

# Authoritarian Media and Diversionary Threats: Lessons from Thirty Years of Syrian State Discourse

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## Abstract

Scholars have long argued that leaders manipulate foreign policy, sometimes even initiating wars in order to enhance their domestic political position. But diversionary wars are relatively rare given the high costs of conflict. In this project, we examine data from major Syrian daily newspapers over a thirty-year period (1987-2018) to explore how autocratic regimes use diversionary rhetoric. We find that emphasis on Israel as a diversionary threat decreases during peace negotiations between Syria and Israel. Further, we find that before the Arab Uprisings, Syria's state-controlled media concentrated on Israel as a security and political threat. After 2011 scrutiny of Israel — and other long-standing topics of state discourse — was displaced by discussion of foreign plots and conspiracies against the Syrian state. Our analysis illustrates how authoritarian regimes make use of diversionary strategies as well as how political shocks generate discontinuities in authoritarian rhetoric.

Key words: *authoritarian media, diversionary conflicts, Arab Uprisings*

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Theories of diversionary war suggest that leaders manufacture foreign policy crises to redirect public attention from domestic to international politics. While scholars, journalists and policymakers have long acknowledged the straightforward and intuitive logic of such a strategy, identifying an empirical basis for diversionary war theory has been challenging for a variety of reasons including the complex determinants of conflict onset and the relative rarity of war. By exploring data from Syrian-regime newspapers, we suggest an extension to the existing literature on diversionary conflict strategies through an examination of *diversionary threat rhetoric* — emphasis on risks to the nation that diverts citizen focus away from serious and credible domestic political concerns to foreign affairs. Because of the high costs associated with conflict, leaders — particularly those unable to credibly wage a diversionary war — may seek to direct the public’s gaze overseas without having to actually fight a foreign rival. The nature and intensity of diversionary threat rhetoric is subject to discontinuities as a result of unexpected domestic political shocks.

Although both democratic and authoritarian regimes employ diversionary threat rhetoric, dictatorships are particularly disposed to engaging in this type of rhetorical strategy. Autocrats often seek to monopolize political information and, as a result, their pronouncements about foreign threats and plots tend to go unchallenged in the public domain. While much of the existing literature on diversionary war focuses on the behaviors of democracies (e.g., Smith 1996; Gelpi 1997; Leeds and Davis 1997; Gowa 1998), an exploration of diversionary threat rhetoric also bridges existing scholarship on diversionary strategies and a burgeoning literature on authoritarian media. And because diversionary threat rhetoric occurs more commonly than diversionary war, it is also more amenable to empirical exploration including the use of automated text analysis.

To empirically explore the use of diversionary threat rhetoric, we examine Arabic-language material from Syria’s three main regime-controlled newspapers — *Tishreen*, *Al-Thawrah* and *Al-Ba’th*.<sup>1</sup> For the period before on-line news, we have hand-coded the front-page of almost every issue of the Syrian daily *Tishreen* from 1987-2002 for headlines of Israel. We find that headlines about Israel — which are exclusively negative — make up a quarter of all newspaper headlines and decrease with improvements in Syria-Israel relations, such as during the peace talks in the early 1990s.

For the period from 2005 to 2018, we have digitally “scraped” the home page of *Al-Thawrah* and used topic-modeling to uncover changing patterns of media coverage. We find that after the Syrian uprisings, regime propaganda shifted away from Israel toward increasing discussion of foreign plots and conspiracies against the Syrian regime. This suggests that exogenous shocks to domestic political circumstances can lead to changes in diversionary threat rhetoric. We also conduct qualitative content analysis of articles from *Al-Thawrah* and *Al-Ba’th* newspapers during the early months of the Syrian uprisings in order to understand in a more fine-grained way how regime discourse evolved during critical periods of political change. We find that Syrian protesters were described as “terrorists” and that Syria is the

