FROM CIVIL MOVEMENT TO CIVIL WAR

SOCIAL NETWORKS AND THEIR ROLE IN FACILITATING THE RISE AND FALL OF THE SYRIAN REVOLUTION

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Author's Declaration:

I, Bouchra Bouchkouj, hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. To the best of my knowledge this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where proper acknowledgement has been made. This thesis contains no material which has been accepted as part of the requirements of any other academic degree or non-degree program, in English or in any other language. This is a true copy of the thesis, including final revisions.

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Introduction

The series of uprisings in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region, starting with Tunisia in 2010, have been labelled by various scholars as the Facebook Revolutions in order to put emphasis on the role of social media during the Arab Spring (Ghrer, 2013). The first uprising, which later went on to inspire a chain reaction in the region, occurred in Tunisia. It all started with the Tunisian street vendor whose aim, whether intentional or not, that is, was to shed light on police brutality and how the Tunisian government frequently turn a blind eye to internal unlawful acts committed by government personnel. According to his aunt, Radia Bouazizi, Mohammed Bouazizi "would come home tired after pushing the [vegetable] cart all day. All he wanted was a 'pickup.' Instead, he started a revolution." (Abouzeid, 2011) His act of self-immolation in 2011 went on to inspire several revolutions across the MENA region. Today, several of these revolutions had significant reverberation, and others, such as the Syrian Revolution, continue to take place.

Today, although the Tunisian government is still facing occasional political setbacks, its successful transition to a democratic government allows observers to regard it as a successful revolution. To measure the success of the Syrian Revolution, on the other hand, it is more difficult. This is because, the Syrian regime continues to control the majority of Syrian provinces, including Damascus. In addition, the many factions and groups which have been created in the country add to the complexity of the Syrian Revolution.

Despite the successes and failures of the MENA region revolutions, they all share one common denominator: the use of social networking platforms to further their respective agendas. Furthermore, social networking platforms were used by the moderate opposition, the Muslim extremists, and the government regimes during the conflicts to further their respective agendas and yield outcomes on the ground. In the case of the Syrian Revolution, the use of social networks could be initially traced to the social networks which existed long before the events started taking place. Subsequently, the Syrian regime as well as extremist Islamist groups followed suit and established robust social networks online and they consequently influenced events and subsequent results on the ground.

Thus, the overall theme of the following thesis will revolve around the subsequent research question:

How did social networks facilitate the rise and fall of the Syrian Revolution?

Limitations

Modern terrorism is a difficult occurrence to study mainly due to its complexity, thus it is important to limit the scope of this piece and acknowledge related informational constraints. Furthermore, terrorist social networks are generally covert and due to their need to operate without detection, they use encrypted social media platforms and the dark web which are both difficult to penetrate. Thus, Paul S. Lieber and Peter J. Reiley (2016) of the Joint Special Operations University at Macdill Air Force Base in Florida noted that "with so much competing noise within formerly semi quiet spaces, determining true measures of effectiveness – let alone measures that might be able to be replicated – seems unfeasible." Furthermore, due to the complexity of the Syrian conflict and the large number of actors involved, the following research will focus on three actors: the Syrian opposition, the Syrian regime, and the self-proclaimed Islamic State (IS). Since the focus is mainly on the reason why the revolution did not prove to be successful (from a social network perspective), the research will address the failed use of social networks by the Syrian opposition and the successful use of social networks by the Syrian regime and IS.

Some of the research on social media platforms focuses on trend data which is obtained through surveys on those same social media platforms. This trend data is extremely important in order for analysts to study the flow of social networks operating on social media platforms. However, they are not a useful tool to study behavioral trends and the intent and consequent (mainly violent) application of individual users (Lieber & Reiley, 2016). "In the ISIS example, this is perhaps where ideological and corresponding foreign fighter flow correlate; [furthermore,] the glaring problem with this paradigm is that clever messaging can manipulate network and message-tracking systems to present a semblance of a network and/or over amplify the relevance of individuals within it" (Lieber & Reiley, 2016). Many ex-military and intelligence personnel tried to fill in this behavioral-causality gap. However, since the global hunt for IS members, recruiters, and supporters continues, IS techniques and their methods, which allow them to have such a high degree of global reach, continue to be reinvented (Lieber & Reiley, 2016). Accordingly, even when one method of communication or a cell is exposed, IS is simultaneously working on other cells and other methods in order for them to remain undetected.

There are further implications to social network analysis which Nancy Roberts and Sean Everton (2016) point out:

- Centrality bias tends to drive analysis
- Leadership bias tends to drive interpretation
- Visual bias tends to drive our focus

In his study "Who Shall Survive?" Jacob Moreno (1934) was one of the first researchers to identify analysts' tendencies to be influenced by the centrality bias. Since then, analysts have extensively studied the centrality bias and began establishing social network analysis softwares (i.e. clustering algorithms) to avoid it in the future, (Roberts & Everton, 2016). However, centrality metrics still get more attention as the data obtained from such metrics is more significant. The other bias which analysts tend to fall victim to is the leadership bias. The leadership bias tends to lead analysts to look for a central hub and attribute leadership and agency to the hub instead of looking further into what this hub might represent (Roberts & Everton, 2016).

