

SYRIA FOR THE SYRIANS:
THE RISE OF SYRIAN NATIONALISM, 1970-2013

A thesis presented

by

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to

The Department of Political Science

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in the field of

Political Science

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
May, 2013

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the gradual emergence of Syrian nationalism as the dominant national identity of the Syrian Arab Republic. It centers on answering two questions. The first is why has there been an increasing appeal to nationalism in Syria over the course of the last several decades and particularly since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011? While some scholars explain changes in nationalism from a number of elite-centric perspectives, these fail to account for the gradual rate of change in authoritarian Syria. The second question focuses on the nationalist performances of the Syrian opposition. Why has the opposition manipulated and rejected some of the regime's symbols while coopting others? Many of Syria's national symbols were originally accepted by the opposition and incorporated into the movement's repertoire and were modified or abandoned only after months of protests. Yet both sides have continued to use some symbols, such as the Syrian map. This thesis uses the concept of rational adaptation to explain the emergence of Syrian nationalism and explain the process through which new symbols were adopted by groups opposed to the al-Assad regime.

Acknowledgements

I owe many people a great deal of gratitude for their limitless patience with me but there are a few individuals I would particularly like to acknowledge. Without them this project would never have been possible. Thank you to Dr. Amilcar Barreto for introducing me to the study of nationalism and helping me transform nebulous notions into this thesis. An immense thank you to Dr. Shakir Mustafa without whom I would never have had the courage to work with Arabic source material. I would also like to thank Hazem Shekho for the Arabic lessons and our many conversations about Syrian identity.

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Introduction

On my first trip to Syria, like many western visitors, I was struck by the omnipresence of the face of the nation's dictator, Bashar al-Assad. Even with only a couple of years of Arabic training I could understand the multi-story billboard with a smiling, waving Bashar al-Assad in front of a Syrian flag that said "Suriyya ma'ak," "Syria is with you." Syrian flags were a common site and I even bought myself a refrigerator magnet saying "I love Syria" in Arabic rebus. It was not until years later when I took my first course on nationalism that the apparent contradictions struck me. Why was the Syrian regime such a tangle of contradictions, an ideologically pan-Arab state wrapped in a national flag?

Since the Arab Spring reached Syria, the American media has often pondered the question of whether a Syrian national identity exists, and if Syria, like Iraq, might slide into, or even dissolve in, sectarian strife. My own discussions with Syrians both during my visits to Syria as well as other locations in the Middle East have indicated that Syrian national identity is not as artificial as the American media often presents. There is a sense of shared experience that makes Syrians unique from their fellows in other Arab states. More methodological measurements of identity have confirmed what I found in my informal conversations. In Charles Phillips' work, the only identity expressed by all 29 of the people he interviewed was Syrian national identity. While it was not the dominant identity for most of them, Phillips (2013: 137) considers this evidence of the acceptance of the present Syrian state.

Syrian national identity has apparently become even more salient since the uprisings against al-Assad's regime began in 2011. Groups and individuals opposed to the al-Assad regime have engaged in a process of coopting, rejecting, and manipulating

the regime's symbols as it develops its own predominantly nationalist symbolic vocabulary. Pro-regime protests competing with anti-regime protests have sought to emphasize their own nationalist credentials through a varied repertoire expressed both out on the streets and on the Internet. The transformation in the stance of the Syrian regime as well as the central role of nationalism in the Syrian uprising poses several complex questions about nationalism, ideology, and conflict.

This work focuses on two over-arching questions. The first is *why have we seen an increasing appeal to state nationalism in Syria over the course of the last several decades and particularly since the beginning of the uprising in March 2011?* While some scholars explain changes in nationalism from an elite-centric perspective, as shall be discussed in the literature review, this fails to account for the changes that have taken place in Syria. The second question focuses on the nationalist performances of the Syrian opposition. *Why has the opposition manipulated and rejected some of the regime's symbols while coopting others?* Many of Syria's national symbols were originally accepted by the opposition and incorporated into the movement's repertoire and were modified or abandoned only after months of protests. In addition, some symbols, such as the Syrian map, have been used by both sides. I argue that this selection reflects an acceptance of certain symbols as legitimate while others are deemed illegitimate and that these assessments are by no means set in stone.

Given the current conflict, the methods available are severely limited. Interviews could not be conducted and attending protests in person was out of the question. However, a wealth of information and documentation has been made available by parties on both sides of the conflict and many more historical materials are also available

through electronic and print media. Thus, the analysis incorporates multiple components, including news articles, photographs, online videos, Facebook pages, websites, currency, national monuments, and artistic expressions and performances.

To understand the symbolic vocabulary and how it has changed over time I have analyzed the symbols used and disseminated by the al-Assad regime at different stages as well as those used by the opposition. This symbolic analysis has included looking at visual representation, such as posters from the Syrian cult of personality, political cartoons, monuments, currency, and flags, with a particular emphasis on the inclusion and use of particularly nationalist symbols like state flags and maps of the modern Syrian state. In addition, I look at the ways in which organizations and individuals opposed to the Syrian regime have manipulated and incorporated elements of the state's symbolic vocabulary to establish its own purely nationalist variant. I have also analyzed several speeches, building on existing research on the ideology expressed by the al-Assad regime, and comparing the nationalist symbols used by the current President of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, Moaz al-Khatib.

Given the ongoing conflict in Syria, doing fieldwork was out of the question. However, the efforts by numerous groups to convey what is happening inside Syria has made an abundance of information available online. Photographs and videos of protests as well as photos of signs and flags used by demonstrators are widely available on the Internet. In addition, the Internet has served as both a forum for groups to display their national identities and strive to increase their own legitimacy. The website of umbrella organizations like the Free Syrian Army and Syrian Ba'ath Party as well as a variety of Facebook pages have also been used to establish a sense not only of what nationalist

symbols are being used but when and how these symbols are coopted, changed, or rejected over time.

As Wedeen (1999) pointed out in her own work, we as researchers cannot know exactly what an actor is thinking, particularly when we research cases in which asking actors is simply not an option. However, as Wedeen and other scholars have shown, a great deal can be learned from the ways in which groups use symbols and how individuals react to those symbols in a variety of contexts. By looking at the transformations which have taken place in Syria's symbolic vocabulary over time, this work seeks to pose an alternative understanding of the rational adaptation model of ideological change as it is applied to nationalism.

Literature Review

Feeling a sense of belonging to a national community is much like being part of a grandiose extended family, the majority of whom you will never meet. Anderson (2006: 6) described nationalism as, "...an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign." The communal bonds are "imagined" as the members will never be able to meet all their co-nationals and it is "limited" as these identities are finite. Clear distinctions exist between the members of one national group and another (Ibid., 6-7). Gellner (1983:1) adds to this definition by defining nationalism as "a theory of political legitimacy" in which members of an ethnic group live within the same polity and all members are equal. Smith, like Gellner, emphasizes the importance of the political in his definition, describing the goal of nationalism to be obtaining and continuing political independence, as well as a sense of cohesion and identification between members of the group. While Anderson's perspective looks more to nationalism

as a social phenomenon, the incorporation of the political by Gellner and Smith to this basic definition is essential, particularly in cases in which ethnic groups transcend national borders. At its heart, nationalism is not only a sense of community but a theory for legitimizing the existence of the state. In the Arab world the ethnic component of these national identities may be questioned. As Massad (2001) describes in his work on the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, even a state whose ethnic group extends far beyond the borders of the political entity, may imagine a new national identity with which to legitimize the existence of that sovereign state.

Many scholars widely acknowledge that nationalisms are not static identities which, once created, never alter. Contrary to the myths that surround them, these identities are by no means permanent. Shelef (2010: 7) provides three possible explanations for how nationalisms change: rational adaptation, elite imposition, and an evolutionary dynamic. Each of these explanations looks not only to different sources of ideological change but also indicates distinct characteristics of change.

Elite imposition has been a key ingredient for several hypotheses on the roots of national identities. The efforts of the elite to produce a literary culture have been attributed with creating cultural and linguistic unity that form the basis for national identities (Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983). In addition, elites often select or create a historic narrative for the nation, thereby imbuing the national identity with certain characteristics (Zerubavel 1995; Chatterjee 1993). The model of elite imposition emphasizes nationalism as a social construction. Yet those things that are constructed can in turn be deconstructed. Elites in this case may change their views in order to take advantage of opportunities and then impose the adopted perspective on the masses. As

such, new incentives for elites should bring about changes according to Shelef's model (2010: 9-10, 18).

This case does not apply to Syria for several reasons. If elites were free to generate a nationalist ideology and then impose it upon the people it would be untenable and inexplicable for the regime to pay homage to multiple national identities. Yet the Syrian regime, particularly under Bashar al-Assad, has often resorted to awkward paradoxes in an attempt to accommodate multiple national identities. Phillips (2013) refers to Arabism as the "genie" that cannot be put back in its lamp, indicating that nationalisms are not purely elite imposed or this identity would no longer be given any credence. In addition to the persistence of Arabism, the gradual change in nationalism in Syria also belies the elasticity Shelef accords to the model of elite imposition. One can also look at the failed attempt under Hafez al-Assad to encourage Greater Syrian nationalism (Mufti 1996). The fact that this attempt at elite imposition failed indicates that the efforts of the elite alone do not explain transformations of nationalism within the Syrian context. Thus the Syrian regime does not fit the model of elite imposition Shelef describes.

Shelef (2010) discusses the "evolutionary dynamic" a process in which distinct ideological variants exist and political bargaining and competition leads to transformation in these variants over time. As such "...the evolutionary dynamic pegs the frequency of change to the cadence of domestic political struggles among nationalist movements." The compromises which groups make regarding their original conceptions of nationalism often have a permanent impact on the group's beliefs and are not only adopted in the short run (Ibid., 193). In many ways Shelef's evolutionary dynamic is another version of

moderation theory. According to some scholars, the inclusion of groups within electoral systems will force them to moderate and modify their positions over time in an effort to be allowed to participate in the electoral arena, in order to garner votes, and then in order to be an effective presence in the government in order to achieve their ideological goals (Mecham 2004; Leiken & Brooke 2007). This model may fit a democratic or somewhat democratic system in which the most popular ideology, or those who can adopt popular elements of nationalist ideology, can win and take control of the mechanisms which allow them to implement their nationalizing agenda. For this very reason it cannot apply to an example like Syria in which the regime, until recently, was the sole promulgator of nationalist ideologies.

Rational Adaptation refers to the acclimation of actors to the status quo, the acceptance and shaping of ideology to reality on the ground. According to Shelef, rational adaptation assumes that national identities are resistant to change and that the facts on the ground put pressure on the established ideology when reality and ideology do not align. Since this hypothesis considers identities resistant to change, big shocks are required to bring about changes in ideology (Shelef 2010: 7-8). Ian Lustick used a similar concept of punctuated equilibrium to explain changes to three nations' conceptions of their legitimate borders. In his model institutional change drives ideological shifts, and as such, drastic institutional changes and a couple of other conditions must be met if the dominant conception of the boundaries are to be challenged (Lustick 1993). However, the Syrian example indicates that while rational adaptation may occur it does not necessarily result in the sticky model presented by Shelef.

As will be explored in the case of Syria, the quest for nationalist legitimacy may cause leaders to engage in a gradual ideological shift rather than a sudden change. Arab nationalism remained the dominant ideology in Syria for decades after the present borders were drawn. While the failure of the Six Day War has been considered the death knell of secular Arab nationalism it remained the dominant nationalism in Syria and only lost ground to a more localized national identity gradually under first Hafez and then Bashar al-Assad. While the regime adapted its ideology and adopted more local symbols the process was by no means sudden. However, in moments of crisis, a regime may make a stronger shift as it seeks to maintain legitimacy. Such crisis fostered the adoption of a more Islamist ideology in both Malaysia and Pakistan (Nasr 2001). Similarly we have seen a stronger expression of nationalism on the part of the Ba'athist regime since the beginning of the uprising in 2011. Yet the incorporation of a distinct Syrian nationalism in addition to the Ba'athist's traditional Arab nationalism is by no means a new phenomenon, indicating that a process of rational adaptation is taking place, in which the leaders adapt to the protect their own legitimacy.

How is it then possible that rational adaptation could bring about a gradual change in nationalism? Lustick (1993) looked to institutional development as a key ingredient to nationalism change. Yet neoinstitutionalists have largely abandoned the evolutionary model of punctuated equilibrium in favor of a more gradual perception of institutional change. Institutions are viewed less as monolithic and static forces acting upon society and more as a grouping of multiple codes or laws. Individuals interact with these structures every day and it is this interaction between the non-monolithic institution and individuals which brings about change (Lewis & Steinmo 2012: 324). This analysis of

continual interaction and a continual press for change has led to a more gradual depiction of institutional change (Peters *et al.* 2005: 1278). In addition, when applying evolutionary models to institutions it is important to keep in mind that just as genes change when passed along to children, so too do institutions (Lewis & Steinmo 2012: 333). An important component of analysis by many neoinstitutionalists are the ways in which institutions interact with and shape groups within society, thereby influencing their policy preferences. Such processes are occurring continually, even during periods of apparent institutional calm and continuity (Peters *et al.* 2005: 1281, 1278).

Just like the institutions that promote it, nationalisms do not vanish between significant events. It remains and may change during periods of relative quiet (Goode 2012: 9). In this way, neoinstitutionalists do not discount the role of agency and instead incorporate it into their understanding of how structures function and shape human behaviors. In much the same way Youssef Chaitani (2007) describes the gradual functional separation of Lebanon and Syria following the end of the French occupation as one rooted both in structure as well as the actions of individual actors. This gradual rational adaptation incorporates both the interests and beliefs of actors as well as the changes on the ground which dictate which path will be deemed legitimate by the population. In order to understand why nationalism has transformed in Syria we need to look at how and when it has occurred. This study therefore looks at the use of nationalist symbols to track a series of transformations in nationalism.

The Power of Symbols

Symbols are inherently images or signs that stand for something else. In some circumstances a symbol may represent a group of people, such as a nation. In such a context those who understand the symbol are able to both infer its meaning and understand the boundaries of the people which the symbol represents (Elgenius 2011: 396). These symbols are used to trigger emotional responses in the viewer and serve as a signifier of the group's cohesiveness (Hobsbawm 11: 1996). Not only can symbols represent a group of people but they may communicate information about the nation to its members, by standing for a historical event, cultural memory, a set of norms, or an understanding about the nation (Butz 2009: 780).

The communication of a symbol's message may not be overt. In his work on banal nationalism, Billig describes the unnoticed permeation of visual space with nationalist symbols in western societies. Such symbols appear on apparently mundane objects such as stamps or money, nationalist identities may be reaffirmed and performed through the recognition of national holidays, and citizens may mindlessly perform nationalist acts like the pledge of allegiance (Billig 1995). As Penrose (2011: 429) explains, the use of these symbols is most certainly intentional: "By making these ideas so natural as to unassailable, the processes, practices and languages of banal nationalism work to construct and reproduce specific nations and nation-states as indispensable cornerstones of an international geopolitical order". Phillips (2013) considers the leaders featured in the personality cults of Syria and Jordan as almost banal symbols. While striking to the unfamiliar observer they go largely unnoticed by members of the population.

