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## Conflict Research Programme

# Syria: The war of constructing identities in the digital space and the power of discursive practices

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# About the Conflict Research Programme

The Conflict Research Programme is a four-year research programme managed by the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the LSE and funded by the UK Department for International Development. Our goal is to understand and analyse the nature of contemporary conflict and to identify international interventions that 'work' in the sense of reducing violence or contributing more broadly to the security of individuals and communities who experience conflict.

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## Abstract

How have Syrians discursively constructed their identities on the social network Facebook between 2011 and 2018? How have various conflict parties used identity politics as a means of mobilization, and how such practices had deflected the rightful demands? Can linguistics using data-evidence approach help us better understand and analyse conflict and identify conflict resolution intervention points?

This research tries to answer these questions amongst others in a series of attempts to show the potentials of multidisciplinary approach to conflict analysis for peace interventions through big data, discursive practices, history and the power of archive.

This paper looks at self and group identity practices within the Syrian conflict by investigating the notion of identity formation from a data-driven perspective. The data is based on analysing published institutional content and comments by ordinary citizens on 296 Syrian conflict related Facebook pages between February 2011 and May 2018. The analysis shows four main clusters of social groups ideologies with certain overlaps and strong fragmentation within the Syrian revolution/opposition's cluster. All clusters' institutions and members have used different rhetorical and linguistic devices in representing their own groups' identities and the other groups' ones. While the roots of the conflict are structural in their nature, mainly of ethnic-religious ideational basis, institutional political messages had a clear role in triggering inflammatory discussions about these identity dimensions. Both the Syrian government and Islamist groups had relatively clear objectives stemming from clear ideologies and explicit communication models. Possessing the needed resources, both have operated within relatively formal structures. This entitled them to continue to construct cultural hegemony through various practices and disseminated discourses via institutions. Both the opposition and the nationalist Kurds lacked self-sustaining resources and clarity in objectives. This hindered, most of the time, the possibilities of creating sustainable and legitimate formal structures and left both the opposition and nationalist Kurds without balanced institutions to formulate more publicly agreeable ideologies to be disseminated for wider public consent, representability, solidarity and public cohesiveness. Beside evidential inter-ideological identity politics; a more intense and destructive intra-ideological identity politics manifested themselves within the opposition cluster resulting in increased fragmentation. This had deflected millions of Syrians from their rightful demands of liberty and equality and channelled public discussions and interests towards minor subjective presumptions and multiple conflicting imagined identities. We concentrated our work on five identity dimensions that were played through identity politics practised in the Syrian conflict. Namely, religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic class, and the geographic location. Through analysed data, we identified four major identity presenting strategies and multiple linguistic devices. To start the discussion, we propose a methodology and a tool for these studies addressing conflict from a discursive point of view.



## 1 Introduction

The paper aims to understand the Syrian conflict following a discursive approach by analysing the online discursive construction of Syrian identities and identity politics in conflict. The objective is to explore alternative perspectives to conflict resolution in the age of information given the power of the internet in the discursive construction lieu. Syrians' natural occurring texts and semiotics on the social network Facebook provide new opportunities to read and understand the Syrian conflict and possibly resolve or mitigate the continuously emerging risks. The ideology-based enormous corpus of beliefs and emotions emerged back since 2011 and still emerging every day constitute collective writing of history process by Syrians, individuals and institutions.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first part provides an overview of the importance of collecting and archiving discursive practices during conflict time for discursive construction studies. A Foucauldian and Gramscian understanding is adopted here to discuss "discursive practices". At one hand, Foucauldian understanding provides a reference to power relations and how power is asserted using language (Foucault, 1977). On the other hand, a Gramscian understanding explains how language when transformed to the mass public via ruling and power classes' institutions can create cultural hegemony (Gramsci et al., 1992). This institutional consideration is crucial to the study of information and ideological dissemination in conflict times. The first part basically sets the theoretical foundation of the work where it is narratively designed around four main dimensions of understanding. (1) identity, social identity, and identity politics; (2) discourse and discursive construction; (3) conflict; (4) institutions & social networks.

Part two focuses on the methodology. Understanding the corpus used for this study, the sampling method, and the tool which was conceptualized and created to serve the research purposes.

Part three, the analytical part, is premised on analysing collected data based on a theoretical foundation presented in part one and the methodology presented in part two.

## 2 Theoretical Foundations

### 2.1 Identity, social identity and Identity politics

#### 2.1.1 Self-Identity

Beliefs and values contribute, in addition to other factors such as gender, religion, race, nationality, work, socio-economic class, age, etc., to the construction of individual identities. They also serve as markers of social affiliation and group identification. Identity crises emerge when individuals between the ages 13-19 fail to achieve ego identity and encounter role confusion. At this age, individuals try to answer questions such as who am I? who can I be? Through which they start to get a clearer notion of social relations (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). James Marcia who builds on Erikson's work provides relevant importance to our research on Syria. The four identity statuses he plots on the axes of 'exploration' and 'commitment' can help us delve into a crucial layer of the Syrian socio-political culture, namely commitments made without exploring alternatives. Through his work we can explain certain types of identity crisis Syrians experienced at least in the past 10 years. These identity crises were obvious in their online discussions and were also manipulated by external and internal factors. Existential crises emerged in many cases when individuals did not know what to do as the norms, and situations they are accustomed to had changed drastically

"The foreclosure status is when a commitment is made without exploring alternatives. Often these commitments are based on parental ideas and beliefs that are accepted without question"

This will also help diagnose several discursive practices from a psychological point of view and relating to the social emergence concept.

### 2.1.2 Group-identification

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) explains individuals' identification with social groups. "the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership" (Tajfel 1972a:31). People reify their social identities through a social comparison between their own group and other groups. Social comparison theory (Festinger, 1957) explains why humans tend to compare themselves to each other. Evaluating one's self-opinion by comparing to others' enables a better self-understanding. However, for a person to reflect through such self-evaluation process, they need to have a self-concept in the first place. Self-Concept is a collection of images influenced by formal and informal socializing experiences. The longer the exposure to those experiences and the more condensed and richer they are, the more rooted the self-concept becomes. In that sense, we can say self-concept is experience dependent. We can now think about the possibility of relating relatively lengthy exposure to certain social experiences to the concept of the imagined nation (Anderson, 1991). Emotional and sensational content disseminated on social media by institutions can also contribute to implanted memories (Landsberg, 2009) phenomena. Implanted memories can then constitute new venues and groups of categorizations. But this is not to assume a determinist effect on identity imposed solely through institutional practices. In fact, people themselves engage in self-categorization processes within groups they identify with by showing distinguishing features they believe they have. Self-distinction assumes exclusively distancing oneself from the "other" who is not "like" or "similar" to group members. This also means increased in-group favouritism and draws less attention to intra-group differences. Still, intra-group conflicts are likely to emerge in the absence of formal structures and clear objectives. This, as we will see, was a distinctive dynamism which groups within the Syrian revolution/opposition ideological construct had created and suffered from. Through this accentuation and attenuation of differences between groups and within groups respectively (Tajfel & Wilkes, 1963) group members perceive themselves not only as different but also better than the others by concentrating on stereotypical positive dimensions. Those dimensions can be imaginary, and they contribute to the imagined identity and imagined nation.

Now to look at the concept of "nation as an imagined community" in relation to self-perception let us consider the mediation role of discursive practices. A nation is a mental construct "it is an imagined political community - and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. it is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion." (Anderson, 1991:6). Imagination can initiate the fabrication of language and its tools. Accordingly, one can continue the search for the notion of a nation within the discursive practices of its members. This imagined political community is fabricated and shared through inter-discursive practices of institutions' figurative discourses and citizens deliberate reflections on them where a dialect relation can describe the negotiation processes of meanings making of this imagined political community. Imagination as a cognitive process of generating images and worlds in the human mind without immediate inputs through human senses is based fundamentally on choosing words that evoke worlds (Long, 2011). Words along with their interpretations are continually acquired and updated through social experiences. The extents to which these words, and more importantly the more sophisticated concepts emerging from them, enjoy public consent can act as barometer of social cohesiveness.

### 2.1.3 Identity politics

Identity politics is an elusive and difficult-to-define concept (Bernstein, 2005). Bernstein alone provides three perspectives to identity politics, namely the neo-Marxist approach, new social movement approach, and social constructionist, postmodernist, and post-structuralist approach (Bernstein, 2005).

In principle, identity politics refers to citizens taking political stands based on perceived outstanding groups' feature(s) they best identify with. Originally, the term is associated with the advocacy and

movement of marginalized citizens together to respond to unfair and anti-human rights practices. But, identity politics as a political campaigning tool has always been used by the left wing politics (Jenkins, 2008). Some argued that identity politics which were supposed to ensure inclusion has turned out to be a divisive medium (AMY, 2018). Some even went far to talk about hate being at the heart of identity politics (O'Neill, 2018). Liberal (Continetti, 2017) and left-wing (Hobsbawm, 1996) critics questioned identity politics as not being able to enhance the lives of marginalized minorities and bring them the aspired social changes they long for.

Originally, identity politics suggests that marginalized people gather and form with other people of similar sentiments and thoughts of injustice their ideological constructs. They gather into groups they best identify with based on these mutual senses of marginalizing, oppression, and injustice. Once they have constructed such groups, they get influenced by rhetoric addressing them, but they do also engage in the processes of influencing the rhetoric through different social experiences and practices, notably including the discursive ones. If they did not perceive themselves oppressed, marginalized, threatened in the first place, people will not identify with and categorize themselves into those -oppression-based groups.

In the Syria context, for example, Syrians not only manifest their own identity elements in their public discussions but also negatively address the identities of the opponents, "since every search for identity includes differentiating oneself from what one is not, identity politics is always and necessarily a politics of the creation of difference" (Benhabib, 1997, p. 28)

A sense of threat triggers and/or amplifies self-categorization/grouping. To release oppression, grouping displays itself through different practices amongst which are discursive practices.

## 2.2 Discursive Work

This analysis of identity construction through discursive practices attempts to identify linguistic strategies and devices used by individual citizens to reflect in a participatory mood on messages disseminated on the social network Facebook by Syrian institutions. Discourse analysis and corpus linguistics are used to handle the complexity of this discursive analysis work (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

It is a challenging task in itself to lexically describe events, actors, or constructs in a complex phenomenon such as conflict. Whose language should the researcher use? For example, in this study, we can describe the same actor as the 'Syrian regime' or the 'Syrian government'. While the latter represents the international and the 'Syrian government' narratives but it does not represent the discourses of Syrians who oppose the Syrian regime. In the same sense, should we use 'revolution', 'crisis', 'civil war', 'social movement', 'conflict', 'war', 'proxy war', 'internationalized conflict' or 'internationalized war' to describe events taking place in Syria at the social, military, political, economic, demographic, and cultural levels since 2011? Each of these descriptive terms signifies a phase of the 'struggle' but also the narratives of a conflicting ideology/political group. Should we use a statement like 'the Syrian president' when he still was not elected democratically in 2000 and millions of Syrians reject his authority? When we talk about Syrians, do we refer to those who were alive in 2011? 2018? Or also those who ended displaced internally and across the border, at the bottom of Mediterranean, under barrels dropped by Syrian regime army planes, under international bombardment, beheaded by terrorists or in prisons and detention centres? Do we still need to call them detainees after eight years of detention, or maybe 'hostages' can be a more relevant term to apply when they are being used as a negotiation card in political talks? When referring to terrorists, which definition are we using? ISIS, HTS, PKK, and Hezbollah are on the list of terrorist groups by many governments. Yet most of international and regional media covering events in Syria had employed different agenda in the past years when communicating news about the four clusters. Whose narrative are we considering? the Syrian government/regime, the Turkish government, nationalist Kurds, international community? When we repeatedly say the international community, to whom exactly are we referring?



As one may realize, while the main objective of this study is to understand conflict through discursively constructed identities it is crucial to draw the reader's attention to the importance of remaining attentive to used language in analysing the language, mainly with sensitive subjects such as conflict. Criticizing, challenging, reconsidering dominant narratives and what seems to be taken for granted discursive practices is an important role of conflict analysis.