Finally, analysts tend to also get entrapped in a bias known as the visual bias. First, a term coined by Markus Bindemann (2010), a Senior Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Kent, the visual bias is what drives individuals to focus their attention on the center of the screen neglecting other parts, in the case of social networks the individual will identify central nodes and artefacts neglecting others elsewhere. Thus, it can be said that "our conceptual schemas predispose us to attribute agency and leadership to central nodes and clusters. Instead of asking what thesis central actors might represent, our tendency is to assume that leaders are in the hub and this should be the focus on our attention. Put simply, we confound centrality with importance and importance with leadership" (Roberts & Everton, 2016).

Literature and Theoretical Aspects

Many try to identify factors which pushed people to start the uprising in Syria. There are many different theories which can explain the phenomenon. Furthermore, people try to study the radicalizations processes which took place that led to a number of the so-called anti-regime secular activists to align themselves with groups with clear theocratic ambitions. Robert Gurr's (1970) theory of relative deprivation can be used to explain why many people rose up against the regime and perhaps why some became affiliated with extremist groups. The theory of relative deprivation states that "people feel aggrieved in so far as they experience a discrepancy between what they have and what they expect to have" (Kriesberg, 1998). Gurr's assumption lies in the notion that people's capacity for violence is connected to the mechanism of frustration-aggression. He explains that frustration is not violence and it does not lead to violence, however the anger resulting from frustrated individuals may influence them to behave in a more violent manner (Gurr, 1970).

In society, people operate based in their "needs" and "wants," relative deprivation however goes further to describe the feeling of need and want is a feeling of rightful entitlement and it is perceived as a "just" and a "must" (Gurr, 1970). However, the capacity to achieve those needs and wants is limited, and as a consequence sense of frustration grows in an individual due to his/her inability to fulfill the just needs and wants. In the case of Syria, a diminishing equity, nonexistent equality, and an increasing gap in relative economic statuses resulted in the majority's inability to fulfill their respective needs and wants which then turned into frustration and then into aggression.

Furthermore, a number of scholars believe that global warming further aggravated regional discontent with governance. Due to the extreme weather between the years 2010 and 2011, food prices surged which could have contributed to the population's frustration with its governments (Johnstone & Mazo, 2013). In the case of Syria, the country was a socialist regime that has long promised its people subsidized prices for foods of nutritional value. This promise coupled with the region's authoritarianism, created a regional ticking bomb waiting to explode. Gurr also sheds light the role of natural disasters which may lead individuals to become violent (Gurr, 1970). An interesting point he makes is that traditional societies are more prone to violence resulting from natural disasters and it comes in the form of collective violence (Gurr, 1970).

"Aspirational Deprivation" is another form of relative deprivation which Gurr points to and "those who experience aspirational [relative deprivation] do not anticipate or experience significant loss of what they have; they are angered because they feel they have no means for attaining new or intensified expectations" (Gurr 1970). In other words, people's expectations on returns increase while their capacity to achieve these returns remains static. When the theory of relative aspiration is applied to the Syrian Revolution, it could be said that media, in all its forms, contributed to Syrians' population. When social networking platforms exasperated the coverage of revolutions across the region, this may have triggered a form of anger in the among Syrians since their expectations on returns increased while their capabilities to achieve them remained static.

For many, the Syrian Revolution resonates with the devastating events which took place in Hama in 1982 when Hafez Al Assad's government slaughtered tens of thousands of people where the regime believed the Muslim Brotherhood was planning an uprising to topple the Baath Party and implement Sharia law in Syria (Khan, 2012). The Syrian Revolution along with the Hama Massacre are both significant catalysts that divided the Syrian identity. Those two events can be explained using Vamik D. Volkan's (2001) theory of chosen trauma. The theory of chosen trauma indicates that a when a significant past event occurs to a certain group, it creates a form of common identity between them. Furthermore, Volkan (2004) suggests that "the chosen trauma becomes a significant marker for the large-group identity. Furthermore, it may create a foundation for the society's development of an exaggerated entitlement ideology that, under new historical situations such as a threat to group's identity, can be manipulated by political leaders to develop new political programs and /or take new actions supported by this ideology." We can see this in the juxtaposition of minorities in Syria and how many of them tend to be pro-regime. For instance, it is more likely to find Shia, Christians, and Druze in Syrian aligned with the regime than with anti-regime activists. This is primarily due to the fact that the Assad regime created a sense of identity among the minorities, a case of "us vs. them." They created a sense of fear among minorities instilling the idea that if Sunnis were to be in power, all minorities will be prosecuted under their Islamist rule. The regime, used this fear held by minorities as a strategic propaganda tool. The regime purposely depicted the opposition as Muslim extremists to increase fear amongst minorities and garner support needed to suppress the revolution.

However, there are other minorities which were on the other side of the spectrum such as the Kurds. The Kurdish population has long suffered forms of structural violence, relative deprivation, and violation of human dignity. For example, for generations, Kurdish Syrians were not allowed to communicate in their language mainly due to government crackdowns against them. The Syrian regime believed that because Kurds share a common identity, their mobilization may lead to them asking for autonomy or even independence. As a result, they were continuously marginalized and isolated from the rest of Syrian society. The Kurds were even deprived of basic civil services, such as enrollment in Syrian schools. Therefore, minorities such as Kurdish Syrians tend to align with anti-regime activists.

