

The Resiliency of Authoritarianism: The Assad Regime of Syria

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to identify the factors contributing to the resiliency of Syria's President Assad amongst a backdrop of falling authoritarians during the Arab Spring. After determining the Assad's regime's strategies of authoritarian rule both before and after the 2011 uprisings, this paper theorizes what Assad's persistence is most dependent on today by analyzing his discourse throughout the conflict. Assad's framing of the war to the media has significantly legitimized his rule.

Keywords: Syria, Authoritarianism, Arab Spring

1. Introduction

For 45 years, the Assad regime has controlled the Syrian people with an iron fist. For 45 years, they lived in fear of speaking out to demand their right to freedom from dictatorial rule. March 15, 2011, however, marks the end of that silence as the Syrian people responded to mass demonstrations across the Middle East protesting oppressive authoritarianism. Tyrannical regimes across the region began to crumble as a result of the uprisings; however, even as the Syrian Revolution enters its fifth year, President Bashar Al-Assad remains as resilient as ever. As the authoritarian leaders of Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya fell, Assad stands strong in the face of a mass uprising demanding his downfall. The Syrian Revolution began as nonviolent protests against the decades-long Assad dictatorship, but it did not take long for the regime to respond with repressive force, seeking to quell the demonstrations as quickly as possible. However, the regime's violent response only strengthened the resolve of the Syrian people. The opposition took up arms, first to defend themselves, and later to fight against regime security forces. The conflict has evolved into a bloody and catastrophic civil war between the regime and various rebel groups. It has become much more complicated than a fight between those for and those against the Assad regime due to the sectarian dimension it has developed, resulting in a medley of rebel groups identifying on different ethno-sectarian lines. Moreover, the involvement of foreign Islamist fighters made the conflict not only an Alawite¹ versus Sunni battle, but also one between hard-liners seeking an Islamic caliphate and moderate rebels for a secular government that excludes Assad. Now, the jihadist opposition has outnumbered the moderate opposition, discouraging the West from providing the rebels with significant military support.

Despite the humanitarian crisis and the abhorrent living conditions in Syria, the international community has failed to pursue an effective strategy of solving the crisis, frightened by the consequences of meddling in such a complicated situation. The Syrian people continue to suffer, feeling as if no one hears their cry for help. Although Assad may not possess as much control over the country as he did before the uprisings, he has been able to hang on to power amidst a backdrop of falling dictators during the Arab Spring. Assad's resiliency has made him a distinct leader in the region. The interesting question here is how he has been able to persevere for four years. This paper will analyze the factors contributing to Assad's resiliency. The literature review will consist of existing theories on authoritarian persistence and Assad's power base in particular. The literature review will first discuss the political economy factors that helped the Assad regime maintain power before the 2011 protests. Then, the paper addresses how Assad adapted his resiliency

strategies to the conflict environment. As the conflict is highly volatile, different resiliency factors can be at work at various points in the conflict. My research focuses on how Assad used the media as a platform for displaying his own manipulative narrative of the conflict. I conclude that Assad's use of the media as his propaganda tool legitimized his rule, making it highly relevant to his persistence.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Alawite Concentration of Power

One of President Hafez Al-Assad's strategies of sustaining power was his establishment of an Alawite-concentrated regime, appointing his kinsmen and family members to critical leadership positions. Building a loyal power circle was crucial to Assad's stability because he was able to use his kinsmen as "unrivaled political brokers" to create political outcomes in his favor.²⁰ For example, President Hafez Al-Assad's brother, Rifat Al-Assad, commanded the internal security forces and the Defense Companies, Syria's paramilitary force, while Assad's son-in-law, Adnan Makhluf, headed the Presidential Guard. President Assad's Alawi clients occupied a majority of the top operational commands of the regime. The Alawi inner circle began to increasingly identify with their sectarian identity as they continued to recruit their kin into the regime. When the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood tried to overthrow the regime in the Hama massacre of 1982, regime solidarity was able to suppress the movement.

2.2 State-Business Alliances

Hafez Al-Assad's rural-minoritarian regime held a historically-rooted antagonism with the conservative urban-Sunni business community. The majority Sunni population denigrated the Alawis and a relationship of mistrust developed between the two groups; however, Assad realized that they needed each other to maintain a strong, stable country. Assad could not isolate the urban business community because of the economic potential they would provide to the state. This was the motivation behind the economic liberalization implemented by Hafez Al-Assad in the 1970s. Since a formal incorporation of the business community risked the stability of the political structure of his Alawi-concentrated regime, Assad secured the interests of the majority Sunni population by creating informal ties between the private and public sectors of the Syrian economy. Members of the business community became unofficial partners of state elites, called the state bourgeoisie. Assad's strategy of appeasing the capitalists through patronage networks stabilized his populist authoritarian regime.

