

# **THE QUEST TO MASCULINITY: GENDERING ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY, HONOR AND SHAME IN SYRIAN SELF-IDENTITY**

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## Abstract

Syrian state behavior since 1946 puzzles traditional approaches to security that prioritize physical security. Syria experienced three major military defeats against Israel. Today, the regime lost its control over the vast majority of national territories to various opposition groups. Yet, Syrian state agents have been showing their content and pride about the military, the state and people. Hafez al-Assad and his successor Bashar al-Assad emphasize dignity and honor of Syria and Syrian people even when the military faces a defeat. This thesis analyzes Syrian state behavior and the discourse that evolve around it through a gendered ontological security lens. The ontological security needs of states motivate them to hang onto routines and practices that define their identity. Therefore, ontological security seeking states might pursue “irrational” policies. This analysis of biographical narrative of Syrian state agents shows that honor and self-identity are inextricably linked to gender structure and gender identities. The qualities that constitute Syrian national honor such as steadfastness also constitute Syrian state masculine self-identity as the protector of the feminized nation and land. In this thesis, I argue that ontological security needs of Syria have been constructed through emasculating –shameful– experiences. Syria’s persistence in engaging and sustaining conflicts and Bashar al-Assad’s discourse on national honor are driven from the anxiety over emasculation. In order to feel as a continuous subject through time, Syrian state agents have been attempting to avoid emasculation and to maintain self-identity as a chivalrous, staunch fighter by resorting to violence and redefining enemies if necessary.

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## Introduction

The wind of the Arab Spring reached to Syria in 2011, however today by 2016, approximately 400.000 people were killed and 45 percent of the population is displaced. It is commonly regarded as the worst humanitarian crisis of our time. President Bashar al-Assad's regime is blamed for murdering civilian protestors, using chemical weapons and refusing the calls for resignation. The regime lost its control over the vast majority of territories and the armed forces were pushed to the western coast. Today, Bashar al-Assad still stands as the president of Syria. Even though the regime lost its capability to pursue a tough and proud foreign policy, half of the country is governed by the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (later to be known as the Islamic State (IS)) and al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra, state agents continue to discursively display their pride and content about the Syrian state and people. Bashar al-Assad's persistence to describe the uprisings and the subsequent civil war as a foreign conspiracy and his pride about the steadfastness of the military is interesting. Considering the Syrian history and how Syria denied many strategic opportunities and put its physical security at risk through the last century, Syrian state behavior and the narration of the self are not only interesting but also puzzling and needs explanation.

The Syrian state's strategic and political behaviors pose yet another challenge to rationalist, particularly the neo-realist school that prioritizes physical security over anything. One of the main assumptions of the realist school is that states first and foremost seek survival. However, Syria is not the only example that challenges the realist assumption that states prioritize physical security. The literature on ontological security in International Relations (IR)

problematize traditional security approaches characterized by the realist school and argue that states seek ontological security and most often prioritize ontological security over physical security. Ontological security refers to “the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency”<sup>1</sup>. It is a sense of continuity and order in events. Ontological security literature claims that states prioritize ontological security because an *ontologically insecure* subject does not know who he or she is anymore and cannot respond to new input and variety of threats. Within this framework, the sense of honor helps the subject to feel valued and coherent, continuous being, thus individuals seek honor. Therefore, the ontological security approach provides a framework that can be applied to study Hafez al-Assad and his successor Bashar al-Assad’s constant references to honor and the Syrian state’s obsession with steadfastness. In the Syrian context, the qualities that constitute the sense of honor also constitute masculine self-identity. Moreover, particularly in the Arab and Mediterranean context, honor and shame are inherently gendered concepts. Studying Syria as a case study shows that the ontological security framework needs to be gendered.

What motivated me to conduct this research is the staunch stance of the Syrian state even when the position the state takes is irrational. It is bewildering that stance of the Syrian state and military has been glorified even when the state faces military and political defeats. My main research question is:

“How can we understand staunch state behaviors that challenge rational calculations and the discourse that praises militaristic behaviors even when the state is facing a defeat?”

In order to answer this question, the following sub questions will guide my research: “How is gender constitutive of ontological security?” and “How does honor and shame operate

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<sup>1</sup> Jennifer Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma,” *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2006), 342.

in formation of state identity and state behavior?” Ontological security literature highlights the notions of honor and shame as strong motivations that influence state behavior. In this thesis, I argue that honor and shame are substantively gendered concepts. Building on the gender literature on honor, I aim to contribute to the literature by gendering honor and shame as a notion shaping and transforming state behavior and the discourse that evolve around it. Masculine honor exists on the basis of protecting the purity –feminine honor- of the nation and territories. Shame –as inverse of honor- should be understood as a challenge to masculine identity. My conclusion is shame –in the form of *emasculation*- creates a deep anxiety and is an *ontological security threat*. I argue that emasculating experiences such as colonial rule, cowardice and loss of Golan Heights have been haunting the Syrian self-identity. Insecurity of being shamed / emasculated is a noticeable influence on Syrian state behavior and discourse about the self. Pursuing ontological security, state agents established a discourse in which enemies were re-defined so that the identity of staunch, masculine, chivalrous fighter can be maintained.

This thesis proceeds as the following: in the following chapter I build the theoretical framework by introducing and analyzing the literature on ontological security and gender. In Chapter 2, I provide a historical background of the Syrian state and demonstrate how the masculine self is reflexively understood. Chapter 3 and 4 are analytical chapters on the notions of honor and shame. I start by demonstrating why honor / shame matters in IR, why and how honor / shame is a gendered concept, then conclude by showing in what ways Syrian internal honor / shame and self-identity is gendered and why it is important to study state behavior.

## Chapter 1: Theoretical Framework

### 1.1 Ontological Security

Within the discipline of IR, there is a developing literature on ontological security that challenges traditional security studies whose only concern is physical security. The ontological security framework is useful to make sense of routinized state behaviors and narratives and why state agents follow “irrational” policy choices under particular conditions. Game-theoretic and traditional approaches to security show variety, however a substantive analysis of traditional approaches is not my main focus. Game-theoretic approaches share the assumption that state is a rational actor that evaluates the choices available and pursues the one that will serve its interest the most. The state is a unitary, monolithic, rational actor that pursues value maximization.<sup>2</sup> By traditional approaches to security, what is referred is mostly the realist accounts for security. Realist approaches understand security in physical and existential terms; states first and foremost seek physical survival.<sup>3</sup> In short, what both approaches have in common is the assumption that states are rational actors that seek physical security and value maximization. Therefore, “irrational” state behaviors pose a theoretical conundrum to rationalist theories. The ontological security framework fills this gap the rationalist theories possess. The need for ontological security is a strong motivation for states to conduct a particular behavior. Ontological security refers to “the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency”.<sup>4</sup> In Giddens’ words ontological security is “a sense of continuity and order in events”.<sup>5</sup> Actors seek to

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<sup>2</sup> For further information see Andrew H. Kydd, *International Relations Theory: The Game-Theoretic Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> See George F. Kennan, “Morality and Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, 1985, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/1985-12-01/morality-and-foreign-policy>; Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: Random House, 1979).

<sup>4</sup> Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics”, 342.

<sup>5</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991), 243.



maintain their identity and routines as it is in order to realize self-agency. Therefore, ontological security seeking states might engage in “irrational” conflicts.

Unaddressed ontological security needs create anxiety and insecurity about the self. Examining how the concept has been brought to IR from psycho-analytic and sociology literature will demonstrate why and how states seek ontological security. Ontological security was initially introduced by psycho-analyst R.D Laing to study and explain psychosis and schizophrenia. Based on his assumption that mental disorders have not only biological but also social causes, he argues that ontologically insecure individuals are more prone to suffer from psychosis or schizophrenia.<sup>6</sup> He argues that the individual experiences her own being as real and whole as a continuum in time, as having an inner consistency; therefore her identity and autonomy is never in question.<sup>7</sup> Namely, ontologically secure individual has a sense of identity and agency that has been consistent throughout time. This consistency is important because the subject knows who she is and she can assess new information and experiences based on her perceived self-identity. An ontologically insecure individual lacks these features; she cannot cognitively organize changes and challenges, and thus fails to adapt and respond to new input and experiences.<sup>8</sup> Since the individual has no stable place to greet others, the individual fail to form social relations. She is vulnerable to changes and overwhelmed and undermined by them. Therefore, ontological security is crucial for individual self-agency.

Building on Laing’s psychoanalytic framework, Anthony Giddens provides a sociological interpretation of ontological security. Giddens refuses the understanding of ontological security as stable “truths” of the self and rather argues that the individual feels ontologically secure by constantly reproducing the self-identity.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, in Giddens’

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<sup>6</sup> R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (London: Tavistock, 1969).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.,43.

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

approach coherence between routines and narrative play a vital role. According to Giddens, our self-identity is constituted through social routines and narratives that are compatible with these routines. The individual feels ontologically secure when the narratives about the self are coherent with her daily routines.<sup>10</sup> Routines are important because day-to-day routines provide us with a sense of who we are and the individual has a confidence in managing social relations as she can predict and manage particular threats.<sup>11</sup> Similar to Laing, Giddens also deems ontological security to be crucial for self-agency. If the individual cannot predict and manage what might happen in her social environment, she is prone to experience existential anxiety in which the awareness of plurality of threats leave the individual unable to act, thus, she cannot be truly herself.<sup>12</sup>

Giddens' sociological interpretation of Laing's insights and his framework regarding routines influenced particularly the constructivist school within IR literature. IR scholars working on ontological security share the assumption that states seek ontological security.<sup>13</sup> The first issue they had to address is whether ontological security is applicable to state level since the state is an abstract concept whereas ontological security is an individual need. Jennifer Mitzen provides three defenses to justify why ontological security is applicable to states. The first rationale she proposes is, in simple terms, an "everyone else is doing it" justification. She argues that the realist assumption that states seek physical security implies that states are like bodies, which can die.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, if the assumption that states seek physical survival is acknowledged, then the assumption that states seek ontological security cannot be refuted on the basis that state is an abstract entity that does not have needs like individuals. However, this

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Roe, "The 'value' of Positive Security," *Review of International Studies* 34, no. 04 (October 2008): 777–94.

<sup>12</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self Identity*.

<sup>13</sup> Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics"; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics", p.351

alone does not justify why ontological security is applicable at state level. As Giddens demonstrates, self-identity and ontological security is closely linked to the capability of an individual to keep a particular narrative about the self going. In Steele's words: "State agents are the ones who construct the Selves of states through narrative... The reason states have an ontological security is because they have a historical account of themselves that has been built up through the narrative of agents of the past, present and the future".<sup>15</sup> Individual state agents help to construct and reproduce state identity through their narrative and these individuals have ontological security needs. Through these narratives, a state identity and routinized behaviors are established and "state agents seek to satisfy the self-identity needs of the states which they lead".<sup>16</sup> Therefore, methodologically, ontological security can be studied at the state level, "as if" states are like people.

Studies on ontological security shed light on phenomena that rationalist theories fail to explain and demonstrate how ontological security needs affect state behavior. Steele utilizes ontological security to explain what rationalist theories fail to account for. What makes Steele's approach unique and more applicable to study militaristic behaviors of Syria is his ontological focus on honor and shame. According to Steele, conceptions of internal honor and shame are closely linked with self-identity and self-value, therefore honor and shame influences state behavior. Steele argues that states look for honor –as the inverse of shame- even if it might be costly to their physical integrity.<sup>17</sup> To illustrate this, he uses the example of Belgium's choice during the WWI to fight a losing war against Germany. He argues that Belgium prioritized honor over physical survival and as such put her physical integrity at risk in a way that helped to maintain their ontological security. Belgian motivation to fight is driven by honor as can be seen from policy statements that stressed Belgium's need to "fight for the honor of the flag"

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<sup>15</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p.20,

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p.19.