Gurr's theories can help us understand the root causes of why Syrians felt marginalized and why the uprising initially started. The theories which the research relied on are mainly social networking theories. For example, Reinoud Leenders (Department of Political Science at the University of Amsterdam) and Steven Heydemann (Georgetown University at Washington D.C.) (2012) pointed to the social movement theory as the backbone to help explain the root causes that led to mass mobilization in Daraa. They further elaborated on the two key elements of social movement theory, which are opportunity and threat, and how the Syria people saw the opportunity and felt the threat and this contributed to their protesting the regime.

Following extensive empirical research, mass communications scholars devised the third-person effect theory (TPE) in order for them to study IS recruitment mechanisms. The TPE theory "predicts that individuals will perceive others to be more influenced by socially undesirable content than themselves. These perceptual gaps, often referred to as third-person perceptions (TPP), are especially important when considering that their behavioral consequences often manifest in the form of restrictive, corrective, or promotional behavioral outcomes" (Golan & Lim, 2016). Consequently, Guy J. Golan and Joon Soo Lim (2016) of Syracuse University used these two theories in order for them to study IS propaganda and recruitment schemes.

The Syrian Opposition: Anti-Regime Activists

The "moderate opposition" is considered an integral actor in the Syrian Revolution as they are viewed as the citizens who started the protests against the Syrian regime. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is an important member of the opposition, especially during its early phases. However, due to the fragmentation of the group, some of its members joined various extremist groups. The focus of this thesis is on the overall moderate opposition in the early stages of the uprising.

Opposition to the Syrian government was not an event that took place overnight. Following a series of failed coups and changing governments in Syria, the Baath Party was the ultimate power in the country. "When the Baath Party took over Syria in 1963, it declared a state of emergency and imposed martial law, changing life in Syria completely," (Zahler, 2009). The state of emergency which the Baath Party declared is still in place in Syria today. Additionally, the bloodshed currently taking place is not the first time a bloody massacre the regime committed against the those who oppose their rule. In 1982, Hafez Al Assad's government killed between 10,000 and 30,000 people in the city of Hama where the regime believed the Muslim Brotherhood was planning an uprising to topple the Baath Party and implement Sharia law in Syria (Khan, 2012). Nonetheless, the difference between 1982 and today is that today the opposition use various tools to convey their messages, especially social media platforms.

We specifically witnessed the rise of peaceful social media opposition following Hamza Al Khatib's torture and death after being held by the Syrian security forces (Thompson, 2011). Hamza was a 13-year-old boy who had participated in an anti-regime protest in Daraa on April 29th 2011. He was later detained by Syrian security forces. On May 25th 2011, "his body was returned to his parents by Syrian security forces who told Hamza's family to never speak of the incident. Hamza's parents defied the order and posted photos of their son's body on YouTube, and a simple search of Facebook reveals multiple Facebook pages related to Hamza. Hamza's father was picked up by the Syrian security forces a week later, and his whereabouts are unknown." (Thompson, 2011)

Protests took place throughout the country. However, some areas more than others. For example, the protests didn't begin in Aleppo until 2012, nearly a year later following the initial protests of

the opposition. Furthermore, the militarization of the revolution did not start until the end of 2011. Those who took to the streets peacefully protesting against the Syrian regime and the brutal regime loyalists (Shabiha) believed in the ability to achieve a peaceful revolution.

However, many of those who took part in the initial uprising share the idea that the revolution was high-jacked by extremist groups. When IS took control over Raqqa, many activists and revolutionary figures opposed their presence. Nonetheless, many fail to see the contrast between the brutality of IS and Bashar Al Assad. In an interview with a female protester from Raqqa, she highlighted the fact that ISIS brutality only shifts the focus from that of the Syrian regime. ‘‘The regime is more bloodthirsty than ISIS,’ she said. ‘They also commit massacres. They also intrude into daily life’” (Feldman, 2014). Many activists in Syria share her grief and agree that IS is in fact benefiting the Assad regime as it shifts the focus from the bloodshed committed by the regime to that of Muslim extremists.

One of the most important issues to look at regarding the Syrian Revolution is how did it started and who started it. The Syrian Revolution can be said to be a product of the oppression exerted on the Syrian population since the times where Bashar Al Assad’s father, Hafez Al Assad, was in power. Many people were optimistic about positive change in the Syrian political sphere as the early risers showed signs of a controlled and organized social and political agenda which “allowed for early collective action and mass mobilizations based on grievances and aspirations otherwise shared by many if not most Syrian throughout the country” (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012). However, the lack of institutional organization and fragmented social networks proved otherwise.

Reinoud Leenders and Steven Heydemann (2012) noted to the social movement theory in order to explain the triggers which led to mass mobilization in Daraa, particularly between March 18th and the beginning of May 2011. The two key elements of social movement theory, opportunity and threat, were what shaped the protests and the consequent aggressive response by the Syrian security forces; however, “the opportunity could well have been lost and the threat of repressions could have nipped protests in the bud” (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012). Furthermore, when a population is under threat and an opportunity is seen in hindsight, social networks become a particularly vital aspect in collective mobilization. Daraa for example, has always been

characterized by its robust tribal social networks which transcend national borders. Prior to the revolution, many of those networks were mostly criminal operating in the black market, importing and exporting goods across the Lebanese and the Jordanian borders. Subsequently, these criminal social networks transformed into revolutionary social networks as they saw members of their tribes/clans under imminent threat by the Syrian security forces (Leenders & Heydemann, 2012).