## 2.3 Institutions & Social Networks

Neo-Marxism suggests that discourses formulated by ruling dominant groups and disseminated to the public via either voluntarily affiliated or controlled institutions contribute to constructing hegemonic culture. Imposed ideologies encoded in crafted discourses and carried out by institutions of power contribute to influencing and shaping public opinions, individual identities and possibly a cultural hegemony.

However, these socialization processes take alternative forms in the social networks and media realm. First, both concepts of ruling dominant groups and powerful ideologies port different notions. With social networks, there is the theoretical possibility that every citizen of this world can broadcast in a one-to-many format, thus posing a radical challenge to the traditional notion of power. This is also noticeable with the possibility of collective many to many broadcasts whether via peers influence, fake profiles or bots. Second, there is the nature of communication methods themselves; the tools, policies, regulations and processes managing those broadcasting platforms and playing a great deal in influencing the shaping of public discussions and regulating individuals' emotions, attitudes and behaviours.

In Syria, as we will see later, the impact of institutional content is undeniable, during the revolution then conflict and war. Social networks were the main source of information to millions of Syrians who were significantly influenced by the disseminated content. Considering the "uses and gratification" approach in studying shared content help to shift to the study of people. While in this case study it will not be in terms of looking at people's individual characteristics, it will still help to study the influence of institutional content through a bottom-up approach by investigating how ordinary citizens identify with, reflect to, and create content corresponding with their social and psychological needs (Cantril, 1940; Hovland et al., 1949).

### 2.3.1 Facebook's political significance

Social networks are popular. Communication on social networks is generally characterized as being easy to operate, exceptionally low in cost, and efficient in reaching a relatively wide audience. In 2014, the middle year in our studied corpus timeline here, Facebook was the main social media with the highest penetration and market share in the Middle East (Andras, 2014). Facebook is a dynamic transformation social construct where realities get mediated and beliefs transform into new constructs. "Facebook use is motivated by two primary needs: (1) the need to belong and (2) the need for self-presentation. Demographic and cultural factors contribute to the need of belonging, whereas neuroticism, narcissism, shyness, self-esteem and self-worth contribute to the need for self-presentation (Nadkarni & Hofmann, 2012). On Facebook, private traits and attributes are predictable from digital records of human behaviour. As an example, Facebook can predict with high accuracy how long one will be in a relationship (Zolfagharifard, 2014). When it comes to identity politics, Facebook environment facilitates these identity practices. Users immerse themselves in chambers of echo, seeking social group confirmation (Snyder & Cantor, 1979).

People like to confirm their beliefs by seeking and receiving confirmatory content (Festinger, 1957; G. Lord et al., 1979). Facebook algorithms do just that. The recommender systems push content that goes inline with user's initial interests, helping only to confirm and enforce user's current beliefs' systems. The potentials to hear "other" points of view in a safe context are scarce. When there is such a minor possibility, if that point of view is not liked by the receiver, the potentials to respond aggressively are usually high giving the nature of the space/network architecture.

Governments understand the power of Facebook. In 2013, Facebook report showed over 53,754 government requests for user data worldwide, the number of requests for the just first half of 2018 was almost doubled to 103,815. Facebook reportedly said they are challenging autocratic practices. The political significance of Facebook is undeniable. Facebook plays an influential role in democratic participation, questioning hegemonic culture, provides innovative tools to the narrative formulation, and opens new possibilities for identity conceptualization and construction/reconstruction. However, the potentials are not realized yet in a holistic understanding with a sharing mentality at the heart of Facebook business model itself. As an example, the mobility and portability features worth further applicable investigation when it comes to “paraphragmatic screen” which suggests that “porous surfaces” can enable both messages’ senders and receivers to generate new types of identities (Sáez-Mateu, 2018).

Facebook has played a vital role in Syrians’ communication as of 2011. The very first calls for revolution appeared on Facebook. Syrians used Facebook to organize their gatherings, and the Syrian government used Facebook to identify opponents, trace, detain and in many cases kill them. In the absence of reliable and balanced traditional media institutions, most of the conflict parties relied on Facebook to disseminate their crafted messages and formulating their own subjective narratives about conflict and inclusively the identities of themselves and their opponents. Civil society organizations used Facebook as an advocacy platform, ordinary citizens extensively and frequently expressed themselves online. New modes of expression appeared amongst Syrians for the first time in 2011. And given Syria’s high-context culture (HALL, 1976; Meyer, 2014), Facebook was a perfect match medium for implicit communication practices and therefore decreasing fact-checking and evidence-based discussions.

In this study, a sample of 296 Syrian Facebook pages is used to analyse discursive practices throughout seven years of the conflict. See appendix for the institutions pages covered in this study.

## 2.4 Conflict

There are several tools to analyse any of the conflict’s main dimensions, i.e., actors/relations, issues, dynamics, contexts/structure, causation, positions/strategies. As this research is concerned with identity politics in conflict times, it presupposes the existence of groups perceiving themselves and/or their demands as rightful, oppressed and marginalized. It is also another premise that such groups are targeted via strategically crafted institutional and public figures messages. To understand how this discursive conflict is taking place choosing a conflict analysis tool addressing the causation of conflict was needed. The Multi-causal role model was elected. However, it was important to first explore the conflict dynamics to better understand the relationship between structural and dynamic factors. The conflict tree helps as an entry tool to understand structural factors. The tree contextualizes structural factors and metaphorically presents them in relation to dynamic and manifest ones. Working with dynamic factors involves understanding events taking place in the short term while working with structural factors involve understanding long-term influences.

In our research we suggest that dynamic factors can be identified in, and extracted from institutional messages such as daily news, whereas structural factors can be spotted in citizens’ daily discussions and they reveal identity dimensions, profound beliefs, personality development and crisis amongst other notions. Manifest factors represent topics citizens like to talk about but not their needs. This can be confusing when doing conflict analysis if not properly interpreted by domain knowledge experts and a serious netnography work. Each array of factors provides a clearer understanding of specific types of discursive practices.

### 2.4.1 Collective memory, Groups & Hegemony

Extensive literature addresses the processes by which collective opinions and memories can be influenced and possibly shaped (Herman & Chomsky, 1998; Lippmann, 1997; Young, 1992, 1994).

Maurice Halbwachs worked extensively on collective memory, basing his work on Emile Durkheim. Collective memory provides another strong sense of identity and unites group members, but it can also be used to sustain hegemonic power. An authoritarian regime, for instance, might attempt to force narratives of a unified history (Wodak et al., 2009).

Memories can be implanted as well as imparted. Individual consciousness can be influenced by mass media through 'prosthetic memories' (Landsberg, 2009). Memories that inspire empathy in the receivers may allow them to take empathetic actions that were not possible before implanting these memories. Memories influence not only our perceptions on current history but also on how this history is written. Both during and after the conflict, different narratives compete intensively. This research identifies at least four ideological clusters that emerged in Syria since 2011.

Within this perspective, carefully and timely collected and preserved natural-occurring material on social media allows to continuously visit and investigate the daily life narratives during conflict times, and thus providing empirical evidences for conflict analysis and peace building efforts. Historical visits to such material can be helpful to understand conflict dynamics but this seems to be a complex task given the huge corpus. A possible entry point is through collections of public discourses about historical events where they show translated perceptions and conflicting points of views about those events and narratives associated with them.

## 3 Methodology

### 3.1 Research Questions

How digital ethnography and linguistics can use big data to leverage our understanding about identity politics in conflict analysis. Syria as a case study?

### 3.2 Approach

This study uses discursive analysis to understand identity politics in the Syrian conflict. The theoretical basis of social identity along with other related domains of knowledge explained in part one, helped frame the research field, establish the foundations, and design the methodology. A mixed-methods approach is used, where methods and tools from digital ethnography, corpus linguistics, historical discourse analysis and conflict analysis are adopted. Naturally occurring materials of ordinary citizens on Facebook throughout more than seven years were collected to permit a bottom-up data-evidence analytical approach to be designed. The main hypothesis formulated here is that the rightful demands of Syrians were deflected by many factors, including identity politics practices by conflicting parties' institutions. That being said, this work focusses on the role institutions play at one end in forming public opinions through the dissemination of narratives, rhetoric, and discourses, and citizens' manifestation of individual and group identities through deliberate participation (Boulianne, 2015) when there is useable access to the internet. The orienting question was whether certain stories strategically disseminated by institutions had participated in enticing conflict by playing identity politics during sensitive times? If yes, then which types of stories were they?

To explore this, the content produced by both institutions and ordinary citizens needed to be studied. But firstly, a directional understanding to what dimensions of identity were at high stake in these online discursive conflicts was needed. Also, the events/occasions of conflict needed to be identified and defined. Within that understanding, institutional content which generated higher lexical engagement by ordinary citizens was mainly considered for the purpose of this research. Engagement refers to ordinary citizens comments on published content. Visual symbols reflecting emotional statuses, commonly known as emojis, were not considered for this analysis. Although they were helpful for other particular studies by the researcher.

### 3.2.1 Bottom-up discursive practices of citizens through everyday conversations

The bottom-up approach looks at comments generated by ordinary citizens on the social network Facebook to better understand how such discursive practices were played in propagating identity elements. Investigating comments in the past eight years helps to understand imagined and constructed worlds through the language of ordinary citizens.

Comments represent an interesting source of information and a possible window to the “diachronic unfolding of conflict” (Lehti et al., 2016).

Through discursive interaction analysis, the research identifies in-group vs. out-group discursive identity practices and how Syrians use several strategies and linguistic devices with different ideological bases to express their identities. Institutions, through their published content, allow for a wider range of public opinions. This capacity to induce opinion expression is magnified during sensitive times such as conflict. During such times people commonly witness increased tensions, polarization, and a general lack of secure and peaceful spaces to debate. Syrian conflict witnessed remarkable shrinking in both digital and materialistic spaces (Freedomhouse, 2018). However, online expressions come with their own communications models too, such as the ability to post anonymously, the absence of moderators, the alternative tools facilitating virality, chambers of echo and filtration, automated organizing and topics framing through pre-set algorithms.

## 3.3 The Tool

T-Algorithm is the main tool that was conceptualized in the first place by the author and materialized by commissioning three consecutive Syrian programmers to allow for digital humanities studies in MENA. The early version of the tool was used back in 2013-2014 for a research project to obtain a master's degree from Paris 8 University by studying emerging online Syrian art after 2011. At that time, the tool was called “Share-Syria”. While working extensively with different types of organizations, mainly in media and human rights sectors, the researcher continued to conceptualize and develop the tool's potentials which is now called T-Algorithm, and for the corpus related to Syria: “T-Algorithm - The Syrian Corps”.

The tool was used to archive several Syrian pages on Facebook representing institutions and organizations with influential ideologies explained under institution section and listed in the appendixes.

The institutions are categorized based on their mandates, political tendency, and when they are media institutions/organizations they are organized based on the type of the publishing medium. The tool allows researchers, journalists, and lawyers working on human rights cases, to search a continuously growing corpus of Syrian semiotics produced on Facebook over the past eight years of struggle. By keywords or lexicons, researchers can also create their own lexicons. One can use several lexicons at the same time to narrow down their research and better focus on specific topics.

The tool allows researchers to search content produced between two points of time, in published stories themselves, the comments on them, or the replies on those comments. Researchers can also search by emotional engagement type or sharing patterns. For any searched material, first results will always show as total numbers allowing the explorer to have a global understanding. Once the researcher had selected the content type to explore (story, comment, reply comment or any combination of the three) data will be presented in a visual format. The researcher can zoom in and out by changing the time frame brackets from the filters' menu. Each time unit; i.e, year, month, day will show data points on the graph when there is data. The data points are depicted as numbers. Once decided, the researcher can load the text and start exploring it. Identified content is highlighted in relevant colours to facilitate spotting searched material within a larger corpus. Once an inquiry has been retrieved, all relevant information is shown in one place, that is: date of published content, source of content, engagement types with content. Content appears in an embedded format showing as it appears in its original space on Facebook. The content on Facebook can be accessed from the same window and once selected by the researcher will be displayed in a new tab in the same browser window. This is crucially important to verify empirical data.

Although this is an analysis finding, and also a methodological challenge which does not necessarily best fit under this paragraph, but for epistemological reasons, it is important to note at this moment that some data is not available on Facebook anymore. There are several explanations such as users deactivated accounts, content deletion by posters themselves, deletion by the page moderators or by Facebook itself. However, the good news is that those links are stored and for critical cases, such as crimes, Facebook can be approached to retrieve the original content. However, this note is of crucial importance for empirical and epistemological reasons. See appendix for some illustrations.

