Ziter, 2013). Concurrently, social media was utilized by the authoritarian regime to both track and entrap activists. Additionally, social media served to market the regime’s narratives about the threats of Islamists and al-Qaeda by depicting the social movements as conspiracies from the very beginning.

Following the first demonstration in Souq al-Hamidiyeh, Damascus on March 15, 2011, a Facebook page dubbed, “*The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011*” or “SRABA2011,” uploaded the video of this protest on YouTube, which was then broadcast on international mainstream media. According to the description on the SRABA2011 Facebook page and also on its official website, this page was founded by
Syrian activists on January 18, 2011 to end the authoritarian role of al-Assad. The SRABA2011 claims that the demonstrations of March 15, 2011 and the day after (March, 16) occurred in response to its call and that “a number of this page activists participated in that demonstration, and several youth were arrested during that day, but it was the spark of the beginning of the Syrian Revolution”\(^\text{20}\) (Thesyriannetwork, 2015, para. 7). This claim exaggerates the role played by this Facebook page and represents the early protests as if they were elite-led. It is worth mentioning that several Facebook pages had previously attempted to mobilize people against the Syrian regime shortly after the outset of the Arab Spring. Most significantly, on February 4 and 5, 2011, several earlier Facebook pages called Syrians to protest under a slogan the “Day of Rage,” that emulated a similar protest slogan used both in Egypt and Yemen, but these calls were met with an unnoticed response from the people (Figure 17). The failure of these initial calls to mobilize people could be attributed to multiple reasons. Of these reasons, the most significant are: the fear of detention by the furious Syrian security apparatus, the ambiguity of the identities of those who were administrating Anti- al-Assad Facebook pages, the influence of the collective memory of the bloody years of 1976-1982, and the mere fact that many Syrians lacked access to the Internet. ADSL service has been available in Syria since 2003; however, it was limited to some locations concentrated in major cities. Moreover, during 2010 only 17.7% of the Syrian population had access to the Internet. The percentage slightly, but insignificantly, increased in 2012 to reach 22.5%, but it does not reveal the political biases or inclination of the Internet users. In

\(^{20}\) http://www.thesyriannetwork.net/aboutus/
other words, whether they were pro-regime or pro-opposition (Figure 18) (Internet World Stats. 2013).

Figure 17. A slogan posted on a Facebook page called “Towards a Social Movement in Syria- the Day of Rage, February 5, 2011”. \(^{21}\) The Arabic text reads “Together for a Day of Rage in Syria to end the state of emergency and corruption in Syria.”

\(^{21}\)https://www.facebook.com/syriarageday25.2.2011/photos/a.175028979207785.35841.175027102541306/175742752469741/?type=1&theater
Figure 18. Internet Growth and Population Statistics in Syria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>Users</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>% Pop.</th>
<th>Usage Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>30,000</td>
<td>17,868,100</td>
<td>0.2 %</td>
<td>ITU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002</td>
<td>220,000</td>
<td>18,586,743</td>
<td>1.2 %</td>
<td>ITU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>800,000</td>
<td>19,046,520</td>
<td>4.2 %</td>
<td>ITU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>3,565,000</td>
<td>21,762,978</td>
<td>16.4 %</td>
<td>ITU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>3,935,000</td>
<td>22,198,110</td>
<td>17.7 %</td>
<td>ITU</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2012</td>
<td>5,069,418</td>
<td>22,530,746</td>
<td>22.5 %</td>
<td>IWS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In point of fact, two of my interviews (Salma and Suleiman) did participate in the first protest in Souq al-Hamidiyeh, Damascus on March 15, 2011; however, they both rejected the SRABA2011’s claims. Salma states that

I never followed or liked the SRABA2011…. I heard that there was fighting over the process of naming the Fridays, but honestly I did not care. Why is it so important? Ok…I understand that [by naming the Friday] you can send a specific message. But people did not protested because of that!

Similar to Salma, Suleiman criticizes the whole idea of an elite-led protest on March 15, 2011:

I was regularly protesting and organizing demonstrations in Damascus…. I--along with others, of course--organized the famous protest in al-Midan [a historical district in Damascus] during which between 5000-6000 protesters participated. But I do not even recall what the name of these Fridays was! In my opinion, the dispute over Friday’s slogans was limited to the Facebook forum. You should know that all the administrators were operating outside Syria…. No one--I mean

http://www.internetworldstats.com/me/sy.htm
an activist--inside Syria back then had the time to be a full-time administrator. Moreover, these administrators were operating outside the country for obvious security reasons.

Ghassan (24, Syrian-Palestinian activist, al-Yarmouk Camp) was a member of the LCC as a representative of the al-Yarmouk Camp on 2011. He confirms that: “the SRABA2011 did call for the protest because no one dared to post on Facebook such a call. However, I assure you they did not organize the protest.” Indeed, the SRABA2011 and other platforms on social media did not gain their momentum before the outbreak of the protests in Dar’a on March 18, 2011, during which the people demanded the release of their children under the slogan of “Friday of Dignity/ Juma’at Al-Karama.” The protest in Dar’a was significant for social media in general because, during this protest, the first “martyrs” of the uprising were killed and subsequently the content of the SRABA2011 became one of the main sources for many mainstream media and satellite news channels. Leading news outlets such as Al-Jazeera, CNN, and BBC rebroadcast thousands of smuggled video clips and vivid images, in place of professional footage, that documented human rights abuses, which were then captured and uploaded on YouTube by citizen journalists. This interaction between social media and mainstream media aided activists to market their narratives and to bypass the state-controlled media as well as to reach millions of viewers.