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<sup>1</sup>There are three primary regime-controlled newspapers in Syria — *Tishreen*, *Al-Ba’th* and *Al-Thawrah*. It is not uncommon for the same basic stories to be covered in all three newspapers. *Tishreen* was founded in 1975 by presidential decree (George 2003, 134) and *Al-Thawrah* was founded in 1963 (George 2003, 124). *Al-Thawrah* was originally published as *Al-Wahdah* in 1958 but transferred to the information Ministry and changed its name in 1963 (George 2003, 124). These newspapers have been widely read in Syria. For example, in the mid-2000s, the daily circulation of *Tishreen* was about 60,000 (George 2003, 125).

victim of “foreign plots” initiated by Israel, the United States and other states. One theme that remains consistent throughout is that the Assad regime has long sought to focus public attention on forces external to the regime consistent with a logic of diversionary threat.

Individuals within Syria may be especially influenced by the authoritarian media campaign. Scheller (2013, 25) argues that “government rhetoric highlighting resistance and a common Arab cause against perceived external conspiracies has therefore always appealed to large segments of the population.” Corstange and York (2018) find that framing matters for how respondents view the Syrian conflict in a survey of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon. There is also evidence to suggest that rhetoric of this type matters for cases outside of Syria. In a sample of Egyptian and Saudi respondents, Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018) find that belief in anti-Western and anti-Jewish conspiracies is common with more than 80 percent of respondents endorsing two or more conspiracy theories. These findings are consistent with the idea that publics in Muslim-majority societies develop their understanding of political affairs, at least in part, through the ways that events are framed by competing local political elites (Blaydes and Linzer 2012). Diversionary threat rhetoric may also provide political cover for individuals who want to maintain solidarity with the regime in a socially permissible way through an emphasis on concerns about national unity.

Can the use of diversionary threat rhetoric help to explain, at least in part, the longevity and persistence of the Assad regime, even in the face of what might appear to be overwhelming political challenges?<sup>2</sup> The most common explanation for the long-lived nature of the Assad regime focuses on forms of sectarian cohesion forged by the Assads as political leaders of the minority Alawi community. But there are scholars who have challenged the idea that this instrumentalized sectarian logic provides a dominant explanation for the Assad regime’s durability. For example, Heydemann (1999, 5) argues that the regime’s populist policies sustained its stability in the pre-2011 period, including the incorporation of “workers, peasants and other social groups” into the state economic sector. Less scholarly attention has been focused on the cultural bases for the regime (Magout 2012) despite the fact that cultural factors have long been thought to be an important part in our understanding of Syrian politics (Wedeen 1999). Hinnebusch (2012, 103) argues that in Syria “foreign policy was used to generate nationalist legitimacy.”<sup>3</sup> Our approach uses media discourse as a window into the regime’s strategic thinking about how external factors might be used to bolster its political standing and legitimacy despite significant internal challenges.

This project has several important contributions. First, it demonstrates how autocrats in places like Syria have long used diversionary rhetoric to preserve their power. During normal times, these autocrats have resorted to traditional threats—mainly Israel in this case—to justify the lack of reforms. During the ongoing Syrian civil war, the regime has shifted its rhetoric to a series of domestic and foreign threats. Additionally, this project shows the promise of using topic modeling to explore Arabic texts. While political scientists are increasingly relying on machine learning to analyze large amounts of texts, Arabic texts remain largely unexplored (for a notable exception, see Nielsen 2017). This project shows the potential of Arabic texts as a tool to examine autocratic strategies to maintain power.

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<sup>2</sup>See Heydemann (1999, 4) for a discussion of authoritarian “success” in Syria.

<sup>3</sup>Nationalist discourse which focused on a common enemy in Israel may have also worked to systematically suppress forms of societal sectarianism. While the regime sectarianism affiliations for political purposes, in this context the Assad regime coexisted with “dormant or hidden societal sectarianism” (Ismail 2011, 540).