4.1 Failures

In a way, it could be said that anti-regime activists failed to acknowledge Daraawis and their contribution to the foundations of mobilizing the masses, consequently, undermining the main causes of the early mobilization efforts against the Syrian regime. Regime loyalists as well as anti-regime activists perceive people from Daraa as rural and backward thinking as their main professional focus is agricultural coupled with illegal activities across the Syrian-Jordanian border. They were always perceived as less educated and consequently less capable of organizing and maintaining a civil society which can challenge regime hostilities towards Daraawis. Thus, when the protests started taking place, Syrian security forces were stationed in central cities where fear of the educated repressed elite was imminent. Furthermore, anti-regime activists also focused their efforts towards larger cities and consequently missed the opportunities which Daraawis presented them with to (maybe) swing the revolution in their favor. In addition, as noted by the International Crisis Group, "[security forces'] violence almost certainly has been the primary reason behind the protest movement's growth and radicalization" (Leenders & Heydemann 2012). In other words, although the heightened violent response by the Syrian security forces presented people with the threat and opportunity (the two key elements of the social movement theory) to remove the regime from power, this also led to the subsequent radicalization of many of anti-regime activists.

Syrian anti-regime activists were faced with other problems of connectivity which also contributed to undermining their revolutionary efforts. When Hafez Al Assad was in power, Syria was more isolationist and economically protectionist with most foreign products barred from Syrian markets and only accessible through black markets like the one which can be found in the town of Madaya near the Lebanese border. Following Hafez Al Assad's death, his son, Bashar Al Assad assumed power. One of the first issues he wanted to tackle was Syria's isolationism. Thus, he allowed for many foreign products and companies to share a fragment of the Syrian market. Furthermore, he introduced the internet to the Syrian public. The World Wide Web was finally accessible by the Syrian public in 2000. However, such as with other media sources, the internet was heavily monitored by the Syrian regime and many websites were censored and restricted (De Angelis, 2011). Thus, many social network platforms such as Facebook were inaccessible by the Syrian

population from November 2007 to January 2011 (De Angelis, 2011). Accordingly, the Syrian population was a neophyte to social media activism which eventually led to discord between activists on the internet other activists on the ground.

When analyzing the Egyptian Revolution, Courtney Radsch (2008) developed three phases of online activism: the experimental phase, the activist phase, and the diversification and fragmentation phase. She noted to how Egyptian activists were first individuals participating in the revolution independently which then led to a politically active community and finally they turned into a dense network characterized by its political alignment. Due to the fairly novel notion of net-activism in Syria however, anti-regime activists did not possess the conditions and time to develop their online social networking skills until the second phase (De Angelis, 2011). Consequently, Syrian net-activism was characterized by disconnected actors mostly operating from abroad such as the online Facebook group The Syrian Revolution 2011 which was operated and managed by the Muslim Brotherhood's Swedish branch (De Angelis, 2011). Due to the fact that the main Facebook opposition page being administered from abroad, this led to undermining the credibility of some activists, especially by the Syrian population residing in Syria. On the other hand, this bolstered the regime's propaganda campaign dubbing Syrian anti-regime activists terrorists sponsored by Islamist organizations and states.

Another aspect which hindered anti-regime activism is the anonymity of some of those activists. Esther Addley (2011) of the Guardian wrote about one of those faceless activists. Gay Girl in Damascus was a blog thought to be written by a Syrian lesbian living in Damascus. However, a large number of bloggers and online activist found the account to be a hoax. The blogs were written not by a gay girl in Damascus but a middle-aged American man based in Scotland (Addley, 2011).

Syrian activists also faced obstacles of mobility. Most anti-regime activists worked in small cells operating from different parts in Syria mainly due to the regime's restrictions on individuals' movements between provinces. Consequently, the activities of protesters and activists tended to be more fragmented. Furthermore, the activists' anonymity coupled with the difficulty they encountered when personally attempting to meet each other, further undermined the trust between individual activists. Add in the fact that many activities were from different provinces, and it

became almost impossible to tell who was a regime-affiliated spy intent on exposing online activists (De Angelis, 2011).

Enrico De Angelis (2011) also pointed to two problematic cases which the professional media faced while covering the events in Syria. The first one was when there was an alleged massacre in Banyas. The Guardian published an article in which they claimed that Syrian soldiers refused to fire at peaceful demonstrators and consequently, their superiors killed them for refusing to obey orders. The Guardian interviewed one of the soldiers to prove the accounts of the story, however the soldier denied this and it was clear that The Guardian reporters were being misled by their informants. Another story which gained media attention was that of Zainab Al Hosni. Al Hosni was reportedly captured and tortured by Syrian security forces and later on photos of her mutilated body emerged online. However, it was later evident that Al Hosni was alive and she appeared on Syrian national television and it became apparent that the fled was to escape her abusive brothers (De Angelis 2011). Thus, professional media lost much of its credibility in Syrian and getting information was gradually becoming more difficult as accounts were hard to verify and the populations lost trust in the media.

Thus, De Angelis (2011) dubbed the Syrian Revolution the "Wikipedia Revolution: a revolution where anyone can contribute through her or his competences, without hierarchical barriers" (De Angelis, 2011). Nevertheless, Wikipedia without the people continuously fact-checking and managing its pages would turn into a chaotic platform where arguments would arise about every word; this is what happened to anti-regime activists. Many disagreed on fundamental issues and their purpose became as vague as their ideology.