2.3 The Rentier Economy

A system of "market-based cronyism" emerged from the economic liberalization and the alliances between the state and the Sunni bourgeoisie¹⁷. The regime maintained public sector dominance through rent-seeking from the oil sector and foreign Arab aid, allowing Assad to magnify the scale of economic resources at his disposal and manage access to them in a way that solidified his authority. The regime's rent-seeking also kept those loyal to it satisfied, thus stabilizing the regime's security. Examples of these activities include controlled privatization of public sector assets delivered into the hands of regime cronies and oil proceeds that were directly handled by the political elite of the regime. Other sources of rents came from the liberalization of the previously regulated banking sector and that of foreign investment. When rents accrue to the state, they are distributed as jobs and welfare benefits, making citizens highly dependent on the government. Rent-seeking also decreases the regime's accountability to its citizens because tax revenue is no longer needed. Thus, citizens are deterred from mobilizing to demand representation²¹. Heydemann and Leenders argue that Assad's ability to create new sources of rents and manage his networks of patronage were central to the resilience of his regime¹⁷.

2.4 Recombinant Authoritarian Rule

The longevity of the Assad regime is partly due to Bashar Al-Assad's ability to reconfigure the patronage networks based on the changing economic and political conditions in Syria during the 2000s.¹² Donati²¹ and Heydemann¹⁷ highlight Bashar Al-Assad's capacity for recombinant rule to be crucial to the stability of the Assad regime after the death of Hafez Al-Assad and before the revolution in 2011. During this period, Assad liberalized the banking,

insurance, and external trade sectors of the economy. These new private sector activities became replacement sources of rent for the regime.

With economic reform also came an upgrading of the Assad regime's system of crony capitalism. Assad sought to form new alliances with businessmen that aligned with Syria's new economic trends. Consequently, he created two holding companies, al-Cham and al-Sourya, in which the regime encouraged key figures of Syria's business communities to join. In essence, the pact between the business bourgeoisie and the regime that was created during Hafez Al-Assad's reign was extended.¹² Members of al-Sourya and al-Cham enjoy the benefits of making the most profits, regulations that are tailored to their interests, and connections to expatriate Syrian and Arab business communities. Assad's authoritarian upgrading of the political economy resulted in a "social market economy" that displayed an image of openness, but in reality overly relied on neopatrimonialism.

2.5 Monopoly over the Means of Coercion

Another contributor to authoritarian perseverance is the regime's ability to maintain a monopoly over the means of coercion in the state. Authoritarians can ensure a loyal military apparatus by sustaining patrimonial linkages between the regime and the military. Both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad were able to do this by infusing the coercive apparatus with kin and members of their Alawite clan. For example, Hafez Al-Assad appointed his brother Maher Al-Assad as the Republican Guard of Syria's Fourth Brigade. Eva Bellin⁷ concludes that a robust coercive apparatus is able to suppress democratic initiatives, precluding the possibility of political transition.

2.6 Post-Revolution Authoritarian Upgrading

Syria has continued to face unstable political and economic conditions after the uprisings began on March 2011. Heydemann¹⁷ argues that the regime was able to adapt to the dynamics of the conflict in a way that contributed to its preservation. Even before the uprisings in March, Assad formed a special committee that declared failure on the part of the Egyptian and Tunisian regimes since they did not instantly repress the protests. As soon as protests broke out in Syria, the Syrian government responded with lethal force. The peaceful protests transformed into full-fledged military offensives as the protestors took up arms to defend themselves. The regime responded with internal institutional alterations and policy modifications. The regime reconfigured its security sector, such as the armed forces and intelligence and security apparatuses, to confront forms of resistance that it was previously untrained for. It also incorporated loyalist shabiha militias, or the regime's thugs, into a formal paramilitary known as the National Defense Forces (NDF). The regime recruited these thugs to brutalize civilians, specifically Sunnis, and eventually fully integrated them into the security apparatus. Heydemann¹⁷ also identifies Assad's strategy of adapting to the war environment through his branding of the peaceful protests as a terrorism campaign led by Islamic extremists. The latter strategy of longevity is what I explore further in my own research.