# Diversionsary Threat Rhetoric in Authoritarian Discourse

Much has been written about the ways that political leaders use external conflict as a way to generate domestic support. Fearon (1998, 303) defines the diversionary use of force as “foreign policy adventurism for the sake of keeping the leader in power rather than advancing the foreign policy interests of the public.” According to diversionary war theory, challenging domestic circumstances encourage leaders to launch overseas military conflicts for domestic political gain (Morgan and Bickers 1992). Participation in foreign conflicts can have cohesive effects. By focusing public attention on a foreign enemy, the public overcomes internal divisions and becomes united against the foreign enemy. Scholars also emphasized the scapegoating effect of diversionary conflicts. When there is wide discontent with the situation at home, leaders can launch diversionary conflicts in order to blame failed policies on foreign enemies (Levy 1989; Tir and Jasinski 2008). Thus, diversionary conflicts can serve to create the perception of a foreign enemy, bolstering political support for the incumbent elite (Morgan and Bickers 1992).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the intuitive appeal of diversionary war theory, scholars have offered a number of pointed critiques. Chiozza and Goemans (2003) show that international crises make leaders insecure, working against the strategic logic of diversionary conflict; Chiozza and Goemans (2004) also find only limited support for a strategic theory of diversionary conflict. Pickering and Kisangani (2005) find that theories of diversionary war are contingent on regime type. Powell (2012) finds that leaders who have put into place “coup proofing” institutions are less likely to use diversionary tactics. The challenges associated with finding empirical support for theories of diversionary war have encouraged attempts to broaden conventional conceptualizations of diversionary strategies to better fit empirical realities. These include the targeting of domestic ethnic minorities (Tir and Jasinski 2008) as well as conflicts that involve a “territorial diversion” (Tir 2010).

An alternative approach for understanding diversionary foreign policy strategies involves expanding — rather than contracting — the scope of empirical exploration to include actions that fall short of conflict initiation. Such an approach builds on Morgan and Bickers (1992, 32) who argue that “lower levels of hostile action, such as threats to use force, shows of force, and uses of force short of war, may be adequate to create the perception of a foreign threat, are less costly and less risky, and may actually be more effective at increasing domestic cohesion.” Kisangani and Pickering (2007) also argue that leaders will prefer to undertake “low-politics” diversions, like humanitarian interventions, because of the relatively low cost and minimal risk of escalation. Kanat (2014) critiques the existing literature on diversionary war theory as being overly focused on one-off diversionary attacks rather than describing the full set of strategies for generating a rally-around-the-flag effect.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>There is wide support for the idea that foreign conflicts can temporarily increase support for the domestic leadership. Some scholars have emphasized that international crises can arouse a feeling of patriotism among the domestic public and potentially increase support of their leaders (Mueller 1973; Lee 1977). Others emphasize that during foreign crises, opinion leaders in the country focus on the crisis rather than on domestic problems, leading to higher support for the leadership (Brody 1986; Brody and Shapiro 1989). Some have found that the biggest rally effect occurs among members of the opposition party as well as among those who are least politically knowledgeable (Baum 2002).

<sup>5</sup>For Kanat (2014), it is critical to focus on leaders and their motivations during periods of conflict and peace.

We use this literature on diversionary conflicts as a conceptual outlook to explore this data. Specifically, we claim that a focus on diversionary threat rhetoric represents an important strategy for leaders to highlight enemies to the nation in order to divert citizen focus away from domestic concerns. Such an approach does not involve the downside risk of initiating a costly foreign conflict but still may generate some of the “rally-around-the-flag” benefits enjoyed as a result of fearmongering about external enemies. While diversionary threat strategies are not the exclusive domain of autocratic regimes, dictatorships may be particularly prone to the use of diversionary threat rhetoric.<sup>6</sup> Autocrats often seek to monopolize political information and, as a result, their pronouncements about foreign threats and plots tend to go unchallenged in the public domain.