Since 2011 the authoritarian regime imposed a complete media blackout, deported foreign journalists who were in the country, and refused to grant visas to foreign journalists and reporters. Consequently, mainstream media became increasingly reliant
on social media and activist-generated online content, which had its benefit but also proved later to be dangerous (Cottle, 2011; Freedom House, 2012; Lynch, Freelon & Aday, 2014). The absence of foreign correspondents on the ground obliged news agencies to host eyewitnesses and citizen journalists, which gave validity to such resources as well as social media and sometime without verifying the news. Lynch, Freelon and Aday (2014) find that the flows of information and activist-produced content became “carefully curated by networks of activists and designed to craft particular narratives” (p. 5). In this vein, we can understand the role of “The Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011,” or the SRABA2011, to shape and craft particular narratives about the conflict in Syria. During the Syrian Uprising, the SRABA2011 Facebook page, alongside other anti-regime pages such as Ugarit News and Sham News, have played a crucial role by literally promoting and constructing the political discourse of the opposition. However, one should not exaggerate the role of these virtual channels during the early phase of the uprising because they would not have had gained their influence without the military escalation and disproportionate violence by the Syrian regime. For instance, as early as of January 2011, the SRABA2011 was consistently pushing for the adoption of the radical Tunisian and Egyptian slogan “The people want to topple the regime,” but this slogan was not adopted by Syrian protesters on a large scale before May 2011 (Moustafa, 2014).

According to Social Bakers, by December 2013, the SRABA2011 had over 863,000 members inside and outside Syria (Social Bakers, 2013). Although the SRABA2011 is formally independent, the Muslim Brotherhood had an influential role
behind the scenes. In fact, the network that launched this page included several activists affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood in diaspora and in exile, particularly the then official spokesman for and administrator of the SRABA2011, the Sweden-based activist Fida’ ad-Din Tariif as-Sayyid ‘Isa. According to Joshua Landis (2011) who exchanged emails with an unidentified source regarding the background of the SRABA2011’s administrator, as-Sayyid spoke to London-based Syrian opposition satellite Barada TV on February 5, 2011, and he “called upon the Syrian people to demonstrate in the streets using [Jama’atna/our group] (which is normally used to imply the Muslim Brotherhood)” (Landis, 2011).

From the beginning of the Syrian Uprising onwards, this page has been among the most widely read anti-regime websites; moreover, it was responsible for selecting the names and slogans for Friday demonstrations, among which were many controversial slogans (Lund, 2013). With the escalating violence and the increasing funds from powerful/sectarian actors in the Gulf to undermine the solid alliance between Iran, Syria and Hezbollah, the SRABA2011 was utilized by sectarian entrepreneurs as an effective strategy for group-making. Thus, as I will subsequently demonstrate, the SRABA2011 started to emphasize its Islamist/Sunni identity at the expense of the secular component of the opposition and present itself as the representative of the moderate Islamic opposition who fight against the hegemonic ambitions of the Shi’a.
Changing Flags

Most importantly, following the “success” of the “Libyan Revolution” on August 21, 2011, the SRABA2011 played a leading role in emphasizing the divisions among Syrians by promoting the adoption of a different flag to represent the uprising, which signified the symbolic influence of the “Libyan Path” (Figure 12) (Fares, 2014, p. 149). Thus, on October 30, 2011, the SRABA2011 posted the following question: “Do you support the use of the Independence Flag as the symbol of the Syrian Revolution?,” and it called upon Syrian activists to vote for the adoption of the new flag in what it termed “Wednesday of the Independent Flag” (November 2, 2011) (Figure 19 and 20). However, similar to the serious flaws that were exposed in the previously discussed polls, it is hard to verify whether the voters were all Syrians or Arabs. The new flag now known as the “Flag of the Revolution”, or known among the activists as the “Green Flag,” had previously been Syria’s official flag during the period 1932-1958 and 1961-1963. Such a symbolic and institutional adoption within the context of the Syrian Uprising also entails an identification of “internal significant others,” who since then became not only the pro-regime groups or individuals but also other organizations among the opposition, such as the NCB the BSS, as well as individuals (Triandafyllidou, 1998).
Figure 19. The SRABA2011’s polling question “Do you support the use of the Independence Flag as the symbol of the Syrian Revolution?” (SRABA2011, October 30, 2011)

Figure 20. Poster of “Wednesday of the Independent Flag” was posted by the SRABA2011 on November 2, 2011.

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23 https://www.facebook.com/questions/10150944573930727/?qa_ref=pt
Soon after this poll, the new-old flag or the “Green Flag” was adopted by the FSA and most organizations among the opposition, and this “Green Flag” gradually replaced the current official Syrian flag, unofficially known as the “Red Flag.” This current official flag of the Syrian Arab Republic represents the short-lived United Arab Republic (UAR) 1958-1961, and it was re-adopted on April, 3, 1980 by the late President Hafiz al-Assad to emphasize his adherence to pan-Arabism (Figure 21). Reem (22, Freelancer and photographer, Jableh/Latakia) recalls the divisive impact of the adoption of the “Green Flag”:

Whenever I see the “Green Flag” waved by Syrian activists, I try to avoid them because I feel that I am a stranger…. For me this flag represents the fragmentation of the Syrian society... I have nothing in common with them… I had very bad encounters with Syrians in the United State…. The first question was frequently “Where are you from?” To categorize me. And when they know that I am from Latakia, they assume that I am pro- al-Assad…. They do not ask me follow up questions. Because they do not care about my personal opinions but rather about my background.

Changing the flag, as a national symbol and a crucial part of the national identity, was only a first step. This fundamental symbolic transformation soon encouraged more radical Islamist organizations and armed Salafist groups, including FSA-affiliated groups, to not only take down the “Green Flag” and replace it with al-Qaeda or Salafist flags in several opposition-held areas but also to threaten, kidnap, torture and even execute the flag bearers.
Aspiring to increase the level of groupness among the opposition and to promote its Islamist discourse, the administrators of the SRABA2011 utilized another mechanism: promoting slogans of the weekly Friday demonstrations. During the relatively peaceful stage of the uprising, the administrators of the SRABA2011 promoted and disseminated unifying slogans that would address the whole Syrian society. When he was a member of the LCC, Ghassan (24, Syrian-Palestinian activist, al-Yarmouk Camp) participated in the process of proposing and selecting Friday’s slogans that would be posted on the SRABA2011,

All the nationalist, secular and unifying slogans were promoted by the LCC…. Each week [during the peaceful phase] they were like one black sheep [i.e. unifying national slogans] among a flock of white sheep [i.e. explicit Islamist slogans]. Most of the Islamist and controversial slogans won most of the time and later became dominant…. The majority of these slogans were proposed by the Syrian Revolution General Commission (SRGC) and the SRABA2011 itself. The SRGC and the SRABA2011 hated the slogans proposed by the LCC. The SRGC had a huge fund [millions of dollars] from Qatar. They could afford to spend lots of money to promote their agenda!…. There is a tight connection between the SRGC and the SRABA2011.