### 3.4 Corpus Design

A corpus of 296 Syrian pages on Facebook was collected. The following criteria were considered in sampling and collecting corpus materials: (1) Language: Arabic. The main publishing language of the page needed to be the Arabic language. Although some pages publishing in Kurdish were collected but they were not used in this study. Also, there are comments by ordinary citizens in English, Kurdish, and other languages. Those were not considered in the analysis; (2) Mode of text: written. Although other forms were collected such as images, videos, links to external or within-the-platform content, emojis but they were not used in this analysis; (3) Political lean: (regime, opposition); (4) Mandate: media, human rights, political parties, governmental, non-governmental, research, education, gender, woman; (5) Sampling: convenience, given the limitation of resources and Facebook management application requirements; (6) Medium: Facebook; (7) Domains of texts: Conflict & Identity.

Content production and distribution speaking, all the content was distributed via Facebook. Facebook platform is the medium. All studied corpus was contained in "pages" format not "groups" nor "personal" pages' formats. From a source of power perspective, content is either published by pages themselves or as different types of engagement with that content produced by what looks like ordinary citizens profiles on Facebook. It "looks like" because it is difficult to verify the authenticity of the identities of content publishers as being the selves they claim to be in real life and/or the citizens with the same formal and legal names and online presented identities. Bots, people with several names, people claiming the identities of others, etc. are all possible sources that cannot be identified easily. Although the author had worked previously on developing authentication scale, but Facebook continuously for user privacy reasons shares less with researchers and applications developers so it is becoming harder for independent researchers to develop such identity verification tools. The difficulty of verifying authenticity depends to a good extent on the seriousness and commitment and cooperation shown Facebook to address this crucial question in digital spaces and lives.

Collecting and structuring the corpus was not easy. We faced several challenges mentioned next. See appendix for corpus details.

### 3.5 Challenges

Challenges faced can be organized into four main types. Linguistic ones, that is all challenges related to language itself considering that we have two main types of language here, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and different versions of the Syrian Arabic dialects. Technical challenges in relation to language, which refers to a lack of information technology tools related to processing natural Arabic language in general but absolutely for the purpose of this research, Syrian different dialects too. Technical challenges in relation to big data, this refers to all the challenges related to the volume of data, acquiring methods, storing and retrieval. And finally, challenges related to the methodology and to the complex research question itself. For more elaborative explanation about challenges check appendix.



### 3.6 Procedure

- First, there was the need to delimit and identify the types of conflicting ideologies -turned out to be four, neither exhaustive nor self-containing- and the main identity dimensions subject to conflict -turned out to be five, neither exhaustive nor self-containing-. For this purpose, the researcher investigated data based on membership terms such as “us”, “them”, “we”, “you”, “they”. This had also helped in identifying the main/global discursive strategies -turned out to be four, neither exhaustive nor self-containing-.
- Created a set of expert lexicons and templates of each identity dimension but also for some divisive discursive terms.
- Identified linguistic devices and other communicative strategies using the three modes of persuasion for a convenient categorization. Linked ordinary citizens’ identity discursive practices to source messages published by institutions (elaborated and published in a separate research paper).

#### 3.6.1 Identifying clusters of conflicting ideologies & main dimensions of identity politics

A method to understand ideological clusters and identity dimensions based on citizens self-identification discursive representation was needed. Referring to conflict analysis literature was helpful. As explained in the theoretical part earlier, group identification is based on discursive distancing practices of one’s self and own group from other groups and inclusively their members. To better understand how the Syrian citizens manifested their identification with a group or another, and how they described other groups, a mixed method was used here. The method blends elements from identity heuristic approach (Van Dijk, 2006) and the elements of conflict analysis given the multi-causal role model factors: membership, reasons, target/aims, relations/actors, resources, channels, triggers, catalysts.

Starting with the membership criterion (Delanty et al., 2008; Rychard & Mason, 2005), discourses containing identity elements of we and us vs. you and them were investigated. Other elements of conflict analysis to better understand each ideological cluster’s objectives, structures, and resources and their sustainability potentials were then explored for a better contextualization.

The membership criterion helped identify four main clusters of conflicting ideologies and five main dimensions of social identity manifestation in divisive manners.

#### 3.6.2 Expert Lexicons: From Strategies to Devices

To move from strategies to devices expert lexicons were generated derived from the data extracted in the previous step for each identity dimension: religion, ethnicity, gender, socio-economic classes, proximity.

Lexicons are good tools when analysing texts related to a specific domain of knowledge and more precisely when texts are the product of a known event as is the case here when discussing the Syrian conflict. We have the texts related to the conflict itself which help filter out non-conflict related texts. For example, words such as checkpoints, human shields, refugees, displacement, destruction, detention, kidnapping, etc. do not happen frequently in the daily speeches of ordinary citizens during the ordinary days. We can also recognize emerging vocabulary with conflict significance. Look at compound words, phrases, and words such as Green busses, Jihad al-Nikah, Sabaya al-Ata, Shabieha, Mundaseen, etc. They port new meanings and significations in the Syrian conflict. Probabilities to find such vocabulary in other discourses even when these discourses are about conflicts in other zones are low.

Occurrences of new terms that are divisive, or exclusive, that are related to categorizing and labelling self and others are helpful to identify groups and generate new words, phrases and templates. The use of big data to understand historical discourses helps in longitudinal studies not only from a

socio-linguistic perspective but also to better understand how divisive terms have unfolded and spread. In section three, the analysis, the emergence of certain divisive, inclusive, and stigmatizing terms were traced back to represent some examples. Realizing how such terms had emerged in the first place helps in understanding the role discursive practices can play when analysing conflict and more particularly how conflict unfolded. Terms and words such as Shabiha/thugs, Moundaseen/infiltrators, Irhabeen/terrorists, Al Shaab Youreed/The people want, and other instances stand as good examples.

Traditionally, the main criticism for developing lexicons as a representation model for text classification is that it cannot consider semantic relations. This was not an issue of concern to this methodological approach which mixed quantitative and qualitative methods. The aim here in using data is to enrich understanding about the conflict and identity in a heuristic mode which can be used for future automation and machine learning models. A main objective of this research is to identify themes under each identity dimension as well as the linguistic devices carrying those themes and communicating them but not to model topics under each theme. In that sense, guided by a heuristic understanding (Van Dijk, 2006) the researcher extracted knowledge using expert lexicons with several iterations which can constitute form now on an observed material for future machine training work.

For knowledge extraction, elaboration, and validation purposes there are several ways to develop syntactic or semantic templates based on the research objectives. The lexicons and templates helped filter out discourses not relevant to this research. The dictionaries were created following a basic procedure. Five main lexicons for each one of the identity dimensions were constructed. They were enriched via three consecutive iterations. The iteration process helped enrich lexicons and create sub-ones by considering most frequent collocation words. The lexicons were then used as bridges of knowledge acquisition moving from strategies to devices. Once devices have been identified, new lexicons were created in Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) language and Syrian dialects.

### **3.6.3 Identified discursive practices by each ideology and by each identity dimension.**

After general discursive devices and strategies were identified under each mode of persuasion they were clustered by ideology and identity dimensions for alternative examination.

### **3.6.4 Linguistic and Literary Devices**

Next step aimed to understand employed rhetorical and linguistic devices. Addressing various linguistic devices employed in the discursive construction of national identities by looking first at the general persuasive methods, and then investigating the rhetoric and linguistic devices used to present both in-group and out-groups.

As one can see, this bottom-up approach allows an empirical investigation on how ordinary Syrian citizens negotiate, construct, and present their identities during their online daily lives. The approach allows us to understand institutional practices in relation to ideologies by directly investigating Syrians ideologies and emotions.

## 4 Analysis

### 4.1 Institutional discourse & Identity politics

One week before the commencing of the uprising in Syria back in March 2011 the Syrian government unblocked Syrians access to Facebook. Syrians who were accessing the network anyways through changing proxies started to follow on the news taking place in their country through their network of friends. Two main regional Television stations (Qatar state backed Al Jazeera and Saudi state backed Al Arabiya) Al Manar and later on Al Mayadeen tv stations backed by Iranian government, BBC Arabic, TV5 Arabic, Syrian state TV, and Orient TV owned by a Syrian businessman and broadcasting from Jordan with management in UAE with no shared or clear information about its funding sources.

Soon as of 2011 an emerged media ecosystem backed mainly by the European union, and the states departments of UK, France, and USA will start mushrooming into more than 400 Syrian media outlet sources. That multiplicity of voices was needed and is still needed, but unfortunately it soon shrunk to only a handful few sources and eventually returned to state and semi state-controlled media. The main media outlets at the time of writing this are few controlled mainly by Qatari, Russian, USA, EU different states and the Syrian regime.

Let us start by having a brief look at the role institutions played in the Syrian conflict. Gramsci (Gramsci, 1971) argues that dominant ruling groups disseminate ideologies and values through institutions to ensure public consent. Institutions pass messages with the objective of socializing whereby people become normalized into the beliefs and values of the dominant social group. During conflicts at a national scale, and even an internationalized one such as the Syrian conflict, each conflicting party develops and operationalizes its own social institutions. While conflict adds to the scarcity of resources, the digital age provides fortunately -or not- the possibilities to run institutions with relatively low resources. This economic efficiency brings with it at least one obvious fatal consequence to democratic life, namely a relatively wide absence of regulations. The Syrian case is not an exception, Facebook as an organic digital construct, provided the needed structures to all conflicting parties to widely disseminate their messages however with the absence of law enforcement regulations.

The Syrian government/regime and its allies were way more conscious and strategically capable of creating and operating such social institutions and the crafted messages disseminated through them. While the main assets of revolutionists were rightful demands and creativity, they lacked the leadership, formal structures and strategic communication, those which were the main assets of the regime. Islamists on the other hand had strong brand equity and they employed very precise, alternative, unfamiliar and accordingly eye-catching viral audio-visual narratives. Those narratives with the confirmatory value to audience assumptions were plausible and 'shareable'. By disseminating content with virality-potentials, Islamists were indeed recruiting advocates and adding up to their popular base. The regime relied on similar virality strategies by employing uniform reductionist narratives. Nationalist Kurds had the dramatic hero power. The fighter women against terrorists for example were repeatedly used in the visual narratives.

Seeking dominance, institutional messages provided the narrative of conflicting parties and kept framing and reframing opponents narratives. The deliberate public responds to those messages demonstrated speakers' perceptions and positions towards communicated messages but also manifested in many cases one or more of the speakers' identity dimensions. Those linguistic manifestations of identity dimensions fed into the identity politics processes. Several factors played at the top-down institutional messaging level. For example, the time of posting messages, any implicitly or explicitly suggestive editorial images, the interactivity of the institution, the messages design itself such as being a call of action, information, sarcastic, hate speech enticing, were some of these factors.

It is helpful in this regard to realize how institutional/catalyst messages themselves were not the exclusive triggers who enticed identity politics conversations but also speakers' comments on them too. The inter-speakers' comments generated citizens-to-citizens conversations. While in few cases, those horizontal communications contributed to bringing inclusivity atmosphere, they had strong impact on polarizing and super fragmenting society giving the absence of formal structures, clear objectives, and communication regulations. Several communication patterns were identified such as that most of the discursive conflicts are triggered by men, as well as the tendency to rush and use sexist terms.

Additionally, institutions efforts towards mainstreaming social cohesiveness and inclusivity by publishing relevant content were usually met by violent and aggressive responses from citizens who did not agree with such content. This brings up again discussions about the changes of one-to-many communication models and the proportionally increased powers of citizens/audience in comparison to institutional powers within the national power spectrum.

Having reviewed institutional messages that triggered heated public discussions, two main elements were identified that contribute to heating up aggressive online discussions. The events that trigger and enforce established identity perceptions and the activism type and degree of institution's moderation systems and policies when moderating public discussions.