Given the often unnoticed nature of these symbols it is not unreasonable to suggest that such symbols could reinforce or establish a sense of national identity in an “unconscious” fashion. A study found that the presence of a large American flag in the room increased the subjects’ national identification as Americans, even if they did not notice the presence of the flag in the room (Butz 2009: 782). Thus, symbols as images which stand for the nation or communicate particular messages to members of the nation possess a powerful and sometimes unnoticed effect on the consumers. This is not to suggest that national identities are only formed by symbols — there is a great deal of evidence to suggest that an increased awareness of one’s identity increases one’s awareness and use of national symbols (Ibid., 783). Rather, symbols are an important part of an interactive process through which messages are both signaled about an identity and which can also be used by individuals to communicate a particular conception of national identity.

Yet the daily consumption of these images may not inspire loyalty but could become a site of contention between groups of citizens and the state. As Jones and Merriman (2009: 166) discuss in the case of road signs in Wales, even simple directional signs can provide opportunities for dissenting individuals to express their disapproval of a particular ideological narrative. As they explain, “...banal signifiers of official nationalisms can be viewed by members of minority groups or nations as symbols of oppression to be resisted and subverted...In broader terms, such work illustrates the context-specific way in which individuals, groups, or institutions view nation-building processes” (Ibid., 166).

Nationalism, as earlier addressed, plays a particularly important role in legitimizing authority (Hobsbawm 1996: 9). At a basic level, symbols give a group a vocabulary with which to communicate a shared identity, in this case a nationalist identity (Phillips 2013). Adopting certain symbols has been used in numerous contexts to associate a state with a particular symbol's legitimizing message. In the case of Malaysia and Pakistan, associating the state with Islamic symbols and adopting Islamist policies granted these relatively young, post-colonial states a means through which to legitimize their authority. As Nasr (2001: 159) explains, "Religion and, more broadly, culture are directly relevant to state reach and power, and hence, to the aforementioned imperatives [of hegemony and legitimacy]." By adopting the dominant religion of the people and through symbolic acts, such as declaring the birthday of the prophet a national holiday, Pakistan's regimes could legitimize their dominance (Ibid., 141). National celebrations also have other symbolic components. Not only does the day itself communicate a message (as in the case of Pakistan) but the participation of the people in national holidays is intended to display a degree of unity among the people (Elgenius 2011: 397). The participation of the many legitimizes the day, whether it commemorates a victory, a religious occasion, or a state's independence. Legitimizing symbols can also be less obvious. In the late 1800s states began to put nationalist images on their currency, using symbols from the nation's history, scenes of how their citizens lived, and physical features or landmarks from the country. By putting these images on the nation's money these states strove to associate themselves with these symbols of legitimacy (Helleiner 1998: 2). States use symbols in all of these various contexts to obtain legitimacy by using symbols that will resonate with their populations.

Nationalist symbols are derived from a variety of sources, as long as they convey something about the nationalist myth or the morals associated with a nationalist ideology. They may come from folk symbols or customs and may be physical or natural characteristics of the homeland (Smith 1991: 65-66). Until the 1970s reproductions of the story of the battle of Tel Hai in Israel utilized the symbols of the plow and the gun to emphasize national values centered on labor and the defense of the homeland (Zerubavel 1995: 157). History plays a particularly important role as a source for symbols upon which to build or reinforce a national identity. As Suleiman (2003: 28) explains

...for the nationalists, the past is the storehouse of old glories, common suffering, dim memories and other distant and authenticating voices which are imagined to have left their imprint on a variety of cultural products- including language- whose significance in the present varies from nation to nation, and, in the history of the same nation, from time to time.

While this past may not be entirely real, the myth of this unified history can bestow legitimacy on the existence of the national identity in the present and bind the group together (Hobsbawm 1996: 12). The history in this use is not a static entity but is a collective memory that is altered and changed over time (Zerubavel 1995). One can see this in the use of history in the Syrian context. While Arab nationalism still finds itself strongly expressed in Syrian history textbooks there has been a shift toward a more Syria-centric view of history, an emphasis on the collective history of the Syrian people as a separate entity from the rest of the Arab world (Bolliger 2011: 108).

The Cult of personality

Like nationalism, a cult of personality relies heavily upon symbols to promote particular myths; in this case not ones related to the community, but the leader. In a cult of personality the leader and the state are depicted as synonymous, promoting the belief that the state could not continue without the leader. The leader is also the object of adoration, painted as an individual of superhuman abilities with the capacity to single-handedly save his people (Cernak 2011: 58). Such cults are not particular to a given cultural context. The cult of personality around Chiang Kai-shek in Taiwan was established in part to replace the previous cult centered on the Japanese emperor. In an effort to replace the emperor's cult with their own, different branches of Kai-Shek's government created incentives for individuals to hang the leader's portrait (Taylor 2006: 99, 101). Stalin also worked to incorporate the pre-existing cult of Lenin into his own personality cult. By associating himself with the adored former leader Stalin was able to shore up his own legitimacy in a time of relative uncertainty (Tucker 1979: 347-348). Just as some states use a nationalist myth to legitimize their claim to power, the cult of personality attempts to use another myth to legitimize their claim to power: the semi-divine nature of the leader.

Like the nationalist regime, the cult of personality also utilizes symbols to enforce its message and reinforce its claims of legitimacy. The promotion of this presentation of the leader is done in part by posting images of the leader everywhere and spreading the words of the leader through government media and books (Cernak 2011: 58). Leaders place symbols of the cult, including the image of the leader at its heart, in locations already imbued with importance, such as buildings used by the army or other important

national institutions (Taylor 2006: 102). In some cases, such as that of North Korean dictator Kim Jong Il, citizens were required to keep a portrait of the leader even inside their homes. By placing the symbols of the cult throughout public spaces a sense of the leader as omnipresent is inculcated by the populace, which reaffirms the myth of the leader as omnipotent and omniscient (Cernak 2011: 58-62). Through the personality cult the leadership produces a way in which the people internalize the power structure they have put in place (Büchs 2009: 28). While governments make an effort to involve their citizens in nationalist events and celebrations to foster a sense of cohesion this symbol of unity is often manipulated within the cult context (Elgenius 2011: 396).

In Syria under Hafez al-Assad it was not unknown for the regime to bus students to events featuring the president in order to create both the illusion of communal unity as well as an illusion of adoration (Wedeen 1999: 2). In Syria, Wedeen argues, the government under Hafez al-Assad expressed its domination over the populace by the forced performance of cult rituals and compliance while a lack of genuine belief ran rampant (Ibid.). To Phillips (2013) this lack of genuine veneration distinguishes the cult of Hafez al-Assad from genuine personality cults. Hafez al-Assad, like his son after him, utilized his own image as well as other symbols and slogans in an effort to establish a myth of unified allegiance to the leader. However, the cult of Bashar al-Assad, like that of Abdullah II, differed from the cult of the father (Ibid.). The cult under Bashar displayed new, more nationalist symbols than the cult under Hafez. In turn, these images have also been manipulated by members of the Syrian opposition. Why we witness these two trends invites a new visit to the study of national symbols, personality cults, and the relationship between the two.

Syria: A Tale of Three Ideologies

Nationalism first appeared on the Middle Eastern stage decades before the creation of modern Middle Eastern states (Wedeen, 1999: 16). Early articulations of an identity distinct from Ottomanism were often not specific as various regionalisms and Arabism often melded together in the Levant (Khalidi 1998). While in 1868 Ibrahim al-Yaziji called for the independence of the Arabs from Turkish rule his discussions of an independent Syrian entity probably influenced the Lebanese and Syrian nationalisms which formed later in that century. These early ideologies are considered by some scholars to have been interest oriented. Ernest Dawn (1991: 8, 11-12) argues that Arab Nationalism got its start thanks to, "...intra-Arab elite conflict, specifically (in the case of the territories later included in the Syrian Arab Republic) being an opposition movement of Syrian notables directed primarily against rival Syrian notables who were satisfied with and occupied positions in the Ottoman government." Just as Anderson described in his analysis of the emergence of nationalism in colonial and imperial contexts, dissatisfaction among members of the elite led to the articulation of a new national identity and calls for a new political order which would allow the dissatisfied elites to obtain access to the power they sought. By the time Syria obtained its independence from the French, the anti-Turkish sentiments of the malcontents had crystallized into three competing ideologies: Syrian nationalism, Greater Syrian nationalism, and Pan Arabism (Mufti 1996: 43).

Arab Nationalism and Pan Arabism have two powerful components on their side: history and language. Just as in the aforementioned German *volk*, arguments have been

made that the shared Arabic language similarly serves as the basis of a common civilization. Language plays two important roles, both the practical or functional role of a method of communication as well as a more symbolic role as a symbol of the nation or a national group (Suleiman 2003, 32). Gellner (1983) claims that modernity has placed a greater importance on the ability to communicate, which has led to language being used as a rallying point for the fomentation of nationalism. The unity of classical Arabic as a language of “a shared clerical or high culture” in the face of a great deal of variety between ordinary Arabic-speaking communities made Arab nationalism a viable choice for a unifying ideology (Ibid., 79). One key component for disseminating a single language and culture is education. In Israel the acceptance of Hebrew as the language of the nation was solidified by the decision to forbid instruction in any other language in schools (Zerubavel 1995). As the educational system in Syria expanded in the 1800s a larger portion of the education improved their understanding of Arabic’s literary and cultural heritage (Suleiman 1993: 80-81). Thus Syria, like other parts of the world, had education and language to thank for the crystallization of an Arab national identity.

The medieval Islamic imperial past was transformed into the Arab Nationalist’s golden age. Not only did this shared language foster a cultural unity across the unit but, “...their conception of themselves was for the most part shaped by the glories of the Prophet Muhammad, of the Orthodox caliphs Abu Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthman, and ‘Ali, and their successors the Sufyani and Marwani Umayyads and Abbasids, all of whom were seen increasingly in terms of their Arab identity” (Muslih 1991: 169). As Hobsbawm (1983) explains, by selecting a Golden Age in the distant past nationalisms legitimize their conception of what the modern imagined community should be. The intense

connection between the Arabic language, the people, and Islam (as well as the Islamic past) in part explains the selection of this particular golden age (Suleiman 2003: 46). In this case, the depiction of the medieval Arab Empire which unified the entirety of the Arab world in modern times as the Golden Age, was an attempt to justify modern Arab Nationalism as a continuation of the historical nation.

Arab Nationalists therefore rejected the borders drawn by the colonial powers as artificial impositions, a perception which rendered the position of the leaders of these artificial creations tentative from a legitimacy perspective (Barnett 1995: 496). Fouad Ajami (1978: 365) also argues that the minority-encompassing Pan-Arab nationalism bore a closer resemblance to the recently abandoned Ottomanism. This made Arabism less of an ideological jump from the status quo in the decades following the end of Ottoman rule. Thus recent history, ancient history, and a shared linguistic identity all put Arab nationalism in a strong position in Syria and much of the Arab world.

The second ideological variant was Greater Syrian Nationalism. As the name implies, this ideology thought the map should be smaller than the idealized map of the Arab Nationalists and should be limited to the territory east of Egypt which had constituted a single territorial unit under the former Ottoman Empire (Muslih 1991: 169). The first nationalist to articulate a distinct Syrian-ness was Antun Sa'ada (Dawisha 2003: 289-290). Different variants of Greater Syrian Nationalism have called for the incorporation of different territories and have largely been influenced by the characteristics which adherents felt made them part of one nation (Kienle 1995: 59). Considering the much greater similarities in dialect across *Bilad al-Sham* as compared to the Arab world as a whole, in addition to stronger historical and cultural ties, on the

surface this appears to have greater potential as a unified high culture than the broader Arab Nationalism.

The third form of nationalism is state-based nationalism (*al-wataniya*). This nationalist ideology is based on the French type in which nationalism is largely a product of state apparatuses and structures in a given physical region, regardless of existing linguistic or ethnic variation. Those who favor *wataniya* generally argue that not only do political and geographical boundaries impede unification but the cultural variation between the various regions of the Arab world would also impede attempts (Dawisha 2003: 219, 287). Egyptian nationalists such as Lutfi al-Sayyid thought a new language should be developed to combine the spoken dialects of individual Arab regions or states, formal Arabic, and also new words for technological and scientific terms. Lebanese nationalists similarly focused on the local dialect rather than classical Arabic. To these thinkers, while classical Arabic may bring the Arab states together the dialects spoken by most of the population reinforced their nationalist positions (Suleiman 2003: 172, 205). Early in Syria's independence many members of the established elite favored a Syrian *wataniyya*. Elites benefitted from the existing political system and thought a transition to Syrian nationalism would keep their positions closer to the status quo than the adoption of a unifying nationalism (Muslih 1991: 173). These three competing nationalisms — Syrian nationalism, Arab Nationalism, and Greater Syrian Nationalism — all competed for dominance during the first decades of Syrian independence and continue to play a role into the present.

Phase One- Ideological Competition in the 1950s and early 1960s

Even before the French left Syria in 1946 Syrian nationalism was not a promising ideology. The strong role played by city elites had led to a localization of Syrian politics at the expense of centralization, a political focus which inhibited the development of a single Syrian community (Mufti 1996: 44) This localized trend was only exacerbated by the plethora of divisions attempted by the French which inhibited a sense of a “Syrian” identity (Van Dusen 1972: 125). As was the case in other pre- or early nation state societies, identification with localized centers of political power outweighed any sense of larger imagined community. The localization of politics led more people in Syria to think of their identity as Arab rather than Syrian (Ibid., 125). In addition to internal Syrian divisions, the carving up of the Syrian province as it had existed under the Ottoman Empire, and the removal of the territories now known as Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine, made Syria seem like a rump state whose borders had been imposed by an illegitimate outsider (Mufti 1996: 44). Thus Syria was an internally divided and localized set of communities residing in a piece of what had once been a large but vaguely defined region of the Ottoman Empire.

Given the public’s lack of identification with Syria as a nation state, politicians were left with essentially two choices, either to adopt some flavor of unification or to face losing the ideological race. Many nationalists in the years immediately following independence opted to at least appear Arab Nationalist for the sake of garnering political support, while individuals such as Husni al-Za’im who endorsed Syrian nationalism fell by the ideological wayside (Mufti 1996: 45; Kienle 1995: 59). Although the National Bloc attempted to adopt Arab nationalism to garner political support, Syria’s participation

in the 1948 loss to Israel did irreparable harm to the legitimacy of the party and opened up the political field to new groups with their own forms of nationalism (Mufti 1996: 49).

Both the leaders of military coups and those competing for elected office found it to their advantage to advocate a form of unification during the 1950s. Adeb Shishakli, a military officer who governed Syria from 1953-1954, legitimized all efforts he made to build Syrian institutions with Arab Nationalist rhetoric (Mufti 1996; 55). In addition he did a great deal to “Arabize” the growing Syrian public education system as well as public life in Syria (Ma’oz 1972: 400). Once Shishakli stepped down and competition reconvened between political parties, the 1954 elections brought Arab Nationalists to power, an indicator of the growing popularity of the ideology in Syria during the 1950s’s (Kienle 1995: 60). Not only did the popularity of Arab unification benefit Arab Nationalists but it also inspired apparent ideological shifts on the part of other political parties. For example, the PPS, a party which espoused Greater Syrian nationalism, conceded that Syria could become the center of a larger Arab state (Ma’oz 1972: 400). In order to be deemed legitimate by the masses, elites opted to toe the popular line of Arab nationalism.

Syrian political elites were not only focused on courting the favor of the Syrian population. In *Sovereign Creations* Malik Mufti (1996: 64) argues that, “ruling elites... had to contend with populations that still felt little loyalty to their central governments and were therefore vulnerable to political manipulation by foreign actors.” The lack of a strong Syrian identity left Syria open to the influence of other Arab states and led to a nested game in which Syrian elites would compete for the support of different outside states. Iraq could find political groups willing to support the unification of Syria and Iraq.