Over the last four years, the administrators developed a process to choose these slogans by posting a poll and calling on Syrians to choose among different slogans (Atassi, & Wikstrom, 2012). Between March 18 and June 17, 2011, with the exception of the sub-national slogan “Friday of the Tribes” on June 11, Friday’s slogans reflected the Syrian national identity by representing all factions of the Syrian society. For instance, on April 22, 2011, the slogan was the “Great Friday/al-Juma'at al-Adheema”, which in Syria coincided with the Christians’ Good Friday, the commemoration of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and his death at Calvary. On May 20, 2011, the slogan was “Azadi”, the Kurdish synonym for freedom. June 17, 2011, was the “Friday of Sheikh Saleh al Ali”, the prominent Alawite notable who fought the French Mandate and resisted the partitioning of Syria. The second controversial slogan, after “Friday of Tribes/Juma'at al-'Ashayer,” was on July 22, 2011, when the administrators of the SRABA2011
tolerated a manipulation during the aforementioned poll and the subsequent voting that promoted the “Friday of Khalid Ibn al Walid’s Grandsons” over the option of “Friday of the National Union”. Several secular participants complained that the voting was rigged through the use of fake accounts and pages. Furthermore, Liberal, Leftist and secular activists disputed the supporters of that choice not only because the SRABA2011 manipulated the process by counting fake accounts votes and posting graphic video and fomenting grievances among the Sunni during that day to influence their choices, but also because of the context of the events during that entire week. According to the Islamic tradition, Khalid Ibn al Walid was one of the companions of Prophet Muhammad, and he was buried in the Syrian city of Homs. From the perspective of the Shi’a, Khalid did not support the cause of Imam Ali, the first Imam of the Shi’a, and supported instead Abu Bakr as the First Rashidun Caliphate. Therefore by promoting the slogan of “Friday of Khalid Ibn al Walid’s Grandsons,” the SRABA2011 revived myth-based grievances and provoked the Shi’a, the Alawites and the Isma’ilis as well. Moreover, during that week, Homs, where Khalid was buried, had witnessed sectarian strife between the Sunni and the Alawites that ignited after mutual sectarian-based killing between the residences of al-Zahraa neighborhood (Alawites) and al-Khaldiya neighborhood (Sunni) (BBC, Arabic, 2011, para. 6). The participants in this poll voted 50.6% voted for the “Friday of Khalid Ibn al Walid’s Grandsons” and 43.3% voted for “Friday of the National Union” whereas the rest 6.1% voted for six other slogans. The SRABA2011 tried to solve the problem by merging the two slogans into one “Friday of Khalid Ibn al Walid’s Grandsons for the National Union.” However, the majority of that Friday’s protesters held banners with the
slogan of “Friday of Khalid Ibn al Walid’s Grandsons,” and the whole voting process itself affected the credibility of the SRABA2011 among the secular opposition and minorities. The dispute among the opposition over the Friday’s slogans reflects the social conflict over interpretation and narrative encoding which Donald Horowitz (1991) called the “metaconflict”. According to Horowitz “[t]here is the conflict itself, and there is the metaconflict—the conflict over the nature of the conflict,” which is a very relevant concept in cases of intra-group conflicts and civil wars (p. 2).

On January 27, 2012, the SRABA2011 stepped forward to reveal its Islamist bias over national slogans when they suggested “Friday of Prior the Declaration of Jihad/ Juma’at ma qabl I’lan al-Jihad” versus the “Civil State/al-Dawla al-Madaniya,” which was included in the options after the pressure of secular opposition but lost the poll. However, the explicit condemnation of this controversial choice by liberals and secular activists, including the LCC, obliged the SRABA2011 to step back and change the slogan from “Friday of Prior the Declaration of Jihad” to the “Friday of Self-Defense/ Juma’at al-Difa’ ‘an al-Nafs”, which implicitly meant no actual change (Al-Jazeera, January 27, 2012, para.11). By December 2012, the SRABA2011 completely deviated from the Syrian-centric and national-centric perspective and adhered explicitly to Islamist characteristics by taking advantage of both the escalation of sectarian tension on the one hand, and the weakness of liberal and secular groups represented in the LCC, on the other hand. Accordingly, the administrators of the SRABA2011 explicitly supported Jabhat al Nusra, the al-Qaeda-official branch in Syria, and refused the decision of the United States to blacklist Jabhat al Nusra as a terrorist group. On December 14, 2012, Syrians protested
against the US move, under the slogan of “There Is No Terrorism in Syria Except of Assad’s Regime / la Irhab fi Souriya illa Irhab Nizam al-Assad” which was promoted in a sophisticated video (Figure 22).

Figure 22. Screenshot from video published on December 12, 2012 to promote the Friday slogan “There Is No Terrorism in Syria Except of Assad’s Regime.”

In a similar process of mobilizing social movements during the Friday of the “Syrian Council Represents Me,” grass roots organizations, such as the Supreme Council for the

26 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zGUIdg2Cu8M
Leadership of the Syrian Revolution (SCLSR), organized protests in solidarity with Jabhat al-Nusra and against both al-Assad and Obama\textsuperscript{27} (Figure 23).

\textit{Figure 23.} Screenshot from video of Ma’arab’s protest in Dara’a on December 14, 2012. An activist holds a paper that reads in Arabic the Friday’s slogan “There Is No Terrorism in Syria Except of al Assad’s Regime,” and the name of the organizers, Supreme Council for the Leadership of the Syrian Revolution (SCLSR) at the top.