If managed thoughtfully by digital institutions in conflict times can play significant role in conflict mediation. Here is a handy account of several occasions where self-identity vs. the identity of the others get higher chances to exhibit themselves:

- Call of action: Institutions sometimes publish stories calling citizens for action. Messages such as "your comment please" clearly encourage audience to participate in public discussions and express their opinions. Institutional messages carrying calls for 'collective help' usually trigger heated battles amongst opponents caused by the tension created between satire and anger/sorrow. Example: Cries from besieged Ghouta.
- Self-honouring and accusation of others: Corruption and betrayal cases
- Nostalgia: being reminded about and /or remembering the good old days
- Threat: When under direct and close threat citizens manifest the concept of identity more in their daily conversations than during the ordinary days.
- Call of action using 'honour' theme.
- Anniversaries related to:
  - Current events taking place since 2011
  - Contemporary history events perceived by many Syrians to have to do with current events such as (Kurds uprising, Hafez Al Assad coup, Hafez Al Assad death, Bassel Al Assad death, Hama Massacre
  - Historical events believed by many Syrians to have to do with the religious dimension of the conflict - Shiite and Sunni / Sunni and Alawite / Sunni and Christians, etc.
  - National and religious holidays and events belonging to one group or another. Norouz, Christmas evening, Eid Al-Adha, Eid Al-Fitr, Ramadan, 7th of April, 17th of April, 16th of October, etc.

## 4.2 Syrians' Group Identification

Having used the discursive expressions of "membership" to understand how individuals identified with one ideological cluster or another, the following themes were identified:

- **Apparent inclusive trans-religion and trans-ethnicity:** Usually using a singular first-person pronoun "I". Noting here that most of the time, this supposedly trans-groups ideologies are not really always truly absolute. As an example, calls to overcome hatred between Arabs and Kurds, suggest at the same time the base of such inclusivity should be Islam. Obviously, that suggestion already excludes other beliefs' systems.
- **Partial Exclusion, face save inclusion, or inclusivity with conditions:** All of us are Syrians except x., where x refers to ideological elements that do not correspond with the speaker's adopted ones.
- **Full exclusion:** You are not Syrian(s), Those are not Syrian(s). Deciding on who will deserve to be called Syrian and who does not.
- **Feelings of estrangement:** This is where a sense of estrangement is manifested explicitly and implicitly. Expressing that through templates such as, 'this is not the Syria we know anymore', or 'we have never had a country', or 'I/We never felt like (a) citizen(s)'.
- **Generalizing:** 'We Syrians are so and so' and with negation variation: 'We Syrians are not (verbs/adjectives)' or also with less emphasis on the national identity: 'We are...!', 'We are not ...!'
- **Self-Victimizing to justify attitude ambiguity:** These templates show variations of self/group presenting to avoid claims and/or blames. Through such expressive material we can identify the degree to which the speaker is seeking agreeability. 'We are neither with this party nor that, we are the poor', 'who cares about us', 'who listens to us! No one listens to us', 'what can we do, nothing at the reach of our hands', 'no one saw what we saw'.
- **Self-Victimizing to justify loss:** Here the speaker aims to justify losses. This can take different forms. If talking to self-group it is in the form of condolences: 'We fought bravely but the betrayals ...'. When talking to the other group: 'You have all the planet supporting you to conquer women, elder, and children'. Note how men are excluded most of the time when the talk is about loss.
- **Forced emotions:** like the 'we love you' campaign enforced by Assad government to impose the 'love' emotions to Bashar Al-Assad amongst Syrians. Another repetitive template is 'if you do not feel that Syria is your pulse, love, honour, mother, then you are a shame'.
- **Citizenship:** 'We are citizens', 'Syria is not Assad's farm', 'Syria is not the property of Assad family'. However, few talks can be identified here when it comes to discussing tangible objectives towards a secular civil society in Syria.
- **Synecdoche:** Syria Assad: We are Assad's -men/people- and similar templates when portraying Öcalan by Nationalist Kurds.
- **Pride:** Mainly when a positive story about some "Syrian" is published. 'We Syrians, our head is always high.
- **Apparatchik:** wide array of texts confirming following Assad, and dead historical characters. Being fanatical Islamists or slavish adherents/supporters. Single-minded zeal or dogmatic Kurds or Arabs.
- **Idealist - Normative - Utopian:** Mostly discourses of many human rights workers and intellectuals. Rarely culturally conscious, or context sensitive norms. By doing this not only very few messages manage to cut through, but a sense of rejection is evoked by masses against basic human right concepts and principles.



- **Identity Politics:**

Discussions about the following main identity dimensions were identified:

- **Religion:** 'We Christians', 'we Armenians', 'we Sunnis', 'we Alawiets', 'we are a Muslim country', 'god with us', etc.
- **Ethnicity:** 'We Kurds', 'We Arabs', 'We Armenians', 'We Circassian', ...etc.
- **Gender:** We woman, we men, we Homs's/Duma's/... men..etc.
- **Social Economic Class:** We poor, we miserable, the damascenes, etc.
- **Proximity:** Youth of Ghouta, women of Douma, Aleppoians, Damascenes. Inside and outside Syria, refugees and displaced. Refugees defined by hosting countries.

### 4.3 Strategies

Through different strategies and linguistic devices, Syrians practiced distancing (this, that, these, those...etc.), categorization (we, you, they), and polarization (with us, against us) in expressing identity elements through the notions of in-group and out-group.

The same membership criterion helped us identify two main discursive strategies of self-grouping versus others' grouping. Two sub-strategies were also identified but we will not focus on them during the analysis although we will visit them while citing certain examples.

- The Positive self-presentation: Members identifying with any of the four clusters of ideologies have strong tendencies to position themselves and their groups' ideologies, purposes, values, and traits in a higher regard than that of other groups. Several methods and devices were used to overstate positive characteristics of one's own ideological cluster in general and the smaller group within that cluster more specifically. Disclaimers were used frequently as a means of face save or impression management 'I am not a racist, but Arabs are x', where 'x' can refer to any sort of racist descriptions. Empathy was employed as conflict tool, conflicting parties played empathy strings either for face save purposes, or to negatively generalize about others who do not show 'similar' empathy as people with no emotions or feelings. Empathy was also used to project one's self as funny or smart and sometimes was instrumentalized to lure others. Empathy was also played for preference falsification as explained elaborately in the chapter about linguistic devices of this research. Dramatization was played by usually employing combinations of hyperboles and metaphors to convey positive self-images in standing in the face of outstanding powers. In fact, the examples are several, and to give a last one, consider 'explanation'. Explanation was used as a discursive strategy to convey a positive image of the self. Through such linguistic moves, talkers project wise, educated, and informed characteristics about themselves and the group they belong to.
- The Negative Other. presentation: Members of groups within each of the four ideological clusters showed tendencies to downgrade and undermine the values, principles, and objectives of other groups. Several devices were used.

Most recognizable ones were, Illegality/criminalizing topos and the portrayal of others as destroyers who are breaking law and order and who deserve severe punishment. Explanation was used in crafted messages to suggest others' weaknesses, corrupted roots, broken souls and thoughts that cannot be fixed. Labelling them as traitors who are linked to the international conspiracy, Zionists, Wahhabis, Shiites and Persians, etc.

Another used strategy was to implicitly spread doubt and distrust amongst 'others' groups' members by highlighting their failures, sharing information about defections amongst them, and practicing character assassinations. Comparison was frequently employed to convey a negative position of the outgroup. Comparisons about living under the rule of Assad, or PYG, or ISIS were often used. Other comparisons made between living under Assad oppression vs. Jordanian, Lebanese or Turkish government oppression.

#### 4.3.1 Two sub-strategies are:

- Negative self-presentation: This was sort of collective-self-humiliation. Templates such as 'we are + negative descriptions' or 'we are not + positive descriptions' were often used. It all started by stories disseminated by Assad regime cluster stating that as a underdeveloped country, Syrians needed still a lot of social and economic development before reaching the point of claiming their other human rights such as freedom of speech and liberty. This type of strategies emerged mainly from internalized oppression and multiple internal oppressions practices extended throughout decades of political repression. Those self-narratives were also used as self-punishment shells to avoid criticism; both self and others' criticism. For example, undermining Arabs culture by associating Arabism to the practices of Hezb Al Baath mainly during Hafez Al Assad's and his precedent Bashar's era, or the Arab reunions' weak and uninfluential summits. Or by associating Arabs to Saudi Arabia specifically or the Gulf countries generally and using pejorative pretexts to describe both.
- Distancing oneself from the 'ignorant' masses. The speaker here acts from utopian position as a preacher, messenger, the wise person carrying normative discourses projected and imposed as sources of virtue and ultimate solutions. This may be regarded as the opposite of the negative self-presentation and it is more concerned with elitism and normative discourses. Mainly noticed amongst Syrians who enjoyed certain privileges working with international organizations.

#### 4.4 Identifying the clusters of Ideologies

The membership criterion from the conflict analysis literature helped understand how Syrians represent their belonging to one ideological group and how they perceive "others".

Published stories by Syrian institutions on Facebook normally receive comments from ordinary citizens. Several factors play in determining the level of citizens' engagement such as stories' relevance, publishing practices, fans base, advertising, Facebook algorithms, the medium used to retrieve stories, and users' psychosocial statuses. For the purpose of this research, comments around group membership criterion were retrieved. The comments retrieval prioritization was based on comments enjoying the highest replies. Replies on comments show a horizontal citizen-to-citizen mode of communication rather than a hierarchical institution-citizen communication. This helps us focus on contestation elements.

The membership criteria allowed us to identify four clusters of ideologies.

##### 4.4.1 Four clusters of ideologies

Four main clashing ideologies during eight years of the Syrian conflict were identified. Government/Regime, Opposition/Revolution, Nationalist Kurds and Islamists. The Islamists ideological structure does not refer to radical Islamists only. Any political ideology embedding and instrumentalizing religion were considered under this cluster.

Overall, the four clusters of ideologies struggle for hegemonizing the society with different degrees of power. The struggle for hegemony held different imaginations about what each ideology aspired 'homogeneous' national community should ideally be like. It aimed at enforcing 'false consent' and political conformity. This had inhibited a pluralist articulation of interests and differences of opinion, which in turn had vital implications on developing in any potentially working form of democratic practices and governance.

##### 4.4.2 Legitimization of dominance - Cultural Hegemony

The Syrian government/regime had articulated "false consent" messages about a homogeneous Syrian nation to impose dominance. On the other hand, Islamists promoted dominance based on false assumption that they know what is good for all Syrians because they are more connected to a divine unusual power.

The opposition had neither the structure nor the material conditions and sustainable resources to seek dominance. However, they tried via alternative yet inconsistent messaging to claim a better imagined nation and portray stories about a better future. Therefore, much of the discursive practices were based on comparison moves by accusing “others” of choosing to live the lives of slaves with no dignity. This discourse had manifested itself through different messages, going from extreme threats to punish those who did not fight with the free Syrian army, or who did not support the revolution at one end to the far extreme left of human rights workers and organizations which promote their own norms as the sole source of virtue.

The nationalist Kurds launched the cultural hegemony messaging system from nationalist rights base. For them, anyone who does not support Kurds rights as presented by the Nationalists deserve punishment including Kurds themselves. The main discourses should be formulated around this core principle and any practices should serve it. Forced military service and imposed Kurdish language as the main language in areas under their control were some examples.

After a long period of political repression, Syrians started finally to experience a decline of hegemonic discourse. As of 2011, the proliferation of voices and new modals of expression managed to create a power -although without enough momentum- to challenge dominant hegemonic discursive practices. Most Syrians did not agree with the way things were. Despite the fact the Syrian regime was in great control of the cultural hegemony fabrication, public spaces, discourses, institutions, and the needed resources that still did not guarantee the continuation of Syrians’ submission. The uprising took off in 2011. It initially had a good control of the discourses and their dissemination between March 2011 and mid-2012. Initially, the Syrian government/ regime was in a reactionary position, trying to contain, manipulate and control the immense growth of alternative discourses represented by a country-large massive social progressive movement. However, despite this proliferation, the Syrian opposition could not earn conscience and did not manage to render their discursive rightful demands into materialized realities. The rightful demands were too abstract and never materialized in concrete objectives. The main objectives lacked specificity, measurability, attainability, relevancy, and time framing (SMART). A very condensed moment in terms of events, struggle and discourses in the current Syrian history was the year 2011. There were hegemonic discourses at the oppressive political regime side and the human rights demands of the wider public at another. It took the Syrian regime a couple of months to articulate its narrative and stick to it for the coming years. That consistent narrative proved to be a working one. Not only because it encapsulated several already globally well-selling concepts but also because the oppositions narratives lost the momentum soon due to many reasons including but not limited to excessive use of power by the regime, a lacking of vision, and a lacking of sustainable independent resource.