In order to compete with the Iraq-backed elites, other groups needed another form of unification that would not only support their political competition but would also placate the people. Thus, Mufti (Ibid., 80-81) argues, even nationalists without strong Arab Nationalist beliefs found themselves in unification talks with Egypt. Thus, a combination of weak internal structure and strong political pressure influenced actors' decisions and pushed the leadership to accept Pan-Arabism as the state's ideology.

Turning to outside actors made a great deal of sense for domestic actors in Syria during the 1950's. Electoral politics during that period were chaotic, replete with multiple coups and switches in government, creating a disincentive for groups to rely on electoral politics (Mufti 1996: 88, 97). The fragility of electoral politics may also help explain the tendency of powerful parties for finding non-electoral methods of dealing with actual or potential ideological rivals. In 1955 the PPS, proponents of Greater Syrian Nationalism, were outlawed, leaving few ideological challengers to the unifying method of Arab Nationalism (Kienle 1995: 60). A failed attempt at a US-backed coup also gave the Pan-Arab Ba'th party a pretext for removing conservatives from politics (Mufti 1996: 85). In a quintessential expression of the value political group's placed on their relationships with external patrons over domestic electoral politics, the Ba'th party opted not to participate in the 1957 elections (Ibid., 89).

Between a Sphinx and a Hard Place — Syrian Elites and the UAR

In 1957 the government found itself divided along similar lines as the Syrian population. The government consisted of a cornucopia of Ba'thists, conservatives, followers of Nasser, Arab nationalists, and Syria's communist party, a variety which

worried members of the Syrian leadership. One potential way to obtain stability would be to form some kind of unity agreement with Egypt (Mufti 1996: 193-194). Again, playing the nested game was a means to keep the elite in power. In the first overtures the Ba'thists displayed a hint of their true beliefs. While their ideology was Arab Nationalist the proposal to Egypt called for the creation of a federal system (Ibid., 194). The interests of the elite led them to modify their nationalism in their policy even while their ideology was in line with the Arab Nationalist views of the people. Not to be ideologically outdone, the Syrian Communists called for total unification with Egypt (Ibid., 195). An interview with Chief of Staff and Syrian Communist party member, Bizri, indicates the leadership's perspective on national unity, "Nobody would dare to say no, we don't want it. The masses would rise against them...I mean we followed the masses. The crowds were drunk.... Who at that hour could dare say we do not want unity? The people would tear their heads off" (Ibid., 90-91). Even though the Syrian communists advocated for the acceptance and strengthening of a distinct Syrian state, it was a communist Chief of Staff who pushed for complete unity with Egypt (Ma'oz 1972: 400). Syrian politicians apparently underestimated the popularity of the proposed maneuver, and their attempts to secure their own political positions in Syria brought about their subordination to Egypt (Dawisha 2003: Mufti 1996).

The United Arab Republic of Egypt and Syria was doomed almost as soon as it began, at least from an elite perspective. Nasser quickly dominated the partnership, managing to alienate essentially every elite in Syrian society in the process (Dawisha 2003: Mufti 1996). In short, the discontent of Nasser's style of unification led to a coup in Syria in 1961 which was lauded by the elites but disapproved of by the masses. In an

ironic attempt to improve their standing with the pro-Arab Nationalism public of Syria, even politicians involved in the dissolution of the UAR proposed new unification plans in order to regain credibility (Dawisha 2003: 231-232). The Ba'th party and others went on to discuss further unification options with various states, although after the failure of the UAR all such agreements included some special safeguards to maintain Syrian sovereignty (Kienle 1995: 57-58).

The experience led to a mass defection within the Ba'thist party away from *qawmiyya*, Arab Nationalism (Dawisha 2003: 224). The change in the perspective of this part of the Ba'th party, known as "regionalists" for their focus on Syrian and the area around it, would lead to an emphasis on a different form of Syrian nationalism (Devlin 1991: 53). The sect of the Ba'th which came to power three years after the 1963 coup promoted a national identity based on "Arabism, Syrianism, socialism, and secularism" (Ma'oz 1972: 401-402). Like the old PPS and the Syrian Communists, who had taken over the cause of Syrian nationalism in the 1950s before they were banned under the UAR, the new Ba'thists still emphasized Syria's Arab identity for popularity's sake but at the same time emphasized a secular Syrian identity (Ibid., 402-403).

While once they had served as a means of providing political support to factions in Syria the limitations placed on new unification talks made them not so much opportunities for other Arab states to be involved in Syrian affairs but for political elites to win popularity points at home (Dawisha 2003: 237). Despite the Ba'th regionalists rejection of Arab Nationalism and efforts to remove those who favored unification from the field of ideological unification they still felt compelled to back Arab Nationalism in

some way. While their policy focus indicated a clear shift within elite ideology they still needed to follow the lead of the masses in order to claim legitimate control.

While Arab identity had not completely vanished, serious attempts at unity were sidelined following the Six Day War (Dawisha 2003: 253). Elites turned to building their own states as a means for disposing of local loyalties and power structures and to provide opportunities to the formerly disadvantaged (Trentin 2009: 495). The failures of secular Arab regimes had become painfully apparent during the Six Day War and the dominant ideology, the ideology of Arab Nationalism, thereby rendered illegitimate (Ajami 1978: 357). Barnett (1995: 500) sees both the UAR and Six Day War as the two failed attempts at Arab unity that proved that the ideal would never become a reality, and essentially brought about the downfall of Arab nationalism. Reality had made its distinction from Arab Nationalist ideology clear and paved the way for nationalist ideologies which bore a stronger semblance to reality.

Syrian Ideologies Under the Domination of the Assads

Scholars and analysts often refer to Hafez al-Assad as a pragmatist, a strategist, and the master of realpolitik. He dominated Syrian politics for thirty years, displaying an ideological flexibility apparently designed to bestow an air of legitimacy on what he considered to be tactically advantageous for Syria. For example, once establishing himself as the dominant political leader in Syria, Assad reincorporated Islam into the Ba'thist Syrian/Arab identity as the Syrian people as a whole were much more comfortable with some degree of religiosity, even among non-Muslim communities. In addition, Assad also removed much of the socialist component from the Ba'th ideology in

an effort not to alienate Syria's bourgeoisie (Ma'oz 1972: 403). While this shift occurred at the ideological level Assad continued to court the military and financial support of the Soviet Union, proving his propensity for realpolitik. The calculations behind these intentional tweaks to the official ideology would only be one of many occasions in which Assad altered the Ba'athism to fit his political needs.

For Assad, nationalisms could be picked up, used as needed, and put back in their proper place afterwards. A key example is Assad's efforts in the 1970's to assert Syria's influence in its near abroad and the regime's use of the Greater Syria nationalism. Under Assad the Syrian bureaucracy improved, the military was staunchly loyal to him, the USSR was providing useful funds, and he had oil revenue. As a result, during the 1970's Assad had no domestic or foreign Arab challengers to worry him, which gave him a new degree of freedom to exert more influence on the neighboring states of Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine (Mufti 1996: 231, 239). When the Lebanese civil war broke out Assad decided to send in Syrian troops, both to prevent the overflow of sectarian violence into Syria and also to prevent Israel from taking over Lebanon and using the country as a second base of operations against Syria (Dawisha 2003: 274-274). The Arab world objected to Syria's invasion of a fellow Arab state but Assad allowed the Syrian national press to implement an appropriate nationalist response.

The nationalism used by the regime to back up its intervention in Lebanon was Greater Syrian nationalism. Whether the goal was to put political "pressure" on the people of Lebanon or whether it was to justify the military maneuver, the official media was given permission to "revive the idea of Greater Syrian unity" (Mufti 1996: 240). This revival can be seen in official descriptions of events in Lebanon during Israel's

occupation in 1985. In one incident a suicide attack on Israelis by a 17 year-old girl was described as, “The bride of the south who was married off to the entire homeland (*al-watan*)...” (Wedeen 1999: 64). In this instance Syria and Lebanon were included in the same *watan*, indicating the use of a unifying nationalism by the media. In addition to promoting Greater Syrian Nationalism in the Syrian media, the Assad regime became the patrons of the Syrian Social Nationalist Party, a party which espoused Greater Syrian Nationalism, and backed the party’s militias during the Lebanese Civil War (Pipes 1992: 126). Assad was willing to manipulate ideology in an effort to further Syrian interests in neighboring states, particularly Lebanon.

Syria, as a colonial product, had to not only build a sense of national identity but also create national institutions and infrastructure (Wedeen 1999: 14). Under Hafez al-Assad and then his son, Bashar, both building processes become evident. Syrian institution building under the Ba’th was considered the best way to modernize Syria (Trentin 2009: 497). As a result, starting in the 1970’s the development of those institutions became a primary focus of the regime (Kienle 1995: 67). Developing state institutions increased the degree to which citizens interacted and identified with their state (Barnett 1995: 481). Assad the elder expanded non-military government-backed organizations in an effort to involve more of the Syrian population in a selectively Syrian society (Mufti 1996: 237). The strengthening of the Syrian state in the 1970’s not only made Assad comfortable about intervening in neighboring states but also gave the government the capacity to expand the public sector (Ibid., 238). The increasing dependence on the state for jobs throughout Syrian society established a concrete connection between the centralized, Syrian regime and the average citizen. In addition to

establishing stronger connections between the population and the state, the government made efforts to internally connect the Syrian state through developments in the transportation and communication systems of the state (Ibid., 247).

The impact of the government's system and the physical structures it created connected Syrians as they had never been connected before. Where once many structures had been too local to foster an imagined community and the imagined community had been immense and divided, Syrian nationalism became a more viable option under Hafez al-Assad. Not only did Assad's institution building create a more unified Syrian state but he also had time on his side, "Not only did the promotion of an integrated polity and common identity proceed uninterrupted, then, but the fact that an ever growing majority of Syria's citizens were born after independence suggests that it was becoming increasingly irreversible as well" (Mufti 1996: 247). Syria had become an accepted fact not only because the state had become more national in focus but also simply because for an increasing number of Syrians, Syria was the only entity under which they had lived.

In addition to the dual purpose of infrastructure creation, both Assad regimes have made more overt attempts at nationalization and articulating a distinct Syrian national identity. The first efforts can be seen in the strange leadership cults which have been fostered to differing degrees under both leaders. As Lisa Wedeen (1999: 15) wrote in her study on the personality cult built around Hafez al-Assad, "...by producing a system of signification that exemplifies simultaneously both state dominance and national community." While connecting the leader to culturally potent symbols like Salah al-Din may seem like a stretch, such connections can still create an emotional response between the people and the leader. Not only did Assad the elder try to establish emotional

connection through imagery but also through pageantry. Like the pageantry surrounding the English royal family, Assad used spectacle and public displays (Cannadine 1983). The opening of the Mediterranean games in 1987, for example, included lavish use of national symbols and repeated representation of Hafez al-Assad including “We love Hafez al-Assad” in rebus (Wedeen 1999: 87).

After the death of Hafez al-Assad in 2000, power was passed to his son Bashar; he was the second son who was training as an eye surgeon when his older brother, the groomed heir apparent, was killed in a car crash. Under Bashar there was a brief opening up of government control known as the “Damascus Spring” but the government soon moved back to its dominance over Syria’s politics and culture. Under Bashar the cult has continued although it has not been subject to the same rigorous academic treatment as Lisa Wedeen gave to the cult of the father. This thesis intends to analyze the cult of Bashar al-Assad and analyze the changes which took place in the symbols used by father and by the son. While a few articles have looked at the use of symbols by members of the Syrian uprising such studies have generally been brief and do not connect this usage to Syria’s past experience with symbols and the personality cult.

The Uprising

2011 was among the most turbulent years in the history of the modern Middle East. Numerous structural factors such as high unemployment among a young and increasingly educated population fed resentment of the status quo. Regardless of the larger factors, the actions of one man will always be attributed with starting the Arab Spring. A young Tunisian man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire in protest of the police’s destruction of his illegal fruit cart, his only source of income. This event

sparked mass demonstrations in Tunisia which led to the ouster of that nation's dictator in January 2011 and inspired protests across the region. Protests in Egypt followed, leading to the removal of Hosni Mubarak in February of that same year. Protests also took place in Yemen, Bahrain, and eventually, Syria.

Syria witnessed its first protest on March 15, 2011 as organizers called for a "Day of Dignity" over Facebook ("Syrian Uprising Timeline"). Protests escalated, growing in size and spreading to new parts of the country. The al-Assad regime, while originally hinting that it would support change and reform, adopted a violent approach to the protesters starting in April 2011 ("Syria Uprising: Timeline"). Many states call on al-Assad to step down and the Arab League suspends Syria's membership in November 2011 ("Timeline: Unrest in Syria"). The violence led to the defection of many members of the Syrian army, some of whom formed the Free Syrian Army to protect the protesters in late June, 2011 (Landis 2011). The violence escalated as the regime and the opposition employ violent means ("Timeline: Unrest in Syria"). This paper has been written during a bloody period in the Syrian uprising as headlines of bombings, attacks, and a refugee crisis have become commonplace. The victor is far from certain and what kind of Syria will emerge from the conflict is largely unknown.

Given the ongoing nature of the conflict in Syria the literature on the uprising there remains fairly limited. Salwa Ismail (2011) wrote one of the earliest analyses on the ways in which members of the Syrian opposition as well as pro-regime demonstrators performed their national identity. While she emphasized the nationalist nature of the opposition's performances she hypothesizes that these nationalist depictions are new, a means through which the protesters establish a new identity that distinguishes them from

the regime (Ismail 2011). One of the other articles to deal with the question of the opposition's response to the government's propaganda is Donatelle Della Ratta's article on a particular set of propaganda posters promulgated by the regime and the responding parodies (2012). By looking at wider trends and patterns in the use of nationalist symbols by both the regime as well as the movement opposed to the al-Assad regime I seek to contribute to the debate on the Arab Spring's place in the articulation of Syrian national identity. In addition, this case will hopefully add to ongoing discussions on the transformation of national identity.

Part One: The Rational Development of Syrian Nationalism

Nationalisms are not static creations. In Nasr's (2001) work the regimes of two relatively young states whose borders were drawn by colonial powers adopted Islamist policies and symbols. He argues that this was an effort to garner legitimacy with their predominantly Muslim citizens. The quest for legitimacy has also been a motivating factor for Syrian leaders. Political elites of the 1950s and 1960s in Syria publically espoused Arab nationalism regardless of their own ideologies because of the desire to have the support of the Syrian people (Mufti 1996: 90-91). Without a strong sense of Syrian national identity, the path to legitimacy was paved with the slogans and symbols of Arab nationalism. The cult of personality established under Hafez al-Assad continued to use pan Arab symbols. However, the nationalist repertoire of the Assad regime slowly began to expand as Hafez al-Assad sought to legitimize his efforts to establish political dominance at home and influence in his near abroad.

Eventually under Hafez and his son, Bashar al-Assad, the nationalism used by the state began to shift to one which acknowledged the Syrian *watan* or state as a source of legitimacy for the regime. Just as leaders in Pakistan and Malaysia adopted religion in an effort to legitimize their colonial creations, the Assads adoption of a more Syria-centric identity strove to legitimize the regime as citizens felt themselves to be more Syrian as time went by. In addition to exploring the ways in which the regime strove to legitimize itself with an increasingly nationalist narrative, this section also analyzes how Syrian national identity has become a legitimizing tool for the regime as well as those opposed to the regime since the uprising began in 2011.