Should we believe that Arab publics are influenced by diversionary rhetoric of this type? For a logic of diversionary threat to make sense, at least some segments of the target population should be influenced by regime rhetoric. While we are not able to bring direct evidence to bear on this question, recent scholarship provides important indirect evidence along these lines. Using a survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Corstange and York (2018) find that framing impacts how individuals view the Syrian civil war. Scheller (2013, 13) has argued that Syrian foreign policy is used in populist discourse to appeal to the citizenry. Nyhan and Zeitzoff (2018) find that conspiracy theories about the West and Israel are commonplace among Arab respondents and associated with anti-Western and anti-Jewish attitudes. Perhaps surprisingly, these beliefs are especially pronounced among those individuals with high political knowledge in their sample of Egyptians and Saudis. For example, almost 70 percent of respondents said that the statement “the United States is secretly trying to help the Islamic State (ISIS) take power in Syria and Iraq” is “somewhat” to “very accurate.” About 50 percent said that they believe that “Jews carried out the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks” (Nyhan and Zeitzoff 2018).

A theory of diversionary threat also connects to a growing literature within political science focused on the practices of authoritarian regimes with regard to the media. This literature has paid particular attention to how authoritarian regimes handle challenges to their rule and how discourse shifts in response to these challenges. Research on this subject has been particularly well developed in the context of Chinese politics (King et al. 2013; 2014; 2017).<sup>7</sup> In post-Soviet countries in Central Asia, like Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, authoritarian regimes have used propagandistic discourse about foreign policy (Anceschi 2014). The next sections consider the extent to which we can empirically observe and measure diversionary threat rhetoric within Syria.

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<sup>6</sup>For example, consider the Trump’s claims that a migrant caravan was “invading” the United States in the run up to the 2018 midterm elections.

<sup>7</sup>For example, King et al. (2013; 2014) find that the Chinese regime does not censor posts that are critical of the government or individual leaders. Rather, state censors suppress content that could lead to social mobilization, regardless of whether they were in opposition to the regime or not. This suggests that the Chinese government allows criticism of its policies but is particularly concerned with the potential for collective action among its citizens. Relatedly, King et al. (2017) claim that the Chinese government hires people to write posts on social media with the goal of distracting the public from controversial issues. They find that fabricated posts tend to praise the government and the history of the Communist Party but avoid controversial issues and arguments with skeptics.<sup>8</sup> This literature has advanced our understanding of how governments attempt to manipulate the media and the effects of these tactics. But much of this literature has been limited to China and there have been relatively few quantitative studies of media in authoritarian regimes outside of the Chinese context.

## Authoritarian Media in Syria

Information policies are believed to be among the Syrian leaderships' "main concerns" (George 2003, 126). As a result, the domestic media under Hafez and Bashar al-Assad has long been carefully controlled by the state. The Ministry of Information — which is overseen directly by the presidency — is responsible for both publishing and censoring state newspapers (George 2003, 126). In addition to national-circulation newspapers, the state also broadcasts television and radio channels which repeat content published in the newspapers (George 2003, 8). While there does exist underground publishing, long prison terms await individuals who overstep government red lines (George 2003). As a result, the media environment in Syria has been described as that which has been historically found in other "people's democracies" (George 2003, 8).<sup>9</sup>

Since Hafez al-Assad's accession to the presidency in 1970, the authoritarian regime in Syria has emphasized the country's position as a "front-line" state in the Arab-Israeli conflict where it has served as a bulwark against Israel in the Arab world. Syria's role as a front-line state in the Arab-Israeli conflict has traditionally defined its external relations with profound implications for the country's domestic politics. The country's participation in the 1967 and 1973 wars against Israel provided powerful incentive for the country to grow its armed forces and associated security apparatus. Israel's occupation of the Golan Heights, in particular, was seen as a legitimate reason to increase the size of the military and to increase the importance of the armed forces in public life (Perthes 1995, 148). Assad saw the recovery of lost Syrian territory as an imperative and promoted the importance of this goal to both the military and the general public (Roberts 1987, 108). The size and sophistication of the Syrian military grew and in the late 1970s, the regime launched a second wave of military build-up (Clawson 1989, 3). Between 1977 and 1988, Syria spent about \$40 billion on the state's security apparatus (Clawson 1989, 13). In the mid-1980s, about half a million Syrians were in the armed forces (Clawson 1989, 21). During this period, about half of all state employees were employed by the security apparatus, representing about 15 percent of the total workforce (Perthes 1995, 147).