The Syrian Regime

The regime which has been in power under the Assad's in Syria since 1971 is one of the key reasons the protests initially took place. The government has been an especially brutal one, particularly following the events of Hama in 1981 when Hafez Al-Assad, the father of Bashar Al-Assad, was in power (Khan, 2012). The oppression and the silencing of the masses took different forms thanks to the martial law which started following the Baath Party's assumption of power in 1963 (Zahler, 2009).

The Syrian government blocked many social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter, especially following the unrest which took place in Tunisia and Egypt. However, people always managed to regain access through Virtual Private Networks and other means such as online proxy servers. Furthermore, the Syrian regime later unblocked many social networking platforms in order to track down those who were planning protests and those interested in taking part in showing their discontent with the regime. "The Syrian regime had long blocked access to social media sites, says Richard Zaluski, president of the Center for Strategic Cyberspace and Security Science, a London-based think tank. 'Blocking, however, prevented the tracking down of activists so the regime ultimately responded by unblocking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter" (Connelly, 2015).

Furthermore, when looking at the uprising in Syria and when trying to understand the behavior of the Syrian government in terms of using military power, it becomes clear that Bashar Al-Assad and his regime were employing all means to hold onto power. Month after month, they have claimed that they are fighting terrorist in the country who are trying to turn Syria into an Islamic state ruled by Sharia law. This message was conveyed using various tools including state-controlled media and social networking platforms.

5.1 Successes

Historically, social networks have played an important role in the transition of governance and political power. Civil societies suffered violations of their basic human rights and citizen's disapproval and frustration grew and as a result people organized and gathered in order to protest the injustices they are enduring. Today, it is somewhat simpler for those social networks to function as members have access to platforms which they do not need to physically be a part of (at least initially) thus making it easier for them to conceal their identity and avoid prosecution by the government in power. "Considered in this light, Internet freedom is a long game, to be conceived of and supported not as a separate agenda but merely as an important input to the more fundamental political freedoms" (Shirky, 2011).

As important as communications and means of communications are in a political movement, it is important to address other aspects of society that initiate political protests. For example, the end of the Cold War came as a result of economic crisis that engulfed the Soviet bloc rather than liberal radio stations preaching liberal ideals. Once the Soviet model of buying cheap wheat for selling expensive oil stopped functioning, the average person started truly feeling the adverse effects the union had on their everyday life and the economic strain it put on families and individuals. Furthermore, in order for a revolution to be considered successful, a strong civil society must be a precedent to any movement on the ground. Nonetheless, it can be said that it is a vicious cycle: how can you have a strong civil society with initially weak political culture, lack of basic freedoms, and little to no political engagement? Furthermore, how can you have freedom and an active political culture without a strong civil society?

However, it is argued that the lack of civil society is one of the main reasons the Syrian Revolution has failed. "Mass media alone do not change people's minds, instead, there is a two-step process. Opinions are first transmitted by the media and then they get echoed by friend, family members, and colleagues. It is in the this second, social step that political opinions are formed. This is the step in which the Internet in general, and social media in particular, can make a difference" (Shirky, 2011). The Syrian regime succeeded in this manner which consequently undermined the revolution

and the protests. Although people were dissatisfied with several aspects of Syrian governance, there wasn't a strong civil society driving the protests. Furthermore, there was no agenda, manifesto, or other proposed methods of governance. The people called for Bashar Al Assad to step down however, there appears to be several problems with this notion. First, the protestors did not offer many alternative qualified alternatives to assume his position of power. Second, the few proposed individuals that were to take over were mostly Syrians living abroad and many were aligned with religious groups which in turn led the people to distrust the opposition and accuse them of having a hidden agenda. Finally, if the regime gets toppled so do those few to little benefits that people have; Syrians learnt from their Iraqi neighbors and saw how having a dictator in power may be better than having a 'democracy' with no clear alternatives.

In order for a political movement to be successful, coordination is extremely important and one of the main forms of coordination is known by military personnel as:

> "'Shared awareness,' the ability of each member of a group to not only understand the situation at hand but also understand that everyone else does, too. Social media increase shared awareness by propagating messages through social networks… the condition of shared awareness – which is increasingly evident in all modern states – creates what is commonly called 'the dictator's dilemma' but that might more accurately be described by the phrase coined by the media theorist Briggs: 'the conservative dilemma,' so named because it applied not only to autocrats but also to democratic governments and to religious and business leaders. The dilemma is created by new media that increase public access to speech or assembly; with the spread of such media… a state accustomed to having a monopoly on public speech finds itself called into account for anomalies between its view of events and the public's. The two responses to the conservative dilemma are censorship and propaganda. But neither of these is as effective a source of control as the enforced silence of the citizens. The state will censor critics or produce propaganda as it needs to, but both of those actions have higher costs than simply not having any critics to silence or reply to in the first place" (Shirky, 2011).