The Flexible Nationalism of Hafez al-Assad

Legitimacy through Pan-Arabism

When Hafez al-Assad took power in the “corrective revolution,” his options were fairly limited. As a member of the minority Alawite sect in a fairly religiously diverse state, religion was not available as a legitimizing tool. Syria’s rulers historically had to deal with the difficult task of establishing a unifying ideology to hold the Syrian populace together while simultaneously maintaining a selective distribution of power. In order to deal with the contradictions between ideology and political reality the al-Assad regime strove to employ symbols and other forms of communication (Wedeen 1999: 15). Having taken charge of a state in which Arab nationalism was accepted, established, and institutionalized, carrying the pan-Arab banner was one path to legitimacy. This can be seen in al-Assad’s efforts to continue discussing unification with fellow Arab states, a move seen by scholars as a tactic “to cover his ideological flank” (Mufti 1991: 232-233).

Included in the efforts to maintain pan-Arab credentials is the use of national holidays that emphasize pan-Arab history. These holidays include Arab Unity Day, which marked the formation of the unsuccessful United Arab Republic (Phillips 2013: 52). Martyrs’ day, established as a national holiday in 1974 during the early days of the Assad regime, also has a strongly pan-Arab component. It commemorates the execution of Arab nationalist thinkers by the Ottoman regime on that day in 1916 (Voltairenet). The founding of the Ba’ath party is also a national holiday, one associated with the image of al-Assad (see Appendix 1). In this image from the early 1990s al-Assad continues to make efforts to directly associate himself with the “Arab socialist Ba’ath party.”

By creating and alluding to nationalist holidays that adhered to pan-Arab ideas, al-Assad the elder appealed to the dominant ideology of the day and increased his own legitimacy. The use of national holidays is by no means unique to the al-Assad regime. Zerubavel (1995) argues that national holidays shapes collective memory, influencing people's perceptions of the past and emphasizing particular national values. Such holidays may be pre-existing but adopted and coopted, like the previously minor Jewish holiday Lag ba-Omer that has become a symbol of the hard-fought pursuit of independence and bravery in battle in modern Israel (Ibid., 97-99). By holding onto existing holidays that celebrated the Ba'ath Party al-Assad could shape Syrian collective memory and emphasize his own pan-Arab credentials.

In other ways al-Assad continued to use the iconography that was the ideological currency of his pan-Arab predecessors. The use of nationalist symbols on money became widespread in the late 1800s and has been used by governments to enhance their legitimacy. The government uses currency to associate itself with symbols from a particular historical epoch, recognizable landmarks, or with authentic country life (Helleiner 1998: 2). Prior to al-Assad's rise, Syrian currency carried symbols of an Arab golden age, the days of the Islamic empire. These symbols, while Syrian, had pan-Arab import, such as the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus, the water wheels of Hama, the Azem Palace built in 1700, and the Takiyya as-Suleimaniyya Mosque. The only pre-Arab landmarks featured on paper currency were the ruins of Palmyra. The symbols used on currency went untouched until the late 1970s or early 1980s, about a decade into the elder al-Assad's reign (Phillips 2013: 53). To maintain these symbols indicates that they still had value as a method through which the regime could enhance its legitimacy.

This effort to use symbols to give the regime and its actions legitimacy also explains the ideological cocktail which al-Assad attempted to use later on in his regime. While the regime would slowly adopt a more regional and then a more national set of symbols, Arab nationalism remained a component of the regime's ideology and symbolic vocabulary. Phillips (2013: 30) asserted that, "Supra-national Arab identity seems to have been produced for so long that it is now embedded a pillar of national identity." While the current uprising calls into question the role of Arabism in Syrian national identity today, the dominance of the ideology in the last few decades prior to Hafez al-Assad's rule does help explain why he would chose to hold onto a pan-Arab ideology. Similarly, former president Hugo Chavez of Venezuela used the image of Simon Bolivar, who, in addition to being a heroic symbol particularly for the poor, also called for Latin American unity (Shifter 2006). While unification in Latin America, like in the Arab world, was not a practical or realistic ambition leaders may still embrace symbols of unity. In a similar fashion, former Phillips considers the decision to maintain a degree of Arab nationalism as essentially rooted in pragmatism (Ibid.). The decision to use and manipulate the existing Ba'ath party structures when he came to power provides an example of how pragmatism limited the ideological choices available to al-Assad. Using this institution, at least before the party's ranks swelled with individuals more interested in opportunity than ideology, would require the maintenance of the old Arab nationalist ideology. Thus these underlying structural factors created an incentive for al-Assad to carry on with Arab nationalism as he sought to legitimize his dominance.

Justifying Diplomacy- The Use of Syrian Nationalism

In the 1980s the Syrian regime decided to get directly involved in the Lebanese civil war. The civil war next door posed serious security concerns for the Syrian regime. Al-Assad worried that Lebanon's sectarian violence would give Israel a pretext for invasion, which would give Syria's enemies another base of operations. There were also concerns that Lebanon's sectarian violence could spill over into Syria (Dawisha 2003: 273-274). In what seems to have been an effort to legitimize Syria's intervention and also to put pressure on Lebanon, the Syrian media was given permission to emphasize the ideology of Greater Syrian nationalism (Mufti 1991: 240).

This use of unity to legitimize Syria's role in Lebanon can be found in regime-produced materials from the period. A poster from the Lebanese civil war (see Appendix 2), shows how the leader, if displayed with national symbols like flags, was not depicted with a Syrian national flag. In this case he is depicted with the pan-Arab Ba'athist flag, which was a much more common symbol than the Syrian flag during Hafez al-Assad's reign (Phillips 2013). Since the poster was displayed in Lebanon during the time of Israel's invasion it comes as no surprise that Hafez al-Assad strove to emphasize his self-portrayal as a fighter for the Arab cause. The poster also associates the Syrian leader with *wihda*, unity. The Syrian regime used symbols in an effort to legitimize their action in Syria by portraying al-Assad as the protector of the Arab people and by emphasizing an ideology which called for the unification of the old Syrian *wilayet*.

Not all efforts to garner legitimacy, however, are successful. The Syrian intervention in Lebanon was perceived as a nationalist action, an effort by the Syrian regime to maintain control of its own territory above all else (Dawisha 2003: 271).

Without being able to do face to face interviews it is difficult to say why exactly the regime's efforts failed, although several options present themselves. On the one hand, the introduction of a new ideology to the government's repertoire in such close proximity to military action probably felt somewhat contrived to a population well-versed in traditional Ba'athist ideology and symbols. Or the fact that Bilad al-Sham was not a component of Syrians' collective memory may also have fueled public rejection of this attempt at elite imposition. Zisser (2006) argues that the people found the limits imposed on the modern Syrian state as a factor too large to ignore and could not accept Syria as "the modern-day incarnation of Bilad al-Sham" (184). It is this structural reality that may have shaped the third path to legitimacy that made its first appearances under Hafez al-Assad.

Assad's Syria

By the end of the 1980s Hafez al-Assad and his regime were making "implicit references" to a Syrian national identity and were using both *qawmiyya* (Arab nationalist) and *wataniyya* (nationalist) arguments to legitimize policy decisions (Kienle 1972: 61). In Phillips work on the banal nature of the cult of personality in Syria and Jordan, he discusses the themes of Hafez al-Assad's cult iconography, such as the family (using his family as an archetype for Syrians as a whole), al-Assad as one of the people (emphasizing his background in a poor family as well as his new role as *pater familias* of the state), and the military. As Phillips (2013: 52) explains, "all these themes appealed to a local view of identity and primarily promoted Syrian state identity." By appealing to the experiences of the Syrian people and nationally recognizable institutions like the Syrian

military, al-Assad implicitly recognized the legitimacy gained from alluding to a pre-existing local identity. In fact, many images of the regime's cult of personality featured Hafez al-Assad and his sons in the uniforms of the Syrian military (Ibid.). The military as an established yet firmly national institution was seen as a way of legitimizing the regime.

The use of the military as a national symbol and method for legitimizing the regime is reflected in other ways as well. For example, Hafez al-Assad's relative victory in the Yom Kippur War is celebrated as a national holiday. In addition, Martyrs' Day has changed into a day of remembrance for not only those Arab nationalists hung by the Ottoman government, but also a national memorial day for all Syrians killed in war since 1916. On that day the Syrian president lays a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier that overlooks Damascus (Voltaire.net). This monument was dedicated in 1994 to Syrian soldiers killed in battle (WarMemorial.net). Such tombs are common in nation states and are, whether empty or not, "saturated with ghostly *national* imaginings" (Anderson 2006: 9). As such the tomb also serves as a symbol of the nation, which explains its appearance on the 200 lira note starting in 1998 (see Appendix 3). By including it on the currency, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier becomes a mobile symbol, used and consumed by Syrians throughout the nation, not just in Damascus.

The paintings inside the tomb, while from Arab history, reinforce the national nature of the monument. They are the Battle of Sultan Yacoub, the Battle of Mount Hermon, the Battle of Maysalun, the Battle of Hattin, and the Battle of Yarmouk (WarMemorial.net). Two of the five scenes depict the modern Syrian army fighting Israeli forces in the Battle of Sultan Yacoub and in the Battle of Mount Hermon. The

third scene from the modern era also emphasizes a Syrian identity as it depicts the Syrian Arab army's failed efforts to defeat the French. The last two paintings go back to pre-modern Syria and can be interpreted as either national or pan-Arab in nature. The Battle of Yarmouk saw the defeat of the Byzantines at the hands of invading Arab armies and marked the dawn of the Islamic Levant. While the scene harkens to the golden age alluded to by Arab nationalists its placement in Syria and the dramatic role it played in Syrian national history allows for its use to be interpreted in a national way as well. The Battle of Hattin is the only battle painted in the monument that did not take place within the modern confines of Syria or did not involve the modern Syrian army. Yet the Ayyubid, Kurdish leader who fought in the battle, Salah ad-Din, has been used by the Syrian regime as part of an Arab and an exclusively Syrian golden age. While his conquest of Crusader territory and unification of much of the Mediterranean Islamic world has been used to symbolize Arab nationalism, his start in Syria and Damascus' role as his capital have also been used by the regime to emphasize Syrian exceptionalism (Phillips 2013: 53). In this way, while some components of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Syria give the regime legitimacy by emphasizing Syria's historical role as the heart of Arabism, it plays a much greater emphasis on a uniquely Syrian national history identity and is an important part of a holiday that has become nationalist in nature.

In addition to the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, al-Assad's regime and its cult of personality made other efforts to associate the leader with the military. Al-Assad's military triumphs came to play a big role in the cult (Phillips 2013: 52). In fact, the cult images even made other efforts to associate the leader with attempts to defend the homeland that he was not even alive for. Al-Assad's image is not only associated with the

day of the Ba'ath party's ascendance but also with the day that the French left Syria, a holiday explicitly referred to as "a symbol of the struggle of the people and of national unity" (see Appendix 1). Efforts to defend the nation, whether successful or not, serve as powerful national symbols (Zerubavel 1995).

The addition of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier to Syrian currency in the 1990s was not the only change to occur to the design of the Syrian lira. While some of the symbols incorporated in the late 1970s and early 1980s were still medieval, such as the citadel of Aleppo and Salah ad-Din, others were more ancient Syrian landmarks, like Bosra's Roman theater and Queen Zannoba of Palmyra. By 1998 images hinting to Syria's ancient past marked four of the nine bills in circulation, indicating the ascendance of exclusively Syrian images (Phillips 2013: 53). In the case of the bill featuring Salah ad-Din, the nationalist symbol of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier tempers his pan-Arab interpretation. The symbols the regime uses to attain legitimacy have therefore changed gradually starting under the latter decades of Hafez al-Assad's rule.

Why would the regime make these efforts to connect Hafez al-Assad with the military, a national institution, and with well-known efforts to defend the Syrian homeland? Why would the regime gradually alter its currency to emphasize an ancient and exclusively Syrian depiction of the past? When one considers the use of symbols by other post-colonial governments the primary motivator is the quest for legitimacy. Whether or not those who consume the symbols believe they give the producer legitimacy, legitimacy remains the mythmaker's underlying goal. Thus the shifts in the symbols used by the regime indicate a shift in what the state believes the people consider legitimate. Just as the government believed the people saw Islam as a legitimate source of

authority in Pakistan and Malaysia, the transition to symbols and rhetoric with a stronger nationalist emphasis indicates that the regime has seen this as the increasingly salient identity.

The historical record reinforces this interpretation in multiple ways. By the 1980s and 1990s the people were no longer calling for a unified Arab state; an acceptance of the nation state, *al-watan*, had set in (Dawisha 2003: 274). To Mufti (1991: 237), this was largely the result of al-Assad's state-building projects, efforts to expand non-military entities to incorporate the citizens into the state, and by instilling national loyalty in children through a rapid expansion of public education. By the 1990s the rhetoric had shifted, with the Ba'athist president saying in a speech in 1992 that Syria's focus should be internal unity as the reality of the distinct Arab states could not be undone (Kienle 1995: 61). The institutional reality of the Syrian state had formed a new national identity, acknowledged and appealed to by the Ba'athist regime. While al-Assad the elder's efforts to legitimize his regime began to acknowledge the growth of Syrian national identity the pace picked up under his son, Bashar al-Assad.

al-Watan and al-'Arooba in Bashar's Syria

While the Syrian regime of Hafez al-Assad may have begun to allude to a national Syrian identity, the regime of Bashar al-Assad embraced it. After a few years' hiatus, the cult of personality was once again manifested in 2005 (Phillips 2013). Yet unlike his father, the efforts to establish the new president's legitimacy included the incorporation of clearly nationalist symbols in his cult of personality (unlike the cult under his father) as well as stronger references to a distinctly Syrian history. The references to an ancient Syrian past, the adoption of the Syrian national flag, and the use of a new map mark the

son's quest for legitimacy targeted at an exclusively Syrian audience. While it may not be clear how much of the cult under Bashar al-Assad has been carefully orchestrated by the regime, it cannot be assumed that the emergence of the new cult is entirely rooted in path dependence. In a state where the regime has played such a dominant role, such feats of large-scale organization were by no means spontaneous or rooted in civil society (Phillips 2013). This section will begin by looking into the nationalist symbols embraced by Bashar al-Assad and ignored by the personality cult of his father, other symbols used to reinforce the regime's legitimacy, and the often paradoxical combination of Arabism and Syrian nationalism used by the regime. It will then transition into an exploration of the nationalist knee-jerk response of the al-Assad regime to the uprising that began in March 2011.

Map as Symbol

Maps hold a potent power as national symbols, emphasizing the connections which exist between the various members of the nation (Anderson 2006: 176). It is in some respects unity through not only inclusion but exclusion, geographically delineating the in-group and the out-group (Shelef 2010: 25). Maps make a clear ideological statement about the bounds of the nation but can also change over time. While the Pan-Arab Ba'athists may cling to the ideology of Arab unity at a rhetorical level, the Syrian Ba'ath Party's logo on their website indicated the changes taking place within Syria. When I first visited the page in 2011 a unified Arab world map was depicted in green but also surrounded by the national flags of the Arab states, acknowledging the precepts of the original Ba'ath party members as well as the reality of the modern world (Syrian

Ba'ath Party). This already marks a strong departure from the stance of the Ba'ath when Hafez al-Assad came to power — yet the cult of Bashar al-Assad has narrowed the map even further.