Barnett has argued that states take "extraordinary measures" during times of war and that the state's new powers often persist even after the war has ended; as a result, he concludes, "if there is a winner during war, it appears to be the state over domestic forces" (1992, 3). Following the 1973 war, Assad appeared to enjoy wider powers with the army firmly in his control (Roberts 1987, 110). The net result was the emergence of what one analyst has called a "national-security state" with the twin goals of "national and regime security" (Perthes 1995, 133). In times of crisis, the Syrian regime has exhibited a tendency to invoke "foreign policy to silence the internal opposition, blaming it for jeopardizing Syrian security or accusing it of cooperating with foreign interests" (Scheller 2013, 13-14).

Despite a significant military buildup, Syria has been poorly positioned to fight a conventional war with Israel for decades. The Syrian leadership has long signaled that it has no

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<sup>9</sup>While the Syrian newspapers cover political events, they are often read "for omissions" (i.e., what issues are not covered) rather than explicitly reported information (Borneman 2007, xxv). Deviations from the "party line" are not permitted and the media has historically been strictly policed (Rubin 2007, 44). Members of the intelligentsia seek out newspapers published in the Gulf or Lebanon and a broader audience has increasingly sought information from Arabic satellite television (Borneman 2007, xxv).

interest in pursuing a “hot” war with Israel (Perthes 2004, 54). Perthes has argued that Syria is not interested in military confrontation but needs to continue playing the “resistance card” as long as Israel occupies Syrian territory in the Golan (2004, 57). Hafez al-Assad — long considered a pragmatic realist — sought only the Israeli withdrawal from the Golan with no expectation that the destruction of Israel would be possible (Roberts 1987, 108). Although the regime’s actual goals were quite limited compared to rhetoric, Hinnebusch has argued that “Assad demonstrated great tenacity in pursuit of his scaled down strategic goals by refusing to settle for less than full Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 lines” (2001, 152).

Rubin has argued that diversionary tactics have been core to the Syrian regime’s survival strategies. He argues that by keeping attention focused on the Israeli threat, “foreign policy” served as a substitute for actual governance of Syria (Rubin 2007, 102). The conflict with Israel rationalized dictatorship and continued rule while providing “endless chances for posturing bravely” (Rubin 2007, 24). This type of diversionary threat maintenance has not been limited to Syria — other Arab states have also sought to ratchet up anti-Israeli rhetoric as it offers regimes “a degree of immunity from radical criticism at home” (Rubin 2007, 20). Rubin cites an incident in March 2001 when Ba’th Party members attending a public meeting asked then-Vice President Abdel Halim Khaddam why more has not been done to stem rampant corruption — Khaddam’s response was that Syria was at a state of war and, as such, domestic reforms were not the priority (2007, 24).

Enemies of the regime are regularly described as foreign agents or anti-nationalists (George 2003, 49). According to Rubin, “fighting Israel — or more often just talking about fighting Israel or praising others for doing it — was the highest of all virtues” (2007, 227). All societal struggles, even those related to the domestic economy, became subsumed by the “main battle” against the twin evils of imperialism and Zionism (Sottimano 2009, 19). The persistent reference to foreign threats in an effort to increase patriotic sentiment at home continued after the accession of Bashar al-Assad where “national patriotic appeal” regularly served as Bashar’s “trump card” (Rubin 2007, 174). According to Saleh (2017, 60), it as a “policy of outdoing everyone else in radical opposition to Israel” while at the same time demanding everyone “continually assert their true patriotic spirit.”<sup>10</sup>

