Heterogeneity in Alternative Media Spheres:
Oppositional Media and the Framing of Sectarianism in the Syrian Conflict

YAZAN BADRAN[1]
KEVIN SMETS
Vrije Universiteit Brussel, Belgium

The 2011 uprisings in the Middle East have deeply shaken the traditional media landscape in the region. They have also reinvigorated scholarly interest in the role of the media in the region's conflicts. Alternative media has emerged as an important avenue for investigation—in particular with resistance and counterhegemonic narratives. However, the complexity and heterogeneity of this sphere have received less attention. The aim of this article is to reveal the heterogeneity in the alternative media sphere that developed in Syria after the 2011 uprising. The article contributes, first, to an understanding of the conflict itself and the role of sectarianism therein and, second, to a more complex conceptualization of alternative media within conflict contexts. We explore these issues by analyzing the diverse framings of sectarian divisions in Syrian oppositional media.

Keywords: alternative media, conflict, mediatization, framing, sectarianism, Middle East, Syria

The media's place in the mushrooming conflicts in the Middle East has continued to garner the attention of communication scholars (Hänska Ahy, 2016; Zayani & Mirgani, 2016). Debates on the Arab uprisings, as Zayani (2016) argues, tend to be "formulated within a binary logic that oscillates between media enthusiasts and media skeptics" (p. 28). Since the 2011 season of uprisings in the Arab world, the media landscape in the Middle East has changed dramatically. One of the key changes has been the development of an alternative media sphere, described by Issa (2016) as "a robust and diverse independent media culture" ("Key Findings") shaking up traditional media landscapes in the Middle East. The homogeneity and the resistant and counterhegemonic nature of this newly developed alternative media

sphere is usually presumed, because it is part of a global sphere of "protest cultures" (on the "amorphousness" of protest cultures, see Markham, 2014). Only a handful of studies, however, have investigated the heterogeneity of this new media environment. Research has revealed, for instance, a wealth of narrative practices among "protest websites" (Matar, 2016), a diversity of voices of dissent through different mediations of the body in the Arab world (Kraidy, 2016), and the sometimes contradictory (counter)hegemonic nature of alternative media in the 2003 Iraq War (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009). However, the need for additional in-depth insight into the heterogeneity of the alternative media sphere and the counterhegemonic "protest" culture it supposedly represents remains urgent.

Our point of entry to explore this heterogeneity is the sectarian divisions within Syria. The uprisings in Syria laid bare several of the structural pressure points of the modern Syrian polity, the most controversial of which is the relationship between the religious and ethnic factions of the country and the role of these factions in Syria's informal politics, usually called sectarianism. The instrumentalization of sectarianism remains one of the most prominent features of the Syrian conflict and is part of the rapid diffusion of sectarianism in the Middle East (Hinnebusch, 2016). Al-Rawi (2015) and Yonay and Shor (2014) argue that the way in which ethnic and sectarian divisions play out in the evolving media environment of the Middle East deserves more attention.

The aims of this article are, first, to contribute to an understanding of the conflict itself and the role of sectarianism therein and, second, to provide a more complex conceptualization of heterogeneous alternative media within conflict contexts. Our literature review therefore focuses on the linkages between mediatized conflict research and concepts of alternative media. We present a qualitative content analysis of online opposition-minded journals reporting on the sectarian issue in Syria and interviews with the journals' editors in chief. This analysis largely focuses on the existence of two distinct frames: an essentialist frame and a social-constructivist frame. Within the contested Syrian political space, both frames stand for different values and conceptualizations for the future of the Syrian polity, and we explore their articulations of three key issues: foreign support to the Syrian regime, the sectarian-demographic nexus, and the role of Alawites in the conflict.

Media, Conflict, and Alternative Media

Media play a central, if often ambiguous, role in conflicts. Defining the exact nature and impact of this role, whether in inciting and perpetuating conflict or, conversely, in contributing to its resolution, has proven highly problematic (Schoemaker & Stremlau, 2014). Countless studies showcase the varied ways in which media can be instrumentalized and weaponized in the course of conflicts (Carruthers, 2011; Hammond, 2000; Zeitzoff, 2018). Cottle (2006), in this regard, describes "mediatized conflicts," noting that media are increasingly implicated within conflicts (p. 8). The co-constitutive role for media in modern conflicts is often emphasized through the notion of the "CNN effect." Underlying this notion is the assumption that media coverage of conflicts can shape the political responses to them (Robinson, 1999). Nevertheless, the intensified mediatization of certain conflicts, and specific phases of the conflict, obscures the fact that "media ignores most conflicts most of the time" (Jakobsen, 2000, p. 131). Moreover, the increasing hybridity of the media environment introduces new forms of interaction

between the media and conflict actors as well as more complex networks of information flows between the different levels of media that should be considered (Gilboa, Jumbert, Miklian, & Robinson, 2016).

Among the theoretical approaches to mediatized conflict that Cottle (2006) differentiates, we are mostly concerned with the kinds of questions asked within the "media contest" paradigm, which sees the media as a dynamic site of power struggle and unequal contestation (p. 20). Inspired by Wolfsfeld's (1997) work on conflict and news reporting from the Middle East, Cottle notes that an important aspect of mediatized conflict is the way that actors seek attention for their own cause. Because actors compete not only over access to news media but also over media frames, we are invited to conduct a "cultural analysis of how norms, beliefs and routines influence the construction of media frames or the guiding interpretative frameworks organizing news representations" (p. 22). What is at stake in such perspectives on mediatized conflict is how (counter)public spheres and spaces of public discussion develop.

Alternative media stand out as an important avenue for investigation. The field of alternative media refers to countless organizations, communication channels, and practices that are outside the realm of corporate mainstream media. The space constituted by alternative media is thus difficult to demarcate and depends on the orientation one takes in approaching its relationship vis-à-vis its communities and other media. Nevertheless, the impetus for alternative media is often found in a rejection of the representations and practices found in mainstream media, and thus alternative media are thought to be better equipped to deliver "counter-hegemonic discourses and identities" (Cammaerts & Carpentier, 2009, p. 5). This characteristic makes alternative media particularly compelling for studying conflicts. A wide range of studies has examined alternative media in conflict contexts, the most notable among them focusing on practices of peace journalism outside mainstream media (Keeble, 2015), on community media within zones of conflict (Carpentier, 2017; Pérez Quintero, Ramirez Hincapié, & Rodriguez, 2015), and on the role of alternative media for social movements (Downing, 2008).