While Hafez al-Assad's face was generally displayed against a featureless backdrop as in Appendix 5 or 1, the poster produced by the regime and held by the pro-regime protester in Appendix 4 depicts the younger al-Assad in front of a map of the modern Syrian state. While the elder al-Assad avoided such direct acknowledgement of the limited bounds of the Syrian *watan*, Bashar al-Assad's regime has incorporated this nationalist symbol in its cult of personality. The use of the map as a symbol, according to Batuman, is a point of *interaction* between the people and elites. The map as symbol shows what the people consider the legitimate bounds of the state yet is intentionally selected and reproduced by members of the elite (Batuman 2010: 223). While the government may make the choice to use this particular representation of Syria for items such as window stickers and posters it acquires its symbolic efficacy from the acceptance of that version of the map by the people.

Other methods also recall these national definitions. During a speech criticizing the Arab League, Bashar al-Assad stood in front of a relatively austere background with the names of major cities from throughout Syria on the wall (RT Arabic). This is similar to protesters putting the name of a protest's location and date on signs or calling out the names of other protest locations during chants in order to emphasize the unity of the homeland (Ismail 2011). The use of the map and other representations of the physical Syrian state are used to associate the leader with the accepted limits of the state, drawing on the legitimacy of the map to give the leader nationalist credentials.

Flagging Syria

National flags are inherently symbolic. Sometimes it is how a flag is used, or abused, which communicates meaning to a socialized viewer (Billig 1995: 39). Some studies indicate the flags, whether consciously noticed by the consumer or not, have a psychological effect on the viewer, leading to a stronger identification with the nation or by affecting their attitudes and steering them in the direction of the values and meanings associated with the flag (Butz 2009: 782, 791). Given the national flag's frequently subtle inclusion on official regalia (such as military uniforms), Syria's national flag was conspicuously absent from the cult iconography of Hafez al-Assad.

Yet Bashar al-Assad's regime has been far more willing to drape itself in the Syrian national flag. The cult of personality that first emerged under al-Assad the younger in 2005 incorporated the Syrian national flag (Phillips 2013). Appendix 4 not only includes a map of the modern Syrian state but also an artistic version of the national flag, with part of the bottom black stripe incorporated in the dictator's suit. The effort to blend the national flag and the map of the modern nation state with Bashar al-Assad's likeness clearly strives to connect all three concepts and legitimize the younger al-Assad as a nationalist leader. In Appendix 6 al-Assad's face is even included as part of the flag, along with the phrase "*Suriyya al-Assad*." Two possible translations of this phrase exist. The first is "Syria is al-Assad" which exemplifies a common effort by leaders with a cult of personality to equate the existence of the nation with the existence of the leader. The leader obtains legitimacy by *being* the nation. The other potential translation is "al-Assad's Syria," a phrase used in the personality cult of his father (Bar 2006: 354). The association of Bashar al-Assad with his father associates him with the man who is

essentially his sole source of legitimacy (Zisser 2007: 52). Here Bashar al-Assad's cult of personality does not just unify the leader with the state but strives to associate the leader with his father and thereby portray him as the legitimate leader of the nation.

In other ways, Bashar al-Assad flags the nation in a less visual manner. Politicians frequently refer to the nation, widening their audience to include all members of the nation and not simply those who are present to hear him. In addition, the media, even if not government-run, has an inherent emphasis on its consumers which it displays by emphasizing the role of the nation in a story, frequently citing the nation in headlines, placing the nation in context to the stories covered, and by making many references to the national "we" (Billig 1995: 51, 105). Bashar al-Assad has certainly done so in the context of speeches, even if the context for doing so is sometimes ironic or paradoxical. As will be shortly discussed, al-Assad has discussed an ancient, exclusively Syrian past in previous speeches, and his speech on January 6, 2013 was clearly concerned primarily with national issues. Yet even when Syria itself is not the primary focus of a speech the nation is still "flagged." On January 10, 2013 Bashar al-Assad delivered a speech addressing the Arab League's decision to remove Syria from the league. While the speech was in many ways an effort to delegitimize the Arab League by questioning its Arabness, he did so by emphasizing the role of Syria as "the beating heart of Arabism" (RT Arabic). Even in a speech focusing on Arabism, al-Assad flagged the nation as he asserted the superior authenticity of Syria's Arabness.

In a similar way the cult of personality under Bashar al-Assad makes similar allusion to and use of the Syrian "we" which his father had generally not done in his personality cult. There are multiple means through which the Syrian "we" is spoken for

in Bashar al-Assad's cult of personality. For example, in Appendix 4 the phrase under Bashar al-Assad's face and the nationalist phrases previously discussed is "*minhibbak*," "we love you." Clearly this is intended to be a communication by the Syrian people as a whole to the Syrian leader, albeit one produced by the regime. Similarly, on the writer's first trip to Syria in 2008 an immense Damascene billboard sported a waving Bashar al-Assad in front of a Syrian national flag with the phrase "*Suriyya ma'ak*," "Syria is with you." These slogans both explicitly identify or allude to the Syrian people and strive to create the illusion of national support. In these cases the regime attempts to establish legitimacy through the illusion of popular support of the nation.

Continuing Transition to a Nationalist Golden Age

We have already discussed the first moves made to adopt a more Syria-centric national history under Hafez al-Assad. The symbols on Syrian currency slowly began to incorporate an ancient past that distinguished Syria from the rest of the ancient world. Similarly, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier highlighted events of predominantly nationalist import. Such allusions to the past gained further ground under the tenure of Bashar al-Assad. During a speech in Hasaka in 2002, he emphasized the longevity of the Syrian nation, "But if we go back in Syrian history, a 6,000-year-old history — and today we know that this history actually stretched back 10,000 years — we discover that the word 'surrender' (*hunu*) does not exist in the Syrian lexicon..." (quoted in Zisser 2006: 182). Not only does Bashar al-Assad emphasize the longevity of the Syrian past but he also endeavors to use archaeology to make a statement about the values of the Syrian people and the values the political elite wishes to incorporate in Syrian nationalism.

Other changes to the official national history have also taken place. The history books used by public schools are strictly controlled by the state and have also been a site of the regime's changing attitudes. As Bolliger (2011: 103) writes, "The overall impression of the changes in the newer textbooks is that the authors still try to strengthen Arab national identity, while also acknowledging that there is a Syrian identity and reality to consider. For young Syrians in particular, Syrian patriotism might be more attractive, referring to a more tangible reality than the seemingly unattainable idea of an Arab nation" These attempts to root the modern creation that is the Syrian state in a new interpretation of the past serves two purposes; both to endow the modern Syrian entity with legitimacy as well as bestow legitimacy upon the ruling regime. The changes in the curriculum as well as in the rhetoric display both the ways in which the regime has been forced by circumstance to acknowledge reality but also to draw on ways in which the modern nation state serves as a new source of legitimacy. The regime has been forced to draw on nationalism to a degree unseen before 2011 as it faces the challenge of an uprising that challenges the legitimacy of the state and the state's use of national symbols.

Ba'athists in a Nationalism Competition

Facing domestic challengers and condemnation from the rest of the Arab world has in many ways forced Bashar al-Assad to match the nationalist dialogue of the opposition. Yet simultaneously, the condemnation by the Arab league has led al-Assad to make an effort to reinforce the Arabist credentials of his state. On January 6, 2013 al-Assad made a rare public appearance at the opera house in Damascus. While the goal of this speech was supposedly to offer an opportunity for negotiation it actually continued

the regime's efforts to rob the opposition of legitimacy. To do so, al-Assad repeated claims that the opposition was tied to foreign powers and, as a result, any victory by the opposition would be tantamount to foreign occupation (al-Assad 2013). By arguing that foreign support made the opposition essentially inauthentic, al-Assad sought to cast the opposition as inherently non-nationalist.

Efforts to justify the actions of the Syrian regime were also largely couched in nationalist terms. Military measures were described as part of the effort to "defend the homeland." He also portrayed this "defense" as an explicitly legitimate task, which is necessary at a legal and constitutional level. He also defended those who fight with the regime, arguing that they simply want to defend their homeland (al-Assad 2013). The repeated use of the word homeland and efforts to describe his behaviors as the defense of the homeland are a clear attempt to play on the national identities of the Syrian people in order to legitimize his regime and its actions.

The regime's flag use has only increased since the challenge to Bashar al-Assad's reign began in March 2011. In an effort to emphasize the regime's nationalist credentials, pro-regime demonstrations sported successively larger flags (Ismail 2011). Not only do protesters paint their faces and wave the red, white, and black flags, but Internet forums and Facebook groups that support the regime flag themselves in artistic ways and try to give their flags additional legitimacy by alluding to the Syrian Arab Army. During his January 2013 speech at the opera house in Damascus, al-Assad stood in front of an immense backdrop with the Syrian national flag (al-Assad 2013). The artistic representation was a composite of the colored portraits of Syrian citizens killed since the uprising began (Spencer 2013). By using a flag of faces the Syrian regime sought to

legitimize its title as the defender of the nation and emphasize its claims as representative of a united Syrian people. The representation also proved controversial, with regime opponents criticizing the regime for using the photos of individuals the regime itself had killed (Ibid.).

Prior to the uprising, Bashar al-Assad did still make references to an Arab identity. Yet Arabist rhetoric was generally limited to discussions on Arabism as a cultural identity rather than a national identity that should be reflected in political reality (Bennett 2005: 13). The regime's rhetorical hold on Arabism was called into question by the Arab League's decision to expel al-Assad's government from the league. Without any serious means of political recourse the al-Assad regime has been left with few options. The tactic they have chosen to adopt is to essentially call into question the Arabness of the Arab League. By emphasizing the superiority of Syria as "the pulsing heart of Arabism," al-Assad sought to rob the Arab League's actions of legitimacy and reinforce his government's role as the sole legitimate carrier of Arabism (al-Assad 2012). Yet even in this speech the Syrian nation was repeatedly flagged as al-Assad lauded the Syrian nation as the most Arab of the Arab states. The regime appears stuck, trying to keep its pan-Arab ideological foundations from crumbling while simultaneously reinforcing its claims to national legitimacy in the face of a nationalist challenger.

The Opposition

A New Old Flag

Selecting a national flag carries with it a great deal of ideological baggage. For example, the Norwegian flag was selected during that country's efforts to attain independence from the Swedes, imbuing it with the credentials of the nation's struggle to

attain independence (Elgenius 2011: 400). Similarly the post-communist Hungarian state of the 1980s decided to go back to the Kossuth flag of 1848 due to its association with “independence and national sovereignty” (Kürti 1990: 7). The selection of the flag by the Syrian opposition also emphasizes the legitimacy bestowed by both the past and the nationalist narrative of the struggle for independence. The green, white, and black flag is that which was used in Syria before the Ba’ath Party took power (Mahmud 2012). In addition, the flag is also associated with the Syrian pursuit of independence from the French (Daraghi 2011). In an interesting twist the opposition essentially uses the same tactic as that employed by producers of Appendix 1, which similarly attempts to associate the leader with the struggle for national independence. Nationalists seek to ground their ideology in the past in order to give it legitimacy (Hobsbawm 1983). In this case the opposition, unified by its stance against the Ba’athist regime, intentionally uses the pre-Ba’athist flag of the Syrian Republic, asserting its legitimacy by claiming the mantle of an older and thereby more authentic period of Syrian history.

The flag adopted by the opposition does not only have age (and therefore authenticity) and a fight for independence on its side. The flag also explicitly associates the opposition with a national, rather than pan-Arab, ideology (Daraghi 2011). The decision by Libyan groups opposed to the late Colonel Ghaddafi displays an intriguing parallel. Like Syria, the opposition selected a flag which predates the regime and, as the flag of the nation’s first monarchy, stands for national independence and unity (Hashim 2011). Efforts to remove the *al-Assad* from *Suriyya al-Assad* appear to have influenced selection of the flag of the Syrian Republic just as the decision to abandon the green flag of Libya was motivated in part by a desire to dissociate the Libyan state from Ghaddafi

(Ibid.). While another flag with pan-Arab colors was used in Libya between that of the monarchy and Ghaddafi's solid green the older flag was adopted. Interestingly, both Syria and Libya's flag selections, in addition to alluding to struggles for national independence, avoid pan-Arabism while placing an emphasis on an epoch in which national sovereignty was the chief consideration. In Libya and Syria the opposition pursues legitimacy among members of the population by disassociating itself totally from the existing regime, associating the opposition with a national struggle for liberation, and affirming a nationalist (rather than pan-Arab) identity.

Since the flag of the Syrian Republic was adopted by the opposition it has been used in numerous ways. Protestors in Syria and around the world express solidarity with the opposition by painting the flag on their faces, waving the flags, or carrying immense versions of the flag at demonstrations. Facebook pages are covered in numerous artistic representations of the flag. Appendix 7 presents a manipulation of the "we love you" image previously discussed. Here the flag in the background has been changed. The top color has been altered, making the flag the one adopted by the Syrian opposition. A version of the new flag has also been incorporated in the symbol of the new Syrian Coalition that supposedly leads the opposition as well as the logo of the Free Syrian Army and, more recently, the logo for the temporary government instituted by the opposition. The coalition, formed over a year after the beginning of the uprising, adopted a star of hands with color proportions that are similar to the flag of the Syrian Republic (see Appendix 8). The medallion held by the screaming eagle of the Free Syrian Army was changed from its original version to include the new flag and the colors are included as part of a circle around the seal of the temporary government. The efforts made by

various groups in the opposition to include the flag of the Syrian Republic emphasizes the legitimacy the flag has acquired as a symbol of the opposition.

Map as Symbol- Reaffirming the Bounds of the Nation

The Syrian groups opposed to the present regime are predominantly nationalist, seeking to bring about political change while in no way altering the present physical parameters of the state (Ismail 2011). This recognition of the status quo has led opposition groups to embrace the map of modern Syria as a symbol of legitimacy, just as the government of Bashar al-Assad has done. For this reason, the map of Syria often serves as a symbol on opposition Facebook pages and even has a place on the website of the Free Syrian Army. In addition to the graphic representations similar to those used by Bashar al-Assad's regime, there are also efforts to represent the symbolic geographic unity of Syria in other ways. Protesters have expressed their solidarity with other regions and fellow demonstrators by referring to locations in chants. Ismail (2011: 544) argues that this practice does not only express unity across distances but also creates a new map of the nation with an emphasis on the centers of the uprising. Another means through which protesters demonstrate their unified presence throughout Syria is by writing the location and date of demonstrations on their posters. Photographs of these photos are then distributed online, allowing fellow demonstrators to read them and incorporate them into their mental map of the national uprising.

A Syrian Golden Age

Just as the regime of both al-Assads made an effort to use history to obtain legitimacy, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces has

made efforts to harked back to a golden age. Like other nationalisms, the Syrian nationalism now espoused by the opposition depicts Syrian nation as ancient, almost eternal, and therefore authentic (Anderson 2006: 11-12). In the first line of his acceptance speech after being elected president of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), Moaz al-Khatib referred to the Syrians as a people who have existed for tens of thousands of years (al-Khatib Speech in Doha). By imbuing the Syrian nation with such longevity al-Khatib gives legitimacy to the nation and to his organization as the entity carrying the nationalist banner.