We will briefly state the discursive practices for the positive self-group identity presentation and negative other-group presentation under each of the four ideological groups.

#### **4.5 Regime**

In the first three months of the Syrian revolution, the Syrian regime labelled opponents as insects, traitors and quantified them as approximately just three thousands who do not represent Syrians. Soon, the regime discourses accused, Jordan, Turkey, Palestinians, Israelis, Egypt, Arab-Persian gulf states, USA and more countries and entire populations for plotting the unrests in Syria. The Syrian government/regime narrative went even further to claim the social movement was a ‘universal’ conspiracy. That was not the only too surrealistic narrative, there were many alike. Assad president himself emphasized in a televised interview that the united nation is not a credible institution and when asked why then he has an ambassador there, he laughed and replied “it is a game we are playing”. Those discursive strategies and sub-strategies were transformed via institutions and public figures to ordinary citizens. When Syrians went out in peaceful protests in Damascus and documented that via mobile-phones filming, as journalists and camera people were under extreme death-threat by the regime security forces and snippers, the Syrian television was so fast

to announce that people went out to streets to thank god for the gift of rain and not to protest. A parliament member stood up during Assad's speech and addressed the president by emphasizing his outstanding wisdom that ruling Syria would not be enough for him, and that he should rule the world. Assad regime's Mufti, the highest ranked figure of the religious authorities in Syria, threatened Europe of potential suicides to come if Europe decided to back up the Syrian opposition. Syrian opposition would hear extremely bizarre suggestions, threats and stories coming from the regime. Like describing tens of thousands of protestors as a dozen of protestors only or threatening in a televised interview opposition figures of publicly sharing intimate materials of them that were stored on a memory stick.

The narrative went through different phases, from reducing others' power to magnifying it in an attempt to exaggerate threat and accordingly the powerful position in resisting it. And by doing so, hijacking and appropriating the concept of resistance which is naturally the core feature of opposition movement.

#### 4.5.1 The positive we

The broad themes of presenting the positive we inside this cluster were manifested in texts such as, Bashar Al Assad is the leader, the wise and the one capable of keeping Syria peaceful and united. The Syrian army is heroic, winner and is supported by honourable Syrians and God. Self-victimizing is played using different mechanisms but always with the objective of presenting group acts as heroic and by creating dramatic heroes leading to catharsis.

We do still read here examples of internalized oppression and multiple internal oppression practices to limit any possible kind of critic initiated by members of "other" clusters' members.

Comparison is used mainly through recalling historical events to remind Syrians how good Syria was under the ruling power of the regime. In this cluster, we will recognize dealing with Syria as a property with a strong sense of ownership. Two examples can be cited in this regard. In the first one, we read Syrians telling "other" Syrians "this is our country, and this is our president, if you do not like it you can just go away". In the second example, we will read Assad loyalists talking to besieged citizens and telling them "we allowed you a passage out but you did not leave your homes". This in itself confirms besieging civilians which is a war crime in itself.

The notion of 'homeland' is strongly present within this ideological cluster due to the "sacrifices" taken by many here to secure and defend the homeland. Maybe, therefore 'homeland' also constitutes one of the very few subjects of in-group criticism practised mainly by soldiers. As a clear example, we read this soldier from the Syrian army talking with bitterness about not even having a room in his own country. But then there are other topics of criticism. Citizens talking about betrayal and the death of many soldiers. Or talking about mixed feelings of anger, frustration and disappointment and helplessness escalating sometimes to the point of questioning joining the military and considering it as a stupid act. The bitterness and anger of seeing soldiers attacked by corrupted authorities such as this video of a woman in Latakia attacking a soldier because he did not allow her to get on the stage in a public event, also constitute a main area of criticism. These discursive self-criticism practices constitute valuable inventory because they contribute to framing the citizenship concept. Firstly, such practices were not possible prior to 2011, and surely not during the first two years of the Syrian revolution. Secondly, they show the new powers distribution and mapping where military have a louder and publicly accepted voice among this cluster. Thirdly, it still implies that criticism can be directed only by Assad loyalists cluster and not the opposition. This also explains why most of the time, any critic is introduced or closed or both by clear statement confirming loyalty to Assad. Fourthly, such criticism practices imply positive self-image by suggesting wider venues of criticism practices are becoming more possible and available in Syria under the ruling power of Assad.

### 4.5.2 The negative they

The others are labelled and categorized in different discursive strategies, templates and moves.

Opposing civilians had chosen to remain in the besieged areas because they wanted to support terrorists. Civilians were granted safe exist but they refused to leave. Civilians are being used by terrorists as shells and so it is not the regime/government forces who are intentionally killing them. Opponents are jihadists, Wahhabis, radical Islamists and terrorists. Opponents have chosen intentionally to be instrumentalized by the “west” to destroy their own country. Opposition people have chosen to “sell” their country for a handful of Petro-Dollars. Those who had left their country are betrayals. The opposition needs to “wake up” and get back to the right track under the leadership of president Bashar Al Assad and stop destroying the country.

### 4.5.3 Top-Down Identity formation

The top-down identity construction was played through identity politics enforced through continuous messaging of downgrading and devaluing the others. Faked conscience and social harmony were translated by the political/military/intelligence regime down the hierarchical ruling model to public through different institutions.

The origins of many discourses pronounced by ordinary citizens within the Syrian regime’s cluster can be traced back to the speeches of the president of Syria himself and several high-ranked regime’s figures. A first example of how Assad own words had contributed to Syrian society’s extreme polarization can be found in his first speech on the 31st of March 2011 where he categorized populations in groups and decided that people are either with his authority or against it. Another striking example can be found in his second public speech addressing Syrians by describing protestors as germs. By disseminating such concept, he created a “deductive architecture” per Bourdieu. By turning citizen objects into germs, the un-elected president had initiated a discourse of sterilization and accordingly constructing collective consciousness along with different sorts of the attitudes and behaviours that we would see emerging later. Not only had he criminalized any opposing behaviour -this was already the case prior to 2011- but he declared them a trivial yet unneeded organs.

The president had also described the opposition as traitors on several occasions. By accusing his opponents of being traitors he as the head of the ‘Supreme Judicial Council’ was implicitly charging them with the highest penalty decree in Syria, which is the death penalty. In a collapsing state during internal conflict times, the president discourse resembled a decree or at least a verbal signature to informal militants to proceed with ‘law’ enforcement themselves outside the court or any juridical framework. As a result, several field executions were conducted. A pattern we continued to identify several years later. At this point, it may be useful to remind ourselves how Assad, and the regime that sustained his power, had hijacked the juridical authority, in that sense, he was in a benefiting position as the accuser and the judge at the same time.

When we move down the hierarchy, we immediately start to see more evidences of human rights violations. The Syrian regime high ranked members declared potential suicidal operations in Europe if Europe politicians decided to support the opposition. They also threatened refugees to think about going back to their own country Syria. Discursive evidence of the regime forced displacement was manifested clearly here as ostracism. By this generalized labelling of the opposition and refugees collectively as traitors, the regime’s key figures in media, military, diplomacy and religious domains could stigmatize any individual opponent or refugee with the same descriptive labels. This allowed then to detain, torture, kidnap and kill with what seemed to be a dominant consciousness of being lawful. Accusing the opposition collectively of being terrorists also helped to continue such practices. We can continue tracing-down the upper authorities’ discursive practices and identify replicated themes in the daily talks of ordinary citizens. For example, many ordinary citizens in this cluster, clearly state that besieged people would be allowed a passage if they would surrender. However, if they refused to surrender, then they would be labelled as terrorists who deserve only to be killed. Other extremely violent calls of actions such as smashing or burning opponents were also used.



## 4.6 Syrian opposition: Identity Politics and Anomie

The modals of expressions at the Opposition/revolution side had changed dramatically during the past years. As the variables interfering and impacting the discourses production and disseminating are multiple here. Dynamic conflict factors are also more obvious in this cluster. During the first and second year of the revolution, several modals of expression emerged. Some of them were necessitated by the new realities, others were merely creative acts of resistance and liberation.

In "The tyranny of structurelessness" (Freeman, 1973) Jo aka Joreen explains how groups without formal discussion and decision-making structure end up controlling each other in a divisive manner. When the group does not have a specific task to accomplish, group members start trying to control each other. Criticizing the personalities of other members become a recognized and dominant feature of group dynamics. Instead of focusing group energy to achieving group's goal(s) the resources are targeted to undermine others and flex personal muscles. Within this cluster, decision making structures, resources and processes were almost absent. In identity politics, as groups' members are usually identifying themselves based on repression experience(s), usually the possibilities are higher they had experienced malnutrition self-perception due to outer-world perceptions and discourses. This could intensify in-groups struggle as it multiplies external oppression.

### 4.6.1 The positive we

Opposition ideological cluster had excessively used self-victimizing discursive moves to promote innocent, rightful, ideal cohesive group. Despite the fact there were millions of victims, self-victimizing has been repeatedly used as a result of structural psychological reasons and dynamic traumatic ones. It is still worth mentioning that the term has been mistakenly used through in-proper translation by Syrian scholars and it was recycled repeatedly. The translated term in many cases was used unfeasibly and in a non-educated manner when intentionally or non-intentionally blaming the victims (Ryan, 2010) in many cases.

Despite the fact there was a consistent pattern of self-idealizing by all conflicting parties, cohesiveness was the least possibly understandable claim within this cluster. Much more than the regime ideological cluster, revolutionists but more political opposition ascribed to the discourse of crying over spilt milk. This has been used not only to attract sympathy and funding but also to justify self/group wrongdoings. Even though the regime was earlier than the opposition in disseminating "fabricated news" about non-true stories, the opposition had employed faked stories too often. Most of those were aiming at portraying opposition and revolution advocates as victims. Soon, such practices fired back and caused opposition severe loss in credibility. Positive-we were also manifested by discussing who is a patriot and who is not, who is revolutionist and who is not. Positioning revolutionists most of the time as idealists or even angles and denying what usually can be regarded as expected psychological implications of conflict, loss and war. The concept of "time" seemed to be an important determinant on who is a patriot and who is not. The historical opposition figures who spent years in detention considered themselves old knights and accordingly had the higher hand in determining who is revolutionist and who is not. The number of months or years in Assad regime detentions and prisons became the main indicator of one's patriotism regardless of the person's background, values and socio-cultural background. This can constitute an interesting area of study about the hero concept. Still within the same theme of discussing who is a patriot and who is not we identify discussions about differences between those "on the ground" in reference to those who stayed in Syria and those who left Syria, where presuppositions are employed to suggest a more patriotism of the former than the latter. And from this reductionist understanding, the theme of "on the ground" was further narrowed down to represent only fighters. In that sense, non-fighters are considered as less powerful and less brave and accordingly should have a second saying when it comes to decisions related to the future of Syria. The ones on the ground are considered as the sole redeemers and defenders where sacrifice is calculated using only materialistic measures. War conditions and the lack of basic resources as well as scarcity in international humanitarian aid,

institutional discourses, mainly sensational media -what bleeds leads-, as well as management systems had contributed to the distortion of the 'sacrifice' concept.

Utopianism was employed extensively by opposition/revolution ideological cluster. Imagined perfect society is communicated by making ordinary citizens invasion the problems of the current political system. Discursive strategies employing utopianism were mainly manufactured by some Syrian civil society organizations.

Those diversified and directive ideologies are few examples to show how conflicting ideologies within the opposition same cluster started mushrooming and weakened the opposition/revolution rightful demands within the past years.

Extreme multiple internal oppressions and internalized oppression were self-practised and any criticism of the positive self/we would be faced with different group muting practices. Many Syrians at the opposition side muted themselves in the past couple of years and experienced spiral silence out of self-protection and because their arguments were drained in response to repetitive counterarguments. The scarcity of resources, had accelerated the self-censoring and self-muting practices. This spreading oil-silence which was heavily controlled by the Petro-Dollar funding granted a better strategic position to Islamists and regime narratives alike.