<sup>17</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security*, 94-113.

and “avenge the Belgian honor”.<sup>18</sup> Applying the concept in a non-Western context, Ayşe Zarakol explains the denial of past crimes by Japan (WWII atrocities) and Turkey (1915 Armenian Genocide)- through ontological security. She argues that Japan and Turkey are not secure and confident about their identity and whether they belong to the West, the East, or both. Moreover, there are domestic pressures within each state who narrate their self-identity as benevolent, victim nations.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, having to admit past crimes to a global audience, in which Turkey and Japan are not sure about their places, means that the state has to reconsider its self-identity. This action would trigger ontological insecurity; Zarakol argues that this is why Turkey and Japan are reluctant to admit their historical crimes.<sup>20</sup>

Ontological security framework can explain “irrational” state behaviors and continuity or change in narration of the self and routinized state behaviors. What is puzzling about Syria is their persistence in engaging losing conflicts, enjoying a cold but stable non-peace situation and still being able to proud of the struggles in which they are ‘defeated’. Therefore, an analysis of self-identity and its interaction with state behavior can shed some light on this issue. However, gender as a structure of social practice is an indispensable component of identity formation. If states contain a self-identity, then states must have a gender self-identity.

## 1.2 Gendering Ontological Security

### 1.2.1 State as a Gendered Institution

In this thesis, I understand gender as a structure of social practice. I do not understand gender in terms of merely as individual choices and performances but I will rather focus on gendered structural relations that shape individual performances. Sandra Harding’s typology is useful to understand this approach. She refers to three aspects of gender: *individual gender*,

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 112.

<sup>19</sup> Ayşe Zarakol, “Ontological (In)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan,” *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (March 1, 2010): 3–23.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

*gender symbolism and gender structure.*<sup>21</sup> Division and organization of social activities are the consequences of assigning dualistic gender metaphors to various dichotomies that have nothing to do with biological sex. Individuals act out their gender identities that have been shaped by the gender structure. Thus, these three aspects are interwoven. Harding's interrelated aspects of gender enable us to examine the means by which a seemingly gender-neutral actor in international relations since gender symbolism is salient in the biographical narrative of states.

The ontological security framework regards the state as an entity that has a capability to have a biographical narrative, thus an identity. Raewyn Connell famously argued that "Institutions are substantively, not just metaphorically gendered. The state, for instance, is a masculine institution."<sup>22</sup> Gender is a significant component of identity construction, therefore a gendered analysis is necessary in a framework that deems identity as a strong motivation for states. Gender dynamics construct, shape and transform state identities as it does individual gender identities. Two key concepts can shed more light on why and how state identity is gendered: gendered nationalism / national identity and hegemonic masculinity.

First, feminist analyses have shown that national identity, nationalism and gender are inextricably linked as gendered expectations (norms) and symbolism are conspicuous in construction of national identity.<sup>23</sup> Regardless whether nation is understood as an "imagined community" or "a group of people sharing a common territory, common language and history", both biological and cultural reproduction is vital for a nation to survive.<sup>24</sup> Women and gender symbols play a crucial role here. As Yuval-Davis shows, women are regarded as mothers and

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<sup>21</sup> Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, (Cornell University Press, 1986).

<sup>22</sup> Raewyn W. Connell, *Masculinities*, 2nd Edition edition (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 72.

<sup>23</sup> Nira Yurav-Davis, *Gender & Nation* (London: Sage Publications, 1997); Lauren Wilcox, "Gendering the Cult of the Offensive," *Security Studies* 18, no. 2 (June 12, 2009): 214–40; Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Towards a Feminist Theory of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition, Revised edition (Verso, 2006); Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

women are expected to give birth to children who will serve their country.<sup>25</sup> Their reproduction function is valorized to the point where it is seen to be sacred. Women's purity is treated as the nation's purity since the nation's survival is dependent on women's reproduction functions. This discursive labeling women as mothers and the reproducers of the nation leaves them as a target in especially warfare. The notorious example of mass rapes in the Yugoslavian civil are linked with the desire to change the ethno-demography of a nation –to Serbicize the Bosnians for instance-. Gender relations are at the heart of cultural reproduction of a nation as well. As Yuval-Davis argues “women are often required to carry the burden of representation as they are constructed as the symbolic bearers of the collectivity's identity and honor”.<sup>26</sup> In collectivity's identity and honor, women play a crucial role as well. Purity is often associated with womanhood and femininity. In many Muslim societies, ‘honor killings’ take place because women ‘fail to behave or clothe properly’. The referent object whose honor is concerned here is the collective identity of the nation, not necessarily an individual woman. The nation should be protected from external threats and territorial integrity should remain pure and impenetrable like a woman. Thus, the nation or the body of the state are often represented feminine in the literature.

The state's masculinity is constructed through the feminized nation. In this dichotomous relationship, the state as an institution appears as the masculine protector of the feminized nation and the body of the state –territory, population etc.-. The state resides in the public sphere in the public / private dichotomy. What does not interest the state to intervene is pushed to the private sphere whereas what is deemed to be more important is addressed in the political / public sphere. Private sphere is associated with domestic / household sphere where women's identities

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<sup>25</sup> Yuval-Davis, *Gender & Nation*.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.45

are narrowed to reproductive functions.<sup>27</sup> Domestic labor, sexuality, child care are the concerns of the private sphere until they require a public regulation, in which case the abstract “public man” intervenes.<sup>28</sup> Not surprisingly, military issues are also addressed at the public sphere. Therefore, the “public man” does not only regulate social life but also protect the “private” from external threats. Feminists identify this phenomenon as the “protection racket” in which “war is the heroic activity of male soldiers saving the lives of innocent women”.<sup>29</sup> As male soldiers protect the lives of innocent women, the masculine state protects the feminized nation. The state reproduces its identity as masculine –sovereign, competent, protector subject- while the identity of the nation is narrowed down to passive object to be protected. Therefore, “protection racket” functions to reproduce and normalize structural dependencies and gender hierarchies. Feminist scholars argue that states are gendered mainly because states “adopt, use and reproduce traits associated with their perceptions of dominant masculinities”.<sup>30</sup> Most often driven by militaristic values, a man –like a state- is expected to be sovereign, honorable and have their own agency and capacity to protect those who are in need.

Second rationale why and how states are gendered can be understood by gender hierarchy and power relations. Against the view that men generally show masculine qualities that are then highly valued, feminist analyses of masculinity in IR have argued that “qualities that are valued as power-enhancing get defined as masculine and hence are associated with men”.<sup>31</sup> Sovereignty, for instance, provides the subject with agency –power enhancing-, hence is associated with the masculine identity of the state. Qualities that are valued as power-

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<sup>27</sup> V. Spike Peterson, “Security and Sovereign States: What Is at Stake in Taking Feminism Seriously?,” in *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory*, ed. V. Spike Peterson (Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1992). p.34.

<sup>28</sup> Terrell Carver, “‘Public Man’ and the Critique of Masculinities,” *Political Theory* 24, no. 4 (1996): 673–86.

<sup>29</sup> Wilcox, “Gendering the Cult of the Offensive”.

<sup>30</sup> Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict*, p. 140

<sup>31</sup> Charlotte Hooper, “Masculinist Practices and Gender Politics: The Operation of Multiple Masculinities in International Relations,” in *The Man Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (Boulder: Westview Press, 1998).

enhancing in global politics are mainly sovereignty and military and political capability and competency. Same qualities place the state in the public sphere and make the state ‘the protector’. Following the constructivist framework of ontological security and structural gender approaches, these qualities make the state a masculine subject while the state contributes to this interaction by valorizing these qualities. However, the qualities that are valued and associated with masculinity show difference based on class, race and cultural structures. For instance, at the individual level masculinity in working class is likely to be defined through labor, hard work and breadwinning whereas masculinity in bourgeoisie can be defined through manners, rationality and wealth. At the state level, gender identity of the Netherlands might show characteristics of liberal, progressive masculinity whereas the U.S is recognized as a militarized masculine subject. However, what they have in common is that their masculinity is constructed through a subordination of a feminine subject: the nation.

To sum up, the ontological security framework sees the state as an entity that is capable to have a biographical narrative, thus the state has an identity that they seek to maintain. Gender is an inextricable component of identity and identity politics. Gender symbolism is salient in the narration of the state’s self-identity and representation of the nation. Qualities that are associated with states such as sovereignty, agency, bravery or rationality are also associated with masculinity. The state is constructed to be masculine protector of the feminized nation. Therefore, following the ontological security framework, one would expect states to maintain their masculine identity even if it puts their survival at risk. However, there is not one single type of masculinity that can be observed in each state, but rather there are multiple masculinities that are constructed in a hierarchical relationship. A closer look at men and masculinities will help us understand the anxiety of states over their masculinity and what exactly states seek to maintain.



### 1.2.2 Men & Masculinities: Hegemonic Masculinity

Sociology and psychology literature highlights the concept of multiple masculinities and their hierarchical relation in order to explain social behaviors and violence. It is important to understand it at the individual level to apply the analogy to the state level. Connell famously argued that masculinities are constructed in a hierarchical order in which *hegemonic masculinity* subordinates other types of masculinities and femininities.<sup>32</sup> Gender as a way of structuring social practices establishes an axis of power in which women are subordinated to men, a structure that feminists tend to call as ‘the patriarchy’. However, Connell demonstrates that in this axis of power, the hegemonic masculinity sits at the top, reproducing the social structure in which other types of masculinities are subordinated as well. Hegemony indicates that masculine attributes that are associated with the dominant understanding of masculinity are produced and reproduced as ‘the common sense’ of gender. Having access to resources, hegemonic masculinity marginalizes the subordinated masculinities. One ubiquitous example that transcend borders is *heterosexuality*. Heterosexuality has been represented as commonsensical and is an important component of hegemonic masculinity, in the U.S for instance.<sup>33</sup> Heterosexual man enjoys domination over not only women but also homosexual man. As Connell argues, that is not only a stigmatization of homosexuality, but gay men experience structural and material consequences of subordination of homosexuality.<sup>34</sup> They are excluded from the military service in many societies, often marginalized and sometimes even criminalized.

The framework of hegemonic masculinity and subordination of homosexuality also helps us to understand the anxieties over masculine gender identity. Hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed type that would be the same across time and space, but rather it is fluid. In Connell’s

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<sup>32</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*.

<sup>33</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 76

<sup>34</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 78-80.

words: “it is the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations, a position always contestable”. This ‘always contested’ nature of men’s power means that hegemonic masculinity is never fixed, closed or resolved; it needs to be constantly produced and reproduced. For example, if the hegemonic masculinity is constituted through bravery, toughness and strength; the individual needs to show these qualities constantly in order to be masculine. Therefore, the individual is under constant pressure to perform what is expected from a ‘real man’. Hegemony of heterosexual man is salient at this point. The individual is under pressure because failing to perform the requirements of hegemonic masculinity means being associated with homosexuality or even ‘worse’ with femininity: “Being a man is a lifelong task: ‘When does it end? Never. To admit weakness, to admit frailty and fragility, is to be seen as a wimp, a sissy, not a real man”<sup>35</sup> Psychoanalytical analyses have shown that the core emotion that motivates the individual to compel to hegemonic masculinity is fear and anxiety, the desire not to be humiliated in front of other men. This, however, renders many types of masculinity quite fragile.<sup>36</sup> The macho man, for example, has such a strong internal pressure and anxiety about being perceived as feminine that he protests his masculinity too much; “he has to show everyone what a man he is”<sup>37</sup> Often times, this anxiety precipitate violence. Psychoanalytical and criminology literature highlights the importance of hegemonic masculinity and the fear of failing to fulfill masculinity’s requirements in violence. When the hegemonic masculinity is constituted through toughness and strength, men accomplish masculinity through their involvement in violence and crime.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Michael S. Kimmel, “Masculinity as Homophobia: Fear, Shame, and Silence in the Construction of Gender Identity,” in *Theorizing Masculinities*, ed. Harry Brod and Michael Kaufman, (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: SAGE Publications, Inc, 1994).