By alluding to a more ancient golden age al-Khatib can establish a glorious and distinctly Syrian past which is both distinct from the Arab (and inherently Muslim) golden age of the Middle Ages and predates the modern religions of Syria. The Ba'ath regime's use of the Islamic Empires of the Middle Ages as a golden age has been previously discussed, although the pan-Arab elements of that legacy have been toned down over time. By selecting an entirely distinct golden age and rhetorically avoiding Arabism, al-Khatib distances the opposition's concept of Syria's golden age from that traditionally embraced by the regime. At the same time, the acceptance and use of this older, pre-Islamic history had already crept into the al-Assad regime, a transition that indicates an acceptance of this older golden age prior to its use by the SNC. In addition, as the leader of an extremely diverse coalition that hopes to offer a state-like alternative to a regime which has grounded itself in sectarianism, avoiding a golden age without current religious connotations has its benefits. No single religious sect is glorified at the expense of others when a pre-Islamic history is utilized. While this by no means

guarantees that this ancient golden age will be embraced by whatever regime may come, it has at least been embraced by the opposition's most recognizable face.

Al-Khatib has also criticized the Ba'athist regime for downplaying the role of early Syrian nationalists (al-Khatib Speech in Marrakech). By accusing the regime of ignoring the founding fathers of the Syrian state al-Khatib makes an effort to delegitimize the al-Assad regime as the leaders of the Syrian nation. In another speech from December 2012 al-Khatib talks directly to the (presumably Syrian) listener and spends time at the ends of his speech imploring the viewer to "remember the early twentieth century" and describes mass protests to plans to divide "*al-sha'ab wa al-turaab al-Suriyy*", "the people and soil of Syria" (al-Khatib) By using the Syrian Republic flag, discussing the importance of Syria's nationalist founding fathers, and harkening back to early expressions of mass support for the nationalist cause, the opposition creates a second golden age centered around the struggle for and early days of national independence.

The period of the struggle for independence and the dominance of the early Syrian nationalists have a legitimizing purpose distinct from the more ancient golden age. Just as the use of the flag does, casting this period as a golden age associates the modern movement with a past struggle for independence and freedom, legitimizing the present movement by using a historical counterpart. Al-Khatib also establishes an ideological heritage for a modern movement that is clearly nationalist in the same way that the al-Assad regime uses national holidays to assert its own Ba'athist ideological heritage. By once again asserting the dominance of a nationalist ideology, al-Khatib avoids the

sectarianism embodied by the Allawite-dominated regime. Thus both the ancient and more modern golden ages are used to give legitimacy to the nationalist opposition.

A Symbolic Leadership

As of early 2013 the Syrian opposition lacks the capacity to instill an ideology through the indoctrination mechanisms often utilized by the state. As a result it must rely on its ability to garner legitimacy by referring to an accepted narrative. The difficulty of attaining legitimacy in a chaotic political climate is evidenced by the growing disenchantment among the Syrian populace with the SNC as well as ideological disagreements within various organizations opposing Bashar al-Assad. In a further testament to the importance of institutions in developing and affirming identities, the SNC has lost face largely due to its inability to create stability and a governing structure for the territories under opposition control (al-Abed 2012). While making appeals to the nation and adopting symbols gave the SNC legitimacy in its honeymoon phase, realities on the ground remain king.

In addition, ideological challengers to the nationalist SNC exist within the opposition movement. Some use religion to legitimize their call to arms rather than appeals to Syrian nationalism (*Suriyya laisat li al-suriyyeen*). There have also been allegations that opposition groups have destroyed the religious sites of minorities (Human Rights Watch). While many parts of the opposition seek to avoid sectarianism not all parties opposed to the regime believe in a Syria for all of the nation's current members. This ideological conflict within the opposition will continue to be an additional source of

strife within the broader conflict. Should the regime fall, there will be difficult discussions ahead on how to define who belongs to the Syrian nation.

Conclusion

Elites do not make decisions in a vacuum. Nationalist symbols are adopted and utilized in order to legitimize the regime that has adopted them. Vali Nasr showed how religion was used to legitimize regimes ruling states that, like Syria, were essentially colonial creations. While the pursuit of legitimacy led Syria's early leaders to follow the pan-Arab sentiments of the people, the same pursuit has led to the gradual adaptation of Syrian national identity by the al-Assad regime. The nation building process that began with an appeal to Arabism led to the formation of a new, distinctly Syrian identity. The Syrian regime's changing tactics, as well as the nationalist tactics taken by a significant portion of the opposition during the uprising, display the growing value of nationalism as a means of securing legitimacy. Phillips may believe that "it is difficult to put the genie [of Arabism] back in the bottle," but the current opposition to the regime seems to have done so. While Arab identity will undoubtedly attain its cultural import, should groups opposed to the regime succeed, it seems unlikely that they will embrace Arab nationalism and that there will be concerted efforts to strengthen Syrian nationalism.

Part Two: Adoption, Manipulation, and Cooptation of Symbols by the Syrian Opposition

The innumerable supporters of the uprising in Syria have produced a wealth of material. Facebook and other websites have been awash in altered versions of state posters, videos of puppets parodying Syrian state television, and cartoons which recount the many forms the opposition has taken. A surprising number focus on Syria's cult of personality and depict parodies of official images and slogans as well as the symbolic destruction of statues. Yet in other instances, images used by the regime, such as Salah ad-Din's eagle or the Hawk of Quraish, have been adopted and incorporated into the symbols of the opposition. Why has the cult of personality played such a strong role in the media campaign by regime opponents? Why are some symbols manipulated while others are reproduced and used essentially unchanged? In order to answer these questions the work on Charles Billig's concept of banal nationalism is particularly useful.

In Billig's landmark work *Banal Nationalism*, the term describes the subtle use of national symbols and inexplicit references to national identity by (largely western) governments. This form of nationalism, while quietly reinforcing existing national identities, is far removed from the fiery and often controversial "flag-waving" variety of nationalism (Billig 1995). In many ways, the manifestations of the personality cults perpetuated by the Syrian regime match Billig's description. While the statues of Hafez al-Assad and posters of Bashar al-Assad struck me as a western visitor, the vast majority of Syrians apparently went about their day paying neither statues nor posters any attention. Just as Americans often do not notice a flag in the room or on a building, the symbols that dominated Syrian visual space seemed to go generally unnoticed. Since the beginning of this research project Christopher Phillip's work, *Everyday Arab*

Nationalism, has been published and similarly applies Billig's work to the production of identities in modern Syria and Jordan, although his work focuses primarily on the persistence of Arab identity. In his view, the proliferation of cult iconography in Syrian and Jordanian society made the images examples of more banal nationalism and less "waved" nationalism than a western observer may expect (Phillips 2013: 49, 71).

Although a symbol, albeit a national flag or a leader's face, may go unnoticed in some situations or by some members of society, banal nationalism may not be as mundane as Billig described. Jones and Merriman's work on road signs in Wales provides an example in which forms of nationalism in well-established nation states may be sites of contention. Nationalism should not be divided into "hot" and cold according to these authors and they "...conclude the paper by reaffirming the need to move beyond notions of banal and hot nationalism and to focus on the everyday contexts within which nationalism is reproduced" (Jones & Merriman 2009: 165). The use of the apparently mundane form of nationalisms provide opportunities for those who oppose a particular nationalist narrative to express their disapproval (Ibid., 166). In Syria Phillips similarly sees elements of the cult of personality as quietly consumed and accepted along the lines of the banal. Yet the form of nationalism implemented by the regime has been challenged during times of conflict, such as Syria from 1979-1982 and since the beginning of the uprising in 2011 (Phillips 2013: 49). The use and manipulation of the symbols promulgated by the regime give credence both to Billig's work on the national permeation of banal nationalism while simultaneously verifying Billig's critics by showing that, while symbols may be considered banal, they are often not accepted as unconditionally as the concept presumes. The banal personality cults of Hafez and Bashar

al-Assad have not only been contested, but transformations in the technology available have offered opposition members new means with which to protest the nationalism the cult promotes.

The Banal Gets Going- Permeation of Visual Space Under Hafez al-Assad

Just as other nation states may seem wallpapered in national symbols, Hafez al-Assad sought to consolidate his power by covering Syria with his likeness. Regardless of which ideology the regime found it expedient to promote at a given time, the visage of Hafez al-Assad became a constant in Syrian public space, establishing an association between the elder al-Assad and the identity of the Syrian nation (Phillips 2013: 54). Personality cults of this kind are by no means uncommon. The government of Chiang Kai-shek created incentives for private citizens to hang his picture (Taylor 2006: 99). As was discussed in the literature review, the formation of cults of personality was intended to give the ruler legitimacy, establish an aura of unassailable power about him. In Wedeen's (1999) work on the cult of Hafez al-Assad she asserted that while the veneration of the leader was not by any means genuine, the regime still asserted its power and accrued legitimacy by forcing individual Syrians to act "as if" they revered their leader. This greater interest in having people behave as he demanded rather than an interest in genuine emotional support has been attributed by some analysts to the pragmatism of Hafez al-Assad (George 2003: 8-9). Regardless of cause, the cult changed the game, de-emphasizing the importance of state ideology and demanding loyalty and respect for the "symbols" of the regime (Ibid., 9).

Al-Assad had multiple mechanisms at his disposal. The Ba'ath party, which he maintained as a mechanism of control, willingly shifted its rhetoric. The party touted the

importance of having a great leader and emphasized dedication to said leader as the greatest of virtues, while disobedience was the greatest of sins (George 2003: 70-71). This shift away from the party's original ideology while it went through a period of mass recruitment made the Ba'ath party a useful mechanism for reinforcing the cult and al-Assad's legitimacy as leader of the nation. Al-Assad also considered the media an important means through which he could direct the people, which led to the government's support for the Syrian media (Kedar 2005). Muhammad Khayr al-Wadi, editor of the state-owned Tishrin newspaper, wrote in an editorial in 1995 that Assad's promotion of the media had not only strengthened the media but that media had promoted a national consciousness and sense of national community (Ibid., 8). As Billig (1995) discussed in his own work, national media outlets "flag" the nation in a variety of ways by focusing on news events transpiring within the state or by placing international events in relation to the nation.

Of course the state control over media also limited the avenues through which Syrians could challenge the national identities used by the regime. As Wedeen (1999) discussed, a certain degree of parody was permitted in television shows, jokes, and cartoons. The fact that these jokes about the regime and parodies of regime slogans were considered funny by Syrian audiences not only reflects the degree to which these symbols were a recognizable part of Syrian life but that the symbols of the regime, even in times of relative calm, were not unequivocally accepted. While context limited the forms expression may take, banal symbols were still challenged.

The media outlets available in the Syria of Hafez al-Assad also limited the forms and degree of regime criticism. The regime was able to put a stop to expressions that

were considered threatening to stability (Wedeen 1999). For example, the famous Syrian political cartoonist, Ali Ferzat, spent most of his career critiquing the regime while trying to avoid crossing the line. Figures in his drawings could rarely be identified as particular regime members and he often used symbols or inanimate objects to convey his message (Hume 2012). His comics, since they were printed, were susceptible to government censorship. In addition, the reliance on print media limited opportunities for artists and others to remain anonymous while producing art or other materials that were critical of the regime. As will be discussed, this has been one of the key factors in the new forms the opposition to regime symbols and slogans has taken in recent years.

The Banal under Bashar al-Assad

Speculations on the kind of leader Bashar al-Assad would prove to be varied extremely. The early years of his rule indicated that he would be avoiding the personality cult his father had embraced and utilized, and many of the posters and easily removed fixtures were taken down (Horn 2012). Yet by 2005 the cult of personality was back (Phillips 2013). While the cult was molded in an effort to better suit his background, Bashar al-Assad's cult also emphasized the connection between father and son (Bar 368). Given his father's role as the source of the son's legitimacy (Zisser 2007), and the use of the cult in establishing legitimacy as was previously discussed, this continuity is by no means surprising.

While the cult under Bashar has been more nationalist in nature than the cult under his father, in many ways it serves a similar function. The symbols and slogans used by Bashar al-Assad's regime have become as recognizable as the components of his father's personality cult and his face is just as recognizable. While Phillips (2013) sees

the inherited cult of Bashar al-Assad as less extreme than that of his father, Bashar al-Assad's face has similarly become the symbol of a particular nationalist identity. While many components of the national identity promoted by the al-Assad regime have been banal, the cult of father and son has become an important part of the Syrian conflict and has provided opportunities for members of the opposition to both protest the national identity of the regime and to promote their own conception of what Syrian national identity should be.

Symbolic Manipulation to Reclaim the Syrian "We"

Numerous graphics produced by regime opponents alter the imagery of Bashar al-Assad's cult in ways that reclaim power for the Syrian people. Where once their support was given without their actual permission (such as the *minhibbak*, "We love you" sign held by the pro-regime protestor in Appendix 4) in these manipulated versions Syrians reclaim agency. In the manipulated version in Appendix 7, the rhyming phrase says *minkibbak*, "We throw you away" or "We dump you." Hence, the use of a standard image from Bashar al-Assad cult iconography, a mass-produced image of the president waving to the observer, is here placed in a trash can complete with banana peel. Not only does this parody a frequently used phrase in Bashar al-Assad's cult iconography but juxtaposes what the opposition asserts is the real desire of the people against what the regime habitually says.

Secondly, the flag in the background, when compared to the original, has been changed. The top color has been altered, making the flag the one adopted by the Syrian opposition. The green, white, and black flag is that which has earlier been discussed as

the flag of the Syrian Republic. The incorporation of the green, white, and black flag provides further evidence of the degree to which this flag has been accepted as the legitimate symbol of the opposition. In this context it also indicates how those opposed to the regime challenge the banal use of the national flag even when the flag is by no means a central feature of the image.

The third component of the image remains the map of Syria in the background. Of all three elements it alone remains unchanged. In this context as well, the map serves as a symbol emphasizing the connections between members of the nation (Anderson 1983,176). In part the unity of the included territory is defined by the intentional exclusion of certain areas (Shelef 2010: 25). In this case the territory tellingly excludes the rest of the Arab world or even the Greater Syria sometimes harkened to under Hafez al-Assad. Yet in the hands of the nationalist opposition producer it lacks the unspoken irony it does when used in the original version produced by the Ba'ath regime.

Other examples of the manipulation of government symbols and signs abound. The manipulated billboard of Bashar al-Assad in Appendix 9. again seeks to reclaim the agency of the Syrian people (in this instance, *Ahl Suriyya*) by altering the original. In this humorous version they have altered the text to say, “The Syrian people know their donkey,” hence the addition of the donkey ears on al-Assad. The phrase originally included in the sign is a derivation from a well-known Arabic proverb, *Ahl Mecca adraa bisha'abiha*, “The people of Mecca know all the little things about their city.” Arabic speakers have manipulated the phrase for centuries to reflect their knowledge of their own homeland or city. The Syrian derivation, *Ahl Suriyya Adraa bisha'abiha*, is well known and widely used. In this instance the recognizable Arabic phrase, which had been

utilized by the regime on this billboard, is being reclaimed and altered by *ahl Suriyya*, the Syrian people.

In another example, as soon as protests began the regime launched a new campaign of posters and billboards featuring multicolored hands and phrases such as “I am with the law.” This was met with versions produced by the opposition, including “I am not Indian,” a way of saying that the speaker understands completely what the regime was trying to do and is not fooled (Ratta 2012). The regime attempted to speak for the Syrian people, in this case by speaking for unidentified “I”s instead of “we.” Yet the regime’s efforts to pass off these sentiments as the beliefs of individual Syrian citizens were not accepted as genuine. In an intriguing turn of events, not only did the regime’s signs become a site of conflict for different ideological narratives but also served as a means through which the two sides communicated. Following the “I am not Indian,” renditions of the posters, the regime changed their phrases in an effort to appear more genuine and specific to the Syrian case (Ibid.). In another example, a group of artists known as “The Syrian People Know Their Way” are producing a series of images in a poster style with which they hope to “replace regime propaganda” (Hume 2012). As Donatella Della Ratta (2012) explains, “... the raised-hand user-generated campaign is revelatory of people’s connections that are not built through shared unbelief anymore; but, rather thanks to a hared awareness of their ability to create, re-create and actively attribute to an open-ended citizenry’s forum.” Through parody and the creation of new posters, Syrians strive to reclaim a voice long used in their name by the regime.