Cammaerts and Carpentier's (2009) description of alternative media and their potential aptness to convey counterhegemonic discourses draws our attention to how actors and issues are represented in a context of conflict. Many violent and intractable conflicts have been understood as antagonistic—as Aggestam, Cristiano, and Strömbom (2015) explore in the context of Middle Eastern conflicts. This notion has been developed in the work of Mouffe (1993) and Laclau and Mouffe (2001) on liberal democracy and conflict (see Carpentier, 2017, pp. 155–158, for a discussion). Carpentier (2017), writing from a discursive-material perspective, explains that antagonistic discourse is articulated at three levels: "the destruction of the enemy," "the radical difference and distance from the enemy," and a "homogenization of the self" (p. 172). In other words, if we are to grasp the complexities of antagonistic and intractable conflicts, such as the civil conflict in Syria, we need to construe processes of us/them opposition, essentialization, and "Othering." The way in which positions are articulated in media should be given full consideration, because simplistic and sensationalist representations of certain ethnic and religious groups in the media could exacerbate conflicts (Allen & Seaton, 1999, p. 3).

Setting the Scene: Syria's Civil Conflict and New Spaces of Public Discussion

The specific site for our study of the contestation over framing in a mediatized conflict is Syria, where a civil conflict has been going on since 2011. As the physical borders of the conflict in Syria began to

solidify, so did the symbolic spaces behind them. A new sphere of media quickly developed in opposition-controlled areas with an agenda and sets of values that radically differed from the hitherto state-controlled media sector. The protest movement in Syria brought about a sudden and violent break in the Syrian public sphere. Established media outlets, both private and state-owned, largely adopted the regime's narrative of the events (Taki, 2012), and the newly formed online activist networks began to take on the role of mediators within the uprising and vis-à-vis international media (Al-Mustafa, 2012). Reporting on the Syrian conflict increasingly relied on the content Syrians created and distributed through social media channels (e.g., videos, photos, songs, posters). This was especially true in the early stages of the crisis, when access to foreign journalists was severely curtailed and restricted by the Syrian government (Lynch, Freelon, & Aday, 2014). Several large nodes of news curation and mobilization also emerged on Facebook and YouTube, including the Sham News Network page and the eponymous Facebook page Syrian Revolution Against Bashar al-Assad 2011, which had around 328,000 followers by early 2012. These pages not only were instrumental in the diffusion of information on the protest movement but also had considerable influence in shaping the messages of the movement—for example, by choosing the names of the weekly Friday protests (Al-Mustafa, 2012). However, as the military conflict took center stage, most activists started leaving the country, coinciding with a shift from the prevalent modes of citizen journalism to a more institutional approach to the media in response to questions of reliability (De Angelis, 2014).

The journals included in this study all have their roots in the protest movement and can trace their histories along a similar trajectory to the one discussed here. They are now part of an expanding media sphere in exile in Turkey. While recognizing their common historical and antigovernment origins, we focus here on the range of positions taken by these media organizations on the causes, dynamics, and trajectories of the civil conflict.

Sectarianism

We investigate the divergence in Syria's alternative media sphere through the lens of sectarianism. Described as the ascription of "political claims or rights to religious communities beyond matters of worship and family" (Douwes, 2010, p. 484), sectarianism (*tai'fiya*) is used by both the regime and the political opposition as an antinormative signifier. The accusation of sectarian motivations underpinning the opponent's actions appears in the narratives of both sides.

The origins of Syria's current sectarian question, and the country being an epicenter of sectarian tensions in the region (Hinnebusch, 2016, p. 145), can be traced back to its formative years as a modern nation-state after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918. The urban Sunni elite, which dominated Syria's political life under the French mandate and immediately after independence in 1946, largely shunned the institution of the army (Seale, 1965). By contrast, Alawites, largely of the peasant classes, flocked to the army in search of social mobility and economic advancement.[2] As the army's role in political life

---

[2] Alawites, a minority sect of Shia Islam, represent about 12% of Syria's population, while Sunni Islam is practiced by an estimated 75%. As a syncretic sect, Alawites are considered a distinct branch of mainstream Twelver Shia Islam practiced in Iran. For an in-depth study of the role of Alawites in modern Syrian politics, see Batatu (1999).

expanded, and eventually completely dominated it after the Baath Party coup on March 8, 1963, so did the role and influence of Alawites in the state, supplanting that of the urban Sunni elite (Fildis, 2012). Hafiz al-Assad's regime (1970–2000), with its reliance on clan and family members in key positions in the state and the army, came to define this Alawite hegemony. More recently, the explanatory value of sectarianism in the Syrian context has gained more currency in light of the heightened conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran (as respective representatives of the Sunni and Shia religious groups) and its spread into Lebanon, Iraq, Bahrain, and Yemen.

The topic of sectarianism was chosen as a basis for our analysis because it is a sociopolitical and moral construct that is intricately linked to the different conceptions of what a future Syrian polity could look like. The different frames present in discourses on sectarian identity have direct repercussions on the public spaces of discussion that they constitute, especially on questions of inclusion and exclusion. Furthermore, Lake and Rothchild (1996) argue that ethnic conflicts are as much related to fears of the future as they are with the present and that information is key to containing them. In this regard, the media's role in that process becomes an essential one.

Method

A framing-based study design was used for this research. Frames aid the receiver in making sense of the text and provide a ready platform for the appropriation of meaning. Competing frames attempt to coalesce support for certain problem definitions, causes, remedies, and moral judgments (Entman, 2004). Entman conceptualizes this dynamic state between different frames as a continuum from frame dominance (where one frame has quasi-hegemonic control over the public debate of a certain issue) to frame parity (where two or more frames offer complete narratives of the same "resonance and magnitude").