<sup>36</sup> Roger Horrocks and Jo Campling, *Masculinity in Crisis : Myths, Fantasies and Realities* (Basingstoke : New York: Macmillan ; St. Martin’s, 1994); Nancy E. Dowd, *The Man Question: Male Subordination and Privilege* (New York: NYU Press, 2010).

<sup>37</sup> Horrocks, *Masculinity in Crisis*, p.90.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Collier, *Masculinities, Crime and Criminology: Men, Corporeality and the Criminal(ised) Body* (London; Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1998).

Bringing the ontological security framework back to the scene, the subject seeks to maintain his masculine identity as it is, since failing to fulfill the requirements of masculinity means devalorization and a disturbance of biographical narrative. As states are gendered entities that are constructed to be masculine, gender analysis of state behavior should take hegemonic masculinity into consideration. Combining these two frameworks, states seek to maintain their hegemonic masculinity. As the case of Belgium –as Steele demonstrates- and the case of Syria –as I attempt to demonstrate- show, honor and shame are significant components of self-identity, and thus state behavior. However, an analysis of honor and shame through a gender lens will demonstrate states’ pursuit of honor and avoidance from shame is closely related to the desire to maintain hegemonic masculinity.

### 1.3 Honor

Building on Giddens, Steele brought the notions of honor and shame into the ontological security framework in IR.<sup>39</sup> Giddens places *pride* and *shame* in a dichotomous position. For him pride is not merely linked to ontological security but also is crucial for a coherent biographical narrative. In Giddens’ words *pride* is “the other side of *shame*: it is the feeling of confidence in the integrity and value of the narrative of self-identity... A person who successfully fosters a sense of pride in the self is one who is able psychologically to feel that his biography is justified and unitary”.<sup>40</sup> A person who feels that his biography is justified, unitary and coherent is ontologically secure. Thus, in a Giddensian understanding pride stands almost as an analogy for ontological security. Honor has often been seen as an extension of individual pride. Following Giddens, Steele employs honor to study ontological security at state level. Individual pride of Giddens appears as *honor* in Steele’s work since the subject of analysis is an abstract entity that is constructed through social interactions. Yet, Steele is significantly

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<sup>39</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

<sup>40</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 66

concerned about internal and individual nature of honor. As he argues “what we find to be honorable at the individual level is shaped and promoted by our sense of who we are, have been and who we wish to be in the future”.<sup>41</sup> Then, honor provides the actor an opportunity to be confident about his / her self-identity, as well as make his / her biographical narrative more coherent and well-sound. In order for the actor to realize self-agency, he or she needs to be confident and secure about one’s self-identity. Therefore, actors seek to fulfill the requirements of honor because they seek ontological security.

Internal honor—honor as reflexively understood by the subject- is inherently linked with a nation’s self-identity since what is perceived to be honorable has been constructed and reproduced by our sense of who we are.<sup>42</sup> As an example to how self-understanding of honor / internal honor functions in international relations, Steele evaluates Belgium’s decision to fight a losing war against Germany in the WWI, following a German ultimatum that requested free passage through Belgian territory to fight the French. According to Steele, this Belgian decision demonstrates that states risk their physical integrity in order to fulfill ontological security needs.<sup>43</sup> In the Belgian case, such ontological security needs are inextricably linked to internal honor. His discourse analysis shows that the decision to fight Germany had been framed by referring to their national honor. Belgian state self-identity was significantly associated with being a sovereign and neutral state. The German ultimatum, then, did not only threaten Belgian territorial integrity but also threatened Belgian identity. Steele shows how different state agents, from the Prime Minister to the Monarchial head of state, justified the war through statements such as “If die we must, better death with honor” or “We have to fight for the honor of the flag... doing nothing is not possible”.<sup>44</sup> In short, Belgian state agents justified the war through

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<sup>41</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 97

<sup>42</sup> Brent J. Steele, “‘Ideals That Were Really Never in Our Possession’: Torture, Honor and US Identity,” *International Relations* 22, no. 2 (June 1, 2008): 243–61..

<sup>43</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 94–113

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 102. For more examples see Chapter 5: “Death before dishonor” in Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 94–113.

the honor of the nation and prioritized preserving honor over territorial integrity. Their understanding of honor and identity as a sovereign and neutral state, however, were defined by themselves and it is that internal honor that drove Belgium into war.

However, it is not possible to totally isolate honor and focus merely on the individualistic nature of the concept. In psychology literature honor tends to be seen as rooted in social interactions and collective memory.<sup>45</sup> As Pitt-Rivers argues honor refers to a person's value assessed by himself / herself or by another party: "individual honor derives from individual conduct but produces consequences for others who share collective honor with this individual".<sup>46</sup> In the Belgian case, other European powers celebrated Belgim's decision to fight a losing war in pursuit of honor. This did not only improve the credibility of Belgium in Europe, but it also shows how collective understanding of honor was perceived in Europe in 1914. Honor is a strong motivation for states that deserves to be analyzed. However, feminist analyses have shown that how honor functions at the state level cannot be fully understood without referring to masculine and feminine conceptions of honor.

### 1.3.1 Gendering honor

Making a distinction between masculine and feminine conceptions of honor is important to understand honor driven behaviors of states through an ontological security lens. As discussed above, the nation is represented through feminine symbols, women's reproductive features are romanticized and women are seen as mothers of the nation. These mothers also appear as vulnerable targets to be protected by enemy men. The masculine enemy other seeks to humiliate men by targeting "their" women. Feminist analyses have shown that woman's

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<sup>45</sup> Patricia M. Rodriguez Mosquera, Antony S. R. Manstead and Agneta H. Fischer, "The Role of Honor-Related Values in the Elicitation, Experience, and Communication of Pride, Shame, and Anger: Spain and the Netherlands Compared", *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 26, no. 7 (09 January 2000): 833–44.

<sup>46</sup> Julian Pitt-Rivers, *The Fate of Shechem or the Politics of Sex: Essays in the Anthropology of the Mediterranean* (Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press, 1977).

honor is understood in terms of their purity and man's honor goes through protecting the honor of his wife and family.<sup>47</sup> Impurity of women means impurity of the family that men are supposed to protect. Similarly, the nation –citizens- and national territories are also regarded as part of one's honor that should stay pure and be protected from enemy men. Feminist analysis of the Belgian case demonstrates that honor-driven Belgian state fought to protect the territory's feminine honor. Sjoberg argues that “it is no coincidence that the following German attack was referred to as the ‘rape of Belgium’.”<sup>48</sup>

The femininity of the nation and national territories or as sometimes called “the body of the state” is constitutive of masculinity. Men's honor requires them to protect the feminine conception of honor as purity. In this interaction, men's role as the protector subject is reinforced and reproduced while women are regarded and kept as victimized objects to be protected. As the literature on the ‘protection racket’ demonstrates, masculinity requires constant threats and a vulnerable feminized object in order to exist as the protector. In international relations, the state adopts the manly duty to protect the vulnerable nation and honor of it. Therefore, as a masculine institution the state is required to protect the feminine conception –purity- of national honor: “the nation state is portrayed as the mother which needs protection against the outside enemy. This appeals to male macho psyche that is called for defense and survival”.<sup>49</sup> Honor motivates states to take particular actions that might hinder their physical security. However, honor has been constructed and reproduced through gender symbolism. It is impossible to understand state behavior without gendering honor. However, male macho psyche and the understanding of honor and masculinity show changes over time and space. For instance, while the Belgian masculine honor was understood in terms of

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<sup>47</sup> Forouz Jowkar, “Honor and Shame: A Feminist View from within,” *Feminist Issues* 6, no. 1 (March 1986), 45–65.

<sup>48</sup> Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict*, p. 87

<sup>49</sup> Rubina Saigol, “Militarization, Nation and Gender: Women's Bodies as Arenas of Violent Conflict,” in *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East: Challenges and Discourses*, ed. Pinar İlkkaracan (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008).

protecting the ‘motherland’ and national honor, the Bush administration narrated the war in Afghanistan as an “honorable war story of good men fighting bad men to protect (Afghani) women”.<sup>50</sup>

As masculinity requires men to protect the feminine conception of honor, failing to fulfill this requirement would make the subject ‘less of a man’. In Connell’s hierarchical pyramid, the subject would be subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity. Steele is right to argue that states seek honor and they do it to fulfill ontological security needs. However, what Steele misses is that one of the main components of these ontological security needs is the need to fulfill the requirements of hegemonic masculinity. Before moving to discussion on honor and masculine self-identity in the Syrian context, it is necessary to understand shame as the inverse of honor.

#### 1.4 Shame, Humiliation and Emasculation

In psychology literature the notion of humiliation has been linked with shame and these two concepts have been often used interchangeably.<sup>51</sup> These analyses have shown that a shame-inducing event challenges the self-value of the subject. Giddens defines shame as “anxiety about the adequacy of the narrative by means of which the individual sustains a coherent biography”.<sup>52</sup> As discussed earlier, sustaining a coherent biography is essential for the agent to realize self-agency. Therefore, the subject feels a deep insecurity about shame and humiliation as their identity and self-agency are at risk. In Giddens’ words: shame “bites at the roots of self-

<sup>50</sup> Krista Hunt, “The War on Terrorism,” in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> For a more detailed analysis see S. Levin, “Some Metapsychological Considerations on the Differentiation between Shame and Guilt,” *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis* 48, no. 2 (1967): 267–76; Blema S. Steinberg, *Shame and Humiliation: Presidential Decision Making on Vietnam* (Montreal Que.; Buffalo: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1996).

<sup>52</sup> Giddens, *Modernity and the Self*, p.65.

esteem”.<sup>53</sup> On the other hand, humiliation needs an audience or a second party whereas shame *can* function at the individual level. Shame is also a disciplinary mechanism, however it is not always approached as an inherently negative thing. Lindner argues that shaming may work for the good of the larger society.<sup>54</sup> Steele’s example of abuse of terror suspect’s in the U.S and how shaming drove the state take a more humane approach supports Lindner’s point.<sup>55</sup> At this point, a body of literature finds it necessary to distinguish shame from humiliation. *Humiliation* is defined as “the enforced lowering of any person or group by a process of subjugation that damages their dignity; “to be humiliated” is to be placed in a situation that is against one’s interest in a demeaning way”.<sup>56</sup> When the subject experiences shame in the form of humiliation, however, s/he is put in a hierarchical position. Psychoanalyst Kaufman argues that one’s relative lack of power in relation to another, and constantly being exposed to this reality is the most humiliating experience for an actor.<sup>57</sup>

What shame and humiliation have in common is that both creates a deep anxiety and insecurity about the subject’s self-identity. Therefore, both of the notions are important for ontological security framework. Although shame might repair disrupted self-identity, it still ‘bites at the roots of self-esteem’ and the subject cannot sustain their biographical narrative. Therefore, ontological security seeking subject seeks to avoid shame. Steele employs the term *shame* as inverse of honor and as a metaphor for when national ontological security is disrupted.<sup>58</sup> Examining the concept of shame in international level, he argues that appeasement policy before the WWII and failure to act swiftly in Bosnia was haunting Britain while the U.S

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<sup>53</sup> Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 55.