Members of the opposition have also acknowledged the role of the previously ignored images of the cult of personality. Appendix 11 is a cartoon in which a young

woman packs her bags to leave Syria to go to England to complete her studies. She is hesitant to leave and decides at the border to change her mind. What shifts her perspective is the sign at the exit point that would normally be considered an example of banal nationalism. The sign shows the Syrian (Ba'athist) flag, a version of Appendix 4, and *raafiqatakun as-salaama*, 'go with peace.' The cartoon does not only highlight the irony of the phrase given the violence within Syria but also displays the character's anger at seeing Bashar al-Assad's face on the sign. The fact that the national flag used by the opposition, the Ba'athist flag, and the cult of personality image are the only colored items in the conflict emphasizes the role of these symbols in the conflict and the emotions solicited by each.

Mocking the Media

The state run media has been an object of criticism and parody since the uprising began in 2011. Media serves an important role as a medium through which the nation is constantly flagged, which is no less true for media outlets controlled by the Ba'athist Syrian regime than other states (Billig 1995; Phillips 2013). The continued control of many media outlets by the Syrian state has provided a mechanism through which the regime not only reinforces Syrian national identity but also attempts to reinforce its interpretation of events and promote the regime as the sole legitimate embodiment of the state. Due to the association between Syrian media and the regime one can assume that there is a great deal of intent in what events are covered and how. As Kedar (2005: 10) explains, "Behind every piece of information there is a purpose, and in the background of every article there is a message which is expressed in *fikra markeziyya* 'a central idea.'

Photographs, editing caricatures, and above all the language and form of expression – all these are intended to pass on messages or support them.” The language the regime and, by extension, the media have used to discuss the uprising has presented those opposed to the regime with an opportunity to challenge the regime’s legitimacy and emphasize their own values and goals.

One of the means through which the media narrative has been challenged is through performance. The popular online series of puppet shows *Top Goon: Diary of a Little Dictator* lampoons Bashar al-Assad and other members of the regime. In an early episode a puppet depicting a Syrian newscaster discusses the activity of the terrorists who threaten Syria and touts out one of those responsible for committing these “atrocities.” The protester, threatened in the background by the *Shabiha* (government thug) character, intersperses his actual account of his peaceful protest with the “corrections” demanded by the *Shabiha*. By depicting the protestors as peaceful, olive-branch bearing individuals who tell the truth (except when under duress) and are interested only in freedom the producers of the performance seek to give legitimacy to the protestors. The ways in which the media and government collaborate to alter the narrative and provide misinformation to the public is also a central part of the piece. The media is referred to as “the prostitute media” who works hand in hand with the coercive regime to tell lies. The language used could almost be taken verbatim from the state media, authenticating the critique as genuinely Syrian.

Other attempts to discredit the state-run Syrian media abound. One video clip, which was widely disseminated via the Internet, shows a reporter for a Syrian news program walking through a street filled with bodies and rubble. Many of those killed

were civilians and all, according to the reporter, had fallen to the “terrorists.” What made this particular clip so infamous and so widely disseminated was a portion in which the reporter attempts to talk to one of the survivors. The survivor, a very young girl, sits speechlessly next to the body of her mother in a flatbed truck while the reporter asks her who has done this to her mother. Appendix 10 depicts one comic artist’s response to the video in which the reporter and cameraman are depicted splattered with blood, just as the soldiers in the background are. The artist depicts the clearly malicious media as not only implicit but directly involved in the violence perpetrated by the regime.

In each of these examples the members of the opposition respond to the Syrian media, depicting it as a mouthpiece and accomplice of the regime. By utilizing the media’s language these forms of protest acknowledge the reach of the national media and the Syrian people’s familiarity with it. While once this language was essentially banal, mocked in private or simply accepted as the usual government doublespeak, within the context of the opposition it too has become a site of contestation. In addition, as will be later discussed, technology has changed not only the forms this challenge can take but has also provided new methods through which they may be disseminated.

Responding to the Cult of Personality- Acts of Destruction

Since the Uprising began in 2011 parts of the cult of personality have not only been manipulated but many have been destroyed (Ismail 2011). Just as the road signs in Wales were subject to graffiti, physical tampering and destruction has been another means for protesting the al-Assad regime and its narrative (Jones & Merriman 2009). This destruction has manifested itself and been disseminated in a variety of ways. Videos

on YouTube show teams of protestors bringing down statues of Hafez al-Assad and burning posters of Bashar al-Assad. Other images show mutilated statues, such as Appendix 13 in which a bust of Hafez al-Assad has not only been given horns but has a shoe attached to the top of his head. The shoe, with the dirty sole touching the deceased leader's head, is a sign of grave disrespect. Appendix 12 similarly shows images of Bashar al-Assad and his deceased older brother, Basil, conspicuously placed in a trash bin, a clear signal of utter disrespect. Ismail considers the efforts to destroy cult iconography an effort to remove al-Assad from Suriyya al-Assad and believes they "signify acts of liberation and repossession of the nation" (Ismail 2011: 542).

The destruction of cult images as a form of protest is also exemplified in the comic in Appendix 14. In the comic, three boys gather in a school courtyard in 2011. One says that he cannot stand having the picture of "that criminal" hanging there. A fellow classmate agrees, having just buried his uncle the day before (we presume he died while protesting the regime). Although they believe it may lead to their school being shut down, the boys decide to take down the picture of al-Assad while no one is looking. The next day they head to school, relieved to begin their day without looking at al-Assad. When they arrive they are greeted by government thugs who threaten the classroom of boys. One of the boys claims sole responsibility at which points he is beaten, dragged off, and presumably killed as he does not appear in the classroom in the later panels in 2012. Despite the fate of their missed classmate, the boys decide to take down al-Assad's picture and throw it away.

The cartoon both highlights cult destruction as a form of protest while acknowledging the permeation of Syrian visual space by the cult of personality and the

importance of the cult's enforcement to the regime. Children are the actors depicted throwing away Bashar al-Assad's picture showing that this is a way in which even the weakest members of society can express themselves. It also could be interpreted as proving the united force which Bashar al-Assad faces as even Syria's schoolchildren protest his rule. The comic also plays upon the banal components of the cult of personality. Since pictures of Bashar al-Assad are a common component of Syrian visual space the conflict over Bashar al-Assad's picture would resonate with a Syrian viewer. While acknowledging the shared national experience of the cult of personality it also serves as an example of how an image that was once an accepted part of public schools has become a site of protest. Just as English-only road signs became a conflict within the Welsh context, the previously banal has become a part of the Syrian conflict as a result of the uprising's challenge to the regime.

Unprotested Symbols- Coopting Components

Flagging the Nation and Flipping Flags

During the first few months of the uprising in Syria, protesters, like those in Egypt and Tunisia, used the Syrian national flag. That flag was adopted in the late 1950s when the Ba'ath party came to power and was reinstated after the failure of the United Arab Republic. National symbols such as flags serve multiple functions in the context of demonstrations. As a symbol of the nation, the flag heightens the viewer's awareness of their membership in the nation, identifies the bearer as a member of the nation, can stand for the group as a whole, and national symbols, "...augment group members' attempts to positively distinguish ingroup from outgroup(s)..." (Schatz & Lavine 2007: 332). These effects certainly proved themselves relevant in Syria.

The demonstrations which formed to protest the al-Assad regime took advantages of the flag's status as a national symbol. The ability of flags to help identify the bearers as members of the nation was useful in a climate in which the Syrian regime made claims that the organizers of the demonstrations were foreigners, questioning the protesters' authenticity. In addition, the flag as a symbol of the entire nation enhanced protesters' claims to speak on behalf of the entire Syrian people. The flag also asserted the salience of Syrian national identity over all other identities, a useful tool in a context in which many feared (and still do fear) sectarian strife.

Yet despite the benefits of using the established national flag, the members of the opposition chose a new flag. The green, white, and black flag of the Syrian Republic emerged gradually and by no means immediately. Based on available journalistic evidence, the Syrian Republic flag seems to have made its first appearances at demonstrations in May 2011 after over a month of protests. The first use of the Syrian Republic flag outside of the protests took place at the Antalya conference, a meeting of representatives from numerous Syrian groups protesting the regime held in Turkey at the end of May and early June in 2011 (Weiss 2011). While that gathering may have unfurled the green, white, and black it would be months before it became the widely accepted symbol of the Syrian opposition.

For several months both flags appeared at protests against the regime and on anti-regime websites and Facebook pages. For example, at a protest in Deir ez-Zor on June 18, 2011, one member of the crowd waves the flag of the older Syrian republic while a child on an adult's shoulders has his face painted in red, white, and black stripes (Sham News Network). Online forums also adopted the new flag gradually, with one popular

group, “The Syrian Revolution 2011” not incorporating the green flag in its profile graphic until November 2011 (The Syrian Revolution 2011).

Another example is the logo developed and used by the *Jaysh al-Suriyy al-Hur*, the Free Syrian Army (FSA). The logo has had two primary forms. The earlier form, depicted in Appendix 15, shows a bird of prey facing left with a circular medallion representing the national flag of the Syrian Arab Republic, with its red, white, and black bars and two green stars. The use of the flag in the original logo shows that, among those who defected from the Arab Syrian Army and first formed the FSA, the red, white, and black flag was still considered the legitimate national flag. By incorporating what was still considered by many to be a legitimate national symbol, the FSA sought to increase its legitimacy as the newly declared defenders of the homeland and the Syrian people. Thus, as the green flag became more dominant and widely accepted as the symbol of those opposed to the regime, the FSA similarly changed its own logo.

The Flag Flip

The need to differentiate between ingroups and outgroups seems to have played a role in the decision to adopt a flag which was more obviously visually distinct. The first pro-regime protests held on March 29, 2011, like the anti-regime demonstrations, highlighted their nationalist credentials by sporting Syrian (Ba’athist) national flags in addition to photos and artistic representations of Bashar al-Assad (“Syria Mobilizes” 2011). In the first few months of the protests one of the few distinguishing characters between the two groups’ flags was the frequent incorporation of Bashar al-Assad’s face on the flags used by pro-regime demonstrators. This precipitated in a competition

between the groups of protesters for a period of time in which larger and larger flags were produced (Ismail 2011: 542).

This limited ability to differentiate between the ingroup and outgroup, those who protested against the regime and those who protested to support it, has been seen in other conflicts between groups who both claim national legitimacy. During the uprising in Libya against Ghaddafi those opposed to his rule adopted the flag of the Libyan monarchy as their symbol (Hashim 2011). In 1956 Hungarian revolutionaries opposed to Communist rule removed the hammer and sickle from the flag, using the modified flag with a hole in the middle as the symbol for its opposition to the regime (Kürti 1990). In both examples those opposed to the regime faced stiff opposition from those loyal to the existing regime and engaged in armed conflict. In Syria the adoption of the new flag similarly appeared after it became clear that the protesters would be challenged using peaceful and violent means.

The flag selected, like the Libyan flag, had particular nationalist connotations that have already been discussed in the previous section. While other scholars have discussed the logic of the flag chosen by the opposition the decision to let go of the established national flag should not be taken for granted. As a national symbol widely accepted, disseminated, and also used throughout the first wave of protests, the decision to adopt a new flag is not without controversy. It clearly took time for the flag to be accepted as a legitimate symbol by the opposition and to turn away from the national flag the opposition originally embraced.

The Free Syrian Army Brand

Since its establishment in the summer of 2011, the Free Syrian Army has established its own symbolic repertoire using symbols largely borrowed from an existing pool of accepted national symbols. As has been discussed, the original logo of the FSA included the accepted national flag with its red, white, and black stripes. In many ways it bears similarities to the national coat of arms, in which a bird of prey (the Hawk of Quraish) surrounds a shield with the national flag. In addition to being found on official government buildings the coat of arms is on Syrian coins. National currencies establish and affirm a symbolic vocabulary shared by all members of society (Helleiner 1998: 4). With its roots in the pre-Ba'athist past, the coat of arms may very well be considered a legitimate national symbol, hence the formation and use of a similar symbol by the FSA.

One question that may require post-conflict interviews to answer is the selection of the eagle as the FSA's bird. While the bird may have been selected for its associations with victory, the bird comes with a great deal of more localized symbolic meaning. The eagle of Salah ad-Din was made the symbol of the United Arab Republic and remained a component of Egypt's flag even after the end of unification with Syria. While carrying pan-Arab connotations, Salah ad-Din also has national significance as has been previously discussed. The statue of the famous leader, which stands in Damascus not far from his tomb, is also on Syrian currency. While the exact reasons behind the selection of the eagle are not clear, the similarity of the FSA logo to existing and accepted national symbols indicates that those opposed to the regime are engaged in both a process of cooptation as well as manipulation and rejection.

The Free Syrian Army has displayed an awareness of the importance of symbols and branding as part of its efforts to present itself as a united and legitimate force. Not

only is the FSA logo found on numerous Facebook pages and forums, the website for the Free Syrian Army also emphasizes the group's connection to accepted national symbols. In addition to changing the logo to reflect the acceptance of the flag of the Syrian Republic as the symbol of the opposition, the green, white, and black flag has become a dominant component of the group's website. The website also sports an icon of a Syrian map in the colors of the Syrian Republic flag, and leaders' pictures are taken with the flag in the background (The Free Syrian Army). The use of the map and the flag show the acceptance of both as national symbols.

The effort to use symbols to present a united front has also emerged. For example, in September 2012 an FSA commander, Abu Haydar, crossed the border into Turkey looking for someone to design a logo to be used on vehicles and clothing for his troops in Aleppo. The Turkish designer incorporated the Syrian Republic flag as well as an eagle and a rifle in the logo for the Northern Storm Brigade. "By building a unified image, the commander told Sedat [the designer], the FSA is seeking to present itself as a force with the trappings of statehood, capable of not only looking to the future with confidence, but also taking a central role in driving change at the heart of the Syrian government" (Mirodan 2012). The selection and use of symbols is a conscious effort on the part of the FSA to establish its credentials as a national, legitimate military. This branding has included the incorporation of accepted national symbols, whether it is the national flag originally embraced by demonstrators, the Syrian Republic flag, or choosing a logo similar to that of the Syrian coat of arms.

New Tools

No discussion on the manipulation and use of symbols in the Syrian uprising is complete without a discussion on the role of technology. While symbols played a role in criticisms of the al-Assad regime in previous decades, the reign of Bashar al-Assad has been marked by the rise of the Internet and an increasingly technologically savvy group of critics and opponents. Not only was Internet usage expanding in Syria but controls were being relaxed, with Facebook officially allowed starting in 2011 not long before the uprising started (Hume 2012). As Eva Bellin (2012: 138) describes, “Social media ... and satellite television (al-Jazeera, al-Arabiya) together enabled the mobilization of collective action in ways that had been heretofore impossible in repressive settings. Both provided a platform for conveying the stories and symbols that fueled participation in protest.” While the government has been able to take down some of the websites that promoted the uprising, more sites have immediately emerged to replace them (Yaqoob 2013). The role of the Internet has been instrumental in giving protesters a means of organizing and communicating outside of the sphere of government control, making a key ingredient which Bellin (2012) believes helps to explain the timing of the uprisings. The Internet has also allowed artists who have fled Syria to continue producing and communicating their work and allows those artists to maintain their ties with those who remain in Syria (Yaqoob 2013). The numerous Facebook pages and websites dedicated to the uprising attest to the explosive use of this new communicative tool. This offers a striking contrast from the forms of protest taken under Hafez al-Assad and during the first few decades of the celebrated Ali Ferzat. The threat to critics of the regime remains high in Syria but a new opportunity for anonymity or to protest from outside the country has been born from technology. While the use and manipulation of symbols reflects common nationalist

themes, they are being created and disseminated in a new way that attests to the power of the Internet as a new organizational tool.