From December 2012 onwards, the discourse of the SRABA2011 targeted the Islamist/ Sunni audience all around the world to confront what they perceived as the threat of the “Iranians”, “Shi’a”, and “minority” who plotted to exterminate Syria's Sunni majority. Such a provocative discourse infused fear not only among minorities but also

\textsuperscript{27} A collection of videos uploaded during the protest of “There is No Terrorism in Syria Except of al-Assad’s Regime” is available on the following link: http://www.uruknet.info/?p=93522
among Sunni secularists (Salamandra, 2013). In his analysis of the process of sectarinization (2004-2007) in Iraq, Harith al-Qarawee (2012) found that Islamists exploited similar strategies by manipulating the sense of victimization among the Sunni minority in Iraq accompanied by an increasing number of Islamist websites and media outlets that “defend the cause of the Iraqis Sunni” (Note 425, p. 355). Al-Qarawee argued that “Sunni identity…was politicized not only as a communal collectivity, but as a transnational one”; therefore, “[t]he transnational Sunni solidarity was a mean reason why the conflict started to take the character of a sectarian clash” (p. 166).

Figure 24, submitted to the SRABA2011’s Facebook Page on April 4, 2013, provides an example of this perception and also reflects the “interrelation of images and written texts” (Rose, 2012, p. 16).

![Figure 24](image)

In the background, we can see lines of men turning their backs to the audience while they are praying during the funeral of Syrian “martyrs”. On the left, the figure depicts a veiled woman who holds her terrified child with her left hand and covers her face with her right hand. Unlike the mother, the child turns toward the audience and stares with a deep and emotional look that combines fear and begging. On the one hand,
the image depicts a contradiction between the expression of the child and his/her mother. On the other hand, the image is accompanied with the text “Friday of Majority Protection”, which reflects what Stuart Hall (1980) calls “a dominant cultural order” (p.57). This “image/text” provokes a “pattern of ‘preferred readings’; and these both have the institutional/political/ideological order imprinted in them and have themselves become institutionalized” (Hall, 1980, p.57). The victimized woman in this figure symbolizes the “majority” in Syria, the Sunnis. She is not merely a woman, but also a mother. The ideology of Islamists, such as al Qaeda, does not recognize political or modern borders; it defines Muslims as a nation by using the Arabic word “Umma”, which in Arabic derived from Umm (mother). According to scholar Bassan Tibi (1997), since the 1970s, the universal concept of the Islamic Umma (a religiously cohesive and universal community) have been revived by contemporary political Islamists as an ideological instrument to confront the secular pan-Arabism (pp. 206, 220, 228).

In the Arab and Muslim World, a woman, especially a mother or daughter, represents honor (Sharaf). Consequently, this representation provokes the morals of Muslim men, especially young men, who would be ready to be recruited with others in order to “recover” his “honor” even if it costs him his life. In fact, this example reflects a crucial element of the Jihadist discourse as a transnational movement. Furthermore, by promoting the slogan “Friday of Majority Protection,” which was the name of the polled slogan on April 4, 2013, the SRABA2011 aimed to lobby and persuade the Muslim audience around the world to support the Syrian Uprising against the “rule of minorities” by implementing this text.
As part of the proxy war in Syria, sectarian entrepreneurs who still run the SRABA2011 Facebook page depicted the intervention of Hezbollah and Iran in the Syrian Civil War since 2012 as an “Iranian Conspiracy against al-Umma” (figure 25), but they ignored the intervention of al-Qaeda and other transnational Jihadist organizations since they were perceived as their coreligionists.

Figure 25, was designed to accompany the polled slogan on June 14, 2013: “The Safavid Project: A Threat to the Umma”. This figure itself has its own agency (Rose, 2012); both the text and image mirror the promotion of sectarian discourse by sectarian elites in the diaspora, mainly in the Gulf, who aimed to attract Islamists to join the “Jihad/Holy War”. On the left side, we can see the image of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Iranian Supreme Leader, who is looking slyly to the right where we see a group of fighters with arms. On his forehead, instead of depicting the symbol of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Shi’a militia, the name is changed to “Hezb al-Shaytan”, which means in Arabic “The Party of Devil”. The reference to Hezbollah is also reflected in the exact colors of the background.
(green/yellow), which are similar to that of Hezbollah’s flag (Figure 26). The text represents the name of the polled slogan on June 14, 2013: "The Safavid project: A Threat to the Umma." This text also mirrors the linguistic relation between “Umm/Mother” and “Umma/Nation”. Moreover, by choosing “The Safavid Project” in the text, the SRABA2011 explicitly refers to the Ottoman–Safavid War of 1623–1638, which makes the connotation of this slogan anachronistic, as the Safavid Empire itself met its demise in 1722.28

These visual examples reveal how the SRABA2011 aimed to lobby and persuade the broad Muslim audience around the world to support the “Syrian Revolution” against the “rule of minorities” by implementing religious symbols, citing holy verses from the Quran and Hadith, and posting tragic photos and videos of women and children to ignite

a religious motivation within their youth audience. This discursive information is consistent with the analysis of the available information about the SRABA2011, which shows that the average age of visitors is between 25 and 34 years old and al Riyadh in Saudi Arabia is the city where the most people are talking about this page (Figure 27).

Additional analysis of the distribution of the SRABA2011 fans, conducted by *Social Bakers*, revealed that only 16.0% of the members are in Syria, whereas the percentage in Egypt was 17.7%, in Saudi Arabia 11.5%, in Tunisia 6.3% and in Jordan 6% (Figure 28).

*Figure 27. The analysis of the SRABA2011.*

(Social Bakers December 12, 2013)
Simultaneously, during the same exact date of the polled slogan “The Safavid project: a Threat to the Umma” on June 14, 2013, Al-Jazeera Arabic conducted another provocative poll that reinforced the binary narrative of the Syrian conflict by asking a superficial question yet a fomenting one (Figure 29):

“Who is responsible for transforming the Syrian Revolution into Shi’a-Sunni conflict?”

The answer was simply:

1) Shi’a

2) Sunni
Figure 29. Themes and slogans promoted by SRAB2011 were disseminated by mainstream media, such as Al-Jazeera.