2.7 Leveraging Strategic Relationships

The Assad regime also owes much of its survival to its ability to leverage its strategic relationships with international allies. According to Ospina and Gray²⁴, Assad has isolated himself from the international community, excluding long-time partners, Iran and Hezbollah. Assad's survival is in line with Hezbollah and Iran's interests because Syria has always been Iran's main connection to Hezbollah. Without Assad, Iran would have no way of supplying arms, missiles, and other types of arsenals to Hezbollah. For that reason, Iran has supported the Assad regime militarily by sending military and security advisors to aid in combat effectiveness. Also, Hezbollah has sent thousands of fighters to fight alongside the regime against the opposition. Not only have Hezbollah and Iran provided military support to the regime, but they have also supplied financial assistance in the form of loans and contracts. Russia has also been a crucial ally to the Assad regime, providing arms and money. More importantly, Russia has served to legitimize the Assad regime by continuously vetoing UN Security Council sanctions against Assad.¹⁷

2.8 The Fragmented Opposition

Part of the Assad regime's power base stems from its ability to stand united amongst the rebels that are practically waging their own civil war amongst each other. While the rebel groups clash based on varying ideologies, the Assad regime neglects ideology and focuses on maintaining whatever is left of its power base. Although Islamic extremists constitute the majority of the rebels, they remain divided along several different lines and frequently fight amongst

each other. Moderate rebels have fought against their Salafi counterparts, Syrians against foreign fighters, and Arab-Salafists against Kurdish forces. The intra-rebel sectarian and territorial clashes have reinforced Assad's position of power because while they were distracted over territorial disputes, Assad and his cohesive circle of cronies reasserted control over previously liberated areas.

2.9 How Strong are all these Factors Today?

Scholars attribute Assad's resiliency to a combination of the factors reviewed above. However, the conflict is changing every day and some of the factors may no longer be applicable to the current situation in Syria. The political economy factors of persistence were legitimate explanations of the resiliency of both Hafez and Bashar Al-Assad before the conflict began in 2011. However, the present day situation in Syria has escalated to the point where political economy justifications are no longer valid. As businesses in Syria are hardly operating anymore and as the regime targets the Sunni majority that once dominated the business community in Syria, state-business alliances are deteriorating.

Furthermore, Assad no longer attains a monopoly over the means of coercion like before. Over 8,000 pro-regime military personnel from a mainly Alawite region of Latakia have reportedly been killed since the beginning of the revolution, along with thousands of other Alawites from different regions. Assad's Alawite support base may be deteriorating as certain Alawite clans build resentment toward Assad, reflecting Assad's favoritism toward the so-called al-Kallasieh clan, to which his family belongs. He has protected this clan in an isolated coastal region away from the war while other Alawite communities are forced to fight in the front lines against the opposition⁵. Some regime soldiers have defected into the Free Syrian Army (FSA), which now controls certain "liberated zones" in the country. Additionally, Steven Heydemann's theory of regime adaptation to the conflict may contribute a solid partial explanation to Assad's resiliency strategy; however, it does not completely encompass the crux of it. The fragmented opposition, along with Assad's international allies, have certainly also contributed to the Assad's strength and legitimacy.

The question remains as to how Assad is able to continue to perpetrate mass crimes against humanity and repression of the Syrian people under the watch of free leaders of the world, such as the United States, the UK, and France. Assad has not been held responsible for violations of international law and the UN Declaration of Human Rights. The international community continues to turn a blind eye to the blatant evidence of inhumanity because of the way in which Assad himself has framed the revolution and the civil war. As the quantity of Assad's discourse, mostly through interviews, has risen, Assad has increasingly focused on legitimizing his authority through portraying an image of himself in the media as an ally in the global war on terror rather than an enemy of liberty. Therefore, a closer look at his rhetoric in the media is warranted in order to analyze how Assad's narrative contributed to his resiliency throughout the civil war in Syria.

3. Methodology

The dynamics of the civil war in Syria are constantly changing, meaning that various factors with varying weights of influence can be at play sustaining Assad's position of power. After a careful study of all the resiliency factors presented by the authors in the literature review, I came to realize that there must be some other factor at play inhibiting the international community from intervening in a war that the UN refugee agency, UNHCR, has deemed the "biggest humanitarian emergency of our era." In an effort to go beyond the current data, I decided to focus on Assad's discourse in the media. By analyzing Assad's interviews and speeches, I found Assad's rhetoric to be highly relevant to his tenacious presidency. Through a qualitative research study of Assad's discourse, I was able to identify Assad's strategy of framing the revolution as a foreign insurgency against his government rather than an uprising of the Syrian people to protest for freedom from authoritarian rule. In fact, Assad delegitimizes any semblance of the uprisings as a pro-democracy movement or "revolution." In denying the presence of a rebellion against his government, Assad comforts the international community, hindering it from taking action against him.