Sottimano describes how the conflict with Israel impacts domestic politics:

“The Arab-Israeli conflict acted as a discursive context for a culture of total war, economic austerity, and an irreducible antagonism: all these elements became part of the ‘struggling experience’ that characterized politically correct identity in Assad’s Syria....Assad’s discourse increasingly turned into an epic, grand narrative that, by requiring all to sacrifice and struggle for ‘Syria’s destiny’ further disempowered them vis-a-vis the imperatives of a superior national cause” (2009, 19).

Blaydes and Linzer (2012) describe the circumstances under which anti-American sentiment has become the type of “all-purpose” issue in the Islamic world that is supported by wide swaths of society around which populations of different ideological persuasions can mobilize.

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<sup>10</sup>These ideas have been repeated as part of the rhetoric of the regime. Acceptable parameters of discourse are exhibited in this way which provide an example for Syrian citizens for how to engage in resistance against enemies (Ismail 2011, 541). Saleh (2017, 60) argues that through this process there has been a corruption of language and political discourse in particular since “language become more dishonest” and “hyperbolic.”

Similarly, in authoritarian Syria where Israel is extremely unpopular both for its handling of the Palestinian issue but also for the continued Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights, anti-Israel nationalism has been cultivated as the regime’s answer to generating popular loyalty. By maintaining focus on the Israel issue, the regime stays on noncontroversial ideological ground. This is in contrast to a focus on other important but potentially controversial issues including the role of religion in political life and the liberalization of political or economic spheres. The need to emphasize a non-controversial ideological theme — like anti-Israel sentiment — was particularly significant given Syria’s Arab nationalist origins. According to Hinnebusch, peace with Israel would require the regime to find an “ideological substitute for the Arab nationalism that for so long had endowed it with a modicum of legitimacy” (2001, 163).<sup>11</sup>

## An Analysis of *Tishreen*, 1987-2002

How can we characterize media discourse in Syria over a relatively long time horizon? In this section, we show the general trends in the coverage of *Tishreen* based on a hand-coding of the newspaper’s front page. Figure 1 plots trends in the coverage of Israel in *Tishreen*, beginning in 1987 and ending in 2002. The gray lines plot the daily average of front page headlines that are dedicated to Israel and the black lines detail the weekly average. Dates for which data are missing are left blank. Over the entire period covered by the data, around one quarter of the headlines involve Israel.

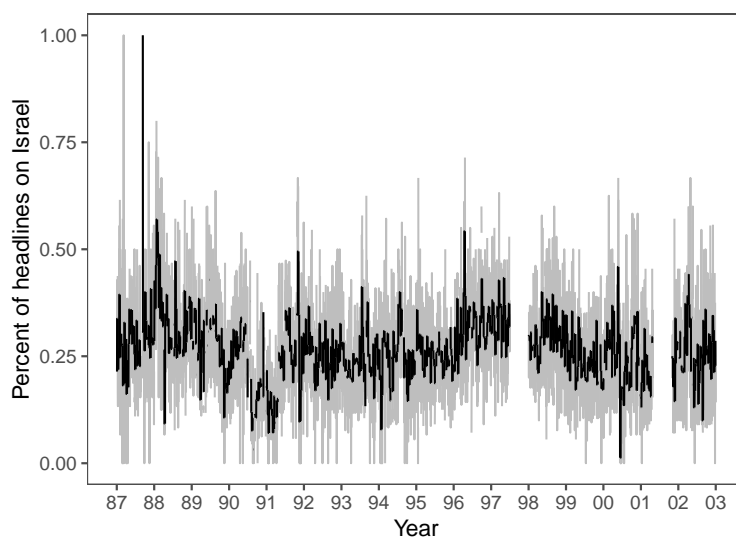


Figure 1: Percentage of *Tishreen* Front-page Headlines Referencing Israel, 1987-2002

