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POWER, DISCOURSE, AND THE ERASURE OF REVOLUTION: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF SYRIA'S STRUGGLE FOR FREEDOM

Abstract: This paper examines how the democratic aspirations of the Syrian uprising were gradually erased through domestic and international discourse. It argues that narratives produced by the Assad regime and reinforced by global actors reframed the uprising from a movement for freedom and dignity into a conflict defined by terrorism, sectarianism, and instability. Drawing on the work of Michel Foucault and Edward Said, the paper shows how power operates through language and representation, shaping how conflicts are understood and responded to. Writing from an Arab American perspective, it also considers how orientalist assumptions continue to influence Western interpretations of Middle Eastern resistance movements. Ultimately, it argues that the erasure of democratic aspirations in Syria is not only the result of state violence, but also of the narratives that shape how the conflict is understood globally.

Mohamed Bouazizi, a street vendor in Tunisia, shook the Arab world by setting himself on fire as a form of protest, triggering a ripple effect so powerful that revolutions surged beyond borders throughout the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The fight for resistance and freedom quickly spread into Syria, more specifically, the southern city of Daraa, which would soon emerge as the cradle of the Syrian Revolution. The fight for Freedom and dignity began at the Al Banin all-boys school in the countryside of Daraa, where a group of schoolboys came together and carried out an act so defiant that it ignited a nationwide uprising. What seemed like an innocent dare by classmates, fifteen-year-old Naief Abazid was oblivious to the fact that his act of teenage defiance would bring an end to decades of suppression and fear inflicted by the Ba'athist dictatorship of the Assad regime. Armed with a spray paint can, he proceeded to unknowingly reshape the geopolitics of the region as he wrote on the wall of the school building, "It's your turn, doctor," referring to incumbent president Bashar Al-Assad, who, before succeeding his father, Hafez Al-Assad, in 2000, was a practicing doctor.

The Assad regime's response was ruthless; in the matter of a few days, Syrian security forces charged into the school, detaining Naief Abazid and fourteen other children. The authorities held the boys in an undisclosed location for weeks, subjecting them to brutal beatings, torture, starvation, and the horrific act of tearing out their fingernails. The parents, pleading with the government to release their children, were left with a cruel and absurd response, with official security chief Atef Najib releasing a statement saying, "Forget your children. If you want children, make more of them. If you don't know how, bring us your women, and we will make them for you." This response by the Assad regime was a tactic used to instill fear against anyone who would dare challenge the regime. No matter the words or tactics used to terrorize the Syrian people,

their pursuit of self-determination ran deeper than fear. On March 18, 2011, the first-ever demonstration of the revolution took place, with the people of Daraa taking to the streets peacefully, demanding justice and accountability for the government's actions. The chants and outcry for "freedom, freedom, freedom" and "peace, peace, peace" were only met with bullets, tear gas, tanks, and mass disappearances. Among those unlawfully abducted by the regime during protests was 13-year-old Hamza al-Khateeb, whose whereabouts were unknown for a month; he was finally brought back to his family, but as a corpse. Pictures and videos made public "showed evidence of a blunt force injury to the face, injuries to his head and back, a severed penis, and possible entrance wounds." Hamza's mutilated body became the breaking point for every Syrian nationwide, unleashing defiance so resistant that the pursuit of freedom became inevitable. Daraa was no longer alone; peaceful protests were erupting nationwide, from the outskirts of the capital, Damascus, to the second-largest city, Aleppo. From the Syrian coastal cities of Lattakia and Tartus to the farmlands of Hama, Homs, and Deir El Zor, the people of Syria reiterated their opposition to the tyranny, shouting, "Come on, Bashar, your time is up," calling for an end to the forty-year rule of the Assad family and their enforced Ba'ath ideology. Declaring their demand for freedom and self-determination, the Syrian people shouted, "God, Syria, and freedom only."