The qualitative research for this study focused on Assad's discourse through public speeches and interviews since the start of the revolution in March of 2011 through the present day. I follow the progression of Assad's rhetoric, analyzing the changing messages that Assad portrays to both his country and the rest of the world. I begin by examining the inauguration speech Assad delivered when he first became President in 2000 in order to compare the discourse from the time of the conflict to baseline rhetoric. I then study a total of three speeches delivered by Bashar Al-Assad and 8 interviews between Assad and various media outlets based around the globe. The first speech was delivered shortly after the uprisings began on March 30, 2011. The second of Assad's speeches addressed the state of

the Syrian crisis as of January 2013, and the third was his inauguration speech in July of 2014 after he was “re-elected” President. The speeches, aimed at consumption by the Syrian people and the Arab world, were delivered in Arabic. I analyzed the speeches as given in Arabic, as well as the English translations.

While the speeches were targeted towards Assad’s domestic audience, the interviews conducted throughout the course of the conflict were targeted toward international audiences. The interviews I analyzed include three with American media, as well as single interviews with British, French, Russian, Lebanese, and German media outlets. I gathered this data from Syrian regime-controlled news outlets, opposition news outlets, and media outlets from various countries. I follow the progression of Assad’s rhetoric, keeping the targeted audience in mind, in order to discover how Assad’s use of the media advanced his position as head of the Syrian state. I proceeded to categorize the primary data based on their platform. The media outlet and language used in Assad’s discourse indicated the audience whom Assad was targeting in that particular discourse. I identified the themes that dominated Assad’s interview responses and speeches, revealing his own narrative of the Syrian conflict that he portrayed to the world. The reappearing themes revealed Assad’s careful planning of the evolving nature of the conflict, as well as the way in which he manipulated the crisis to sustain and legitimize his position of authority.

4. Analyzing Assad’s Message

The analysis reveals several consistent themes that are incoherent with the reality on the ground in Syria, but at the same time appeal to the interests of the West and Western allies. Assad’s discourse was minimal before the conflict; his inauguration speech on July 17, 2000 was one of his major speeches before the war. He referenced the need for economic reform, as well as the need for the Syrian people and the government to work together to achieve this goal. Before the revolution, Assad made it seem as if he was willing to work with the people toward economic development and modernization; however, time has proven that his dictatorial form of governance lacks concern for the fate of the people.

Throughout his 2000 inauguration speech, he never once mentioned terrorism, whereas his discourse presented throughout the conflict is flooded with rhetoric on terrorism. I identified four main themes that Assad fed to the media after the people rose in 2011: combatting terrorism, fighting rising sectarianism, uniting against a foreign threat, and having the support of the Syrian people. I analyze each theme more deeply below by referencing the discourse. Assad has framed the conflict as a war against foreign terrorism and extremism. Although the rise in Islamism has allowed these frames to become more legitimate, Assad has spun the war to make his rule seem like the only legitimate alternative to extremist rule in Syria.

4.1 Combatting Terrorism

The most prevalent theme of Assad’s discourse by far is combatting terrorism, appearing in every single post-revolution interview and speech that I analyzed. From President Assad’s first address to the Syrian people after the uprisings on March 30, 2011, Assad made it clear that he was not recognizing the uprisings as a revolution. Rather, he labelled them a “foreign conspiracy” intended to undermine Syria’s national unity and stability. Assad attributes the start of the killing to the conspirators, claiming that the government was as clueless as the Syrian people, “and did not understand what was happening until acts of sabotage started to emerge.” Assad notes that not all of the protestors were conspirators, but citizens who had “good intentions but were misled.” Assad claims that “they mixed up three elements: sedition, reform, and daily needs.” He notes that the latter two factors were covered up by sedition, discrediting the theory of a rebellion occurring against him.