<sup>54</sup> Evelin Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2006), 21.

<sup>55</sup> Steele, “Ideals that were really never in our possession”.

<sup>56</sup> Lindner, *Making Enemies: Humiliation and International Conflict*, xiv.

<sup>57</sup> Gershen Kaufman, *The Psychology of Shame: Theory and Treatment of Shame-Based Syndromes*, Second Edition, (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 2004).

<sup>58</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 54



as the new hegemon was haunted by the failure to prevent the genocide in Rwanda.<sup>59</sup> Feeling of shame about past behaviors, he argues, drove Britain and the U.S to take action in Kosovo. Failures in Bosnia and Rwanda challenged the capacity to narrate themselves as the defender and promoter of human rights and democracy, thus need for ontological security shaped their foreign policy behavior. Both Lindner and Steele highlight the potential of shame to discipline the subject for greater good. However, what they miss is that like pursuit of honor, seeking to avoid shame and especially humiliation could be dangerous. No different than honor, shame and humiliation are closely linked with gender dynamics and gender identities. A gendered analysis of shame and humiliation demonstrates why the actors seek to avoid shame and how it could be dangerous.

#### 1.4.1 Gendering shame and humiliation: Emasculation

As argued above shame and humiliation are deeply related to the capacity of the subject to keep a particular narrative about the self going and they are understood as inverse of honor. If self-identity and honor are gendered, then it would be impossible to study shame and humiliation without a gender analysis. In the context of honor, man would be subject to shame if he fails to protect the honor of his family. Masculine honor is defined through protecting one's kinship. Therefore, when a third party hinders the capacity of the actor to protect himself or his kinship, regardless if his kinship is actually hurt or not, he would feel ashamed. Shame disciplines bodies and transform gender identities as well. Gendered analysis of shame also demonstrates why shaming is not always for the greater good Cynthia Cockburn, for instance, gives the examples of British women during the WWI who were shaming able-bodied men who did not participate to the war.<sup>60</sup> What is expected from an able-bodied men was to fight for his

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 124-135

<sup>60</sup> Cynthia Cockburn, "Militarism and War," in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd (New York: Routledge, 2010).

country, thus those who did not participate to war were shamed for not fulfilling what has been expected from them. Experiences of torture in the Abu Ghraib prison and media representation of it, however, demonstrates a different understanding of shame. As Krista Hunt argues, victorious masculine American identity was reproduced by shaming and subduing Arab men.<sup>61</sup> By being tortured by a female officer, Arab men were “humiliated”. Discipline mechanism there was to teach Arab men their role as the racialized inferior other. What both stories have in common is that shame and humiliation was directly targeted at actors’ masculinity. In other words, they were *emasculated*.

In biological terms, emasculation refers to removal of the external male organs: penis and testicles. Freud first described the concept of *castration anxiety* or *castration complex* arguing that when a child discovers the anatomical difference between the sexes, he makes sense of the difference by presence or absence of penis. This leads the child to assume that females have been castrated and develops an anxiety that he might be castrated as well.<sup>62</sup> Jacques Lacan approached castration complex different than Freud. He understands castration as not lacking a real organ but rather as a “symbolic lack of an imaginary object”, therefore castration bears on the imaginary phallus.<sup>63</sup> Emasculation as it appears in the gender literature is mostly influenced by Lacanian approach to linguistic and psychoanalysis. Following the gender literature, I understand emasculation not as castration but rather as a failed masculinity. At this point, it is better to recall Connell’s *hegemonic masculinity*. Following the framework, failing to fulfill the requirements of hegemonic masculinity makes the subject “less of a man”. Emasculated man is subordinated to the hegemonic masculinity. This shift in power hierarchy

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<sup>61</sup> Krista Hunt, “The War on Terrorism,” in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>62</sup> Sigmund Freud, *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (White Press, 2014), 207.

<sup>63</sup> Jacques Lacan, *Séminaire, tome 4 : la Relation d’objet* (Seuil, 1998).

poses an ontological security threat to the individual –in this case to the state- because emasculation is the most shameful and humiliating experience for men.

Emasculation and shame / humiliation are closely linked. As the example of British able-bodied men who did not participate to the war demonstrates, emasculated man is shamed by the public or as evident in the Abu Ghraib case, men are “humiliated” by being “emasculated”. Although in these examples men are shamed or humiliated by a third party, anxiety over one’s masculinity is a deep and private feeling:

“The actual threat that many men experience is an unconscious, internal one: the sense that they are not ‘real’ men... this fantasy of being under constant siege by a multitude of external feminizing forces is really an unconscious defense that is employed to keep out of mind something even more disturbing—an identification with women”.<sup>64</sup>

Especially in the war times, “external feminizing forces” could be higher in quantity and more challenging. Since masculinity is most often linked to protecting the honor –purity- of the family, rape becomes a weapon also to emasculate men. In Jones’ words: “their inability to protect ‘their’ women is a devastating demonstration of their emasculation”.<sup>65</sup>

Emasculation also means that the individual is no more confident about his gender identity. This disruption of self-identity often leads men to resort to use of force. Feminist analysis of Congolese soldiers who committed rape demonstrates that soldiers –men- justify rape through their emasculation. In the interviews perpetrators claimed that “their” women started to refuse to sleep with them because they fail to fulfill the requirements of the breadwinner role, thus they committed rape to “feel manly again”.<sup>66</sup> Anxiety over gender identities, in this case emasculation and the deep fear of being emasculated, and how the actor

<sup>64</sup> Stephen Ducat, *The Wimp Factor: Gender Gaps, Holy Wars, and the Politics of Anxious Masculinity* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2005), 1.

<sup>65</sup> Adam Jones, “Genocide and Mass Violence,” in *Gender Matters in Global Politics: A Feminist Introduction to International Relations*, ed. Laura J. Shepherd (New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 132.

<sup>66</sup> Maria Eriksson Baaz and Maria Stern, “Why Do Soldiers Rape? Masculinity, Violence, and Sexuality in the Armed Forces in the Congo (DRC),” *International Studies Quarterly* 53, no. 2 (June 1, 2009): 495–518.

is motivated by this anxiety should not be overlooked. Because of the structural elements such as globalization and poverty, men cannot fulfill their position as men. As Sara Meger argues “violence operates as an instrument of power”, Congolese soldiers resort to violence and rape to contest the changes brought by globalization.<sup>67</sup>

This anxiety can be observed in state level as well. The literature on multiple masculinities and emasculation in IR is a new and developing one, yet it is possible to find valuable works particularly on the U.S. identity. The Vietnam War is considered as a traumatic and emasculating practice for the U.S identity as the U.S identity shows characteristics of a militarized masculinity.<sup>68</sup> The U.S had to prove its masculinity as a tough Cold War warrior vis a vis the Soviet Union, yet the American army gave heavy casualties and had to withdraw against the racialized, -perceived to be- inferior enemy. The American state’s masculine self-identity was shattered as the limitations of their ability to successfully intervene in overseas countries; American manhood was also significantly challenged as men could not justify their patriarchal authority on the basis of protecting the nation.<sup>69</sup> Feminist analyses have shown that this anxiety over gender identity had implications on state behavior. As evident in Bush’s discourse the Gulf War became a platform where American masculinity was reconstructed: “By God, we’ve kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all”.<sup>70</sup> American masculinity is highly linked with superpower identity, in the African context, however, African masculinity

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<sup>67</sup> Sara Meger, “Toward a Feminist Political Economy of Wartime Sexual Violence,” *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 17, no. 3 (July 2015), 425-426.

<sup>68</sup> For a more detailed analysis see David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

<sup>69</sup> Steve Niva, “Tough and Tender: New World Order Masculinity and the Gulf War,” in *The Man Question in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 114-117.

<sup>70</sup> Maureen Dowd, “After the War: White House Memo; War Introduces a Tougher Bush to Nation,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 1991, sec. World, <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/02/world/after-the-war-white-house-memo-war-introduces-a-tougher-bush-to-nation.html>.

experienced emasculation by being subject to colonial practices.<sup>71</sup> As masculinities are not fixed and universal, hegemonic masculinity and emasculation need to be contextualized.

### 1.5 Methodology

Theoretically this thesis is built on Steele and Giddens' accounts on ontological security and structuralist approach of Harding and Peterson to gender. Giddensian approach to ontological security is compatible with the understanding of gender as a structure of social practice. Giddensian "structuration theory" does not prioritize structure or agency over the other, but rather holds the view that the structure is constructed through constant repetition of the acts of individual agents.<sup>72</sup> There is a social structure: institutions, and organized ways and expectations of doing things in the society that shapes individuals' behaviors, however the individual has an agency since the social structure can change when people start to ignore or try to replace the existing structure. Gender is an important component of this structure that organizes social behavior. As Connell argues "when we speak of masculinity and femininity we are naming configurations of gender practice".<sup>73</sup> Gender expectations as a structural factor influence the agent's behavior while the agents constantly reproduce these expectations by performing them. Gender ideologies and hints on gender identities can be found in gender symbolism and gender structure.<sup>74</sup> Building on Steele and Giddens, however, I am more concerned about gender self-identity as it is reflexively understood by the agent. As discussed above, state identity is constructed and reproduced through the narratives of state agents and ontological security is related to one's capability to keep a particular narrative going. Therefore, methodologically one can study ontological security by scrutinizing biographical narrative.

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<sup>71</sup> Jane Parpart, "Masculinity/ies, Gender and Violence in the Struggle for Zimbabwe," in *Rethinking the Man Question: Sex, Gender and Violence in International Relations*, ed. Marysia Zalewski and Jane Parpart (London & New York: Zed Books, 2008),

<sup>72</sup> Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*.

<sup>73</sup> Connell, *Masculinities*, 72.

<sup>74</sup> Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*.

In this thesis I employ discourse analysis as a method within single case study analysis as my methodology. In particular, I analyze how the Syrian self-identity is narrated by the Syrian state agents. It seems as though developments in Syria will still dominate the debates in IR and foreign policy of many countries in the near future. However, so little has been done to understand how gender functions in the Syrian context and so few are interested how the Syrian agents perceive themselves. It is important to understand self-identity to understand how the interests of a state are constructed. In terms of the discourse, I interrogate Bashar al-Assad's rhetoric particularly when he addresses to the nation like inaugural and Army Day speeches and interviews. The sources and translations I used such as Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and SyriaTimes are directly linked to the Ministry of Information. Therefore, it should not be understood as merely Assad's discourse but also the rhetoric of the Ba'ath regime and the Syrian state he represents. By employing discourse analysis within single case study, I aim to highlight and analyze gender symbolism and other components of self-identity that are embedded in the discourse. Ontological security framework looks for a change or continuity in narration of the self, thus historical approach is necessary. For analytical purposes, I preferred to start my analysis from 1920s and focus on key events that shaped Syrian identity and conceptions of honor such as the 1948 Arab-Israeli War, 1967 Six Day War, 1973 Yom Kippur War and relations with Lebanon under Hafez al-Assad. However, I have to note that a more detailed genealogy would strengthen my argument.