Similar to the process of virtual sectarinization in Iraq during which “Arab media such as Al-Jazeera channel provided these groups [sectarian groups] with platforms to communicate their messages and attracted more fighters” (Al-Qarawee, 2012, p. 166), Al-Jazeera and other Gulf-based channels, such as Al-Arabiya, continue to endorse and promote the politicization of cultural difference in the Middle East, which, consequently leads to the re-construction of sectarian perceptions at the expense of national identity.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

In this thesis research, to examine the process of sectarinization that challenged the perception of the “weak” Syrian national identity within the context of the Syrian-Uprising-Cum-Civil-War, I investigated the dynamics of sectarinization as well as how the sectarian narrative was constructed. Although sectarianism in Syria became an important dynamic, sectarinization should be understood and studied as political, cultural, and psychological processes. Nevertheless, before the uprising, its manifestation in the socio-political arenas was constrained legally and socially, partly thanks to the power of Arab nationalism in post-independent Syria. The visibility of sectarian identities, as a form of collective identity, and the politicization of cultural affiliations were conditioned by the transformation of political and social spheres following the Syrian Uprising, which gave momentum to the instrumentalization of such affiliations to serve as an ideological motive and a source of political legitimacy. To understand what forces contributed to the transformation of power relations and the process of sectarian reconfiguration as well as the production of extreme violence in Syria following the “Arab Spring”, as a pivotal event, I consider a hybrid approach. This hybrid approach combines critical constructivism, instrumentalism, and Symbolic politics as a theoretical framework to analyze the role of social media and mainstream media in promoting sectarian groupness.

In this research, I identified and articulated the interaction between four interrelated forces:

1) Political-sectarian Syrian elite who exploited symbolic politics by changing Syria’s official flag and manipulating the process of selecting Friday’s slogans,
2) Regional actors in the Arab Gulf monarchies, mainly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, as well as independent sectarian individuals who funded and sponsored certain fractions among the Syrian opposition for their own interests,

3) Certain grassroots organizations on the ground (such as the SRGC, the SYRCU, SCLSR) who manipulated legitimate demands of the protesters to implement sectarian-inclined slogans promoted by social media as in the case of the “Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011” or SRABA2011, and

4) Mainstream media and Arab satellite outlets, particularly Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, that disseminated such slogans and sectarian narratives as well as provided sectarian elite with platforms to instigate more sectarian strife.

The interactions between these four forces contributed to the process of sectarinization within the Syrian context. It further promoted and constructed a sectarian discourse that challenged the perception of Syrian national identity and marginalized the voices of the secular and non-sectarian actors within the opposition (the soft-liners).

The dominant discourse of both the Syrian regime and the political opposition organizations is highly dichotomous. Both sides framed and coded the conflict by defining the “significant other.” This rhetorical and performative “othering” was also extended to the opposition as in the cases of the SNC and NCSROF on the one hand, and the NCB on the other hand. The dominant discourse of the regime is still consistent from the very first speech of President Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian Parliament, on March 30, 2011. The Syrian regime, gradually abandoned the pan-Arabism rhetoric and instead
emphasized pan-Syranism as a defensive identity that defines itself against multiple “significant others” such as the Islamists, the “traitor Arabs”, the “West”, and “Israel.” The difference between the discourse of the NCB and that of the other opposition organizations, such as SNC and NCSROF, is derived from the very structure of the NCB. This structure consisted of a coalition between leftist parties and Pan-Arab parties that firmly opposed sectarianism, international intervention and arming the opposition. The NCB continue to strive for a secular, democratic state. The SNC and the NCSROF are mainly supported by Turkey and Arab Gulf monarchies and consisted of young activists, liberals, and Islamists who advocated armed groups, mainly represented by the FSA and Jihadist groups. The majority of the armed opposition organizations promoted the establishment of an Islamic state and the imposition of Shari’a Law. As a result, the dominant discourse of the opposition demonstrates contradictory perspectives stemming from their fractured and competing political entities as well as the rivalry between their regional backers.

Since its establishment, the NCB lacked international and regional support as well as broad popular support at the mass-level; however, the SNC initially gained international and popular recognition through multiple tactics. Of these tactics, the SNC most successfully used: the manipulation of protest slogans to gain legitimacy as an official representative of the “Syrian Revolution”, the implementation of manipulative strategies through the support of certain grassroots organizations on the ground (such as the SCLSR and the SRGC), the extensive promotion on Arab TV satellites (particularly Al-Jazeera) and social media (particularly the SRABA2011) (at the expense of the NCB),
and the influx of funds from competing Arab Gulf monarchies which directly affected the SNC’s cohesion and independence in the long run. Consequently, the SNC, and also its successor the NCSROF, lost the trust of large segments of the Syrian society—particularly among minorities—especially after the SNC’s as well as the NCSROF’s support of sectarian-based military offensives against minority-dominated areas. Moreover, both the SNC and the NCSROF became increasingly influenced by the Saudi-Qatari rivalry on the one hand and the locus of agency of the increasingly polarized masses on the other.

My interviews with 15 Syrian activists, currently residing in Washington D.C, support this data analysis and the discourse analysis of critical examples which deconstruct and, thus, reveal how the interlocking roles of the opposition organizations, political/sectarian entrepreneurs, regional actors, mainstream media, and social media functioned in promoting and constructing sectarian narratives of the Syrian Uprising-Cum-Civil-war. However, surprisingly, all 15 interviewees expressed a strong sense of state-level identity (pan-Syrianism), which challenges the claims that “artificial states” engender artificial and ephemeral national identities. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy to mention that all 15 interviewees rejected sub-national identities (ethnic, sectarian, tribal) as well as supra-identities (Islamism, Pan-Arabism). However, although some of them explicitly expressed an understanding of the reasons behind the radicalization of protesters at the mass level as well as the motives behind the involvement of the Jihadists in the Syrian conflict, they differentiated between Syrian Muslims and Non-Syrians Muslims. Such a rhetorical differentiation further challenges the practices of groupism and reification as well as the dichotomous and simplistic representation of the Syrian
conflict as Sunni vs. Shi’a/Alawites or majority vs. minorities or any other reductionist and culturalist versions. Yet, one cannot call what my interviewees expressed a mature sense of national identity nor can one overlook the significance of their exile affecting their personal, individual perception of national identity. More importantly, the ever-changing dynamics of re-constructing/re-imagining national identities in the context of the ongoing civil war in Syria are conditioned by where individuals reside. In other words, the dynamics that affect the perception of national identity among Syrians currently within Syria differ from the perceptions of those who have fled to Syria’s neighboring countries or to the US. In conclusion, further research could investigate the continuing role of elites in the process of sectarinization by practice as well as by discourse through their work with Non-Governmental Organizations and Syrian refugee schools in Syria’s neighboring countries, particularly in Turkey, and how Syrian national identity would be reshaped/re-imagined in post-conflict Syrian.
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APPENDIX 1: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Tell me your story about what brought you to the U.S?