The journals used as case studies in this research were chosen to account for the diverse forms of online literary platforms currently operating in this sphere of oppositional media. This emerging sphere of Syrian media is coherent in the sense that the journals position themselves in dialogue with mainstream political opposition (e.g., not with radical Islamist groups such as ISIS) and are largely supported through international media development agencies. Two weekly news journals were chosen: *Souriatna* and *Enab Baladi*.[3] The two journals have their origins in the region of Damascus in southern Syria. Additionally, one fortnightly journal, *Ayn al-Madina*, from the region of al-Jazira in northeastern Syria, and one monthly journal, *Hentah*, from the central town of al-Salamiyah, were chosen for analysis. Due to the high turnover rate in publications among emerging Syrian media, the journals studied here were notable for their longevity. The oldest of the outlets, *Souriatna*, was established in September 2011, and the most recent, *Ayn al-Madina*, was established in March 2013.

All the texts that discussed the topic of sectarianism, in any detail, were filtered and selected from the four journals (*N* = 66). Articles that contained the following keywords (or variants of them) were included in the analysis: sectarianism, sects, Alawites, Shia, and Sunni. The time frame of this study spanned three months, from February to April 2015. This was a period of military stalemate between the regime and the

---

[3] There are no significant daily journals operating in this emerging media sphere at the moment.

rebels with neither side claiming any major advantage. Moreover, the period preceded the major escalations in the conflict with the intensification of Western military operations against ISIS in mid-2015 and direct Russian military intervention in favor of the Assad government in September 2015.

An iterative process of qualitative content analysis was performed on the selected articles to identify the two main dominant frames of reference used to elaborate the issue of sectarianism. Different passages were coded and sorted according to common discursive and rhetorical strategies used in them. The iterative process allowed the researchers to explore linkages between the two distinct framings as well as contradictions in them.

Four semistructured interviews were conducted (in Arabic) with the editors in chief of the journals. The interviews inquired about the institutional arrangements at the organization, the editorial processes and editorial policies on the issue of sectarianism, and the level of identification of different actors with the prescribed frames. All translations of article excerpts and interviews were conducted by the researchers.

Analysis

The four journals examined share a similar normative view on the Syrian uprising as a legitimate and, initially, peaceful popular movement against the authoritarian regime of Bashar al-Assad. They also agree that the Assad government's suppression of the protests was the single most significant factor in submerging the country into its protracted state of violent conflict. Between these two maxims, many nuances and divergent opinions exist to explain the failure of the protest movement to effect change as well as its failure to draw on the support of some significant constituencies in the battle against the regime. These nuances reveal a different imagining of the country Syria was just before the uprising. Explaining the sectarian phenomenon means articulating the exact roles of the sectarian identities of groups or individuals in provoking and sustaining the conflict and determining the type of interactions these groups and individuals had with the protest movement. In the analysis, two frames are identified in relation to their different conceptualizations of the sectarian issue. The two macro frames constructed from the qualitative analysis, and described here, represent a polarization of the salience of sectarian identity in understanding the Syrian conflict. The examined texts thus fall along the spectrum of the two macro frames.

The first frame postulates that social interactions and political choices are largely determined through the identitarian backgrounds of the participants. In societies built around a multitude of sects and religious groups, sectarian identities play a guiding role. Sectarianism is understood as the antinormative value motivating some groups to dominate others with differing sectarian identities. Thus, sectarianism is explained as a phenomenon that arises within concrete social groups and drives changes in the power dynamics between these groups and in the structures governing them. This frame is identified as the *essentialist* frame.

The second frame turns the essentialist assumptions on their head, stipulating that social categories, such as sectarian identities, are formed and understood through the political choices and interests of the participants. Thus, what constitutes a sectarian identity within a society is subject to the changing power dynamics and political interests of different groups in that society. Sectarianism is then

understood as a function, or by-product, of these political interests and their interplay. This frame is identified as the *social-constructivist* frame.

Essentialist Frame

This frame identifies sectarian identity as the most important element governing political and social interactions. According to this frame, the links between individuals in a certain religious group form a primordial connection that solidifies the community and distinguishes it from other groups in society. An individual's place in society and his or her interactions with others within the political and economic spheres are often determined and conditioned by their respective sectarian identities. Thus, the fortunes of individuals become intricately tied to those of the group.

In Syria, sectarianism, as a negative phenomenon and an antinormative value, arises when the balances of power among the different religious communities shift too far in favor of one at the expense of the others. Therefore, as sectarian identity becomes the primary impetus for the actions of individuals and groups alike, it attains an objective explanatory power in the Syrian context. As the battle lines are conceptualized along sectarian lines, specifying the religious backgrounds of the participants becomes the same as specifying both their allegiance and their motivation. This is illustrated in the following example from *Enab Baladi*. In discussing a series of mortar attacks by opposition forces on the city of Latakia, the journal is meticulous in describing the sectarian identities of the victims (all civilians) as Alawite in one case ("Al-asad yantaqim," 2015) and Sunni in another (Al-Jablawi, 2015a). These sectarian backgrounds and their implied role in determining the allegiance of an individual thus become instrumental in the moral evaluation of a certain act. In this example, explicit condemnation is only forthcoming in the second case, when the targeted community is Sunni and thus conceived as pro-revolution. Such framing can be observed most consistently in *Enab Baladi*. Editor in Chief Jawad Sharbaji explains:

> We do not allow our newspaper to be used to express sectarian hatred. However, do we name things as they are? Recently, we had a meeting about this, and we decided that, yes, we must publish things as they are. Because the issue is no longer hidden. When I mention Kafriya and al-Fu'ah [two predominantly Shia villages in the Idlib governorate], I cannot not say "Shia" or "Alawi." You must specify and explain the background for this battle. . . . We must call things as they are. There are confessional backgrounds to all these wars in the region. (personal communication, July 28, 2015)

Sharbaji perceives the conflict in Syria largely through the prism of its confessional components. This perception is often combined with the acknowledgment of the negative implications of sectarian identification and the regime's role in impelling it to the surface.