Conclusion

This work has been a preliminary attempt in addressing the rise of state nationalism in the Syrian context. The transformation has been largely gradual, with the gradual inclusion of increasingly nationalist symbols under Hafez al-Assad, a shift to increasingly more nationalist symbols under Bashar al-Assad, and the culmination of this transition to Syrian nationalism displayed by the numerous groups opposed to the al-Assad regime. While the regime gradually edged itself away from Arab nationalism it never completely abandoned it, as discussed in the analysis of a speech by Bashar al-Assad as recently as January 2012. As the opposition has adopted a more nationalist perspective some symbols have been accepted and used while others have been rejected. The regime's gradual adoption of new symbols and the opposition's adoption and rejection of certain symbols indicates an active process of identity formation and reformation.

Yet the presence of decision-making evidence by no means indicates that elite imposition is the cause. If the elite were capable of imposing a preferred nationalist ideology on the Syrian people, Hafez al-Assad's Ba'athist regime would have clung to the Arab nationalism of its Ba'athist roots or made a complete transition to a more nationalist ideology. As Wedeen (1999) notes, even the regime's efforts to inculcate a cult of personality were only successful at the level of performance and never attained a level of actual belief. The failure of al-Assad's efforts to promote Greater Syria as a legitimate nationalist identity also reaffirms the weakness of the concept of elite imposition in Syria. Similarly, the efforts by Bashar al-Assad to impose his particular combination of Arabism and Syrian national identity have clearly been rejected by a large portion of the Syrian population. The gradual transformations within the symbolic

vocabulary of the opposition further affirm that elite imposition does not adequately explain changes in Syrian nationalism.

Why would rational adaptation result in such a generally gradual change? To explain the gradual use of Syrian nationalism by the regime as a source of legitimacy the perceptions of the validity of that identity must have gradually changed as well. Lustick and other scholars would advise that we turn to institutions as a key source of the establishment of a new national identity. While the national borders of Syria have not drastically changed between the state's establishment and the first transitions to the expression of Syrian nationalism, Hafez al-Assad did oversee a drastic process of institution building (Mufti 1996). Given the lengthy and gradual process involved in institution building an identity rooted in this structural reality would also emerge gradually. The development of institutions and the people's increasing interactions with these state institutions explains the gradual rational adaptation of the regime to Syrian national identity.

The legitimacy of Syrian national identity also explains why the groups opposing the regime have chosen to embrace it. Several umbrella groups like the National Coalition and the FSA have used nationalism to communicate a unified identity and portray themselves as legitimate vis-à-vis the Syrian regime. Rational decision-making explains the opposition's adoption of particular symbols, to destroy symbols associated too closely with the regime, and to gradually reject the Syrian national flag for an older version. The content of these symbols and the decision to adopt, alter, or reject national symbols used by the regime shows that this is not simply a case of path dependency but that decisions are actively being made to select symbols which will make the opposition

appear more legitimate. When we consider the meaning tied to these symbols as well as the efforts to which supporters and members of the opposition have gone to reproduce these symbols, such as the FSA officer's effort to go to Turkey to have a logo using the green flag and the eagle of the FSA, there can be no doubt that this process of symbol selection is largely a conscious one. However, the fact that these changes have been gradual and often conducted in a somewhat incoherent fashion indicates that this process does not reflect elite imposition as characterized by Nadav Shelef. The flag of the Syrian Republic was adopted gradually and only after weeks of protests and the gradual militarization of the regime's response. If elite imposition was behind symbol selection and implementation this transition would have been faster, more complete, and there would not have been instances of both flags used simultaneously by protesters.

What is displayed on the part of all parties is a rational adaptation to the realities of the uprising. Having witnessed the uprisings elsewhere in the Arab world, the Syrian opposition took to the streets wrapped in nationalist symbols. Yet these symbols were gradually modified to fit the context. While the opposition in Egypt held onto symbols like the national flag, the Egyptian opposition was not met with sustained violence or mass counter protests as was the case in Syria or Libya, both of which saw the opposition adopting a new old national flag. Given the period of months over which the flag was gradually included it was clearly not elite imposition but appears to have been a gradual process of responding to regime supporters who continued to support the regime and also used the national flag to emphasize their own nationalist legitimacy. Rational adaptation has also appeared in the efforts by the regime to respond to the nationalist uprising by reaffirming its own national legitimacy. Facing a challenge to its claims as the legitimate,

national representative of the people, the regime of Bashar al-Assad has predominantly responded by emphasizing its own nationalist credentials through the use of symbols and displaying them in events such as pro-regime protests.

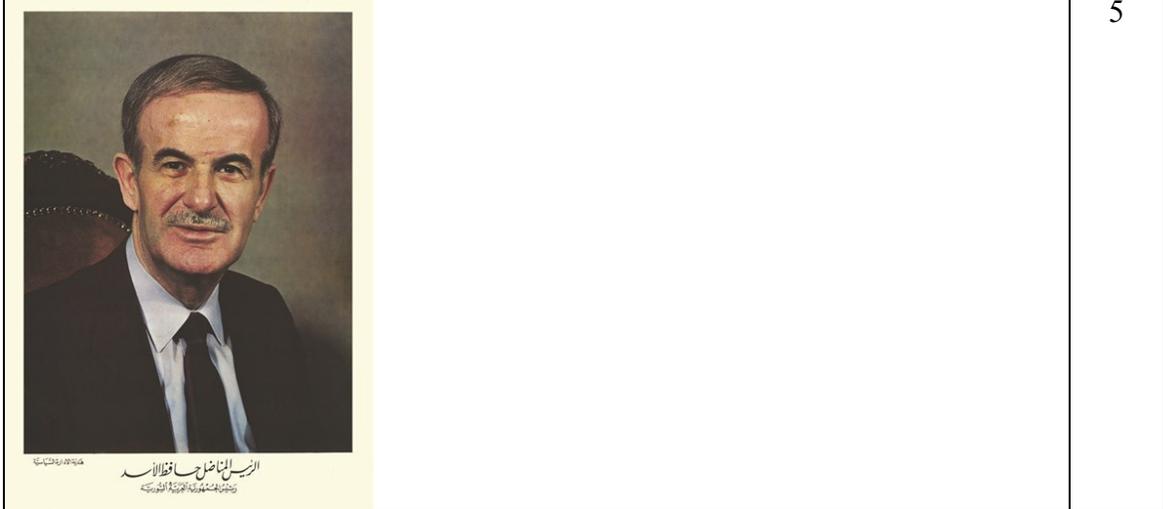
In both quiet times and times of nationalist challenge we see rational adaptation on the part of those who perform nationalism in Syria. During times of relative ideological quiet the regimes of Hafez and Bashar al-Assad gradually adapted to the rising relevance of the Syrian nation state. As the state's institutions were developed and strengthened under Hafez al-Assad the exclusively Syrian identity became more viable and offered a new means through which the regime could enhance its legitimacy. In times of challenge the changes have accelerated as the regime responds to the changes to the status quo that resulted from these challenges. Yet these periods of challenge do not represent the kind of sudden shift to an acceptance of the boundaries of the state as Shelef believed rational adaptation would cause. This analysis shows that the period of acceptance of the modern Syrian state's borders, even on the part of the regime, has been a lengthy one reflecting a gradual acceptance by the people of the Syrian state as a legitimate entity. The recent conflict has not been between those who cling to a pan-Arab dream and those who promote Syrian nationalism; rather, it has been a conflict between a regime that is unable or unwilling to entirely forsake Arabism and continues to blend it with state-based nationalism and a collective of opposition groups who use state-based nationalism in their effort to legitimize their anti-regime position.

A great deal of room for further research exists. When it comes to expanding our understanding of nationalism and its transformations a great deal of work remains to be done. The connection between institutions, identities, and the choices we as individuals

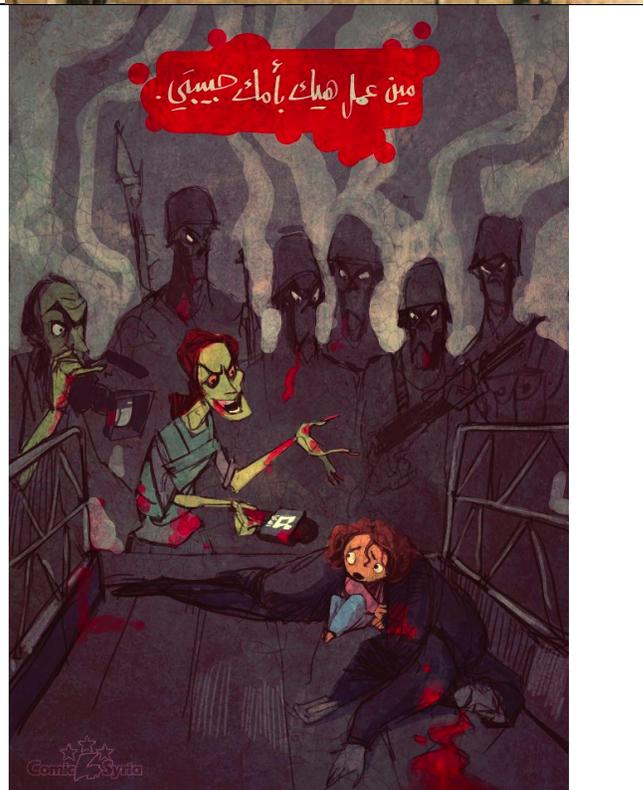
make based on these important factors calls for more analysis. In the Syrian case specifically, more work will need to be done to understand the interaction between the development of national institutions and the acceptance of being Syrian as a legitimate national identity. Clearly this study was limited greatly by the ongoing conflict. While there is a great deal that we can understand based upon the available resources and materials, being able to interview both the disseminators and consumers of these symbols would add immensely to our knowledge. While conducting interviews in Syria has been rendered problematic for decades due to regime control, it remains one of the surest means through which we may gain an accurate understanding of actors' decision-making.

The current situation in Syria is still chaotic. While this work analyzes changes in nationalism beginning with the al-Assads and continuing through the early months of 2013 the situations continues to change. While most of the attention in this work has been paid to the large umbrella organizations for opposition groups and the nationalism they have thus far embraced there is no guarantee that this ideology will remain the dominant one or that it will not alter in significant ways. If the regime does fall whatever government replaces it will have to apply the lessons it has learned during the uprising to define the nation. There will be numerous questions to answer regarding who is included in the nation, what the golden ages will be, which symbols are incorporated in the new national lexicon, etc. Since certain symbols have acquired legitimacy over the course of the uprising we can make educated guess that a victory by the opposition may lead to the adoption of the flag of the Syrian Republic, the utter destruction of the cult of personality, and the incorporation of the eagle as the symbol for the Syrian military. Whatever the

outcome, there will be more work to do on the Syrian case as the nation reconstitutes itself.



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سفر

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2

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كتر عجة..

ركبت بالسيارة لكمل السفارة

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 A photograph showing a man in a dark suit and light-colored shirt sitting on a large, rusted metal trash can. Behind him is a large poster of Bashar al-Assad with Arabic text: "نعم لراعي الشبيبة والشباب" (Yes for the youth and young people) and "بشار الأسد" (Bashar al-Assad). The trash can is overflowing with garbage. The background shows a street scene with buildings and a fence.	12
 A photograph of a bronze bust of a man's head and shoulders, mounted on a concrete base. A black leather shoe is placed on top of the bust's head. The bust is outdoors on a paved area.	13

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Images

Appendix 1. Bob Cromwell. Taken in 1990s. Source: “Travel in Syria- Damascus.” 2012. Digital Image. Available at <http://cromwell-intl.com/travel/syria/damascus.html> (accessed November 23, 2012).

Appendix 2. Arab Socialist Baath Party Organization in Lebanon, One Arab Nation with an Eternal Message. 1987. The Collection of Zeina Maasri. Available from: Signs of Conflict: Political Posters of Lebanon’s Civil War (1975-1990) Archive at http://signsofconflict.com/Archive/poster_details/1800 (accessed November 23, 1012).

Appendix 3. 200 Lira Bill. Source: Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (Damascus, Syria) at <https://sites.google.com/site/islamic-architecture/unknown-soldier-tom---damascus-syria> (accessed January 23, 2013).

Appendix 4. Agence France-Press. March 29, 2011. Source: “Syria Cabinet Resigns, Assad to Address Nation.” The Raw Story. Available at <http://www.rawstory.com/rs/2011/03/29/syria-cabinet-resigns-assad-to-address-nation/> (accessed November 20, 2012).

Appendix 5. The Militant President. 1984. The Collection of Abboudi Bou Jawdeh. Available from: Signs of Conflict: Political Posters of Lebanon’s Civil War (1975-1990) Archive at http://signsofconflict.com/Archive/poster_details/1984 (accessed November 23, 1012).

Appendix 6. Hussein Malla of the Associated Press, Two Syrian children holding a flag with Bashar al-Assad’s face on it at a demonstration on March 25, 2011 in Damascus. Available at Washington Post Blog, “Does the United States Know Who Would Succeed Assad in Syra? [Ask a Think Tank]” by Allen McDuffee. Available at http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/think-tanked/post/does-the-united-states-know-who-would-succeed-assad-in-syria-ask-a-think-tank/2012/02/10/gIQANMQv3Q_blog.html (accessed November 20, 2012).

Appendix 7. Anonymous. Source: *Suriyya balad al-Ahraar*, “Free People of Syria” Facebook page. November 15, 2012. Available at: http://sphotos-b.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ash3/18231_290334384419686_729033206_n.jpg (accessed November 20, 2012).

Appendix 8. Anonymous. Source: *Wikipedia*. “Syrian National Coalition Official Logo.” November 17, 2012. Available at: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:SyrianNationalCoalitionOfficialLogo.svg>

Appendix 9. Anonymous. Source: *Suriyya balad al-Ahraar*, “Free People of Syria” Facebook page. October 30, 2012. Available at: http://sphotos-b.xx.fbcdn.net/hphotos-ash3/525991_284435035009621_234536571_n.jpg (accessed November 20, 2012).

Appendix 10. Comic4Syria. “Meen ‘amal heyk biummik habibati?” Comic4Syria Facebook page. August 27, 2012. Available at:

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=275557372548084&set=a.265821056855049.50016.260831947353960&type=1&theater>

Appendix 11. Shami, Rand. “Sifir.” Source: Comic4Syria Facebook page. November 9, 2012. Available at:

<http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=298973526873135&set=a.298973450206476.59510.260831947353960&type=1&theater>

Figure 12. Anonymous. Source: *Suriyya balad al-Ahraar*, “Free People of Syria” Facebook page. September 14, 2012. Available at: http://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=267416836711441&set=a.261373010649157.58629.261368847316240&type=1&comment_id=478601&offset=0&total_comments=1 (accessed November 20, 2012).

Appendix 13. Anonymous. June 26, 2012. Available at: <http://www.vbsyria.com/vb/showthread.php?p=1259463>

Appendix 14. Anonymous. “Sha’aba.” Source: Comic4Syria Facebook page. January 30, 2013.

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