2. When and how did you start getting involved in political activist organizations?

3. What do you think are the main Syrian political activist organizations in neighboring countries of Syria such as Turkey?

4. Can you share with me your organization mission and goals?

5. How you work to promote these mission and goals?

6. What do you think are the main human rights violations before the Syrian Uprising in Syria?

7. What do you think are the main human rights violations since the beginning of the Syrian Uprising?

8. What are main challenges that your organization face through the course of the Syrian conflict?

9. How your organization deal with the involvement of radical Islamist groups in the Syrian conflict?

10. How does your organization work with Syrian minorities?

11. What does it mean for you to be a Syrian?

12. How do you see the status of women after the Syrian uprising? What are the main violations against Syrian women?

13. What do you think, currently, of the Syrian national identity?

14. What do you think about the division of Syria into several states?
15. What do you think about the relationship between the Syrian government and the Syrian regime?

16. Social and traditional media depict a sharply divided relationship between the "minority" and "majorities" in Syria, in your opinion to what extent this reflects the reality on the ground?

17. What do you think are the sources of the sectarian rhetoric?

18. Which Syrian flag represents Syria for you and why?

19. What are your recommendations to develop the practices and strategies of the Syrian activist organizations as well as American and international non-governmental organizations that focus on Syria to combat sectarian discourse and to promote secular national discourse?
APPENDIX 2: LIST OF SLOGANS OF FRIDAY PROTESTS BETWEEN 2011 AND 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Slogan</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>March 18</td>
<td>Dignity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>March 25</td>
<td>Glory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 1</td>
<td>Martyrs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 8</td>
<td>Steadfastness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 15</td>
<td>Persistence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 22</td>
<td>Great Friday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 29</td>
<td>Rage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 6</td>
<td>Defiance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 13</td>
<td>Free Women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 20</td>
<td>Azadi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 27</td>
<td>Guardians of the Homeland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 3</td>
<td>Children of Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 10</td>
<td>Tribes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 17</td>
<td>The Honorables - Saleh al-Ali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>June 24</td>
<td>The Fall Of Legitimacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>Leave!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 8</td>
<td>No to Dialogue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 15</td>
<td>Prisoners of Freedom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 22</td>
<td>Descendants of Khalid [Ibn al-Walid]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>July 29</td>
<td>Your Silence is Killing Us</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>August 5</td>
<td>God is with Us</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Similar lists were published online; however, this list was based upon Matthew Barber’s list published on Syria Comments on December 14, 2013 and Pham Binh’s list published on The North Star, on April 1, 2013. I corrected and more accurately translated certain slogans.