The essentialist frame emphasizes the salience of the sectarian identity of a community and its instrumental role in understanding the conflict. The frame often presents communities as homogeneous, self-contained, and living within hardened and recognizable boundaries. These boundaries hold within them a set of essential group-wide values that function as a marker of the community, distinguishing it

from the others and to the others. These values, just like the allegiance of the community, are presented as self-evident. The conflict conditions in Syria, according to this frame, privilege such interpretations. For example, in news articles on Homs or Latakia,[4] it becomes possible to understand the "loyalist" and "Alawite" labels as interchangeable synonyms to describe certain neighborhoods, groups, or individuals and to contrast them with "opposition" and "Sunni." In an article on Homs, the writer investigates life in a "loyalist neighborhood" after a series of bombings that claimed the lives of 41 schoolchildren. Halfway through the article, the writer states:

> The *most noticeable* observation was that *veiled women* [emphasis added] were strolling along the [loyalist] street, in a sign, perhaps, that inhabitants of revolution-minded [*mahsuba 'ala al-thawra*] neighborhoods can wander freely in this area without encountering a reaction [from the loyalist inhabitants] against those who can be considered as supportive of those responsible for the bombings. (Al-Homsi, 2015, p. 6)

The excerpt illustrates the frame's assumptions about self-evident allegiances and values in several ways:

- The reference to "veiled women" identifies a marker, the veil, as a self-evidently Sunni value that is presumed to be universally identifiable by the reader.

- The Sunni identity of the women, represented by the veil, is then taken to identify them as "inhabitants of revolution-minded neighborhoods."

- The veiled women are also presented in contrast to the nonveiled women of the loyalist neighborhood. Thus, a countermarker, the lack of veils, is also presented and understood as a self-evident Alawite value.

- The writer implies that the other side—that is, inhabitants of the loyalist neighborhood—uses the same markers to identify and categorize the different communities. The writer identifies the "lack of reaction of the loyalists" as the "most noticeable observation." This can only be noteworthy in that it demonstrates that the Alawites have the same understanding of these markers—that is, that the veiled women carry with them Sunni pro-revolution values and are presumably supportive of the bombings. These markers, according to this frame, are universal in their meaning and in their explanatory value.

The essentialist frame conceptualizes the Syrian conflict along sectarian battle lines. The conditions of the conflict, according to this frame, privilege a reality within which sectarian identification and belonging become its most effective rallying point.

---

[4] Homs, in central Syria, and Latakia, on the Mediterranean coast in northwestern Syria, are two major cities with large communities of both Sunnis and Alawites.

Social-Constructivist Frame

The social-constructivist frame, in contrast, imagines sectarian identity as a subjective variable prone to changes according to the political interests of individuals and groups rather than an overriding communal link. The choices members of a certain community make with regard to the conflict are based on a larger and more complex array of variables and interests than simply the dogmatic belief in a certain religious doctrine or blind loyalty to the social group. According to this frame, sectarian identities, because they are so malleable, are used to achieve political gains and hegemonic goals for some groups over others or to respond to certain challenges. However, the political interests of the elites that use sectarian communities are not necessarily aligned to the interests of these communities. This is presented as especially true in societies where the development of active citizenship is weak or thwarted by the political elite.

The social-constructivist frame reverses the order seen in the essentialist frame. It postulates that, rather than sectarian identity being intrinsic to sect communities and forming the impetus for their behavior and driving political changes in their environment, it is the political setting and interests of the elites (which are never fully identical to sect communities) that shape different sectarian identities for different communities and condition their interactions. According to Naji al-Jerf, editor in chief of *Hentah*, the real fault lines in Syrian society that triggered the current crisis lie elsewhere—beyond those of religious communities:

> We believe that as the revolution developed into an armed conflict . . . there was a regionalist crisis in Syria as well as a rural-urban crisis. These crises developed as time passed and violence increased, into a crisis with a sectarian appearance. At its depth, this crisis is not sectarian, but often times it expresses itself as such. (personal communication, July 24, 2015)

The social-constructivist frame rejects sectarian identities as objective concepts that can be used to understand the current crisis. Moreover, they are portrayed as deliberately implanted smokescreens that are used in tandem by different powers to conceal the root causes of the conflict. These causes are seen to be linked to economic and political marginalization of certain elements in society along rural-urban and regional divisions rather than sectarian divisions.

The frame posits that the support of Alawites to the regime cannot simply be explained by sectarian kinship. Instead, a longer historical process is involved in which the agency of the sect, as a group as well as individuals, was systematically appropriated by the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad. The Assad dynasty has, in effect, "transformed the sect, and the state, into subservient components [of the dynasty]," as explained by Muawyah Hammad (2015, p. 14) in an op-ed in *Ayn al-Madina*. Ziad al-Amir, editor in chief of *Ayn al-Madina*, expands on this idea:

> Theoretically, the majority of the Alawites are supportive of the regime. This support has varying reasons. The motivations for people to support the regime are different for each

individual: there are people who have personally benefited from the regime, but there are also people who have only recently come to support the regime because they have seen the chaos. The revolution did not present promising examples for people on the other side to join us. (personal communication, July 26, 2015)

Sectarianism in this frame appears as a tool to achieve or preserve a hegemonic status. The regime is often accused of cynically using the colonial-era maxim of "divide and rule" to ensure its survival. For example, Khaled Qannut (2015b) of *Souriatna* states that the regime "has worked tirelessly to enflame [*izka'a*] sectarian struggles between the people of Hawran as Sunnis, and the people of Jabal al-Arab as Druze . . . to entrench its rule" (p. 15). The frame postulates that sectarianism is not solely the purview of the regime but also a tool used by the opposition and its allies. Qannut (2015a) also accuses Zahran Alloush, the de facto leader at the time of rebel forces in the areas surrounding Damascus, of "using sectarian discourses" (p. 12).