#### **4.6.2 The negative they**

The regime is described as a traitor who "sold" Syria. Citizens identifying themselves with the regime ideological cluster are described as cowered, grey people/with no attitude or position towards human rights atrocities, and most of the time they are taking the regime position for religious reasons only. Those people are always positioned as the 'others' who need to be punished severely -when- the revolution will make the ultimate victory or by god when opposition lose battles or by juridical systems 'when the moment of truth will come'. Because the main practice in presenting self was self-victimizing, hyperboles were employed to convey an extremely strong opponent. The narrative would go: just because the "whole world" is supporting 'them' they are winning, otherwise they would have lost the battles easily. Many of these 'others' are described based on history forging narratives as monsters and weird creatures, implying they need to be killed.

In addition to the regime/Syrian government and revolution/opposition ideological discursive clusters, the data shows another two main ideological clusters of both extreme ethnic and religious bases. Both need separate studies. For highlighting purposes, here are some brief insights. Both clusters' main discussions focused on military operations.

### **4.7 Islamists**

As we will see elaborately under the Religion identity dimension, the discursive practices of Syrians throughout the past 8 years (2011- May 2018) and regardless of their religious background contained strong religious identity elements. However, due to counter-terrorism programs by different states and/or voluntarily acts by citizens, the content disseminated by radical Islamists usually get deleted from social networks. This eliminates evidences accessible by public – which a precedent in the juridical shift of powers by keeping such crimes-evidences within the control of only private and for profit companies-. It also makes tracing back the sources of those messages almost impossible. That said, giving the lack of what can be considered as institutional social media messages by Islamists we suggest other resources when discussing this type of disseminated discourses, namely the published written and audio-visual material by Islamist groups. Therefore, a devoted study for Islamists discursive practices is recommended.

#### **4.7.1 The positive we**

Islamists presented themselves as the power and will of God on earth, and therefore they continuously suggested they will win. This cluster had witnessed intense practices of lure of promises where the costs were too high, mainly in souls. Their objectives were clear, to create a state ruled by what they claim as Sharia.

### 4.7.2 The negative they

Because they hold the absolute truth, they accused their enemies of being infidels and they enforced their own system of punishments to any disobedience. They committed a wide range of atrocities and violations. Islamists raped, killed, beheaded and took sex hostages. While other conflicting groups had similar practices and as cited in many human rights organisations' reports way more than the Islamists' ones. However, they refused to admit such violations while Islamists made sure those atrocities were publicly communicated maybe as a means to terrify their enemies. Islamists accused their opponents as incapable of realizing the truth or what is good for their own selves and threatened them if they do not obey to be killed. They destroyed sculptures and historical monuments and they aggressed anyone who criticized their practices. Within certain areas, they recruited children and they punished parents who would not let their children be taken to participate in the fights. Their opponents online endorsed such practices. Radical Islamists opponents advocated that ISIS/ISIL is 'remaining and expanding' and they attacked anyone who refuses such slogans. They also attacked moderate opposition trained and equipped by Americans and accused them for being betrayals.

## 4.8 Nationalist Kurds

Nationalist Kurds hand enjoyed extensive media coverage positioning them as the fighters of terrorists. Next, under the section of ethnicity we will discuss several modals of expressions carrying ethnical identity elements in general and Nationalist Kurdish in particular.

### 4.8.1 The positive we

Nationalist Kurds mainly presented themselves as the fighters of terrorists and fighters for an independent state. They had relatively clear objectives, formal leadership and structures, and military power supported by USA, Russia and European Union. Despite that fact they had also some support from both the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Assad regime at certain times; however, they still had big fights against each other during other times. With this support, nationalist Kurds managed to control areas with oil fields. Those competencies in terms of logistical support and resources dyed this ideological cluster discourses with a similar tone of pride to those in the Regime/Syrian government cluster. Israeli government statements about its support to Kurds rights in Syria had also provided that sense of confidence and sometimes arrogance amongst nationalist Kurds leaderships and citizens alike. Women fighters were instrumentalized and extensively presented in the communicated messages in 'western' media and on social media. Nationalist Kurds described women fighting within their militants positively and usually with a poetic language.

### 4.8.2 The negative they

Nationalist Kurds positioned their opponents as radical Muslims and terrorists and nationalist Arabs. They associated Arabs with Saudi Arabia, and they addressed them as a collective group of terrorists obsessed only with women and money. When discursively attacking their opponents -the Arabs- they used history forging to provide a sense of credibility to their generalizing statements. Obviously, in conflict times, those statements were countered by similar statements and history forging by many Arabs. One can also argue that they were a countering such statements that were initiated by Arab Nationalists in the first place. For this reason, amongst others we suggest a separate study of the discursive practices of Nationalists from different parties. Nationalist Kurds also continuously reminded Arabs that they did not support them in the Qamishli uprising back in 2004. They attacked Shawaya for betraying them. Using the presuppositions about Arabs and their relations to women, they accused them of that but by using sexist language. In several evidence cases, they considered their opponents as males only and attacked 'their' women, considering these women as properties. With such discursive practices, not only they consider women as a commodity, but they also described them with very sexist and violent words. This went in a continuous vicious cycle with similar practices by radical nationalist Arabs.

## 5 Five identity dimensions examined

Reviewing ordinary citizens discourses about their identities and the ‘others’ identities shows the following five dimensions that were continuously discussed.

### 5.1 Religion

Disputes based on religious identity elements were the most obvious ones among identity politics practices. Online discursive conflicts took place mainly between Shiites and Alawites at one side and Sunnis on the other. Eventful dynamic factors communicated with different nuances of truth by institutions belonging to all conflicting parties triggered re-enactments of historical events of religious significations and relatability. Members of conflicting ideological clusters traumatized by aggressive present experiences and with no ambiguously foreseen future were discursively reconstructing their identities based on historical events to justify their current history political positions.

The Syrian regime was the first to strategically involve the religion dimension in the Syrian social changes as of 2011 by launching the campaign “No to sectarianism”. At that time there were still no materialized manifestation of any sectarian-based disputes. The president of Syria referred to “historical” religious anger semi-implicitly in one of his earliest speeches. As explained earlier, sectarianism and religion were instrumentalized to justify Assad regime’s oppressive practices. One can -justifiably- argue that sectarianism has always been there in Syria, although it was muted. The countering argument can also be that this was exactly the very reason why sectarianism had manifested itself aggressively and violently once state failure started to take place. Had not the Syrian regime muted public discussions, Syrian citizens would have got healthier environment to express their different identities and identity dimensions and better reflected on who they were. It can be also helpful to recall how Assad regime was the first to let regional radical Islamic armed powers into Syria through its affiliations with Hezbollah and Iran. But that was not enough to flame the peaceful protests, Assad regime also released those identified by the Syrian regime itself to be radical Muslim prisoners as of June 2011, just three months after the beginning of the peaceful protests. One of them was Zahran Aloush, who would soon become the head of what would be known as Jaesh AL Islam. Those sectarianism production practices had confirmatory power to regime’s narratives.

Islamists, through their Sunni and Shiites institutions along with public figures spread an atmosphere of victimization amongst their groups’ members by triggering historical events, exaggerating present events or completely faking stories of religious and sectarian basis. Those practices had enticed anger, a sense of revenge and blind adoption of those institutional promoted messages among their followers. Hanging beheaded citizens on the fences of public squares, high quality filming of collective killing practices, burning a Jordanian pilot in a cage, distributing nearly impossible to verify terror news about an archaeologist they beheaded, killing journalists and citizen journalists as well as many other practices of extremely violent atrocities were all inflaming public anger and acting as a divisive power counter peace and inclusive citizenship. Islamic groups labelled any kind of internal criticism as being divisive and used the same rhetoric of Assad’s authoritarian regime and ‘Islamic resistance’ about the sole priority of fighting the enemy and nothing else, and implicitly suggesting there is one enemy. Faked profiles on Facebook as well as verified ones played sectarianism by disseminating reminder texts about near future crimes in Hama committed by Hafez Al Assad’s regime as well as the stories about Sunni-Shiites current history conflicts and the relatively historically distant one. But those historical events were re-contextualized and remixed as to make them serve the ideological purposes of each party. For example, when the radical so-called Sunnis communicate messages about Hama they tend to reframe the event as if it was a brutal attack carried out by Alawites against Sunnis. Those discourses and practices backed up the regime narrative of imagined non manageable sectarianism. This mutual-interest manufacturing of sectarianism by all parties was facilitated by social media due to the ease of spreading faked news, contagious emotions, chambers of echo, unverified faked profiles, Russian and Iranian bots farms

and projects respectively, along with the non-human rights conscious enough then algorithms. But those radical religious ideologies were not limited to prominent and known ISIS/then/IS or Muslim Brotherhood, many political-Islam groups emerged gradually and mushroomed by attracting and recruiting their own supporters where they contributed to the hyper fragmentation of the Syrian society fabric.

Appropriating god as a source of power and credibility to win over -the others- seems to be a shared discursive pattern amongst all four ideologies. Mainly, Islamists seems to be engaging god in all their discursive practices, using -him: for them- as the source of a hypothetical delegated power they enjoy, accusing their opponent of not respecting god's orders, and assuring them god will manifested through Islamists practices will eventually dominant. This discursive dominance is too strong, too abusive and very intolerant. It is also difficult to be challenged via traditional discursive practices models and their carrying media. On the other hand, the Syrian government/regime's opponents seem to be appropriating god too. Despite the manufactured consciousness about running a secular state, the president Assad himself and his wife Asma keep engaging god in their battle against their enemies. In his many speeches Assad keeps using god as an ally, his parliament members interventions during his speeches to praise him and his wise leadership do also many times involve god where Assad sometimes respond by applauding and endorsing the text. Assad's family followers do the same. Soldiers in battles do the same. They frequently use the word "god" as a source of power and credibility. An outstanding use of god can be seen in the discourses of opposition. In fact, as of March 2011 the revolutionists raised the slogan: "God. Syria. Freedom". It is outstanding because of the speed god is being instrumentalized to mobilize or to soothe. It is outstanding because it reflects a critical interpretation to god's role in daily life by citizens with religious faith. Before battles, opposition will have noticeably big confidence in victory with the help of god. Right away, after any loss, god turns into a good source of grieve and refuge. Before battles we read words such as "victory with the will of god", after loss we read grievance and prays to god to take revenge! Before battles, god is a logistic supporter, after the loss, god is fully in charge and is pushed to the front lines to take revenge.

Most of the military fractions have been radicalized to one degree or another so that they would fit more or less under Islamists ideologies clusters, but here the discussion is also considering a relatively big portion of a supposedly moderate Muslims who are supporting opposition fighters and not radical Islamist groups.

The Nationalist Kurds employed similar moves as the ones used by the Syrian regime and opposition, albeit less frequently and with softer tones. The discussion about religion and god needs more work than this brief explanation giving the embedded religion concept in the Syrian society.

In fact, the use of god was not limited to him/her as a source of power, credibility and victory. In fact, many members of all ideological clusters except the Islamists, had discursively attacked god for several reasons, such as countering Islamists discursive domination, as a response to the plausible story of regime that opposition is a bunch of radical islamists, or merely to distinguish secular self from the religious others.

It is worth noting here how God is used as THE sole problem solver. We have discussed earlier the informal logic and analytical skills most of Syrians lack due to corrupted systems of knowledge which eventually not only prohibit sound judgments and argumentation but also push towards seeking and taking radical choices. We can now develop that understanding to better understand why god as a metaphysical overwhelming power was frequently relied upon to solve difficult questions. The flag of Hezbollah, with the word 'god' carrying a Kalashnikov, is a striking example of instrumentalizing god as an arm. The slogan of Muslim brotherhoods party in Egypt 'Islam is the solution' is another manifestation. In the same line, many Syrians discourses during -at least-eight years confirm the role of god as a sole problem solver for many Syrians who lacked problem-solving skills due to knowledge and education oppressive systems that were imposed on them and mainstreamed over the last fifty years of Assad family brutal ruling of the country.