## Chapter 2: Historical Background

### 2.1 Historical Background

States' self-identities and gender self-identities are constructed through social interaction. In order to exist, these identities have to be constantly reproduced. Therefore, studying self-identity requires historical approach. In this chapter, I narrate key foreign policy events that I find important in constructing Syrian state (gender) self-identity. After listing the events in a chronological order, I attempt to demonstrate how those events speak to the masculine identity. What is the identity that the state seeks to maintain? Understanding how the masculine self-identity has been constructed is vital to analyze the contemporary events and the discourse evolving around them. In the case of Syria, gender self-identity show characteristics of paternal, chivalrous and militarized masculinity that highly values steadfastness and resistance.

Steadfastness, nationalism and anti-imperialist / anti-Western agenda have been key notions in Syrian self-identity. Although the Ba'ath regime and the former president Hafez al-Assad appear as the architects of Syrian self-identity, no actor is capable of constructing a distinctively novel identity that is not grounded on history. Therefore, I prefer to narrate the events chronologically. The period of the Ottoman rule over today's Syria and 'the Arab Kingdom of Syria' or 'Greater Syria' that lasted until the French occupation in 1920 are indeed important to provide a more nuanced understanding of Syrian identity. Feminist analyses have shown that gender ideologies and symbolism in Syrian culture in which man appears as a revolutionary and reformist subject with full agency are rooted in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>75</sup> Literature and the political life as platforms where identities are co-constitutive were heavily

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<sup>75</sup> Fruma Zachs and Sharon Halevi, *Gendering Culture in Greater Syria: Intellectuals and Ideology in the Late Ottoman Period* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2015).

influenced by the revolutionary and nationalist movements in continental Europe as well as the pro-Western, Jacobin movement of the Young Turks in the Ottoman Empire. However, for analytical purposes I find it fair to start from the independence of Syria from the French mandate in 1946. Following the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in 1918, Faisal bin Hussein –later to be known as King Faisal I of Iraq- set up an Arab government in Greater Syria under British protection. King Faisal sought to bring Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims together under pan-Arab ideology and rule over today's Syria, Lebanon, Israel –Greater Syria- and Iraq. However, as the French asked for full implementation of the Sykes-Picot Agreement that divided the Middle East among imperial powers, Faisal could not resist the French pressure. In 1919, Faisal's decision to giving compromises to French Prime Minister Clemenceau and Zionist leader Chaim Weizmann over Jewish immigration to the historical Palestine triggered a civil unrest particularly in today's Lebanon since the Muslim subjects of Lebanon feared to be subjugated to a newly found Christian kingdom in Greater Lebanon. As the treaty of Sevres was issued in 1920, France was granted the mandate over Syria and Lebanon while Britain claimed mandates over Palestine, Jordan and Iraq. Revolts dominated the region and Syria started to form an army. However, this attempt ended up with an easy French victory and independence of Lebanon and a Christian council that *de facto* governed Lebanon. Syria existed as a French mandate for around 26 years, experienced bombardments by the French forces and lost their sovereignty over Lebanon and Hatay (*Alexandretta*).

Nationalist discourse and how the self-identity is narrated are grounded on particular key foreign policy events following the independence of the country from the French mandate in 1946. Relations with Israel and the political and international dynamics in Lebanon have marked the modern Syrian diplomatic history. However, until 1970 relations with Israel and Lebanon had been marked by internal political instability and coup d'états. Once the state gained independence in 1946, Colonel Husni al-Za'im led the country into the 1948 Arab-Israeli



war as the chief of staff. Civil unrests and revolts between the Jewish and Arab subjects of Palestine was ongoing since the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Jewish insurgency in 1947 turned into a civil war and the civil war turned into an inter-state conflict as Israel declared independence in May 1948. Egypt, Jordan and Syria entered Palestinian territory and attacked Jewish forces and settlements. The Syrian President Shukri al-Quwwatli stated that the presence of Syrian military in Palestine was “to destroy the Zionists”.<sup>76</sup> However, the war resulted with a heavy defeat for the Arab coalition. Subsequently, President al-Quwwatli was overthrown by a coup and replaced by Colonel Husni Zaim. According to the historian John McHugo, “the army felt humiliated by the politicians who had sent it off to fight with inadequate equipment and supplies”.<sup>77</sup> Zaim’s coup can be regarded as a milestone in modern Syrian history. He stayed in power for only four and a half months, but he marked the beginning of a new era in Syrian politics in which politicians have not been trusted and coups followed one another. Moreover, Zaim appointed himself to *Marechal* and wore a grandiloquent uniform.<sup>78</sup> Zaim was overthrown four months later and until 1958 seemingly ideology-free political class, Jacobin social-engineer Ba’athist party and the army have been in clashes. Ba’ath party was dreaming of transforming the society and modernize the country under a pan-Arab, nationalist identity. Although they took part in democratic politics, political parties have often recruited their officers to the army. This demonstrates the significance and the value of the army in Syria.

1950s were marked by Cold War politics and unity with Egypt in 1958 was a key event for Syrian self-identity. Since their independence, siege mentality had been prominent in threat perception of Syria. There was a feeling that the *motherland* was surrounded by enemies: Hashemite Iraq in the east, Turkey – the state that is a NATO member and that ‘stole’

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<sup>76</sup> Benny Morris, *1948: A History of the First Arab-Israeli War* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>77</sup> John McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*, First Edition edition (The New Press, 2015), 126.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

*Alexandretta* from Syria – in the north, Lebanon as once a Syrian territory that is ‘stolen’ by Christians and last but not least the archenemy Israel in the south. Antagonism towards Israel was so strong that the U.S and Britain was hated for aiding Israel. This antagonism drove Syria to establish better relations with the Soviet camp.<sup>79</sup> However, as the Egyptian leader Gamal Abdel Nasser stood up against Israel and the Western bloc, Nasser started to be seen as a hero in Syria as well. Nasser was praised and embraced in Syria mainly because of his pan-Arab themed patriotic rhetoric and actions. The Ba’ath party whose main principles go through pan-Arab nationalist thought called for a union with Egypt. In 1958 the union was formed and lasted until 1961. Syrians found themselves subordinated in this “emotionally driven and hasty union”;<sup>80</sup> problems of Syria were left unaddressed as they were “foreign” to Nasser and economic situation deteriorated during the period of the union.<sup>81</sup> In 1961, the Syrian government was toppled down by a coup and the union was dissolved subsequently. Coup attempts and counter-coups dominated the early 1960s. Coups in 1960s were bloodier than earlier. The Ba’ath party and the reformative, patriot and militaristic principles they represent gained power throughout the 1960s.

1967 Arab-Israel War or as known as the Six-Day War shook the country and challenged the political stability up to a point where Hafez al-Assad came to the power by a coup in 1970 and shaped the Syrian history during his thirty year tenure. Egyptian president Nasser mobilized his forces along the Israeli border. He took one step at a time to observe Israeli reactions in order to stop before passing Israel’s red lines.<sup>82</sup> However, his strategic approach failed as Israel launched pre-emptive strikes and caught Egypt off guard. After receiving false reports that announced easy Egyptian victory against the Israeli army, Syria entered the war by

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<sup>79</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.,141.

<sup>81</sup> Said K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab*, 1st edition (Thomas Dunne Books, 2004).

<sup>82</sup> Laura Neack, *The New Foreign Policy: Power Seeking in a Globalized Era*, Second Edition (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008).

launching artillery attacks over northern Israel.<sup>83</sup> Israeli counter attack destroyed two-third of the Syrian air forces and the Golan Heights of Syria was captured by the Israeli army. In short, it was another humiliating defeat for the Arab coalition. The loss of the Golan Heights was traumatic for the Syrian people. The defeat was particularly humiliating for Syria since another false report announced a strategic point was captured by the Israeli army and the Syrian military fled from their positions without firing a single bullet.<sup>84</sup> Civilian leadership led by Salah Jadid has blamed military incompetency while the military led by the defense minister Hafez al-Assad criticized the politicians.<sup>85</sup> This conflict between Jadid and Assad intensified when Jadid romantically wanted to strike Jordan in order to support Palestinian guerillas while Assad rejected this idea on strategic basis because he believed the U.S. would intervene in the behalf of Jordan and Syria would be humiliated once again. The conflict between Jadid and Assad ended by a military coup in 1970 that brought Hafez al-Assad to the power.

Assad's tenure until 2000 –when he died- was marked by the 1973 Yom Kippur War against Israel, relations with Egypt, the political situation in Lebanon and the principles of militarism. Under Hafez al-Assad Syria tried to assert itself as a power in the Middle East that will not bow to Israeli pressure, as the staunch fighter against Zionism and imperial forces. Hafez strengthened the army's grasp over politics. The state of emergency that was declared in the 1963 coup was never lifted as long as Hafez al-Assad lived. Anwar Sadat's –Nasser's successor- policies brought Egypt and Israel into another war in 1973 which ended up with another defeat for the Arab coalition. However, Israeli troops were caught by surprise and Israel suffered from heavy casualties. Although the Arab coalition lost the war, the Yom Kippur War of 1973 increased the morale of Syria. In historian McHugo's words: “still smarting from

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<sup>83</sup> Mike Shuster, “NPR : The Mideast : A Century of Conflict : Part 4,” *The Mideast: A Century of Conflict* (Washington: National Public Radio, October 3, 2002), <http://www.npr.org/news/specials/mideast/history/transcripts/6day-p4.100302.html>.

<sup>84</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*, 151-152

<sup>85</sup> Patrick Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

accusations that the army had run away in 1967, many units failed to retreat when that was the sound military course of action, and their men paid for it with their lives. The army had redeemed its honor and had every reason to be proud of its performance”.<sup>86</sup> In the Camp David Accords following the Yom Kippur War, Hafez al-Assad initiated a discourse condemning Sadat’s Egypt for giving too much compromises to Israel and for serving American and Zionist interests.<sup>87</sup> By condemning Egypt, Hafez al-Assad’s Syria was represented as the staunch fighter in the Middle East against the Western conspirators. In 1973, the Syrian constitution was amended in order Ba’ath Party to gain the status as the “leader of the state and society”.<sup>88</sup> The authorities have represented the wisdom of Assad as “beyond the comprehension of the average citizen”.<sup>89</sup> The Ba’ath Party used the education system as a tool to indoctrinate Ba’athist principles of nationalism, secularism and reforms. Hafez al-Assad and the Ba’ath regime he was representing further asserted their position as a staunch fighter against Israel in 1975 Lebanese Civil War. Initially Assad tried to play a conciliatory role, however as this approach failed Syria intervened to Lebanon in 1976. Syrian military presence in Lebanon stayed until 2005. According to McHugo, one of the goals of the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon was to humiliate Assad’s Syria.<sup>90</sup> However, bombardment was not sufficient to repel Syrians from Beirut. Although Syria lost a significant number of their aircrafts and gave heavy casualties throughout the years, in the end Israel failed to drive Syria from Lebanon.

Hafez al-Assad drew an honorable and tough image of Syria to the world and to the Syrian nation while nationalism and militarism were praised and institutionalized within the country. Hafez al-Assad’s successor Bashar al-Assad mainly followed his father’s legacy, like

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<sup>86</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*, 158.

<sup>87</sup> Seale, Asad: *The Struggle for the Middle East*.

<sup>88</sup> “Profile: Syria’s Ruling Baath Party,” *BBC News*, accessed May 12, 2016, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-18582755>.

<sup>89</sup> Bahgat Korany, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States: The Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Ali E. Hillal Dessouki, Revised ed. edition (The American University in Cairo Press, 2010).