The social-constructivist frame also problematizes the question of homogeneity within different communities, especially those perceived to ally themselves with the regime. *Ayn al-Madina* devotes a regular section in each issue to explore and discuss hyperlocal tensions and debates in the Alawite community. The section, titled "al-Madina's Fisherman" (*sayyad al-madina*),[5] sheds light on topics such as infighting between members of the regime's militias ("Hina yaqtatil shabbihat al-asad," 2015) or the tragic negligence faced by injured regime soldiers ("Trajidia al-jarih al-asadi rateb muhammad," 2015). Ziad al-Amir explains the value of such exploration as drawing on, and highlighting, the shared experiences of both the loyalist and opposition populations in the war:

Alawites are obviously an important component of today's conflict. We have tried to tell [the pro-revolution audience] that not only you are suffering, they are suffering too. They are losing their safety and their children as well. . . . They are manipulated and impoverished [like you] with no access to electricity or drinking water. (personal communication, July 26, 2015)

Finally, the social-constructivist frame explains society as a complex of political influences and interests that may or may not intersect with sectarian identities and communities but that attempt to manipulate these subnational communal links to gain political dominance. The negative influence of this manipulation is countered by promoting normative values of citizenship and consensual democracy within a civil state. Thus, *Souriatna*, for example, runs a dedicated section to discuss issues of equal citizenship and how they influence an individual's relationship with the state. The emphasis on equal citizenship, rule of law, and, implicitly, secularism, is positioned both as a refutation of the authoritarian model of the state under the regimes of Bashar and Hafez al-Assad as well as a response to the growth of sectarian identification and framing in the current conflict.

---

[5] In reference to the Syrian Mediterranean coast, which is considered the traditional heartland of the Alawites.

Framing Strategies

The terminologies and discourses used by the journalists help us reconstruct the essentialist and social-constructivist frames. They also showcase the various nuances and understandings of the sectarian problem. Such discourses provide readers with important tools for the appropriation of meaning. By emphasizing or deemphasizing a certain element, or by using emotional or neutral language, different frames attempt to steer the reader into looking at the topic under discussion from a certain angle. Analyzing the divergences in these framing tools, we can start to distinguish the two macro frames in terms of their preferred understanding of the Syrian conflict and the place of sectarianism within it. The application of these different strategies will be presented through three main themes: foreign support to the Syrian regime, the demographic question, and the role of Alawites in the conflict.

Iranian (or Shia) Support

The Iranian intervention on the side of the regime of Bashar al-Assad has been decisive to the regime's survival. Iran has provided Assad with a multitude of resources, including a credit line as well as arms (Goodarzi, 2013). Furthermore, Iranian troops and militias, including Hezbollah, a Lebanese militia group backed by Iran, have fought alongside Assad's forces since at least May 2012 (Hughes, 2014). This involvement features heavily in discussions on sectarianism in the Syrian context. The modern Islamic Republic of Iran, a majority-Shia country, is seen as the power base of Shia Islam and has long been embroiled in geopolitical competition against Saudi Arabia, understood as the power base of Sunni Islam. Thus, Iran's involvement in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad is often viewed as exacerbating the sectarian fault lines in Syrian society.

The framing of the Iranian involvement in the Syrian conflict is an area that is inherently intertwined with the issue of sectarianism. The essentialist frame sees the Iranian intervention as driven by the kinship between the Alawites, as a branch of Shia Islam, and the Iranian and Lebanese Shia. The main incentive of this intervention is religious in nature—that is, to promote and spread confessional values. As Jawad Sharbaji of *Enab Baladi* states:

> When they [Hezbollah] enter [the town of] al-Qusayr and raise banners saying "Ya Hussain" [an Arabic phrase used by Shia Muslims to call on the support of Hussain bin Ali, the third imam of Shia Islam] on the mosques, you cannot hide the sectarian dimension. . . . All these militias coming from Iran and Iraq are coming under the banner of the "protection of the [Shia] holy sites"; they are coming here with sectarian goals. (personal communication, July 28, 2015)

This framing is reflected in the terminology, where "Shiite," or the antinormative label "sectarian," is used to describe foreign militias fighting alongside Assad combined with a stronger emphasis on the militias' presence on the battlefield.

In contrast, the social-constructivist frame uses national labels (Iraqi, Lebanese, Iranian, Afghani) rather than those associated with sectarian identities in reporting on foreign militias. *Souriatna*'s Mansour al-Omari (2015), for example, explicitly rejects the sectarian dimension in Iran's involvement and pointedly describes the alliance between Assad and Tehran as the "axis dressed up as Shia" (p. 11). According to this frame, while the political and military alliance between Assad and Iran might be described by its detractors as a "Shia alliance," or might even self-identify as such when it is convenient, this label has little analytical or explanatory value.

This emphasis on the sectarian identities of the foreign militias in the essentialist frame finds even greater resonance when the regional power struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran is taken into consideration. The regional Arabic-language media framing of this conflict as a Sunni–Shia one has become so widespread that it has become the norm. Jawad Sharbaji of *Enab Baladi* thus believes, "you cannot report on the Iranian nuclear deal without mentioning the background of the Sunni–Shia struggle in the region" (personal communication, July 28, 2015).

The Sectarian-Demographic Nexus

In a context of massive movements of refugees, the Iranian involvement in Syria is not only seen through the prism of military assistance but also perceived as aiming to fundamentally alter the indigenous culture and identity of Syria by changing the demographic composition of the country. Such fears become exceptionally resonant at a time of such great demographic upheaval in the country. Thus, we see several stories about Iranian and Assad-sponsored *Shiitization* (Shia proselytizing) of Syrian communities and about the expanding sphere of Iran's economic influence.

In one such story on *Enab Baladi*, Walid al-Agha (2015) reports on how the regime resettled 5,000 people from the families of "Shia militias" that were based in the town of Bosra al-Sham after the opposition took control of the area. According to al-Agha, the families were resettled in the area of Hujayra in southern Damascus after its "majority Sunni" residents were expelled. The area is adjacent to the Sayyidah Zaynab Mosque and mausoleum, an important holy site for Shia Muslims. This act, according to Al-Agha,

> can only be described as "settlement" . . . whereby Assad forces aim to form a "Shia belt" around Sayyidah Zaynab to "establish a suburb near the capital Damascus akin to the southern suburb in Beirut [*al-Dahiya al-Janubiya*—a large, predominantly Shia Muslim neighborhood in Beirut, Lebanon, considered the main stronghold of Hezbollah]." (p. 5)

Such framing can be put in the context of a larger emphasis on the perceived issue of changing demographics in sensitive areas in Syria in favor of the rural Alawites and its importance to the current conflict. In this view, the Alawites are seen to be, over a long period of time, translating their political hegemony over the state into a demographic hegemony in hitherto traditionally Sunni areas through internal migration and settlement (Al-Ali, 2015).