Matthew Barber’s list: http://www.joshualandis.com/blog/names-of-the-revolution/
Pham Binh’s list: http://www.thenorthstar.info/?p=8118
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event Description</th>
<th>Arabic Translation</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>We Won't Kneel Except to God</td>
<td>لن نركع إلا لله</td>
<td>August 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beginnings of Victory</td>
<td>بشائر النصر</td>
<td>August 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patience and Determination</td>
<td>الصبر والثبات</td>
<td>August 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Death Rather than Humiliation</td>
<td>الموت ولا المثلة</td>
<td>September 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Protection</td>
<td>الحماية الدولية</td>
<td>September 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Will Continue Until the Fall of the Regime</td>
<td>ماضون حتى إسقاط النظام</td>
<td>September 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opposition Unity</td>
<td>وحدة المعارضة</td>
<td>September 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory for our Sham [Levant] and our Yemen</td>
<td>النصر لشامنا ويمننا</td>
<td>September 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The National Council Represents me</td>
<td>المجلس الوطني يمثلني</td>
<td>October 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army Freemen</td>
<td>أحرار الجيش</td>
<td>October 14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Martyrs of the Arab Deadline</td>
<td>شهداء المهلة العربية</td>
<td>October 21</td>
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<tr>
<td>No-Fly Zone</td>
<td>الحظر الجوي</td>
<td>October 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God is Greater than All Tyrant</td>
<td>الله أكبر على من طغي وتجبر</td>
<td>November 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freezing Syria's Arab League Membership Is our Demand</td>
<td>تجميد العضوية مطلبا</td>
<td>November 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expulsion of [Syrian] Ambassadors</td>
<td>جماعة طرد السفراء</td>
<td>November 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Free Army Protects Me</td>
<td>الجيش الحر يحميني</td>
<td>November 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Buffer Zone is our Demand</td>
<td>المنطقة العازلة مطلبا</td>
<td>December 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Strike of Dignity</td>
<td>اضراب الكرامة</td>
<td>December 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Arab League is Killing Us</td>
<td>الجامعة العربية تتلتها</td>
<td>December 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protocol of Death</td>
<td>بروتوكول الموت</td>
<td>December 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marching Towards Freedom Squares</td>
<td>الزحف الى ساحات الحرية</td>
<td>December 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2012
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
<th>Arabic Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January 6</td>
<td>“If You Are with God, He Will Grant You Victory” (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>إن تنصروا الله ينصركم</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 13</td>
<td>Support of the Free Syrian Army</td>
<td>دعم الجيش السوري الحر</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 20</td>
<td>Detainees of the Revolution</td>
<td>معتقلي الثورة</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>January 27</td>
<td>Right to Self Defense</td>
<td>حق الدفاع عن النفس</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 3</td>
<td>Sorry Hama, Forgive Us</td>
<td>عذرا حماة سامحينا</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 10</td>
<td>General Mobilization - Russia Is Killing our Children</td>
<td>اللفاء للانتفاضة الكردية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 17</td>
<td>Popular Resistance</td>
<td>المقاومة الشعبية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>February 24</td>
<td>We Will Revolt for You, Baba 'Amr</td>
<td>سننتفض لأجلك بابا عمرو</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 2</td>
<td>Arming the Free Army</td>
<td>تسليح الجيش الحر</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 9</td>
<td>Loyalty to the Kurdish Uprising</td>
<td>الوفاء للانتفاضة الكردية</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 16</td>
<td>Immediate Military Intervention</td>
<td>التدخل العسكري الفوري</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 23</td>
<td>We are Coming, Damascus</td>
<td>قادمون يا دمشق</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>March 30</td>
<td>The Arabs and Muslims have Let Us Down</td>
<td>حاننا العرب والمسلمون</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 6</td>
<td>“He Who Prepared a Ghazi (Fighter), has himself Fought” (Hadith)</td>
<td>من جهز غازيا فقد غزا</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 13</td>
<td>Revolution for All Syrians</td>
<td>ثورة لكل السوريين</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 20</td>
<td>We Will Be Victorious and Al-Assad Will Be Defeated</td>
<td>سننتصر ويهزم الاسم</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April 27</td>
<td>“The Command of Allah has come up; so do not seek to hasten it” (A</td>
<td>أتي أمر الله فلا تستعجلوه</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Arabic translation</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Devotion is Our Salvation</td>
<td>إخلاصنا خلاصنا</td>
<td>May 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Victory from God and Conquest is Close” (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>نصر من الله وفتح قريب</td>
<td>May 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heroes of Aleppo University</td>
<td>أبطال جامعة حلب</td>
<td>May 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus, Our Time Is Near</td>
<td>دمشق موعدنا القريب</td>
<td>May 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Children of Houla are Torches of Triumph</td>
<td>أطفال الحولة .. مشاعل النصر</td>
<td>June 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebels and Merchants, Hands in Hands Until Victory</td>
<td>ثوار وتجار يدا بيد حتى النصر</td>
<td>June 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full Preparation for Full Mobilization; Russia is the Enemy of the Syrian People</td>
<td>الاستعداد التام للنفير العام .. روسيا عدوة الشعب السوري</td>
<td>June 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>if leaders are defeatists, then where are the peoples?</td>
<td>إذا كان الحكام متخاللين .. فأين الشعوب ???</td>
<td>June 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are Confident in God’s Victory</td>
<td>ولتون بنصر الله</td>
<td>June 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People’s Liberation War</td>
<td>حرب التحرير الشعبية</td>
<td>July 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toppling Annan, the Servant Of al-Assad and Iran - Rage for The Martyrs of Tremseh</td>
<td>إسقاط عوان خادم الأسد و إيران العصب للشهداء التريسة</td>
<td>July 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan Triumph Will Be Written in Damascus</td>
<td>رمضان النصر سيكتب في دمشق</td>
<td>July 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uprising of the Two Capitals</td>
<td>انتفاضة العاصمةتين</td>
<td>July 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deir Ez-Zor - The Victory Is Coming From The East</td>
<td>دير الزور النصر قادم من الشرق</td>
<td>August 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arm Us With Anti-Aircraft</td>
<td>سلحنا بمضادات الطائرات</td>
<td>August 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With the Union of our</td>
<td>بوحدة جيشنا الاحتر يحقق النصر</td>
<td>August 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Army, Triumph will be Achieved.</td>
<td>لا تحزنى درعا إن الله معنا</td>
<td>August 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do Not Grieve Dar’a; God Is With Us</td>
<td>الوفاء لطرابلس الشام وأحرار لبنان</td>
<td>August 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loyalty to Tripoli and the Free Lebanese</td>
<td>حمص المحاصرة تناديكم</td>
<td>September 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Besieged Homs IS Calling You</td>
<td>إدلب مقبرة الطائرات ورمز الانتصارات</td>
<td>September 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idlib is the Grave of the Air Force and the Symbol of Victories</td>
<td>أحباب رسول الله في سوريا يذبحون</td>
<td>September 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Those Whom the Prophet Loves Are Being Massacred in Syria</td>
<td>توحيد كتاب الجيش الحر</td>
<td>September 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unifying the Free Army Battalions</td>
<td>نريد سلاحنا لا تصريحات</td>
<td>October 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We Want Weapons, not Statements</td>
<td>أحرار الساحل يصنعون النصر</td>
<td>October 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free People of the Coast Making Victory</td>
<td>أمريكا ألم يشيع حفناً من دمائنا</td>
<td>October 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>America, Is your Animosity not Satisfied with our Blood?</td>
<td>الله أكبر نصر عبده وأعز جنده وهزم الأحزاب وجهده</td>
<td>October 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Is Great: He made Victorious His worshiper, and Made Mighty His soldiers and Defeated the Confederates Alone</td>