Assad planted the seed that grew into an Islamic extremist opposition force when he released extremist prisoners from Sednaya prison shortly after the start of the rebellion. This is how the Syrian part of ISIS was born^{9, 6}. Assad fostered the terrorism he claims he is devoted to fight, justifying his narrative that he must defeat the foreign Salafists seeking to establish their own Islamic caliphate in his country. ISIS did not cultivate from the rebellion like Assad claims; rather, it took advantage of the chaos in Syria, making the country its safe haven. ISIS was able to gain battlefield experience and attract financial support from the Gulf States who sought to overthrow Assad. Members of Syrian rebel groups that lacked resources, or just needed to support their families were enticed to join ISIS as well. Assad continues to prop up ISIS because the reality is that the two sides actually make each other stronger. ISIS represents itself as the only alternative to Assad while Assad purports that he is the main force in defeating ISIS. For that reason, evidence shows that they have been strategically ignoring each other on the battlefield. Assad has been targeting the moderate opposition and avoiding ISIS. According to Jane’s Terrorism and Intelligence Center, only 6%

of regime counterterrorism operations targeted ISIS. While Assad claims that he is combatting terrorist-affiliated organizations in Syria in all his interviews and speeches, the evidence proves the contrary.

Once Islamists flooded the opposition, Assad became justified in replacing the term “conspiracy” with “terrorism” in defining his opposition, just like he had planned. The term terrorism, being inherently political, is often used as a political tool. Bruce Hoffman²³ attributes the term’s contested meaning to the fact that usage of the term has changed over time to accommodate the political discourse of each successive era. The media and the West’s classification of Islamist opposition groups in Syria as “terrorist-affiliated organizations” allowed Assad to use the term as a political tool as well, justifying his regime’s actions by labelling them counter-terrorism operations.

Assad’s first interview applying the “combatting terrorism” frame was with American-based ABC’s Barbara Walters on December 7, 2011. Assad claims that “from the very first few weeks we had those terrorists. They are getting more and more aggressive, they have been killing.” Throughout the interview, Assad repeatedly references terrorism as the force he is fighting. Even the mere fact that ABC provided Assad with his first platform to feed Western media his narrative contributes to his international legitimacy as head of the Syrian state.

Furthermore, President Assad delivered a speech before the People’s Assembly on June 3, 2012. The main focus of his speech was the growing terrorism in Syria aimed at undermining the homeland. He asserts that there must be a distinction between terrorism and the political process in order to move forward in Syria and discredit the terrorism. Assad classifies the destruction of infrastructure and declining provision of basic resources on “acts of sabotage by terrorists.” So far, Assad’s message is consistent to both the West and his own people: the war is not between the government and the Syrian people, but between the Syrians and terrorists.

One month later, German media conducted an interview with Assad on July 5, 2012. Unlike the Barbara Walters interview, this interview was with a German regime apologist, Jurgen Todenhof. Todenhof is known in Germany for being an anti-war advocate and critical of Western policy toward the Middle East. The interview was another platform allowing Assad to convey the same message regarding terrorism in Syria. He clearly stated that “the rebels are an amalgam of Al-Qaeda and other extremists and outlaws who have escaped the police.” He goes on to claim that the highest percentage of people is being killed by gangs, Al-Qaeda, and other outlaws or extremists. Only a few months later, Assad was interviewed by Russian-based RT. The interviewer, Sophie Shevardnadze, called Assad “a well-educated man who has fallen victim to media demonization.” Assad was offered an interview with another ally, where he could frame the conflict as a war against terrorism. He asserts that “terrorism is his enemy,” and substantiates this claim by referencing Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch whom recognized the terrorists that captured government soldiers and executed them as war criminals.

In January 2013, Assad delivered his first speech on the Syrian crisis since June 2012 to a crowd of his supporters at the regal Opera House. He addressed his concerns about terrorist groups attacking his homeland. He claimed that Syrians were rebelling against these groups, not his government, labelling the crisis as a “fake revolution.” Assad pledged to continue residing as President of Syria “as long as there is one terrorist left,” despite international demands that he step down. Assad continues to reiterate these themes throughout the entirety of his discourse until this day. In Assad’s interview with Lebanese-based Al-Manar on May 30 2013, Assad states that the Syrians were deceived to believe that there was a revolution occurring against the failings of the state. Assad did another exclusive American interview with CBS’s Charlie Rose on September 10, 2013, after it was proven that Assad had used chemical weapons on civilians. Assad is relentless in his position that the majority of his opposition is extremist foreigners despite the facts and research that Rose presents him with.