Nevertheless, another article in *Enab Baladi* describes these demographic threats felt by Damascus's Sunnis as analogous to the threats felt by the Alawites in the coastal regions from the advent

of the Sunni refugees (Al-Jablawi, 2015b). These sentiments, and their motivation on the grounds of sectarian identities, pit the two religious communities against each other. By recognizing that these demographic fears are mutual and are ingrained in the relationship between sectarian communities, the frame attempts to establish and elucidate the universal identification with one's sect, and the concrete boundaries between sects.

On the other hand, the response of the social-constructivist frame to the Shiitization question emphasizes the local economic and political conditions rather than the identitarian level. *Ayn al-Madina*, for example, published a two-page feature on Shiitization within the Ismaili minority community in the town of Masyaf. The choice of the Ismaili community, a separate branch of Shia Islam, directly problematizes the approach to Shiitization as a religious venture targeted against Syria's Sunnis; rather, it is interpreted as an Iranian project that "uses religion to achieve political gains" (Al-Faqih, 2015, p. 12). This project, according to the frame, is underpinned by the political considerations and interests of the state of Iran rather than being driven by a Shia religious fervor. Thus, it utilizes religious tools and discourses to achieve political domination rather than the other way around.

By examining the reasons that young men from the town convert to Shia, a more complex local reality is revealed. In addition to the obvious incentives of money and influence, prior enmities and clashes with the local neighboring Alawite villages emerge as incentives as well. By joining a larger group, the writer states, some Ismailis hope to gain protection from assaults by thugs from neighboring villages (Al-Faqih, 2015). Through its analysis of the fluid balances of power among these three religious communities (all considered branches of Shia Islam) on the hyperlocal level, the article illustrates the main assumption of this frame: political conditions, constraints, and incentives shape—rather than be determined by—relations among different communities and individuals and their subjective identities.

The Alawite Question

The essentialist frame's approach to the discussion of Alawites totalizes their relationship with the regime and the army into one of complete assimilation. This framing is reinforced by categorizing this assimilation, and the sectarian-driven project behind it, as a continuation of other historical episodes that are interpreted in the same light. So, for example, the first part of Zakariyya al-Husaini's (2015a) feature on the emergence of sectarianism in Syria explains how Alawites came to dominate the Syrian army under the French mandate. In the second part, which covers the period right after independence and until the 1963 Baath Party coup d'état, al-Husaini (2015b) develops this story by describing how the Alawites masterminded a plan to "overrun the army by volunteering en masse" (p. 8).

This reporting on Alawites reflects the frame's conception of identities as objective categories of their own. Because these values and the allegiances they engender are already attested, thorough examinations of the structures inside this community are no longer needed. For if sectarian identity is the only plausible explanation for political allegiance, then to question *why* Alawites support the regime is pointless. The emphasis then shifts to demonstrating and illustrating *how* this support materializes in the Syrian conflict.

In contrast, the social-constructivist frame devotes much effort to exploring the internal pluralities within the Alawite community. This exploration can be seen as an attempt to uncover and understand the conditions that shape Alawites' support of the regime as well as counter the regime's narrative of internal solidity. In one story, which appears in a dedicated section in *Ayn al-Madina* where local issues in the Alawite community are regularly explored, the writer relates the struggles of an Alawite mother to provide for a family hit by the misfortunes of the war. When her son, Rateb, a soldier in the elite republican guard unit in the regime army, loses both his legs in the war, the family is left without income:

> As a result of this, the mother's last resort was to carry the photo of her handicapped son and to knock on the doors of government officials in Tartus, so that she may succeed in propitiating them into hiring her college-graduate daughter in whatever job. . . . The mother was insulted, sent away and scolded several times and the deputy-governor yelled in her face: "you think your son is the only one injured in this country?" ("Trajidia al-jarih al-asadi rateb muhammad," 2015, p. 19)

The article then highlights the many sympathetic responses the mother received within the loyalist community, drawing attention to the sharp contrast between the sympathies of the loyalists with the mother's suffering and their support of the very institutions that perpetuate that same suffering.

The problematization of the sect's relationship with the army and the regime is illustrated even more concretely in Salim Bassis's (2015) report in *Souriatna* about Alawites' different responses to mandatory conscription in the army. Bassis's article investigates the financial incentives offered by informal militias to attract young men who decide not to serve in the army. In conclusion, Bassis emphasizes that economic conditions are the determining factor in joining the regime army or the loyalist militias and that, in general, "only few join the regular army today, and most of them come from among the poor who cannot afford any other way" (p. 4).

These examples reveal the often-contradictory processes that are seen to govern the relationships between these communities and the regime. The social-constructivist frame attempts to show that sectarian identity is far from being the main influence behind the actions of individuals and does not sufficiently explain their political allegiances and choices.

Conclusion

The analysis reveals the heterogeneous nature of the alternative media in Syria. Articles in which the essentialist frame dominates contain all the hallmarks of antagonistic discourses in their discussion of the sectarian issue. By explaining the conflict through primordial linkages of sect communities, the essentialist frame creates the "self" and the "other" as homogeneous, distinct, and irreconcilable categories. This process includes the creation of important signifiers of each identity group (such as the veil, or lack thereof) that obscure contradictions within each community (such as class, region, or even sect). The social-constructivist frame, however, exhibits a reverse process. Categories of "pro-uprising" and "pro-regime" are much more malleable and difficult to demarcate. The focus is often on the complexity of these different communities and on the motivations behind their self-identification with either of these categories. The

distinction between the two frames can also be discerned in their treatment of the relationship between the Alawites and the regular army fighting on behalf of the Assad regime. The essentialist frame portrays the army as a representative (and an extension) of a totally mobilized and militarized sect. The social-constructivist frame portrays a more complex relationship in which some Alawites (and members of other communities) identify with the army willingly, some are forced to join, and some attempt to escape.