<td>دارياً أخوة العنبر والدم نحو عدالة دولية</td>
<td>November 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daraya Brotherhood of Grapes and Blood, Towards International Justice</td>
<td>ان أوان الزحف إلى دمشق</td>
<td>November 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s Time to March to Damascus</td>
<td>دعم الإئتلاف الوطني</td>
<td>November 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the National Coalition</td>
<td>اقتربت الساعة وان الانتصار</td>
<td>November 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Hour Has Come Closer And It is Time For</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text</td>
<td>Arabic</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victory</td>
<td>ريف الشام أصابع النصر فوق القصر</td>
<td>November 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Damascus Countryside, Fingers Victory Over The Palace [the Presidential Palace]</td>
<td>لا للقوات حفظ السلام على أرض الشام</td>
<td>December 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No to Peacekeeping Forces in The Land of Sham [Levant/Syria]</td>
<td>لا إرهاب في سوريا إلا إرهاب الأسد</td>
<td>December 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There Is No Terrorism in Syria Except of al-Assad's Regime</td>
<td>جمعة النصر انكتب غ بوانك يا حلب</td>
<td>December 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Victory Was Written On Your Gates, Oh Aleppo</td>
<td>خبز الدم</td>
<td>December 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bloody Bread</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homs Is Calling The Freemen To Lift The Siege</td>
<td>حمص تلادى الأحرار لفك الحصار</td>
<td>January 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No for Lakhdar we are all Jabhat al-Nusra</td>
<td>لا للأخضر الإبراهيمي كلنا جبهة النصر</td>
<td>January 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The [Refugee] Camps of Death</td>
<td>مخيمات الموت</td>
<td>January 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Revolution [Aleppo] University - Martyrdom Engineering</td>
<td>جامعة الثورة .. هندسة الشهادة</td>
<td>January 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Leader Forever, Our Sayyed [Prophet] Muhammad</td>
<td>قائدنا للإبد سيدنا محمد</td>
<td>January 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The International Community Is al-Assad's Partner In His Massacres</td>
<td>المجتمع الدولي شريك الأسد في مجازره</td>
<td>February 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold Fast to God’s Rope All Together; Do Not Split Into Factions.  (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>و اعتصموا بحبل الله جميعاً</td>
<td>February 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Arabic Text</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>God Is Sufficient as a Supporter (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>وکفی بالله نصيرنا</td>
<td>February 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Proud Raqqa is on The Road of Freedom</td>
<td>الرقة الإبرية على طريق الحرية</td>
<td>February 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One Umma [Nation], One Flag, One War</td>
<td>أمة واحدة راية واحدة حرب واحدة</td>
<td>March 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Sectarian State Will Never Come to Pass</td>
<td>لن تمر دولكم الطائفية</td>
<td>March 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Years of Struggle and the Victory of Our Revolution is Near</td>
<td>عمانًا على الکفاح و نصر ثورتنا قد لاح</td>
<td>March 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your Chemical Weapons Will Not Stop the Tide of Freedom</td>
<td>أسلحتكم الكيميائية لن توقف مذ الحرة</td>
<td>March 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give Glad Tidings to those who Patiently Persevere (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>و بشر الصابرين</td>
<td>March 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refugees... Honor and Dignity is Still our Motto</td>
<td>لاًجنون .. والشرف والكرامة عنواننا</td>
<td>April 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syria is too Strong to be Divided</td>
<td>سوريا أقوى من أن تقسم</td>
<td>April 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Iran, Party of the Devil [Hezbollah], You will be Defeated Along with al-Assad</td>
<td>إیران و حزب الشیطان: ستهزمن مع الأسد</td>
<td>April 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Protection of the Majority</td>
<td>حماية الأكثرية</td>
<td>April 26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syrians Are Being Killed with Your “Red Lines”</td>
<td>بخططكم الحمراء يقتل السوريون</td>
<td>May 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baniyas - Sectarian Genocide and International Cover-Up</td>
<td>بانیس: إیادة طائفیة واًغطاء امیی</td>
<td>May 10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Independence of the Syrian Decision</td>
<td>استقلال القرار السوري</td>
<td>May 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Arabic Translation</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlatan Resistance, al-Quds [Jerusalem] is not in Homs</td>
<td>دجال المقاومة.. القدس ليست في حمص</td>
<td>May 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Ideals of the Revolution Are Our Red Lines</td>
<td>مبادئ الثورة خطوطنا الحمراء</td>
<td>May 31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Al-Ghouta And Al-Qusayr, Unbreakable Will</td>
<td>الغوطة والقصير إرادة لا تنكسر</td>
<td>June 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Safavid project: A Threat to the Umma</td>
<td>المشروع الصفوي: تهديد للامة</td>
<td>June 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support of al-Sham[Levant/Syria] is in Action Not Words</td>
<td>نصرة الشام بالأفعال لا بالأقوال</td>
<td>June 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ardent Revolution and a Paralyzed Opposition</td>
<td>ثورة متوقعة ومعارضة مفعدة</td>
<td>June 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beware and Wake Up Oh Brigades</td>
<td>تنبهوا واستيقظوا أيتها الكران</td>
<td>July 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Until We Change Ourselves</td>
<td>حتى نغير ما بالفسنا</td>
<td>July 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramadan is the Month of Victory and Conquests</td>
<td>سيف الله المسول</td>
<td>July 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Drawn Sword of Allah [ the title of Khalid Ibn al-Walid]</td>
<td>إن بنصركم الله فلا غالب لكم</td>
<td>August 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If God Grants You Victory Then None Can Defeat You (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>ابطال الساحل قادمون</td>
<td>August 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Heroes of the Coast are Coming</td>
<td>دعم ثوار الساحل</td>
<td>August 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support the Revolutionaries of the Coast</td>
<td>الإرهابي بشار يقتل المدنيين بالكีماوي والعالم يتفرج</td>
<td>August 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“There Is No Victory Except from God” (A</td>
<td>وما النصر إلا من عند الله</td>
<td>August 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Arabic Translation</td>
<td>Date</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Only with Chemical Weapons Does al-Assad Kill Our Children</td>
<td>ليس بالكيميائي وحده يقتل الأسد أطفالنا</td>
<td>September 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Murderer Is Under the International Community’s Protection</td>
<td>القاتل بحماية المجتمع الدولي</td>
<td>September 13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only Syrians Will Liberate Syria</td>
<td>وحدهم السوريون من سيحرر سوريا</td>
<td>September 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoners as Pure as Jasmine [referring to female prisoners]</td>
<td>أسيرات يظهر الياسمين</td>
<td>September 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank You Turkey</td>
<td>شكراً تركيا</td>
<td>October 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Weapon is For the Fronts Not For Liberated Areas</td>
<td>سلاحنا للجهات لمناطق المرارة</td>
<td>October 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Save Moadamiyyah And Southern Damascus</td>
<td>أنقذوا المعضمية وجنوب دمشق</td>
<td>October 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Solution Is In The Hague, NOT In Geneva</td>
<td>الحل في لاهاي لا في جنيف</td>
<td>October 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No to the Iranian Occupation of Syria</td>
<td>لا للاحتلال الإيراني لسوريا</td>
<td>November 8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Go Forth, Whether Light or Heavy” (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>انفووا خفافاً وقفاً</td>
<td>November 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Blood of the Martyr [Abdel-Qader Saleh] Unites Us</td>
<td>دم الشهيد [عبد القادر الصالح] يوحدنا</td>
<td>November 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“God’s Hand is with the Community” (A verse from Quran)</td>
<td>يد الله مع الجماعة</td>
<td>November 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking the Siege</td>
<td>كسر الحصار</td>
<td>December 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moving the Battle to the Areas of the al-Assad Occupation</td>
<td>نقل المعركة لمناطق الاحتلال الأسدي</td>
<td>December 13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>