Ignoring dialogue, the Assad regime countered the Syrian people's calls for freedom with what would unknowingly be a fourteen-year era of brutal repression and siege on the population. The voice of the people, harmless yet powerful, nonetheless terrified the Assad government as peaceful protesters were met with the spraying of bullets. Startled by the regime's response, the protesters who managed to escape the onslaught fled to their homes for safety. Following behind them were security forces, who went on a military crackdown, storming neighborhoods and forcibly breaking into the homes of petrified Syrians. These unwarranted break-ins ended with civilians forcibly dragged out of their homes, only to be forcefully disappeared or killed on the spot, before the very eyes of family members. The forcibly disappeared were almost always taken to undisclosed locations and subjected to torture, all in the name of fighting for freedom and dignity. The regime's military crackdown rapidly extended to regions of the country that had not yet experienced these raids. The pacifist voices of the Syrian people, given no other choice, chose to arm themselves in the name of self-defense. In pursuit of protecting their communities and the chase for freedom, both ordinary citizens and defected soldiers, who refused to harm protesters, came together to form the Free Syrian Army. The Free Syrian Army came about to become the army for the Syrian people, fighting the tyrannical Assad regime. "The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has evolved significantly since its emergence in the summer of 2011. At the time of its formation in late July 2011, its founding leader, Colonel Riyad al-Asad, described the establishment of a force with a dual purpose: to protect peaceful protesters demonstrating against President Bashar al-Assad's regime and to initiate resistance operations against his security forces." (Lister 2016, 1). The Free Syrian Army embodies the very Syrian people who first took to the streets of Syria in March 2011, the parents of children tortured and killed by the regime, and the kids whose parents were forcibly taken and disappeared. The actions of the regime created resistance.

The Free Syrian Army was never an outside force, proxy, or faction but a force rooted within the Syrian people who endured a painful siege under the Assad regime. Since the first uprising in Daraa, "the FSA remains the cornerstone of Syria's moderate opposition component. The FSA is also strategically important because of its extensive civilian popular base and its representation of the revolution's original vision and brand" (Lister 2016, 12). However, as time went on, the battle for freedom became far-fetched when global foreign powers intervened for the

sake of strategic interest, exploiting Syria and turning the country into a power vacuum. This paper helps uncover the truth behind the Free Syrian movement and its distortion and reconstruction by external foreign powers, with the theoretical principles of post-structuralism and post-colonialism helping expose the very power and colonial structures that undermined and ultimately defaced the Syrian people's legitimate fight for freedom, turning it into a terrorist-designated movement.

Post-structuralism, a theory that challenges many theories within international relations, rejects universally accepted “truth” and “knowledge” as fixed, instead positing that they are socially constructed, shaped, and molded by power and political agendas. Post-structuralism challenges the idea of an objective truth or concrete doctrine, as power elites constantly reshape it to fit their motives. The truths we are presented with do not have absolute validity. Prominent poststructuralist Foucault states, “We must not imagine the world turns towards us a legible face, which we would only have to decipher” (Foucault 1981, 67). It is imperative that one understands that these “truths” and doctrines are nothing more than constructed realities and ideologies, formed by elite powers, which are then imposed on society as a whole.

Following the 2011 uprisings, the Assad regime imposed extensive coercive control over the Syrian population. The Syrian people faced the scrutiny of undercover spies, who relentlessly pursued anyone daring to criticize the government. Government moles disguised as taxi drivers, bus passengers, teachers, journalists, or regular civilians would go after anyone who was found to have uttered the word “freedom” or insulted the regime. They had forcibly disappeared, tortured, and executed, with loved ones having no clue about their families’ whereabouts or whether they were still alive or dead. The Assad regime imposed discourse-based control on Syrians, forcibly eradicating any idea or concept of freedom and completely suppressing what was once the resistance. Foucault’s concept of “regime of truth” directly applies to the Syrian regime and its actions in constructing its truth and knowledge regarding the Free Syrian Army. This system’s tools consist of the elite actors, who were the Ba’athist ruling party; the dominant discourse; and the language used towards the FSA. The Assad regime successfully established a regime of truth by using state media to disseminate propaganda domestically and, in an international context, international diplomacy to persuade foreign actors to view the Free Syrian Army as an extremist group in its national affairs. The Free Syrian Army, a liberation group created by the Syrian people, was defaced in the international community by the Assad regime: “The al-Assad regime has repeatedly claimed that it is fighting ‘foreign-backed terrorists’ while refusing to cite any empirical evidence for its assertions” (Flood 2012, p. 137).

The prevailing dominant discourse transcended borders, with foreign states harnessing the Assad regime’s framing of the uprising as a warrant for intervening in Syrian affairs. One of the most prominent global powers of the world that intervened in the pursuit of consolidating the Assad regime’s narrative of taking down “the terrorists” was Russia, a country that had ties with the Ba’athist party ever since Syria was liberated from France. The involvement of Iran and Iran-backed proxies who sought to inflict their Shi’ite ideology on Syria, a country where the religious makeup consists of “The vast majority, 74% Sunni Muslim” (Heritage for Peace n.d.). Alawites, “a Muslim sect from which the Assad family originates.” Current estimates of the Alawite population place the group around 10 percent.” (Al-Omar 2018). The Assad family favored the involvement of Iran and its proxies in hopes of furthering sectarianism within the country, with hopes of removing the majority Sunni population. The political concept of security vs. liberty became one of the most powerful discursive tools used by the Assad regime. The regime established an ‘Us vs. Them’ narrative, where ‘Us’ referred to the Alawites, who constituted only

ten percent of the country's population, and 'Them' referred to the Sunnis, who made up the majority. In the process, the regime ignored the country's religious composition of "16% other Muslim (including Ismailis, Shiites, Alawites, and Druze) and 10% Christian." (Heritage for Peace n.d.).