The diversity of framing strategies and approaches emphasizes the myriad actors that populate spheres of alternative media. The oppositional media sphere in Syria thus functions as a site of discursive struggle between diverse political and ideological forces united only by their opposition to the incumbent authority in the country. Along with other studies (see Cammaerts & Carpentier 2009), this finding challenges the simplistic assumptions of alternative media spheres as carriers of invariably counterhegemonic narratives. It also highlights alternative media actors' strategies in embedding (or disembedding) their work within mainstream narratives if it is advantageous to their cause. Thus, alternative media actors situate their work within an increasingly hybrid media environment that offers both challenges as well as opportunities for synchronization with mainstream media narratives (see Alexander & Aouragh, 2014; Gilboa et al., 2016).

Although this article takes its starting point in the mediatized nature of modern conflicts and recognizes the central role of the media in such an environment, we have attempted to move beyond simplistic narratives of media empowerment as advised by Zayani (2016). This is especially important in the context of the Arab uprisings, where binaries of skepticism and optimism permeate the discussions on the media's role in the region. Finally, in line with Cottle (2006), we recognize the limitations of focusing on media representations. We believe that further work is needed on the dialectic relationship between such representations, the public(s) of these media, and the media producers themselves.

References

Aggestam, K., Cristiano, F., & Strömbom, L. (2015). Towards agonistic peacebuilding? Exploring the antagonism–agonism nexus in the Middle East peace process. *Third World Quarterly*, *36*(9), 1736–1753. doi:10.1080/01436597.2015.1044961

Al-Agha, W. (2015, April 26). "Tawtin shi'i" janouba dimashq ["Shia settlement" south of Damascus]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 5.

Al-Ali, S. (2015, February 1). Dimashq sata'ud wa nahnu sanabqa hurrasan laha [Damascus will return and we will stay its guardians]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 10.

Al-asad yantaqim min al-ghouta wa yashun "harb ibadah" [Assad takes revenge on Ghouta and wages a "war of extermination"]. (2015, February 8). *Enab Baladi*, p. 3.

Alexander, A., & Aouragh, M. (2014). Egypt's unfinished revolution: The role of the media revisited. *International Journal of Communication*, *8*, 890–915.

Al-Faqih, S. (2015, March 1). Mandubu iran fi misyaf tahdid wujudi limujtama'iha [Iran's deputies in
        Masyaf are an existential threat to its community]. *Ayn Al-Madina*, pp. 12–13.

Al-Homsi, A. (2015, February 22). Al-ahyaa al-muwaliyah fi homs: khawf wa halaa wa in'idam al-shu'ur bi
        al-aman [Loyalist neighborhoods in Homs: Fear and panic and absence of a sense of safety].
        Enab Baladi, p. 6.

Al-Husaini, Z. (2015a, March 22). Tarsikh al-ta'ifiyya fi suriyah, kayfa bada' wa man wara'uh? al-juz' al-
        awal: fi thil al-ihtlal al-faransi [Entrenching sectarianism in Syria: How did it start and who is
        behind it? Part 1: Under the French mandate]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 8.

Al-Husaini, Z. (2015b, April 5). Tarsikh al-ta'ifiyya fi suriyah, kayfa bada' wa man wara'uh? al-juz' al-
        thani: ba'd al-istiqlal [Entrenching sectarianism in Syria: How did it start and who is behind it?
        Part 2: After independence]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 8.

Al-Jablawi, H. (2015a, February 1). Bayna al-ta'yid wa al-'idana 7 madanyin dahaya sawarikh jaysh al-
        islam fi al-lazikiyah [Between support and condemnation, 7 civilian victims by Jaish al-Islam
        rockets in Latakia]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 4.

Al-Jablawi, H. (2015b, March 29). Onf al-sujoun yatasa'ad fi al-lazikiyah [Violence increases in Latakia
        prisons]. *Enab Baladi*, p. 5.

Allen, T., & Seaton, J. (1999). *The media of conflict: War reporting and representations of ethnic violence*.
        London, UK: Zed Books.

Al-Mustafa, H. M. (2012). *al-Majāl al-'āmm al-iftirāḍī fī al-thawrah al-sūrīyah* [Virtual public sphere of the
        Syrian revolution]. Beirut, Lebanon: Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Al-Omari, M. (2015, February 22). Di mistura: tabaki ala ha'et karbala' fi dimashq [De Mistura: Crying on
        the Karbala wall in Damascus]. *Souriatna*, p. 11.

Al-Rawi, A. K. (2015). Sectarianism and the Arab Spring: Framing the popular protests in Bahrain. *Global
        Media and Communication*, *11*(1), 25–42. doi:10.1177/1742766515573550

Bassis, S. (2015, February 1). Al-'alawiyyun yakhtabi'un, shabab yughadirun suriya khilal araba' wa
        ishreena sa'a [Alawites hiding, youth leaving the country within 24 hours). *Souriatna*, p. 4.

Batatu, H. (1999). *Syria's peasantry, the descendants of its lesser rural notables, and their politics*.
        Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Cammaerts, B., & Carpentier, N. (2009). Blogging the 2003 Iraq War: Challenging the ideological model of
        war and mainstream journalism? *Observatorio (OBS*)*, *3*(2), 1–23.
        doi:10.15847/obsOBS322009276

Carpentier, N. (2017). *The discursive-material knot: Cyprus in conflict and community media participation*. Bern, Switzerland: Peter Lang.

Carruthers, S. L. (2011). *The media at war*. London, UK: Macmillan Education.

Cottle, S. (2006). *Mediatized conflict: Developments in media and conflict studies*. Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press.