The Syrian regime's success lies in their ability to control all three aspects and especially in their ability to eliminate or marginalize the opposition. In the case of moderate anti-regime activists, their disappearance proved the most fruitful as the regime was able to eliminate moderates and consequently, they were able to back their propaganda claims that the opposition was made up of Muslim extremists. On the other hand, in the case of censorship and propaganda, the regime initially started by denying citizens access to social media platforms and other anti-regime media sources. However, when the anti-regime demonstrations gained momentum, the Syrian regime reversed their policy and relaxed Internet access to the public mainly in order for them to track anti regime activists and thus, they succeeded in penetrating various robust activist networks. Hence, it could be said that the use of social media is a double-edged sword as it is "just as likely to strengthen authoritarian regimes as it is to weaken them" (Shirky, 2011).

The Self-Proclaimed Islamic State (IS)

"The first video message that Al Qaeda released globally was in the year 1996, then they started releasing on the World Wide Web in 2001. However, the dramatic evolvement of their videos took place under Atiyallah, who they call 'Bin Laden of the internet'" (Farghali, 2015). However, we can see that ISIS in fact mastered social media usage. Some regard cleric Anwar Al Awlaki the Bin Laden of the internet as he still influences recent terrorism. When Abdirizak Warsame appeared in trial for conspiring to plot terrorist attacks against the United States, the Federal judge asked him what inspired him to plot and his response was Anwar Al Awlaki. (Shane, 2015)

IS recruitment videos heavily rely on social media platforms in order to further their agenda and attract sympathizers and followers. "The group's principal tool for expanding its influence has been brute force, but as it has attempted to build credibility and establish legitimacy, it has shown a deftness for propaganda, using social media and cyber technology to recruit fighters and intimidate enemies" (Farwell, 2014).

Today, despite continuous losses in the battleground, IS continues to recruit larger numbers of enthusiastic domestic and foreign fighters. The media mainly focuses on recruits coming from the Middle East and North Africa region and Europe, however, it is important to note that IS recruiters also operate in various parts of the world such as South Asia, the former republics of the Soviet Union, sub-Saharan Africa, and the United States (Golan & Lim, 2016). Alex Chung (2016) of Monash University noted that while recruiters are looking for their perfect candidates, "there [tends to be] a process iteration, a progression and graduations from adopting ideology to radicalization to full-on violent acts. Terrorists originate from diverse socioeconomic background including highly educated, financially comfortable, and well-integrated individuals."

6.1 Successes

IS has been successful in their process of recruiting fighters and their success lies in their sophisticated and unprecedented use of social media platforms (Golan & Lim, 2016). Faisal K. Abbas, editor in chief of Al Arabiya News, once stated that "extremists are always the first to condemn technology, yet they are its best users, using the democratic values of social media for undemocratic purposes, which makes social media a curse" (Chung, 2016). They use social media platforms in order for their ideological messages to spread and raise their international profiles and recruit and inspire fighters and lone wolf attackers. Google, Twitter, Facebook, and various other social media platforms have extensively worked to delete IS-sponsored material on their platforms however, due to technologically advanced and tech savvy IS members, they always managed to launch a new page, profile, or group chat in the case another was deleted.

Mass communications scholars have conducted extensive empirical research in order to devise and support the third-person effect theory (TPE). The TPE theory "predicts that individuals will perceive others to be more influenced by socially undesirable content than themselves. These perceptual gaps, often referred to as third-person perceptions (TPP), are especially important when considering that their behavioral consequences often manifest in the form of restrictive, corrective, or promotional behavioral outcomes" (Golan & Lim, 2016). Consequently, Guy J. Golan and Joon Soo Lim (2016) applied the theories and studied their effects on IS's recruitment propaganda.

Golan and Lim (2016) noted that "American Muslims are often perceived in a stereotypic manner; generally, they are perceived as violent and untrustworthy as well as usually suspects of potential terrorism by law enforcement authorities in the United States." Furthermore, American media often focuses on specific issues regarding American Muslims: controversies regarding Muslim praying spaces and terrorism consequently often portraying American Muslim as the other in an American society (Golan & Lim, 2016). In addition, unlike Christianity, Islam has not developed since its emergence in the 7th Century and the Quran – despite it being an outdated text – it is still followed ipsissimis verbis. As a result, many Westerners tend to see Islam as a religion which does not align with Western values and consequently Western Muslims are often seen as members of an out-group (Golan & Lim, 2016). IS tends to capitalize on the marginalization of Muslims in

Western societies. Outsider Muslims are often targeted and are (somewhat easily) radicalized as their fear of rejection from Western societies is matched by their inclusion in a homogenous group with similar values and ideologies. "Numerous causes have been cited including domestic issues in the West such as anti-immigrant policies, unfairness in the criminal justice system, unequal distribution of wealth, and racial and religious discrimination – all contributing to the disenfranchisement and marginalization of potential radicals" (Chung, 2016).

IS recruiters also tend to communicate with different parts of the world in a manner in which they would believe and sympathize with the organization's religious, political, and social agenda. For example, the propaganda aimed at Westerners is often different from propaganda and messages issued to IS audience in the Middle East and North Africa. They have released various images and videos, some of the images show IS fighters eating "Snickers bars and nurturing kittens, a historical reference, as Danish strategic communication expert Thomas Elkjer Nissen has pointed out, to Abu Huraira, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad known for being fond of cats. These warmer images aim to communicate the message that, while strictly Islamic, ISIS stands for promoting the welfare of people, not murdering them" (Farwell, 2014).