Assad’s most recent interviews were arranged with American-based Foreign Affairs and the UK-based BBC. The Foreign Affairs interview was on January 26, 2015, in which Assad blatantly denied the existence of a moderate opposition. Assad stated in the interview that “what’s left, what Obama called the ‘fantasy’, what he called the ‘moderate opposition’-it is not an opposition; they are rebels. Most of them joined Al-Qaeda...” Here, Assad is given the opportunity to speak to the American public amidst talks of arming the moderate opposition in Syria. On February 10, 2015, almost four years into the revolution, BBC correspondent Jeremy Bowen was still asking questions about how the conflict began. Since his first interview, Assad’s responses to those have remained consistent.

Clearly Assad’s framing of the revolution as a war against terrorism has justified the continued fighting and the use of force by the military. While Assad’s “conspiracy” argument may have been challenging to defend, “combatting terrorism” is valid since terrorist-affiliated rebel factions actually infiltrated Syria from abroad. Not only are they fighting in Syria, but they are also gaining strength by the day. Meanwhile, the moderate opposition forces in Syria, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), are weakening as their financial and material resources are either hijacked by the government or simply unable to reach them. This weakness created a vacuum, which allowed for the emergence of extremist foreign opposition groups, such as ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra, seeking to establish an Islamic caliphate in a chaotic region. These insurgents now make up a large part of the opposition, as they receive financial and material support from the Gulf States. As the events of the conflict have unfolded, Assad’s framing of the war as a fight against

terrorism now appears genius. The terrorists that were nonexistent in the beginning became a reality, working entirely in Assad's favor. Assad's classification of ISIS and other extremist organizations as "terrorist" resonates with every audience from the Middle East populations and governments to the United States. It shifted the world's attention away from his regime's actions and toward ISIS's terrorism, giving him the legitimacy he needs in order for his rule to seem like the only viable alternative to Islamist control of Syria.

4.2 Battling Rising Sectarianism

The rise in Islamic extremist groups fighting in Syria handed Assad the opportunity to convey another message that legitimized the use of force by his regime: battling increasing sectarianism in the country. The foreign opposition groups brought with them their radical Sunni ideology into Syria. As these opposition groups gain more membership, their ideology becomes more powerful, which does Assad a major service. It makes him appear that by combatting the terrorist groups, he is also combatting their radical ideology pervading Syria. There is evidence, however, that the rise of sectarianism is attributed to none other than Assad himself. According to Housam Darwisheh¹⁰, Assad introduced official propaganda that added to the threat of sectarianism by highlighting armed gangs, Salafi, militants, and foreign conspiracies. He also spread rumors of sectarian attacks among various communities and villages to pit them against one another. In fact, Assad's rhetoric on sectarianism was apparent in his first speech addressing the uprisings, before the rise of ISIS. Assad fabricated stories of conspirators soliciting sectarian attacks, planning the sectarian element of the war from the very beginning. Once again, Assad got exactly what he wanted when radical Islamist ideology permeated the country, increasing sectarian tension in the region. Assad exploited sectarianism when he released Sunni Islamist militants from prison so they could fight alongside the opposition. As a result, the Free Syrian Army, found itself fighting not only against the regime, but also Islamist militants.

Despite the fact that Assad fostered the sectarianism, he tries to validate his efforts to counter it through his interview with Lebanese Al-Manar. Assad blames the terrorists for attempting to divide Syrian society with sectarian slogans. Assad states that "even though they were able to infiltrate certain pockets in Syrian society, pockets of ignorance and lack of awareness that exist in any society, they were not able to create this sectarian division. Had they succeeded, Syria would have been divided up from the beginning." Assad's message through this quote is that he is succeeding in defeating the sectarian mantras of the opposition and that sectarianism was absent from Syrian society before the revolution. However, Assad's alliance with Iran since the 1980s, as well as Hezbollah in Lebanon, created a Shia sphere of influence that penetrated Syrian culture.

Additionally, in Assad's interview with CBS in September 2013, Charlie Rose asks Assad if the civil war is transforming into a religious war. Assad responds by reiterating that the war started partly as a sectarian war, referring back to his stance on foreign conspirators inciting conflict in March 2011, but that the war no longer has a religious element. However, Al-Qaeda "uses Islam as a pretext and as a mantle and as a cover for their war and for their terrorism and for their killing and beheading and so on." In this interview, Assad emphasizes Al-Qaeda's use of radical Islam as their motivation for terror. Since the Syrian people are against their ideology, it stresses the increasing sectarian tensions damaging Syrian society. Therefore, Assad depicts himself as the moderate force working to counter pervading sectarianism associated with the rise of ISIS.