<sup>90</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*, 168.

his father he sought to represent himself as the reformer who will honor the Arab nation.<sup>91</sup> The ways he follows to achieve that, however, seem to be different than his father's. He encouraged free market and called for improvements in the position of women and democratization of state institutions. This momentum of reform and progression was shadowed by the U.S policy of 'war on terror' when the U.S included Syria into the 'axis of evil'. This period of tension was also brief and from 2005 until 2011 the regime focused on reforms and building better relations with its neighbors. However, like his father Bashar al-Assad promised his people of returning Golan Heights to 'where it belongs' and often tribute to his father's achievements. Assad's Syria backed Shi'ite Hezbollah, thus maintained Syrian presence in Lebanon even after Syrian troops withdrew in 2005. The Syrian security forces' harsh responses to the civil uprisings in 2011 destroyed the reformist, progressive image. Calls for Assad's resignation started to come particularly from the so-called West as the regime was blamed for murdering civilians. Civil unrest gradually turned into an armed conflict by the end on 2011; both "more moderate opposition" such as the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and jihadist extremist groups such as al-Qaeda affiliated Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (later to be known as the Islamic State) launched major offensives in 2012. By late 2012 and 2013, opposition groups started to hold control over a large territory, pushing the regime to control only the western coast and the south west. It is a really complex and brutal conflict in which many regional and international players are involved. A detailed empirical information is not within the scope of this thesis.<sup>92</sup> What is important to know about Bashar al-Assad's tenure and the civil war is that the regime lost control over a vast majority of national territories, responded harsh and brutally both to the civil unrest and the subsequent armed conflict and eventually they were subject to an ongoing military operation conducted by the U.S led coalition.

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<sup>91</sup> "Profile: Syria's Ruling Baath Party", *BBC News*.

<sup>92</sup> For further information see Samer N. Abboud, *Syria* (Polity, 2015).

## 2.2 Gender Self-Identity

The following two chapters on honor and shame will discuss how gender identity has been constructed and reproduced through the masculine and feminine conceptions of honor and shame and how these gendered conceptions of honor and shame operate in the Syrian state identity formation. Before moving to the analysis of honor and shame, however, it is necessary to show the role of these historical events given above in perception of the hegemonic masculinity. My conclusion from the historical data is that the experience of being a mandate and feeling constantly threatened by the presence of Israel strengthened and reinforced the paternal, chivalrous, militarized masculine identity.

The relation with Israel and the West, Syria's position vis a vis Egypt and the political situation of Lebanon and Golan Heights are constitutive of Syrian masculine identity. It means that while masculinity shaped foreign policy behaviors, these foreign policy events shaped and transformed masculinity. Militarized masculinity is evident in the glorious military uniforms the presidents have been wearing, the Ba'ath Party's militaristic ideology and representation of routines and key events. By standing up against Israel and defending the honor of Syria as a state / military that would never surrender, Hafez al-Assad emerged as a "father" and victorious "combatant" (*al-munadil*) who could protect the Arab nation and restore its dignity.<sup>93</sup> In the posters and banners Assad was represented as the father of the nation: of young children in youth organizations, of soldiers in the military and martyrs.<sup>94</sup> Moreover, some newspapers referred to the 1973 war as "the war of manliness".<sup>95</sup> It was the war of manliness because after the humiliating defeat in 1967, Syria stood still against Israel and fought relentlessly in 1973. In other words, they showed the qualities of a chivalrous warrior. As Egypt gave compromises

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<sup>93</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 54.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

to the enemy and participated to the peace negotiations, Egypt started to be represented as “treacherous” and “coward” -traits that are traditionally associated with femininity-.<sup>96</sup>

The representation of 1973 War and Camp David Accords show that combat and militarism constitute hegemonic masculinity in Syria. However, manliness was defined not by being victorious and crushing the hyper-masculine predator enemy –Israel-, but rather by “steadfastness” (*sumud*), “struggle” (*nidal*) and willing to “sacrifice” (*tadhiya*) for the impurity of the body of the state (the nation and territories).<sup>97</sup> This is also evident in Bashar al-Assad’s discourse during the civil war. Even when the regime lost control over large territories, Assad kept repeating that the military proved its manliness, as a “true man” is supposed to fight no matter what in order to protect his country. Steadfastness does not only constitute gender identity of the Syrian state but also the reflexive perception of internal honor. Understanding the masculine and feminine conceptions of honor and how honor operates in the formation of state identity will draw a clearer picture.

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<sup>96</sup> Asaf Siniver, *The October 1973 War: Politics, Diplomacy, Legacy* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

## Chapter 3: Honor

### 3.1 *The Steadfast, Staunch Fighter of the Middle East*

To start with, how the Syrian internal honor is reflexively understood today is inextricably linked with how honor has been constructed and reproduced throughout time. As discussed in the previous chapter, Syrian identity and history have been marked with their struggle with Israel and colonial powers who support Israel. The foundation of Israel on historical Palestinian territories, partition of Lebanon from Syria and the loss of Golan Heights left wounds in the Syrian collective memory. Sovereignty or the purity of the national borders have been challenged throughout time. Arab armies were humiliated twice –in 1948 and 1967 wars-. The trauma of 1967 War will be discussed in details in the following chapter, what should be noted here is that “cowardice” of the Syrian army and loss of Golan Heights disturbed the internal honor. It is evident in military strategies during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and narration of the self in the aftermath of 1973 War. It is no coincidence that Hafez al-Assad started to be represented and seen as the father of the nation right after 1973. Unlike 1967 War, the Syrian army stood still against Israeli forces and refused to retreat even when it was more strategic to withdraw. The military “regained its honor” by fighting to the end and Hafez’s Syria diplomatically stood still against Israel and the U.S.<sup>98</sup> In his address to the nation right after the 1973 War, President Hafez al-Assad stated that: “Today, we are fighting the battle of honor and pride, in defense of our precious land, for our glorious history, and of the heritage of our forefathers. We fight the battle, equipped with faith in God and in ourselves; and with the solid and compelling determination that victory will be on our side”.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*.

<sup>99</sup> Hafez al-Assad “Speech at Damascus” (1973), *Syriatimes*, accessed May 29, 2016, <http://syriatimes.sy/index.php/editorials/commentary/14691-the-late-president-hafez-al-assad-we-are-the-rightful-owners-and-the-owners-of-a-just-cause>.



Determination is the key element to understand internal honor of the Syrian state. What is honorable is holding tight to one's principles and fighting without giving up. Loyalty to the nation and resistance was best grasped by the word *sumud*: "steadfastness". The Syrian nation is honorable because they have not bowed to the enemy neither in 1973 War, nor in the following Camp David Accords. The 1973 War, Camp David Accords and Syrian military presence in Lebanon for decades have shown that the Syrian nation fights staunchly, the Syrian people are loyal to the state and they do not fear death. *Sumud* requires people to sacrifice themselves to protect the nation's honor. Hafez al-Assad's speeches show it clearly:

"Our ancestors have won victory through faith, sacrifice and through their racing to win martyrdom in defense of our divine religion and the rightful message. Today, through your courage and heroism, you have revived these spirits alongside the glorious Arab tradition.... The honor of the Arab soldier is your responsibility and the future of our peoples is in your hand, for the sake of which you have to fight relentlessly."<sup>100</sup>

It is the duty of the Arab soldier to protect the honor of the Arab soldiers and protecting the people. Honor requires the citizens and the military to be steadfast; steadfastness requires sacrifice. In 1973 Syria regained its honor because the military fought relentlessly and they did not run away from sacrificing themselves.

Syrian behavior in 1973 War and the subsequent Camp David Accords puzzle rationalist game-theoretic and traditional approaches to security. The Syrian armed forces refusal to withdraw put their physical security at risk without providing any strategic advantage in return. The Arab coalition were defeated twice to Israel, thus it is quite unlikely that Syria miscalculated material capabilities. One can argue that Syria is only one component of the Arab coalition, therefore they might have influenced by other states' preferences. However, when Egypt took part in peace negotiations, the most serious critics came from Assad's Syria. Moreover, Syria persistently rejected the offers of Israel to return

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

Golan Heights back to Syria in exchange for a peace agreement. The ontological security framework brings an alternative explanation to Syria's diplomatic and strategic behavior in 1973 war and Camp David Accords. Driven by honor, Syria sought to maintain its self-identity as the steadfast fighter against Israel and the colonial West. As can be observed in Hafez al-Assad's discourse, honor was defined through steadfastness. Steadfastness requires the subject to sacrifice itself if it is necessary. Returning Golan Heights back to Syria has been one of the main goals of the Syrian state for decades, however giving compromises to the enemy would be against the code of internal honor. In other words, an exchange with Israel could have been strategic and value-maximizing, yet this would have left Syria ontologically insecure.

Discourse of Bashar al-Assad shows that honor still plays a significant role in Syrian self-identity. As the country was shaken by a disastrous civil war, the state elite shifted their focus from Israel to domestic stability. Syria maintained its identity as the staunch fighter, however this against a new enemy. Bashar al-Assad has been particularly proud of the steadfastness of the army and emphasized it in every opportunity. Assad called the army as "the guardians of Syria's dignity, and pride, shielding the Syrian borders with their bodies and keeping ever vigil on Syria's security, safety and stability".<sup>101</sup> He praised the military for "showing unique courage in the face of terrorism and its backers, and stunning the entire world by their steadfastness and ability to overcome difficulties".<sup>102</sup> Under Hafez al-Assad Syria's honor as a steadfast and staunch state was constructed and reproduced vis a vis Israel, whereas Bashar al-Assad started to represent the state as a steadfast and staunch fighter against terrorism after the civil war broke out in 2011. Loyalty and steadfastness was measured by holding onto the land and not joining

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<sup>101</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "2013 Army's Day Speech" (Speech, Damascus, August 1, 2013), accessed May 20, 2016, [http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=1147:president-bashar-al-assad-s-army-day-speech-august-1-2013&catid=119&Itemid=496](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1147:president-bashar-al-assad-s-army-day-speech-august-1-2013&catid=119&Itemid=496)

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

the resistance movements that are believed to be plotted by the colonial powers. At his inauguration speech in 2014, Assad condemned who refuse to fight for the regime against jihadists and colonial powers for having *no honor*:

“...the bigger danger, which provided the foundation for the crisis and its different aspects, was the lack of morals by distorting religions, undermining honor, and selling out the homeland...The colonialist West is still colonialist; the means may change, but its essence is still the same. If the West and its Arab flunkies have failed in executing their plans so far, this does not mean that they have stopped their destruction of Syria as an alternative goal. This will achieve the same objective over the long term, but unfortunately with the help of those Syrians who have no honor and so sold their homeland”.<sup>103</sup>

This discourse on steadfastness and honor intensified particularly after 2012 and 2013 when Al-Qaeda related Jabha al-Nusra Front and Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (later to be known as the Islamic State) started to hold control of some cities. In his 2014 inauguration speech he congratulated the Syrian people for: “defying all forms of fear and terrorism and voting under fire in the referendum and the elections, thwarting the aggression, the aggressors and their machinery. This steadfastness altered all expectations, circumstances and facts; positions changed, players withdrew, terminology dropped, alliances vanished, councils divided and other bodies disintegrated”.<sup>104</sup>

### 3.2 Gendering Syrian Honor

Steadfastness constitutes the pillar of honor and self-identity of the Syrian state, however as argued in the previous section honor is a deeply gendered concept. The gendered nature of honor is particularly important to analyze honor cultures such as Syria. It is better to recall the distinction between feminine and masculine conceptions of honor. This distinction is particularly crucial in the context of Arab and Mediterranean gender dynamics. Feminist analyses have shown the link between female chastity and honor. As Sherifa Zuhur

<sup>103</sup> Bashar al-Assad, “2014 Inauguration Speech” (Damascus, July 16, 2014), *SyriaTimes*, accessed May 20, 2016, <http://syriatimes.sy/index.php/speeches/14180-h-e-president-bashar-al-assad-takes-the-constitutional-oath>.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

demonstrates: “among Arabs, one type of honor, *sharaf* applies to men and can be attained through family reputation, hospitality, generosity, chivalry and to some degree socioeconomic status and political power. *Ardh* pertains specifically to women’s chastity and sexual virtue”.<sup>105</sup> Attaining masculine honor (*sharaf*) goes through protecting the purity of the feminine honor (*ardh*). Steadfastness is valorized because it serves the purpose to protect the feminized nation. Quoting Hafez al-Assad: “The land is important. It connotes dignity and honor. A man is not chosen to go to paradise unless he can do so in a dignified way.”<sup>106</sup> A man is honorable if he can protect the dignity and honor of his family. As it is man’s duty to protect the honor of his family, it is the state and military’s duty to protect the honor of the land and nation..