As noted by James P. Farwell (2014), another aspect which contributed to IS's success in communicating their messages was their Twitter app the Dawn of the Glad Tidings. The application gathers users and their personal data then it allows the organization to mass communicate tweets, links, hashtags, and images. Furthermore, IS's tech savvy recruiters manage to post messages and communicate with users and followers of the application in a manner that seldom triggers Twitter's spam-detection algorithms. For example, during IS's journey to take over the Iraqi city of Mosul, supporters and affiliates produced and transmitted up to 44,000 tweets a day. As a result, if someone searched for 'Baghdad' on Twitter, an imaged produced by IS ends up popping up first in the search. Their use of hashtags on Twitter and various social media platforms has proven to be especially successful. For example, at some point they produced an Arabic hashtag reading #theFridayofSupportingISIS. This hashtag was mentioned and retweeted over 20,000 times in one day. Furthermore, during the World Cup, IS "tweets imaginatively hijacked hashtags such as #Brazil2014, #ENG, #France and #WC2014 to gain access to millions

of World Cup Twitter searches, in the hope that users would follow links to the group's propaganda video" (Farwell, 2014).

Furthermore, even when IS-affiliated accounts are suspended on Twitter (or other social media platforms), they manage to get them back up either manually or using a self-devised or commercial application. For example, Berger and Perez (2016) monitored some of the key words which IS supporters and recruiters use in order to garner support and spread their messages. One of the key words they found used by many IS supporters was Baqiya Shout out. Bahia Shout out's account was deactivated however "when the user returned from suspension on August 25, the list was immediately reconstituted at its full size and thereafter consistently returned from suspension intact, suggesting the user had started to employ a Twitter application (or some other method) to save and relist member automatically. Such apps are available commercially but can also be coded with relative ease" (Berger & Perez, 2016). Thus, IS supporters and counterterrorism experts agree that suspending accounts can be seen as short term policy and it is considered a fruitless effort as they will simply create a new account using the same username or a similar one. However, as it will be explained later, if this short-term policy is consistent and persistent, some accounts will most likely eventually be permanently closed down.

Although IS has proven to be successful in their online recruitment and media efforts, there is a downside to their approach and methods of internet usage. For example, despite IS leaders' opposition to its release, a video of the chopping of a man's hand in Raqqa circulated online. IS fighters were proud of this video however opposition groups capitalized on such atrocities helping them discredit IS narratives garnering further opposition (Farwell, 2014). Furthermore, "Releasing warm and fuzzy images of ISIS murderers hugging pets was a good gambit, but the emotional impact of images depicting ISIS militants drenched in the blood of Muslims and other innocents is likely to backfire" (Farwell, 2014). Thus, it is important to note that airstrikes and coalitions may temporarily crippled IS however the best strategy to defeating IS's online presence is by delegitimizing the group among Muslims by revealing how Muslims are treated in IS-held territories. Furthermore, many Western nations have developed various anti-radicalization schemes which pointed along with crisis-period institutions that specifically deal with terrorism; i.e. U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the UK's Prevent project which promotes the de-

radicalization of young children, and Australia's Counter Violent Extremism (CVE) programs; however, all these programs actually – as mentioned earlier, "[contribute] to the disenfranchisement and marginalization of potential radicals" (Chung, 2016).

Farwell (2014) notes that IS leaders clearly see how social media is a double-edged sword. For example, the leadership's whereabouts and their identities are protected and they tend to use minimal electronic communication amongst them. For instance, top-ranked IS commanders and leaders tend to use couriers to personally deliver command-and-control messages while social media is mainly used to spread their message and recruit fighters. However, as technology is continuously evolving, the group is becoming more susceptible to cyber-attacks (Farwell, 2014).

Berger and Perez (2016) extensively monitored suspension of IS-affiliated accounts. Earlier it was mentioned that although Twitter suspended those accounts, users returned and they managed to garner roughly the same amount of support or followers as their accounts did prior to the suspension. However, with certain users, Berger and Perez (2016) found that sometimes this policy works. They followed four different accounts, A, B, C, and D. These accounts were the most likely to be suspended and then return to the social media platform. They found that repeat offenders, users with accounts which were regularly suspended, experienced a steady decrease in network size and momentum. Furthermore, they found that "depressive effects of suspension often continued even after an account returned and was not immediately re-suspended. Returning accounts rarely reached their previous heights, even when the pressure of suspension was removed. Users B and C, for example, returned from suspension and then remained online for several consecutive days without approaching their earlier levels of performance" (Berger & Perez, 2016).

Conclusion

The theory of relative deprivation states that "people feel aggrieved in so far as they experience a discrepancy between what they have and what they expect to have" (Louis Friedberg, 1998). The assumption is connected to the idea that frustration and violence do not have a directly causal relationship. Frustration does not lead to violence; however, frustration leads to a degree of anger which could lead to violence (Gurr 1970). The Syrian Revolution started in a peaceful manner, however, the increasing number of arrests, torture and executions led to anger which later turned some protesters to become violent. Other protestors chose to align themselves with extremist groups as they saw moderate efforts gradually losing ground while extremists were gradually gaining momentum and ground. In other cases, the violence which later erupted led people to join the Free Syrian Army. However, the Free Syrian Army quickly lost credibility, their funds were running low, and it became fragmented with many members joining other factions which aim at implementing Sharia law in the country.