De Angelis, E. (2014, September 11). Rethinking Syrian media. *openDemocracy*. Retrieved from https://www.opendemocracy.net/arab-awakening/enrico-de-angelis/rethinking-syrian-media

Douwes, D. (2010). Migration, faith and community: Extra-local linkages in coastal Syria. In P. Sluglett & S. Weber (Eds.), *Syria and Bilad al-Sham under Ottoman rule: Essays in honour of Abdul Karim Rafeq* (pp. 483–495). Leiden, Netherlands: Brill.

Downing, J. (2008). Social movement theories and alternative media: An evaluation and critique. *Communication, Culture and Critique*, *1*(1), 40–50. doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2007.00005.x

Entman, R. M. (2004). *Projections of power: Framing news, public opinion, and U.S. foreign policy*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Fildis, A. T. (2012). Roots of Alawite-Sunni rivalry in Syria. *Middle East Policy*, *19*(2), 148–156. doi:10.1111/j.1475-4967.2012.00541.x

Gilboa, E., Jumbert, M. G., Miklian, J., & Robinson, P. (2016). Moving media and conflict studies beyond the CNN effect. *Review of International Studies*, *42*(4), 654–672. doi:10.1017/S026021051600005X

Goodarzi, J. (2013). *Iran and Syria at the crossroads: The fall of the Tehran-Damascus axis?* (Viewpoints No. 35). Washington, DC: Wilson Center.

Hammad, M. (2015, February 1). Al-'alawiyyun . . . heena yatahawal al-wa'i ila ghayr bashar al-asad [Alawites . . . when consciousness turns away from Bashar al-Assad]. *Ayn Al-Madina*, p. 14.

Hammond, P. (2000). Reporting "humanitarian" warfare: Propaganda, moralism and NATO's Kosovo war. *Journalism Studies*, *1*(3), 365–386. doi:10.1080/1461670X.2010.10094088

Hänska Ahy, M. (2016). Networked communication and the Arab Spring: Linking broadcast and social media. *New Media & Society*, *18*(1), 99–116. doi:10.1177/1461444814538634

Hina yaqtatil shabbihat al-asad . . . fi ahad ma'aqilihim [When Assad's thugs fight . . . in one of their strongholds]. (2015, February 15). *Ayn Al-Madina*, p. 19.

Hinnebusch, R. (2016). The sectarian revolution in the Middle East. *R/Evolutions: Global Trends and Regional Issues*, *4*(1), 120–152.

Hughes, G. A. (2014). Syria and the perils of proxy warfare. *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, *25*(3), 522–538. doi:10.1080/09592318.2014.913542

Issa, A. (2016). *Syria's new media landscape: Independent media born out of war* (MEI Policy Paper No. 2016-9). Washington, DC: Middle East Institute.

Jakobsen, P. V. (2000). Focus on the CNN effect misses the point: The real media impact on conflict management is invisible and indirect. *Journal of Peace Research*, *37*(2), 131–143. doi:10.1177/0022343300037002001

Keeble, R. L. (2015). Giving peace journalism a chance. In C. Atton (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to alternative and community media* (pp. 335–346). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Kraidy, M. M. (2016). *The naked blogger of Cairo*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (2001). *Hegemony and socialist strategy: Towards a radical democratic politics*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Lake, D. A., & Rothchild, D. (1996). Containing fear: The origins and management of ethnic conflict. *International Security*, *21*(2), 41–75.

Lynch, M., Freelon, D., & Aday, S. (2014). *Syria's socially mediated civil war* (Peaceworks No. 91). Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.

Markham, T. (2014). Social media, protest cultures and political subjectivities of the Arab spring. *Media, Culture and Society*, *36*(1), 89–104. doi:10.1177/0163443713511893

Matar, D. (2016). Narratives and the Syrian uprising: The role of stories in political activism and identity struggles. In M. Zayani & S. Mirgani (Eds.), *Bullets and bulletins: Media and politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings* (pp. 89–107). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Mouffe, C. (1993). *The return of the political*. London, UK: Verso Books.

Pérez Quintero, C., Ramírez Hincapié, C. E., & Rodríguez, C. (2015). Cameras and stories to disarm wars: Performative communication in alternative media. In C. Atton (Ed.), *The Routledge companion to alternative and community media* (pp. 123–133). Abingdon, UK: Routledge.

Qannut, K. (2015a, February 15). Al-muzawadah, tubarrer shallal al-dam al-suri [Upstaging: Justifies the Syrian bloodbath]. *Souriatna*, p. 12.

Qannut, K. (2015b, February 8). Hawran wa jabal al-'arab: mina al-thawra al-souriyyah al-kubrah 1925 ila al-thawra al-souriyyah 2011 [Hawran and Jabal al-Arab: From the Great Syrian revolt in 1925 to the Syrian revolt 2011]. *Souriatna*, p. 15.

Robinson, P. (1999). The CNN effect: Can the news media drive foreign policy? *Review of International Studies*, *25*(2), 301–309.

Schoemaker, E., & Stremlau, N. (2014). Media and conflict: An assessment of the evidence. *Progress in Development Studies*, *14*(2), 181–195. doi:10.1177/1464993413517790

Seale, P. (1965). *The struggle for Syria: A study of post-war Arab politics, 1945–1958*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Taki, M. (2012). *Country case study: Syria*. London, UK: BBC Media Action.

Trajidia al-jarih al-asadi rateb muhammad [The tragedy of Assadist victim Rateb Muhammad]. (2015, March 1). *Ayn Al-Madina*, p. 19.

Wolfsfeld, G. (1997). *Media and political conflict: News from the Middle East*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Yonay, Y., & Shor, E. (2014). Ethnic coexistence in deeply divided societies: The case of Arab athletes in the Hebrew media. *Sociological Quarterly*, *55*(2), 396–420. doi:10.1111/tsq.12056

Zayani, M. (2016). On the entangled question of media and politics in the Middle East. In M. Zayani & S. Mirgani (Eds.), *Bullets and bulletins: Media and politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings* (pp. 23–43). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zayani, M., & Mirgani, S. (Eds.). (2016). *Bullets and bulletins: Media and politics in the wake of the Arab uprisings*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zeitzoff, T. (2018). Does social media influence conflict? Evidence from the 2012 Gaza conflict. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *62*(1), 29–63. doi:10.1177/0022002716650925