God seems to be yet another scarce resource in this conflict that everyone seems to be battling to gain a bigger portion of. However, god was one, although big, theme among other ones under the religion identity dimension. In brief, we can realize now, six main constructs of religious identity presentation of self and others:

- God's role
  - Engaging the persuasive power of god. God is repeatedly quoted as a lexical move to provide credibility to one's own claims. It is also used intentionally or not as a promise to lure people.
  - Appropriating God: 'God is with us and we will eventually win'. This template has been used extensively by all parties.
  - God as a revenge taker: 'God will take revenge for us'. This is played in parallel with victimization.
  - God is angry at us: This is always played as an explanation to one's own group's failure. 'It is because we are away from god and do not follow [his] commands, we are facing all this pain and misery'. 'God is taking revenge from us'.
  - God as targeted subject: insulting god is played as a sincere manifestation of anger, or to insult others' beliefs by targeting their god. This was also a discursive move used for self-polishing and secular purification. Many Syrians working with international human rights or media organizations, with obviously strict and radical secular agendas, used this approach to ensure they are agenda-fitting. This practice is visited elaborately in our work dedicated to the modes of persuasion in the Syrian conflict.
- Religion based hate speech. We have discussed earlier hate speech practices and we have emphasized the importance of a separate research for this material. However, it is worth mentioning that most of hate speech practices are related to religion and gender. We will come to the gender based verbal violence latter under gender section. When we discuss hate speech within the religious dimension, we note several themes most of them are built onto false injected religious teaching and knowledge. The roles of dominant religion institutions and textbooks during Assad ruling since 1970 are undeniable in this regard. However, there is also this strong influence of embedded false religious teachings in society by Ottomans.
- Victimization: All religious groups and sects in Syria played victimization insisting they have been marginalized and violently targeted based on their religion/sect. Although true in many cases, however, this polarized, one dimensional description of realities prohibited more feasible translations, analysis and understandings of conflict realities.
- History and the re-enactment of historical events

Most of the religious discussions refer to historical events and historical labelling. Salafists, Wahhabis, Shiites, Sunnis, Ottoman empire, historical battles between Hussain and Mouaweh, Ottoman empire atrocities, massacre of Hama, and other events are some of the main examples.

Discursive practices demonstrating re-enactment of historical events were the most obvious ones and they were triggered mainly by institutional messages communicating news stories and the comments on them. Whether that news was initially verified or not, and how this news was edited and published constitute a domain of interest and main concerns to conflict analysts and professional media practitioners.

For example, we note a peak in the use of a word such as 'Ottoman' among Syrians as of 2017 due to atrocities of Turkish forces against Syrian-Kurds in battles such as Ghousn Al Zaytoun, the Arabic words for Olive Branch.

But also more critically such words with their historical significance are triggered by institutional messages not about any current events. Those messages are about historical events trying usually to glorify one party or another or to remind about the crimes of one party or another such as messages about Battle of Gallipoli to glorify the Ottomans or a commemoration of the Armenian massacres presented with revenge enticement. Other examples we note when visualizing the data, are the peaks in the use of words related to historical conflicts between Shiites and Sunnis whenever there are events related to Hezbollah interventions in Syria.

- Disturbed Islamic identity - Self presentation
  - Associating Islamic identity with Saudi Arabia: This is divisive from Syrian Alawites and Shiites due to historical sensitivity and proxy conflicts between Iran & Saudi Arabia
  - Associating Islamic identity with Turkey: This is divisive from Syrian Armenians, Christians, and Kurds due to historical sensitivity
- Disturbed Islamic identity - Others negative presentation
  - Associating the other Syrian with Turkish Ottoman empire, Saudi Arabia's Wahhabism or Iran Shiites. This is history forgery and divisive speech.

## 5.2 Ethnicity

Ethnic identity politics were mainly played by Kurds and Arabs. Although we can trace other discursive practices by other ethnicities such as Armenians or Circassians but those were fewer compared to the Kurds/Arabs one. We can identify the following main discursive practices in relation to Arabs/Kurds.

### 5.2.1 Hate speech:

- Kurds practiced discrimination based on origins where for example they would use skin colour to trigger racist elements. Arabs came from Yemen; they have dark skin colours and now that some of them have lighter skin colours is just because Arab women had practiced sex with white "crusaders".
- Arabs practiced discrimination based on social economic class where they described Kurds as shoe polishers in reference to a period in the Syrian history when the profession was stereotypically practiced by some Kurds.
- Defending ethnical rights but in using gender based verbal violence. We will cover this under the gender section.

### 5.2.2 Historical forgery

- Arabs claim Kurds were living far away in the mountain areas and were only hosted by Arabs when they were expelled. Then they denied the good hospitality and turned out to be settlers and separators making a fortune of the public disorder in the past years and the support of both American and Russian governments.
- Kurds claim the Syrian Arabs came from Yemen and they had never lived in this land before the Kurds. They accuse Arabs of being Wahhabis influenced by Saudi Arabia and that their relationship with the Turks -described by Nationalist Kurds as Ottomans- is a masochist one.

### 5.2.3 History and the re-enactment of historical events

- Kurds continuously remind Arabs about Qamishli intifada in 2004 and how Arabs did not support them
- Arabs continuously remind Kurds about their hidden separation tendencies and what they did in Iraq.

### 5.2.4 Comparison to Israel

- Arabs (we are always referring to Nationalist Arabs) compare Kurds to Israeli settlers and accuse Kurds of being supportive to Israel.
- Kurds (we are always referring to Nationalist Kurds) claiming Israel the only democratic state supporting Kurds rights and they compare it to non-democratic Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries states in argumentation to defend establishing ties with Israel state that is war with Arabs since 1948.

## 5.3 Gender

Women were used as war objects in discursive practices and this was also enforced had enforced through divisive identity politics. Women were presented as complementary males accessory and were used to attack and insult opponent male speakers by attacking “their” “properties” in cases or their “honour” in others. Shaming victims of sexual assaults or shaming others as practicing voluntary prostitution are amongst the main gender-based identity politics practices aiming at presenting the other’s identity as a fragile, dishonourable and cheap ones. In that sense, continuously practicing shaming victims of sexual assaults in conflict - indeed even worse-shaming men for sexual assaults women were exposed to. And moreover, such “shaming” was not addressing opponents’ close female family members such as their wives, sisters, girlfriends, mothers, etc., but any women assumed to belong to a collective group such as Arabs or Kurds, Pro regime loyalists or revolutionists. These practices implicitly suggested woman as a collective property. Discursively speaking, opposition discriminatory public practices started back in 2011 by addressing Bushra Al Assad and Asma Al Assad family members of Bashar Al Assad and Luna Al Shibli a journalist working in the presidential palace. However, the regime/government had already practiced such violations by targeting pacifist activists through private messages at mid night phone calls threatening to “rape” their sisters and mothers. It is also a widely known story amongst Syrians how Assad regime forces had dealt with the fathers of the children who were arrested in Dara as early as 2011 and the insults to their wives/children’s mothers. The regime rape practices in detention centres back in 2011- had also inflamed gender-based identity discussions. This had encouraged many women to take bold steps to identify based on their gender identity dimension and establish organizations and institutions led by women.

We notice the use of historical vocabulary in a sexist context. The word Hareem is used by regime and nationalist Kurds clusters to negatively describe opponents by linking them mainly to Ottoman empire.

Contradictory values systems are noticeable when people are talking about their -supposed- rights by insulting, attacking and violating the opponents using gender based discursive violence.

We identify several types of gender elements manifested discursively when discussing identity. Some examples are:

- Comparing men to women as a mean to understate their power by describing men who escaped war battles as women or worse as “hareem”, suggesting women are weak and coward creatures.
- A woman is a commodity: accusing opponents as “their” women are being bought and sold in refugees’ camps.

- Muted woman: women are pushed out of online public space discussions: Violently attacking women who try to participate in public discussions and/or contribute counter points of views by labelling them as prostitutes. Even worse, claiming prostitutes do not have the right to express their opinions.
- Reversal role: sometimes speakers would even accuse stubborn and “brave” women who continue to discuss publicly despite being exposed to “attacks”. Women are blamed and shamed for continuing the discussion despite they were insulted and attacked and aggressed. Such comments might go extremely further to ask women if they are ‘continuing the discussion because they are glad to listen to sexual insults’.
- The concept of honour was extremely used. Honour is firmly attached to the sexual lives of women.
- Most of discussions involving sexist language take place amongst males. And in many cases female voice mediates heated discussion between males. The moderation mechanism most of the time employ reminder moves about how Syrians were one family and “brothers” despite the international manipulation and conspiracy theory. Here we note repetitive linguistic normative moves.
- Woman practicing violence against women: Although rare but we also notice several examples of women being verbally aggressive against other women. As the sample example of “woman as a commodity” above.
- Contradictions:
  - Examples of public figures with verified accounts accusing opponents of being Wahhabis while still have no problem describing women as Hareem.
  - It is of interest to understand how “god” frequently fits in the same sentence with violent wording aggressing women (Islamists cluster more than the others).
  - Using gender based verbal violence when calling for one’s own rights (Nationalist Kurds, Regime, and opposition clusters).

Most of the time sexist language escalates during violent events taking place on the ground such as brutalities in Efrin or Duma.

#### **5.4 Social Economic Class**

Like god, money is a very debatable and conflict-generating topic due to its scarcity.

Several models of expressions were identified under the social economic identity dimension. Social economic status is inter-linked to all other identity dimensions but mainly proximity. The internally displaced and refugee Syrians had to deal with undeniable economic and social conflict implications.

Under this identity dimension the following main themes were identified:

- Blaming the victim: many refugees were blamed for leaving their countries
- Self-victimizing is strongly emphasised by relying on social economic dimension by all ideological groups but mainly the regime and the opposition clusters although in different ways. While the regime cluster played it with a sense of pride and even arrogance, opposition used the impoverishment as an added layer to claim helplessness. The regime loyalists had four main reasons to approach impoverishment with this sense of denial.
  - Knowing they are making victories and accordingly loss becomes justified.
  - Knowing there is a huge reserve of oil in the coastal area and accordingly in the worst-case scenario the geo political areas under their best control are rich.

- Not being displaced as proportionally as much as the opposition members.
- Making relatively bigger gains through war growing economy and all parallel clientele-based sub-economies.
- Superiority is highlighted amongst nationalist Kurds who enjoyed controlling oil-rich geographic areas with the needed support of USA, Russia and Israel.
- Complains amongst loyalist soldiers due to lacking of financial resources and the spread of corruption.
- Discussing corruption but still attacking those complaining about the deteriorated economic situation in the country when critics touch upon critical topics such as ruling power advantages.
- Accusing citizens claiming their rights and reminding them how their lives were -great- and challenging them with questions such as 'what do -you- need more!?'
- Satisfaction-masked passiveness due to life hardships. We would frequently here statements like, "I just want to raise up my kids".
- Attacking and accusing those who do not take a clear political position as being self-interest cantered and selfish.
- Falsely claiming that only the -poor- lose in conflict and accordingly zeroing the loses of everyone else. In a way creating an environment of victimizing and self-victimizing competition.
- Asking online readers to contribute daily prices of basic needs. Users generated content (UGC) acts as a medium to collect information.

## 5.5 Proximity

Almost half of the Syrians population (11 million) have been internally displaced and forcibly deported from their homes and lands to become refugees in other countries. As early as 2011 detention and massacres by Assad regime constituted the main two reasons for those waves of materialized human rights violations and the consecutive demographic changes. Despite the fact the Syrian regime was the main actor in forcing citizens out of their homes, all conflicting parties played effective role in those displacements. Institutions had repeatedly addressed the displacement and refugees' crisis, and we can trace undeniable linguistic elements in the daily discourses of Syrian citizens about new and continuously changing proximity. We identified different modals of expressions amongst refugees and displaced citizens depending on the area they were forcibly re-located to.

Under this identity dimension we note the following main modals of expression:

- Demographic changes reflected through geographic movement constituted an important umbrella theme under which many sub-themes had emerged and were reflected in the daily conversations. Seeing those demographic changes positively, neutrally or negatively were reflected through different linguistic and rhetoric devices and moves. Liberation, purification, occupation, demographic engineering, demographic war, etc. were example terms.
- The internal displacement of millions of Syrians, almost seven millions, has always been a main discussion topic among Syrians. This displacement is the result of violations committed by fighting parties. Besieged areas, massacres and deportation are key topics. Several new vocabularies emerged or carried new significations during the conflict such as green busses, yellow trucks, safe passages, and so on as the data shows. The 'Green Busses' were used by regime forces to deport besieged Syrians to other areas in the



country after certain arrangements were organized mainly by the Russian government. The deal was in a way or another something equivalent to saving citizens lives in exchange of taking their homes and lands. Besieged people agreed after several months -and in other noticeable cases, years- of being under siege. Loyalists to Assad regime would use the phrase 'Green Busses' in discourses aiming at humiliating opposition members. The 'Yellow Trucks' on the other hand was suggested by extreme loyalists to Assad regime requesting uprooting the homes and people in besieged areas using 'yellow trucks' instead of giving those people the chance to be deported in 'green buses' through temporary 'safe passages'.