Relative deprivation is not only based on what is considered as needs and wants, but also based on beliefs that a person or group are entitled to those needs and wants. The feeling of rightful entitlement to those needs is perceived as a "just" and a "must". However, the capacity to achieve those needs and wants is limited, and as a consequence frustration results from the inability to fulfill the just needs and wants. Furthermore, as the Syrian people were unable to obtain those needs through the peaceful means they had intended, this turned into frustration and now into violence.

When looking at the uprising in Syria and then trying to understand the behavior of the Syrian regime's use of military power, it evident that the Syrian regime's main goal is to remain in power regardless of the circumstances. Similarly, all other actors share the same aspirations of gaining and maintaining power. Furthermore, the Syrian regime continuously claimed to fight Muslim extremists, which was initially false. However, Following the Syrian regime's continuous crackdowns and the opposition's continuous losses, many moderates turned either back to supporting the Syrian regime or joining other groups.

The theoretical overview is a tool used in order to paint an overall picture for the reader. In addition, it is relatively more tangible to simplify some of the complexity of the situation through theoretical analysis.

Another important aspect is the actors that play an active role in the Syrian Revolution or as some may call it, the Syrian Civil War. The main three actors the research is focused on are:

- The Opposition
- The Syrian Regime
- The self-proclaimed Islamic State

However, it is important to note that there are various other active opposition groups that can be added to a different category (such as former Al-Qaeda affiliated Al- Nusra Front) or a sub-category (the Kurdish factions which can be categorized under the moderate opposition.) Furthermore, third parties are also becoming increasingly involved, especially following the U.S-led coalition against the (so-called) Islamic State, in addition to the Iranian government, Russia, and Hezbollah to list a few. Thus, the research provides a limited view of the social networking and media initiatives taken by each and every group.

Social Networking platforms have developed into a form of political protest. As mentioned in the first section, the Arab Spring is increasingly referred to as the Facebook revolution attributing its worldwide coverage to social media platforms. Social Media platforms can also facilitate terrorism domestically and internationally. For example, terrorist group such as the (so-called) IS use social media for recruitment and to spread messages of fear. In one of their publications in the Arabic language the writer wrote:

> *Inside the World War Against the Islamic State: Facebook and Twitter Announce Plans to Immediately Remove the Islamic State's Online Publications*
>
> *Facebook and YouTube started a new campaign to remove Islamic State's posts and videos from their websites. The two platforms use technologically advanced algorithms to spot and remove videos which belong to the Islamic State. According to the source, these same*

> *algorithms are used to prevent the content from reappearing on the website. This material belongs to the Islamic State, which declared the Khilafa and Sharia law and removed the colonial borders. Last December, President Barack Obama asked social networking platforms to help stop jihadist operations through spotting what he called "hateful content" in addition to removing any substance which is associated with jihadist activities which appear on their websites. Last May, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and Microsoft pledged to the European*
>
> *Union to halt activities which promote violence and to stop "illegitimate hate speech and terrorist advertisements." In line with the pledge, the companies must, within 24 hours, review all the complaints and the reports which are sent to their websites which might include hate speech.* (Al Haq)

The Syrian regime also uses social networking platforms to remain in power, however, they use them differently. They first blocked the networks, then they started using them as an espionage tool to uncover opposition networks. The events which will unfold will become increasingly crucial in deciding the fate of the Syrians.

The analysis focused mainly on the successes and failure of the different actors involved. It was evident that the Syrian (moderate) opposition was the loser and the Syrian regime and IS were clear winners, at least initially. One of the main reason for the Syrian opposition's losses was due to their lack of organization and coordination. Initially, opposition groups from different provinces coordinated with each other and took the streets to protest the Syrian regime. Later however, the regime along with extremists penetrated the moderate opposition and initiated a campaign to stop it from gaining momentum. Furthermore, although social networks were relatively robust in some provinces such as in Daraa, these networks operated solely in their respective provinces, as they had tribal links with each other. Finally, due to the slow Internet penetration in Syria, the protests did not reach a phase where it was coordinated on a mass scale among various people from different provinces in the country.

The Syrian regime, on the other hand, followed a tit-for-tat approach. Instead of devising policies to counter anti-government protests, they waited for an action and countered it with a reaction usually in the form of a repressive governmental policy. Furthermore, one of the successful ways

the Syrian regime operated was by allowing free access to the internet and monitoring activists throughout the country. The Syrian regime initially had banned various social media platforms and denied access to many main stream media outlets, specifically the ones which did not support the regime. However, in order to unveil protestors' identities, they lifted the ban and by doing that not only did they reveal the identities of the protestors but they also uncovered the various actors in their social networks**.**

Although IS might be a relatively new organization, they proved to be the most tech savvy of the groups involved. Furthermore, due to their broad and international support base, they had managed to gather various individuals with various backgrounds in order to penetrate the Internet and have a robust global reach all due to their dense social networks and advanced Internet skills (which help them anonymously recruit and stay undetected for an extended period of time.***)*** However, it is important to note that today IS is slowly losing ground, especially in Iraq, and their self-proclaimed capital is under siege which means their days are numbered.

Finally, while ISIS is dying out and the conflict, to many seems like it is dying out, one cannot ignore the direct catalytic effects of social networks and social media platforms in the rise and demise of the revolution as their vitality will only increase with time and technology.

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