4.3 Promoting National Unity

Another common theme that showed through Assad's rhetoric is Syrian national unity against a foreign threat. As the presence of foreign fighters in Syria surged, the reiteration of this message helped Assad gain more traction- it gave the civil war meaning, and legitimized the use of force by his regime. When Assad portrays the Syrian people as unified under the Syrian government, he hopes to send the message that the strength of a unified Syrian body will help in defeating the threat of the jihadist ideology that had entered Syria.

From the start of the conflict, Assad utilized the national unity rhetoric. In his first address to the Syrian people on March 30, 2011, Assad expresses his willingness to bring the people that incited the violence to justice to "bring about national unity rather than disunite the Syrians. Let it be for strengthening the country rather than weakening it, for putting an end to sedition rather than enflaming it. Let us act as quickly as possible to heal our wounds and restore harmony to our larger family and maintain love as our uniting bond." Assad's speech is aimed at rallying his country under a sense of patriotism, "the real force which protects Syria at every juncture." In blaming the killing on foreign conspirators, Assad is able to represent himself as the guardian of a unified Syrian population.

Assad's speech to the People's Assembly on June 3, 2012 delivers a similar message. Assad states that "terrorism will not break the will of the Syrian people and Syria will ever remain the castle of steadfastness and it will recover

and witness the defeat of its enemies.” In this quote, Assad attempts to communicate that every Syrian has a common enemy: the terrorists. Furthermore, towards the end of Assad’s speech on the state of the Syrian crisis in January 2013, Assad lays out a political solution to the crisis which revolves around “Syrian-led dialogue among the people of Syria.”

The same theme comes across in Assad’s 2014 inauguration speech, where he addresses the country as if the Syrians voted him into power. He congratulates them for “denying all forms of hegemony and aggression with their patriotic consciousness.” It also shines through during the Foreign Affairs interview, where Jonathan Tepperman mentions the division of Syria into “three ministates”: areas controlled by the government, those controlled by ISIS and Jabhat Al-Nusra, and then areas controlled by the Sunni and Kurdish opposition. Tepperman asks Assad how he will unite the country again. Assad responds by saying that all the Syrians within those ministates still believe in unity and are still united under the Syrian government. Assad’s message of uniting against a foreign threat aided him in moving the world’s attention away from his actions and toward ISIS. With talk of the United States partnering with Assad to take down ISIS, the U.S. could potentially ally with a ruthless dictator, and it seems justified to politicians since rule by ISIS could be worse than rule by Assad.

4.4 Maintaining Popular Support

Although it is hard to believe that Assad would actually convey to the media that he has the support of the Syrian population, he does so nonetheless, and his confidence in it is striking through the course of his rhetoric. It first emerges in his interview with Barbara Walters. As Walters questioned Assad’s resolve in having the support of the Syrian people, Assad remained defiant, claiming that “the majority of Syrians are in the middle, meaning they are not against [him].” It appears again in Assad’s interview with Russian TV when he claims that “the problem is not between me and the people...how can I be here if the Syrian people are against me?”

Furthermore, in Assad’s interview with CBS, Charlie Rose asks Assad if he would ever step down given the current situation. Assad asserts that he cannot quit on his country unless the public demanded it, but obviously the public supports him because he could not have lasted for two and a half years otherwise. Assad also claims that “Syria could not have withstood against the West and Saudi Arabia without the support of the Syrian people.” He goes on to mention that the Syrian population condones the military because without it, “it could not do its job and advance.”

In the interview with Foreign Affairs magazine, Assad portrayed unwavering self-assurance that the people of Syria are still behind him. When asked how he will ever put Syria back together again, Assad responded with: “the Syrian people are still with the unity of Syria; they still support the government.” BBC’s Jeffrey Bowen takes it one step further by asking Assad how he can violate humanitarian law in the name of protecting his people. Assad avoids giving a direct response by spinning his own rhetorical question at Bowen: “you are talking about somebody or a government who is killing its people and the people supporting the government. This is a contradiction. There’s no logic in it. What is the answer? How can you have support and kill the people at the same time?”

Assad uses the fact that the regime has persisted throughout years of the revolution as evidence of popular support. However, this message prevails only through interviews with foreign media outlets. In none of his speeches does Assad convey that he has the support of his people because in those speeches, his people are his audience. The truth remains that a totalitarian regime has many other ways of persevering that rarely include popular support.