- Inside vs. outside Syria: Refugees constituted more than six million refugees in neighbouring countries to Syria and in other counties of the world constitute almost the third of Syrian population. Yet, regime/Syrian government loyalists had continuously accused refugees for leaving their country in hard times and accordingly deprive them many of their rights including the right of expression as well as in many cases their properties. This where statements by the Syrian government such as the invitation to 'return to the lap of homeland' were initiated, promoted, attacked and joked about.
- On the other hand, many citizens in the opposition cluster accuses loyalists of remaining in a country with no human rights and choosing the 'military boots' over 'dignity' and 'freedom'.
- Refugees in neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey) were exposed to different types of discursive violations by members of the hosting countries. Those violations are continuously discussed online.
- Topics about refugees who are committing violations in neighbouring countries as well as in Europe do usually generate another type of heated discussions. Opposite to this are topics glorifying refugees or showing their achievements whether faked or true ones. These types of topics do also generate heated discussions albeit with more sarcastic tomes.
- Nostalgia constitutes a large portion of Syrians' daily narratives. Remembering the good old days, sharing photos and images from childhood and youth, and tagging friends as a call of notice. Cooking constitute a main blanket theme for such discussions.

## 5.6 Modes of persuasion

Finally, general modes of persuasion ethos, logos, and pathos were manifested through different rhetorical and linguistic devices with different degrees of expertise amongst conflict parties. Overall, all conflicting ideologies showed minimal reliance on logos (appealing to audience and convincing them through logical arguments). On the other hand, all ideological clusters demonstrated stronger practices of pathos (appealing through emotions). The Syrian regime/ government seemed way much better than others in playing ethos (appealing through the credibility of the source), but the ordinary citizens in this cluster did not seem any better than their fellow citizens in other clusters in practicing ethos. Arguably one can also suggest that Islamists' conservatism also played on the need to repent for our moral delinquency by going back to the 'original' teachings of Islam.

This can be marginally true except that the regime had relied on its own credibility not on a borrowed one. Islamists relied on a borrowed or, to put it better, a hijacked one. In that sense Islamists opt to luring promises as they could not affirm their credibility through materialized actions.

We identified several literary devices that were used throughout eight years of struggle by both institutions and ordinary citizens in identity discursive practices. We dedicated a separate thesis chapter for this work and it is published in another paper. Here is short list of the devices covered in the paper.

- Populism & Generalization
- Preference Falsification
- Presupposition
- Counterfactuals – Identity and temporality
- Repetition or informal fallacy
- Normalizing and Justifying of crimes
- Passive construction
- Metaphors
- Commemoration
- Lure of promises
- Hate speech
- Tragic hero
- Zoomorphism
- Schadenfreude

## 6 Conclusion

Big data can be used to analyse conflicts and bring constructive insights about a major conflict construct: identity. In this paper historical discursive analysis was used following a data-driven approach to understand the Syrian conflict from identity politics perspective.

By analysing the content of 269 Facebook pages, the research showed how conflicting ideological clusters had employed different discursive practices to influence realities by reflecting on the different identity dimensions. Facebook as the main source of information for many Syrians played a vital role in disseminating those discursive practices. It also provided new understandings to the notion of power. With the shrinking spaces imposed by regimes of repression, ordinary citizens went to Facebook to express their identities and to socialize with the similar 'others'. Facebook provided a space where needed sense of security and existentialism during uncertainty times can possibly be attained. Power institutions disseminated strategic messages that triggered ordinary citizens daily talks about conflict, their identities and political positions. The power of institutional messages during conflict times gains momentum in the digital spaces. However, with the absence of formal structures, legitimate leadership in many cases, democratic representation and monitoring tools, and other vital resources, the power of freedom of expression dissolved and a cosmetic online democracy was created.

The data-driven approach showed the structural impact of traumatic historical events and the triggered re-enactment during conflict times. Data shows the role of technology in entitling anyone to share massively collective memories about historical events, even the ones they have never experienced first-hand themselves. This power of sharing combined with the impact of virality and speed spreading of online messages call for new understandings to history writing in a collective nonlinear way. This also shows the emergence of a new power of especial particularity during conflict times: the power of archive.

Four main clusters of ideology were discussed in this work, and five identity dimensions of significance in daily talks were identified and analysed. However, it would be naïve to assume that there are sharp cuts between those five identity dimensions just as much as it is would be too reductionist to assume crystal clear cuts between the ideological clusters in the first place. The

discursive practices carrying the different dimensions of identity are interlinked. This intertextuality provides possibilities for further understanding to the Syrian identity changes.

Identities are personal, contextual and events sensitive. They get influenced and shaped by current happenings as much as by social, and cultural variables. It is crucial to distinguish between the social and cultural dimensions. The implications of each one of them on identity presentation during conflict times are different.

Differences and similarities held by social groups' members about their selves, their groups, and about others' identities are perceptual. Identities carry differences, but also inclusively, similarities between members of different ideological clusters. Identities are continuously changing. That said, there will always be real-time new possibilities for peace intervention and building efforts. This is where we see and emphasize the vital roles technology can play.

## 7 Discussion and Recommendations

1. We have realized and elaborated extensively about memory role in discursive practices during the Syrian conflict. When designing peace building interventions, a high priority needs to be given to the politics of memory and traumatic pasts. What to forget and what to remember should constitute vital questions in the process of future making. Institutional messages play vital role in the process of writing the future by visiting history or by not visiting it. On the other hand, truth and justice need to be considered as vital towards peace. Perceptions about both are often linked to historical narratives and to memory work. Truth, and justice about conflicts perpetrators and victims ensure peace. Neglecting truth and justice might only provide quick fixes and short-term false security but it will definitely waste long-term peace opportunities (Pelinka, 2009).
2. Moderation: Institutions are responsible. 'pages' and 'groups' administrators need to play a more proactive, peace-oriented role in moderating comments - mainly hate speech content. There is no excuse to ignore this. Not only most of the institutions do not take positive proactive approach in moderating the themes, but they also intentionally entice anger and hate. Many institutions, particularly those where the administrators are living in democratic countries, became more conscious in the past years of the legal consequences of enticing hate. However, many still play it in an implicit and/or indirect way. International Non-governmental organizations (INGOs) with communication/media mandate need to have a more constructive and responsible role in building and sustaining messaging systems during conflict times by allocating sustainable longer-term funding to digital platforms with inclusive and engaging messages models. INGOs need to consider more measures and key performance indicators to ensure a peace-making content is disseminated by funded institutions, as well as proper moderation work is being done. INGOs themselves need to consider more internal accountability and transparency when evaluating, initiating and approaching communication projects in conflict zones. Identifying potential players should not be influenced by the same tribe mentalities and identity politics manipulation practices in conflict zones themselves.
3. There is plenty of potential in real time peace intervention possibilities. Information system need to be used to understand conflict in a more real time manner. There is little use of studying hate speech produced and published by institutions after those institutions themselves had dissolved. A real time work is needed to detect, identify, diagnose, suggest and possibly provide solutions and track them as early as possible.
4. A continuous dilemma for hate speech resisters is how to resist hate speech while at the same time not violating freedom of expression. In fact, technology in its current status provides solutions to lessen hate speech. 'Pages' administrators on Facebook can choose to automate the process of not exhibiting 'comments' containing certain terms. A list of words, or a hate speech dictionary, can be create in a couple of clicks by the administrators which will make posting any comment containing such terms impossible. Although such technical tactics are not expected to create a radical change in behaviour, however, they can certainly reduce the chances of creating disputes.

5. In conflict, designing alternative spaces and platforms is much needed. In the digital transformation era, innovation and artificial intelligence (AI) are crucial when designing. New sets of skills need to be obtained and transferred to relevant parties to cope with the new realities and norms.
6. Group influence: Digital spaces need to show -voters and their count- post voting and not pre voting. Instead of showing the number of 'likes' and 'likers' before posting one's own comment or clicking the 'like' Facebook & others can encourage a more autonomous, group-influence-free culture.
7. Artificial intelligence -particularly Visual Recognition (VR) and Natural Language Processing (NLP)- can be used to better evaluate published content taking into consideration contextual factors. With the needed linguistic and semiotic domain expertise, Neural Networks can be designed to create models of evaluation and editorials policies in the digital spaces.
8. Algorithms need to place less priority to echo chambers and more priority to open space, dialogue and freedom of assembly. Recommender systems need to consider aspired selves and not only the current ones.
9. Using information technology and particularly geographic information systems (GISs) to create crowd peace and reconstruction solutions.
10. Digital citizens verification: Facebook and other social media platforms provides fertile soil for conflict, hate speech, terrorism, and more gloomy actions. But this is just the sad, dangerous, and negative side of a much bigger story. Those platforms also provide all the possibilities to mediate conflicts. By providing more authentication models in a gamifying style, the game of democracy and citizenship will be played more joyfully by everyone. Verified digital space citizen badges can be thoughtfully designed by Facebook and other social networking platforms as means to control ideologies disseminated hate speech by faked profile and bots and also to encourage citizens to be more self-conscious and responsible about their accumulated expressions towards their digital reputation.
11. Facebook to open up data and help: as we could see several faked profiles had enticed violent actions. Without the help of Facebook, and naturally, similar social networks, it will be extremely difficult to identify those people, get to understand their behaviour and understand the patterns worked out.
12. The influence of daily events and their reporting by institutions during conflict on daily life discourses was obvious in this study. The complexity of events and their enormous number encouraged developing a data aggregation methodology to collect events and extract entities. We have used a hybrid approach of Wikification along with artificial intelligence from Microsoft cloud services supported with expert lexicons developed in this research. This can also help to make a better use of commemoration as potential intervention conflict resolution medium. The work can be considered by other researchers for further development.
13. While we have focused in this study on divisive discursive practices, a devoted work to examine inclusive discursive practices is needed. We still can briefly state here that women played vital role in discursive disputes mediations. Despite the fact that most the time women are blocked and attacked by men whenever they contribute a challenging texts to the normative ones, women still had times to act as conflict mediators by mainly reminding about the old good days and how all Syrians should consider themselves as one nation regardless of gender, ethnicity, and religion. There are several modals of expressions falling under inclusive discursive practices that can be considered for future work on dispute such as: Talks about food, football, success stories of Syrians abroad and stories depicting the losses of all parties because of violations committed by everyone are just few examples. Such messages can play to release tension, bring conflicting parties closer and help Syrians relate to and identity with a more inclusive identity.

14. Careful attention was given to non-engaging content. For future work this can show what was not interesting to Syrian ordinary citizens and possibly why. This also highlights the problems related to creating inclusive content during sensitive conflict times and suggest ways to properly design engaging inclusive content to possibly mitigate conflict risks.
15. Eight studies are needed to better contextualize and understand the Syrian conflict and possibly generalize for other conflict zones:
  - a Two studies addressing the daily talks of ordinary citizens and institutional messages disseminated by Nationalist Kurds, and Islamists clusters are needed. Twitter need to be considered as another medium when addressing Islamists discourses.
  - b Refugees discourses and ideologies by proximity.
  - c The west in Syria. Understanding Syrians perceptions towards the 'west'.
  - d Syrian Civil Society: Intuitional strategic analysis and communication strategies.
  - e Syrian women in the digital space: Challenges and potentials.
  - f As mentioned above, inclusive content needs to be studied alone. This can provide potential answers towards social cohesiveness and to what brings Syrians closer?
  - g Hate Speech: How hate messages unfold and spread. tapping with a date and geo location sign.

"The foreclosure status is when a commitment is made without exploring alternatives. Often these commitments are based on parental ideas and beliefs that are accepted without question"



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## 9 Appendices

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