The dominant understanding in the Syrian context is that protecting the nation and national honor requires the actor to be a steadfast, staunch fighter. Steadfastness, staunchness and being reformist / revolutionary are likely to be valued as power-enhancing qualities, thus associated with masculinity. The link between the Syrian understanding of honor and masculinity is also evident in the discourse. The 1973 War has been represented by some newspapers as “the war of manliness”.<sup>107</sup> Unlike the 1967 War, the Syrian army did not flee and even managed to gain some military victories against Israel. Following the 1973 War Hafez al-Assad addressed “his” people as “the sons of a nation, which has been known throughout history for stances of manhood and pride, of heroism and redemption”; he told his sons that: “while we do our duty to defend our land and the honor of our nation, we are ready to make every sacrifice and accept all challenges in order to win the right and win principles”.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>105</sup> Sherifa Zuhur, “Criminal Law, Women and Sexuality in the Middle East,” in *Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East*, ed. Pinar Ilkkaracan (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, Ltd., 2008), p.19

<sup>106</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “Hafez Al-Assad, Who Turned Syria into a Power in the Middle East, Dies at 69,” *The New York Times*, June 10, 2000, <https://www.library.cornell.edu/colldev/mideast/asadd3.htm>.

<sup>107</sup> Lisa Wedeen, *Ambiguities of Domination*, p.54

<sup>108</sup> Hafez al-Assad “Speech at Damascus” (1973).

Sacrifice and steadfastness are requirements of Syrian internal honor, however steadfastness is necessary to be able to protect the dignity and purity of the feminized nation and land.

This chivalrous type of masculinity and its link with honor can be observed in Bashar al-Assad's discourse as well. Assad addressed the military as: "you represent the aspiration of our people in defending their dignity and honor and restoring stability and security of the homeland due to your determination to implement your sacred duty towards the homeland".<sup>109</sup> The Assad regime discursively gave the responsibility of manly duty of protecting the vulnerable to the military. Patriotism, fighting against the enemy without giving up or giving any compromises and staunchness are features that constituted the national honor and these features also constitute hegemonic masculinity. Assad showed his content about the military in such: "you have stunned the entire world by your steadfastness and ability to overcome difficulties and achieve accomplishments, expressing a unique manhood in the encountering of most severe barbaric war in modern history".<sup>110</sup> The Syrian army expressed a unique manhood in the encountering of war because although they were 'surrounded by enemies' the army kept fighting and showed qualities of steadfastness. In a different speech Assad stated that:

"The history of our hero Army is full of the pages of honorable struggle, and of the battles of heroism and manhood in defense of the Homeland as well as of the Nation's dignity. And today your bravery, heroism and sacrifices recall back to memory the image of those national epics, made by our Army throughout its history, proving that you are up to the trust in you".<sup>111</sup>

These battles of heroism and manhood are not necessarily the ones ended with victory as Syrian history is actually full with defeats and struggles, but it was the struggle itself that has been

<sup>109</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "2012 Army's Day Speech" (Damascus, August 1, 2012), accessed May 20, 2016, [http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=278:president](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=278:president).

<sup>110</sup> Assad, "2013 Army's Day Speech"

<sup>111</sup> Bashar al-Assad, "2015 Army Day's Speech" (Damascus, July 30, 2015), *Syriatimes*, <http://www.syriatimes.sy/index.php/editorials/commentary/18940-syria-s-impregnable-fortress-and-defender>.

glorified. These battles were ‘manly’ because the Syrian army stood fast and still in order to protect the honor of the nation.

The discourse of state agents does not only prove the point that the Syrian self-identity is masculine, but also it shows how masculinity operates in self-identity and state behavior. As hegemonic masculinity is never a fixed and complete state, masculinity always needs to be reproduced. Fluid nature of gender identities indicate that while masculinity drives the actor to act in a particular way, the very act constitutes masculinity. To be more specific, masculine identity of Syria led them to engage in 1973 war and fight relentlessly. However, what makes Syrian identity masculine is also that Syria has fought relentlessly. Recalling the ontological security framework, Syria acted and narrated itself in a way that it could reproduce its identity as masculine. For instance, the state started to lack the material capability to pursue a staunch and aggressive foreign policy against Israel and the colonial West. One would expect that it hinders the capacity to keep the narrative of steadfastness and staunchness going. This means that Syrian state agents would not be able to narrate the state identity as masculine and steadfast, therefore feel ontologically insecure. However, as states seek ontological security, state agents established a new discourse in which the enemy was re-defined: the terrorists. Co-operation with the colonialist West (the U.S led coalition) and fighting losing wars against insurgents and jihadists did not necessarily pose ontological insecurity in regards to the masculine self-identity since state agents could narrate the self as the steadfast fighter against terrorism. The enemy might have changed, but still the new enemy poses a threat to purity of the nation and land, thus it is men’s duty to protect it against terrorists. Giving attention to Assad’s words can enlighten those who are puzzled with glorification of defeats of the regime during the civil war: “You (Syrian people) have restored the true meaning of the word revolution and proved that Syrians

live honorably and die as martyrs honorably, that their dignity is more important than life itself”.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Assad, “2014 Inauguration Speech”.

## Chapter 4: Shame and Emasculation

### 4.1 Emasculating Experiences: The Colonial Past and the 1967 War

It is not possible to understand how honor operates in the Syrian state's self-identity without giving reference to shame. Honor helps the agent to realize a sense of pride about his / her identity. By fulfilling the requirements of honor the agent feels valued. Shame, on the other hand, does not only undermine the ability of the agent to feel valued, but also hinders the ability of the agent to feel himself / herself as a continuous being in time. Therefore, shame stands almost as an analogy for ontological *insecurity*. This chapter analyzes what constitutes an ontological security threat to Syria and demonstrate how shame operates in the construction of self-identity. In the case of Syria, "shameful" and "emasculating" experiences created such an anxiety that state agents show characteristics of macho masculinity to avoid shame and emasculation.

Like honor, Syrian anxiety over shame and emasculation can be grasped by examining the self-identity, honor and shame through a historical approach. Past experiences of shame and humiliation leave unpleasant memories. Not long after the Ottoman Empire dissolved, Syria fell under French mandate that existed for twenty three years. Colonial rule denies sovereignty to the colonialized subject, however sovereignty and agency are key features for masculinity. The independent Syrian state that shortly lived before the French mandate was subjected to *emasculation* as the French army "penetrated into" the Syrian territories. Treaty of Sevres granted France the mandate of Syria in 1920, however Syrians responded to that by claiming independence and naming Faisal as the king of all Arabs. France replied to these events by sending an ultimatum that gave two choices to Faisal: submission or resignation. The following Franco-Syrian war was costly for the Arab Kingdom of Syria: King Faisal quickly surrendered when the French attacked, the Syrian army was crushed and France reached Damascus in one



day.<sup>113</sup> Syria failed to prove its military capability to protect the nation and its sovereignty was denied for twenty three years. Syrian state was *humiliated* in front of its nation by the Western colonial powers.

The end of an emasculating experience of mandate is an important practice that constitutes Syrian internal honor, however Syria faced another humiliating experience in 1948, not long after their independence from France in 1946. Syrian nationalist groups played an important role by fighting the French at home and putting political pressure abroad. This provided Syrians with a sense of agency and sovereignty. The role nationalist groups played is important since the efforts these groups have put made it possible for state agents to narrate Syria as “has always been steadfast”. In a way, Syrian men and the state they fight for regained their masculinity by playing a role in ending the colonial rule and attaining agency and sovereignty. Chief of staff, and later to be the president, Husni al-Za’im’s obsession about glorious military uniforms can be interpreted as a practice to regain an image of militaristic and masculine subject. The post-colonial Syria seemed to have pride about their self-identity. However, this period of pride was brief as Syria got involved in 1948 Arab-Israeli war which resulted with a devastating defeat for the Arab League. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War and the Palestinian exodus in 1948 has been referred as “the catastrophe” – *al-Nakbah*- and “the rape” - *al-’ighṭiṣāb*-.<sup>114</sup> The Syrian state failed to prevent “the rape”, thus was subjected to shame and emasculation.

The period between 1948 and 1971 could be even more shocking and shameful than “the catastrophe”. In the aftermath of 1948 Arab-Israeli war one coup followed another, Syria united with Egypt in 1958, showed its discontent with the dominating personality of Abdel Nasser and declared independence from Egypt by 1961 coup (that was followed by 1963

<sup>113</sup> Eliezer Tauber, *The Formation of Modern Iraq and Syria*, (Routledge, 1994).

<sup>114</sup> Ahmad H. Sa’di and Lila Abu-Lughod, eds., *Nakba: Palestine, 1948, and the Claims of Memory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), pp. 253-254.

coup).<sup>115</sup> In short, in this period Syrian political history was marked with domestic political instability, a weak foreign policy and military record. In this political atmosphere, Syria experienced its “Vietnam syndrome” in 1967 Arab-Israeli war. The Syrian army fled from the Golan Heights, two third of the Syrian air forces were destroyed and their arch-enemy Israel occupied Golan Heights. The 1967 war had consequences on gender self-identity. Israel was the enemy other who is seen as a threat to the purity of the nation and territorial integrity. The 1967 war is traumatic not merely because Israel penetrated into the Syrian territory, but also because the Syrian army fled without firing a bullet. This is particularly shameful because masculine understanding of honor requires men to fight for the nation to the end. To use the terminology, the Syrian state / army could not fulfill the requirements of *hegemonic masculinity*, thus *emasculated*. This trauma can be clearly observed when the army refused to withdraw in the situations in which they should have withdrawn in 1973 Yom Kippur War. This example clearly shows the ontological security needs of the agents and how honor and shame is related to ontological security. The anxiety about shame was so strong that the army denied strategic advantages they could have had by retreating and put their lives at risk. As masculine conception of honor needs sacrifices and steadfastness, retreating would have also meant emasculation for the Syrian soldiers and the state they fight for.

These experiences of failed masculinities set the conditions in which Hafez al-Assad and the Syrian state and military he was representing were praised and accepted as the father of the nation. Yom Kippur War tends to be represented as “a war of manliness” that Syria regained its honor.<sup>116</sup> The Syrian elite could keep the narrative about the self as a staunch fighter of the Middle East and the protector of Arab dignity against Israel going. Since masculinity was defined through protecting the honor against the enemy other –Israel-, 1967 War took the

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<sup>115</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of the Last Hundred Years*.