David Campbell's post-structuralist insight into foreign policy and its role in constituting a state aligns with the actions of the Assad regime. David Campbell argues that states do not possess fixed identities; instead, they construct their own identities based on their own definitions and formulations of what constitutes a threat. Denying that foreign policy is solely a response to external threats, he argues that it is merely a practice that produces boundaries. The Syrian government, on its own, created an internal threat to its affairs, evident in its violent response to the Syrian people who peacefully chose to protest. Afterwards, the Syrian movement and the Free Syrian Army were labeled as an external, foreign-backed, extreme group. Forging such a fabricated threat granted the Assad regime, on an international level, the legitimate right to inflict brutality on the Syrian people.

A prominent scholar of post-structuralism, Richard K. Ashley, challenges the traditional international relations view of "heroic practice." This belief asserts that sovereignty is inherently rational, ordered, and coherent. The Assad regime contradicted this very idea. Rather than being rational, the Syrian government shot at its people. Instead of being ordered and coherent, the Syrian government relied on repression, alienating the population and upholding sectarianism within the country by privileging a religious minority, which ultimately led to widespread dissent and conflict among various groups within Syria. Ashley himself states, "a well-bounded sovereign presence that decides its bounds, an already legitimate power that defines for itself the social basis of its legitimacy and power." (Ashley 1988, 250). In this instance, the Syrian government decided its bounds for the sake of power as it declared the Free Syrian Army an external terrorist group meddling with Syrian affairs. This label was placed upon the FSA, a narrative that dismantled the Syrian people's legitimate struggle and fight for freedom.

While post-structuralism reveals the truth behind the Assad regime's constructed narrative and deceitfulness towards both the Syrian people and the international world, it is only superficial. Post-colonialism goes deeper, revealing the global order and power structure that enabled the international acceptance of the Assad regime's narrative. We must delve into the deep colonial presumptions about the Middle East that persist even now, obscuring the postcolonial realities and ultimately shaping the world's perception of the Syrian fight for freedom, despite the tactics employed by the Syrian government. Edward Said, a prominent Arab-american theorist, created the concept of Orientalism. A concept asserting that the world's perception of Arab culture, history, and muslims lies in the hands of the West. The West, through the education system, media, and film, and with the help of power elites, distorted the true lens of the Middle East as a whole, ultimately constructing the idea of the "Orient."

Said goes on to state, "The Orient was almost a European invention and had been since antiquity 'a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, and remarkable experiences.'" (Said 1978, 1). The Middle East, a region seen by the West to be backwards and irrational, helps us had better understand why the Free Syrian Army was not deemed a legitimate uprising against authoritarianism but rather another non-state terrorist group. Orientalism and its misrepresentation of Syria became the reason why the international order abandoned the Syrian cause. For the next fourteen years, the Syrian people were left isolated from the world, fighting

solely by themselves. Bashar al-Assad's deceptions would not have prevailed without the complicity of the West's deep-rooted orientalist views.

Sanjay Seth, a theorist who challenged post-colonialism, argued that international relations selectively determine what is considered legitimate and illegitimate. He adds to this view, stating, "this overlooks that knowledge serves to constitute that which they purport to merely cognize or represent, and that IR theory serves to naturalize that which is historically produced" (Seth 2011, 168). Taking Seth's viewpoint on post-colonialism and applying it to the Syrian uprising and how the world reacted to the resistance, it becomes evident that the international system itself falsely understood the resistance as another turmoil spill in the Middle East.

Post-structuralism alone does not provide the full picture of the Syrian Revolution. Although it does help us get a better grasp of how the Assad Regime fearmongered the Syrian people, constructing language and state-bound narratives to suppress any form of uprising, it is still very superficial. Postcolonialism dives deeper, revealing how century-old orientalist propositions have shaped today's view of the international global order, which accepted Assad's lies and led to a lack of proper action against the Assad regime. Together, both theories help uncover the truth behind why the international order failed the Syrian people and their cause.

The Syrian Revolution ultimately exposed the flaws within the international order. Justice became debatable when it came to dominant discourse and deep-rooted colonial biases, as these biases often skew perceptions of fairness and accountability in international responses to the Syrian crisis. Recognizing oppression requires overlooking any form of dominant distortions or biases.

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