In summary, the four dominant themes of Assad’s discourse represent the targeted messages that Assad aims to get across to both his domestic and international audiences. After examining the speeches in both English and Arabic, it appears that the messages are consistent across languages. Assad has to ensure that his messages remain uniform across all audiences because not only does he have to convince the Syrian population and the international community that the civil war is a result of the terrorist infiltration, but he must also convince himself of that exact lie that he manipulated in order for his image as President of Syria to remain legitimate. For that reason, Assad can never waver in his rhetoric. Assad has succeeded in convincing the world that he is the only logical force for defeating the terrorist infiltration, conquering sectarian tensions, achieving a unified Syrian body, and doing it all with the support of his country.

5. Conclusion

As the Syrian civil war enters its fifth year, the world still sits idly by as the actions of the Assad government continue unquestioned. All the reasons explored in this paper for Assad’s resiliency point to his intelligence as a relentless dictator. His portrayal of the conflict in Syria as a war against terrorism to both domestic and international audiences in the media established him as a necessary agent in defeating the terrorism. Assad constructed his strategy of nurturing

the terrorist opposition from the initiation of the revolution. Once the influence of Islamic extremism grew strong enough, Assad was able to legitimize his rule as a more viable alternative to rule by ISIS, or any other Jihadist group seeking power in Syria. He claims that he is reversing the sectarianism that has permeated Syrian society as a result of the influence of Islamic extremism; however, sectarianism in Syria existed long before the revolution and only intensified with the rise of Islamic militants. His rhetoric emphasized his willingness to defeat the influence of terrorism in order for a political solution to be determined in Syria. According to Assad, that solution would be solely determined by the Syrian people. He consistently propagated Syrian unity throughout his discourse, as well as his attainment of the Syrian people as allies in the conflict, in order to justify his authority to the international community. Foreign media outlets have been eager to provide Assad with the platform to spread these messages, which also helped legitimize his image.

Assad's ability to use the media as a way to distract the world from regime brutality and devastation of society is unique in the Middle East region. He is unmatched among authoritarian Arab leaders in his deceptive persona and Western appearance. His abilities to both communicate effectively in English and dodge tough questions in an eloquent manner are unparalleled in the MENA region. Assad and his wife also maintain a Western appearance in their media interactions unlike other Arab leaders, which appeals to Western countries and their perception of Assad's legitimacy. Gadhafi, Ben Ali, and Mubarak lacked these characteristics that aided Assad in gaining international legitimacy through his use of the media. Assad's discourse also impacts his audience inside Syria as it aims to rally whatever internal support he has left, reassuring his current Alawite supporters that he is the leader they need for a prosperous Syria.

As the international community shifts its attention away from the actions of the Assad government and toward combatting hardline Islamic radicalism, Assad and Iran have taken the opportunity to offer the U.S. their partnership in crushing the influence of ISIS. The focus on ISIS terrorism abroad has done Assad the service of removing his name from the headlines. People watching the news are left thinking that Assad may not be as harmful as was once presumed, and that the downfall of ISIS is a higher priority. U.S. alliances with supporters of terrorism will only benefit Assad's strategy of maintaining power, and will prove that his manipulation of the Syrian Revolution was effective.

As much as the theories in the literature have contributed to explaining Bashar Al-Assad's resiliency, the influence of Assad's narrative in keeping him in power continues to increase. His rhetoric delivers the impression that he is the solution for Syria. Assad aims to show the world that he is the moderate force against Islamism. He presents himself as Syria's guardian, the only agent willing and strong enough to reverse the effects of the war and unite a peaceful Syria. Unfortunately, this message resonates with the international community, saving it the effort from intervening in a messy situation. With the world so focused on defeating Islamic extremism, there is no one left to watch the Assad regime. Assad and his cronies are left unscathed as the Syrian population dwindles by the day.

Assad's persistence throughout the revolution and the civil war highlights his competence as a manipulator. This study does not reject any of the current theories on Assad's post-2011 resiliency; however, it suggests that the pre-war theories of authoritarian longevity are no longer significant. The study confirms that Assad's image and utilization of the media contribute to his regime's authoritarian stability in a way that no other Arab dictator has attempted to emulate. Assad tailored this strategy to work effectively with his personal characteristics. Despite the Assad regime's monopoly over the means of coercion, patronage networks, international allies, fractured opposition, and ability to adapt to the dynamic forces of the Syrian conflict, Assad's resiliency may have been threatened without his manipulation of the revolution and his ability to effectively spread his narrative of the conflict to the world.

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7. Endnotes

¹The Alawite clan is a minority in Syria that follows a sect of Shia Islam. The Assad family belongs to the Alawite sect, while the majority of the Syrian population is Sunni Muslim (70%).