<sup>116</sup> McHugo, *Syria: A History of Last Hundred Years*; Seale, *Asad: The Struggle for the Middle East*; Hafez al-Assad, “Speech at Damascus” (1973).

opportunity from the Syrian state agents to narrate themselves in line with masculine qualities. Continuity and coherence of the narration of the self was disturbed; in other words the Syrian state was subject to *ontological insecurity* in the form of *emasculatation*. It is not to claim that emasculating experiences Syria has had “directly” and “absolutely” shaped strategic or foreign policy behavior. However, deep insecurity of emasculatation made changes and transformations in discourse, strategic and foreign policy behavior possible. Yom Kippur War, Syrian presence in Lebanon throughout the 1970s and standing still against the “colonial West” made Syrians ontologically secure since they could narrate themselves steadfast and staunch. Steadfastness enabled Syrian men to feel manly again. Years of political instability challenged the sovereignty and capacity of the state to have a successful foreign policy, in this atmosphere Hafez al-Assad and the state he represents appeared as the father figure who is competent enough to take care of the nation.

#### **4.2 The Contemporary Quest to Masculinity**

Unlike honor, shame does not appear in the discourse explicitly, but rather needs to be interpreted. Because shame bites at the roots of self-esteem, agents rarely speak about a shameful experience. Hafez al-Assad’s heavy focuses on steadfastness indicating that failing to act steadfast is a shameful act. The shame the 1967 war has brought can be observed in the tactical strategies (armed forces refusing to retreat) rather than discourse. Hafez al-Assad’s Syria regained Syrian honor, thus now it is the duty of Bashar al-Assad’s Syria to protect the national honor. The devastating civil war does not make Bashar al-Assad and the Ba’ath regime’s job easy. When the state faces ‘multiple enemies from every corner’, their sovereignty and authority is challenged, seeking to avoid shame, thus emasculatation could be a more difficult task. At this point, one could question whether Bashar al-Assad’s Syria seeks to avoid shame

at all. The answer can be found in the state agents' discourse and strategic behaviors of the state and military.

First, the uprisings in 2011 posed an ontological security threat to the Syrian state agents since discontent of the population and the regime's brutal response undermined the capacity of state agents to narrate themselves as the protective father figure. The regime's harsh response received heavy criticism particularly from the so-called West. In an interview Bashar al-Assad was asked if he is remorseful about the regime's harsh response:

“Assad: What do you mean remorseful? You mean being sad or-- or regret?

Interviewer: Regret.

Assad: No, a regret-- you regret when you do-- when you do mistakes, when you commit a mistake. I always try to protect my people. How can I feel remorseful if I try to protect the Syrian people?

Interviewer: Do you feel guilty?

Assad: I did my best to protect the people, so I cannot feel guilty, when you do your best. You feel sorry for the lives that has been lost, but you don't feel guilty”.<sup>117</sup>

He justified the military's harsh response by stating that it is individual wrongdoings, thus the regime has done nothing wrong institutionally. This interview should be interpreted through a lens of ontological security. In order to explain the role of shame in state behavior, Steele interrogates discursive expression of *regret* and *remorse* for past wrongs as his methodological approach.<sup>118</sup> According to Steele, another element that constitutes shame is state agents' conduct of counterfactual practices by giving reference to how a particular policy action would be inconsistent with self-identity. The regime's response to the uprisings did not constitute shame because Assad believed they had done nothing wrong. The state sought to maintain its

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<sup>117</sup> Bashar al-Assad, ABC's Barbara Walters' Interview With Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, interview by Barbara Walters, December 9, 2011, <http://abcnews.go.com/International/transcript-abcs-barbara-walters-interview-syrian-president-bashar/story?id=15099152>.

<sup>118</sup> Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 13.

self-image as a father by putting the blame on individuals, thus acquitting the state as an institution.

Individualizing the wrongdoings of the army, however, is not sufficient alone for the Syrian state to maintain its masculine identity since the institution still failed to protect “his own people”. One would expect that this is counterfactual to the sense of self-identity, thus it posed an ontological security threat to the Syrian state. The discourse on individualization of crimes gradually disappeared from the discourse as jihadist organizations such as al-Qaeda affiliated al-Nusra and ISIS increased its presence in the arena. Assad started to narrate the uprisings as a foreign conspiracy. At a speech he gave in 2012 he said:

“In the beginning, we used to tell those with good intentions that there is a foreign conspiracy. Now things have become clear, albeit belatedly. This terrorism cannot appear like that suddenly. There are stages which started from the beginning. There was small-size terrorism using small arms and in small areas. Then it grew to reach this stage and this level”.<sup>119</sup>

The army’s harsh stance against the protestors does not constitute shame because they were not “protestors” but “terrorists” that were plotting with foreign powers. Advancements of al-Nusra and ISIS deeper into the Syrian territory does not constitute shame because the army stood still against the new enemy: “You have proved to the entire world that pressures and conspiracies, even varied and intensified, would but increase your determination and insistence upon encountering the challenges, reiterating that Syria has basics which can never be breached into; these basics lie in the interests of the Syrian Arab people, and its national and pan-Arab objectives”.<sup>120</sup> At the same speech he said:

“It (foreign conspiracies) will end when the Syrian people decide to turn into a submissive people, when we submit and abandon all our heritage: the heritage of the October war of liberation in 1973, when we abandon our pan-Arab positions. We defended Lebanon in 1982, when it was the springboard of resistance which led to the liberation of Lebanon in 2000, when we stop supporting the resistance which

<sup>119</sup> Bashar Al-Assad, “Damascus University Speech” (Damascus, January 10, 2012), accessed May 30, 2016, [http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=274:president-al-assad-s-2012-damascus-university-speech&catid=118&Itemid=496](http://www.presidentassad.net/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=274:president-al-assad-s-2012-damascus-university-speech&catid=118&Itemid=496).

<sup>120</sup> Bashar Al-Assad “2013 Army’s Day Speech”.

we supported in 2006 and 2008 in Lebanon and Gaza, when we give free concessions partially or fully in the peace process, particularly in our occupied land in the Golan, when we abandon our pan-Arab positions towards the Palestinian cause which we have adopted since 1948, when we accept to be false witnesses to the systematic and unprecedented destruction of al-Aqsa mosque.”<sup>121</sup>

This narration of the self as a united nation standing still against foreign conspirators and their state contracted terrorist organizations indicates that taking a compromising and soft stance would bring shame.

Discursively labelling all protestors, insurgents etc. as terrorists is vital for Syrian state agents to avoid shame and emasculation, thus maintaining their ontological security. Relations with Israel plays a key role at this point once again. Geo-political analysis of the Israeli-Syrian relations in 2000s draw another puzzling picture. As Emile Hokayem argues, Israel perceived Syria as a predictable enemy that is unwilling to escalate directly, thus easy to deter.<sup>122</sup> When Israeli intelligence discovered Syria’s supposedly undercover nuclear programme, the operation to destroy a nuclear reactor was deliberately not publicized. The reason behind this was to prevent a possible Syrian retaliation out of humiliation. Syrian state agents did not only keep silent to Israeli attacks but also after the operation Syria participated to peace talks with Israel that was mediated by Turkey in 2007.<sup>123</sup> Since the civil war broke out and the regime’s authority has been undermined, Bashar al-Assad rarely mentioned Israel in his speeches and show little aggression towards Israel, if any. Following the framework of ontological security, silence over Israeli attacks and peace negotiations must have brought shame since it hinders the capacity to narrate the self as the staunch fighter against Israel. As the civil war broke out, all the discursive focus shifted on the new enemy: extremist terrorist groups –including “more moderate” oppositions like the Free Syrian Army-. The regime has been fighting these groups brutally and relentlessly while this very struggle has been highly glorified. Therefore, the state

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Emile Hokayem, *Syria’s Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, 1 edition (Routledge, 2013), 108-109.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

agents could maintain the narrative of steadfastness against those who are conspiring to divide and conquer Syria.

The framework of hegemonic masculinity and ontological security on shame can help us understand the regime's violence and glorification of such acts. Taking a weaker stand against Israel, losing the control over territories and eventually being subject to international intervention are practices that undermine Syria's masculine self-identity. The domestic situation was perceived to be an existential one by the Syrian state agents, thus making any concession was believed to show weakness to the enemy, hence inviting more pressure.<sup>124</sup> Considering the emasculating experiences of colonial experience, 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars and losing sovereignty over territories, Syria could not show weakness as a man is not supposed to show weakness. At this point it is appropriate to recall the psychoanalysis of macho man; macho masculinity is a fragile one, thus a macho man protests too much. The regime's aggressive stance against the uprisings in 2011 and discursive labeling of all opposition groups as terrorists can be interpreted as regaining and showing masculinity through violence. As the fear of emasculation played a constitutive role in tactical strategies during the Yom Kippur War, the fear of emasculation and in fact starting to experience emasculation by losing sovereignty plays a constitutive role in Syria's stance during the civil war. Following ontological security needs, state agents seemed to manage to avoid shame and emasculation by maintaining their steadfastness against the new enemies.

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<sup>124</sup> Hokayem, *Syria's Uprising and the Fracturing of the Levant*, 51.

## Conclusion

One of the main goals of this thesis is to display and deconstruct how gender and insecurity of emasculation shapes state behavior and discourse about the self. Displaying gender dynamics that are embedded in social practices and discourse can broaden our understanding of state behavior. My purpose was to shed some light on the motivations of states to engage in “irrational” behavior. However, how a gendered analysis can be utilized to propose solutions and improve the inhumane conditions people of Syria are suffering from is out of the scope of this thesis. This does not mean, however, that it is not important. Another shortcoming or limitation of the approach I take is that it neglects how the society and individuals including military personnel perceive and reflect the masculine state self-identity that the ruling has been narrating. Ignoring how state identity is perceived by the citizens and institutions that constitute state mechanism brings the risk to regard the state as a monolithic entity. Therefore, further research on how state self-identity is perceived and reflected by other state agents would help to overcome this problem. Moreover, feminist agenda seeks opportunities for social change and emancipation. Thus, more thinking on how a gendered analysis can be utilized to study conflict resolution and post-conflict situations is necessary.

There are a lot of lessons that can be drawn from a meticulous analysis of quest of the Syrian state to regain masculinity and maintain it as it is. However, the purpose of this thesis is only to climb another step to understand how gender functions in formation state identity in the Middle Eastern context. The ontological security framework broadens our understanding of state behavior and makes it easier to critically read state agents’ discourse about the self-identity. Honor and the fear of shame are strong notions that should not be simply overlooked in analyses of the role of identity on state behavior. Constructivist and post-structuralist approaches in IR take identity as a crucial element in construction of interests, social structures and behavior. However, they tend to neglect gender as an important component of identity. The



Syrian case stands as an example how honor and shame as components of self-identity are gendered. The features such as steadfastness that constitute honor are also constitutive of masculinity. To simplify it, a man is expected to be steadfast in order to protect the purity of the nation and national territories. The Syrian self-identity has been also narrated as the steadfast, staunch and noble fighter of the Middle East against the colonialist West and Israel. When the capability to narrate the self as staunch and brave was disrupted in 1967 War, the Syrian state faced emasculation as ontological insecurity. As the masculine self-identity has been constructed as a steadfast warrior, military defeat does not deal a significant damage to the ability to keep the narrative about the self going. The honorable and manly thing to do is to keep fighting. Therefore, even though the regime lost its sovereignty over half of the country and the military faced defeats against insurgent and Islamic fundamentalists, Bashar al-Assad displayed how honored and proud he feels about the army and “his” people. In the end, the Syrian state seems to be successful at his quest to masculinity, yet regaining masculinity will not bring 400.000 people’s lives who died during the civil war and countless more who lost their lives in the conflicts with Israel.

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