The patterns presented in Figure 1 suggest that discourse about Israel has been a prominent and continual feature of Syrian public discourse. Given the relatively high level of tension

<sup>11</sup>Given this discussion, we expect the Syrian regime to resort to emphasizing the Israeli threat constantly in order to divert public attention from domestic problems and encourage Syrian nationalist sentiment. Specifically, we might expect the Syrian regime to discuss the Israel threat on Friday when circulation is highest. See discussion in the Appendix on this point.



between Syria and Israel for the past decades, this is perhaps not surprising. However, following the Madrid Conference of 1991 and through 1996, Syria and Israel engaged in peace negotiations. The Madrid Conference initiated the first meaningful attempt to find a solution and forge an agreement. The timing of the Madrid Conference and initiation of a Syrian-Israel track was closely tied to international developments. Rabinovich (1991) argues that by the late 1980s, Hafez al-Assad had come to realize that changes taking place within the Soviet Union were going to have far reaching consequences for Syria. In particular, a decline in the stature of the USSR, a decreasing relevance of the Soviet-American rivalry and an improvement in Soviet-Israeli relations were all going to have a negative impact on Syria's standing (Rabinovich 1991). Shad et al. (1995), however, suggest that this was not al-Assad's preferred strategy arguing that Hafez al-Assad would have rather remained both anti-Western and anti-Israel in rhetoric conditional on the strength and support of the Soviet Union. Indeed, scholars have argued that Assad was not interested in peace if it meant that he lost the support of public opinion as he was genuinely worried about how the regime was perceived (Scheller 2013, 18-19).

In December of 1989, Syria announced the re-establishment of full diplomatic relations with Egypt while simultaneously softening Syria's position on Israel (Shad et al. 1995). In 1990, Hafez al-Assad signaled a willingness to speak with the Israelis, a decision that was likely a function of a deliberative process that had started some time before (Shad et al. 1995). Shad et al. (1995) argue that there was an overhaul of Syrian foreign policy after the collapse of the Soviet Union and in the wake of Syria's participation in an American-led coalition against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. Assistance provided to the US during the Gulf War provided a chance for Syria to signal its desire for improved relations with the US and Western actors (Shad et al. 1995).

Table 1 shows the results from a regression of mentions of Israel in *Tishreen* on an indicator for the peace talks. The first column includes the period from October 30, 1991 through early March 1996. This period represents the official peace negotiations that began with the Madrid Accords and ended with the collapse of the talks (Cobban 1999, 15). The second column includes a narrower period, starting when Syria restored relations with Egypt and declared its willingness to talk with Israel in December 1989 and ending in August 1993, when the peace talks with Israel significantly slowed down because of peace talks between the Israelis and Palestinians.<sup>12</sup> As can be seen in the table, coverage of Israel during peace talks has decreased by 2.3-4.3 percentage points, representing between one-fifth to over a third of a standard deviation.

These results are largely consistent with arguments by scholars focused on the study of Syrian foreign policy. For example, Scheller (2013, 78) argues that "Hafez al-Assad slowly began to prepare the public for the prospect of peace...the regime modified the language used in the official media with the aim of assuring the public that peace was a strategic choice to advance Syrian interests." While al-Assad may have also modified his language, our findings suggest that the omission of discussion was a key way in which he attempted to prepare the Syrian public for the possibility of peace with Israel. These results suggest that well Israel was

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<sup>12</sup>When the Israelis were negotiating with Palestinians, they claimed that the Israeli political system could digest progress on only one track of the peace process at the time. This led to slowing down the peace talks with Syria. See Cobban (1999, 56).

frequently invoked by the regime, its value as a topic diversionary discourse decreased during periods when the probability of normalization increased.

Table 1: Coverage of Israel in *Tishreen* during the peace talks

	Percent of daily headlines mentioning Israel	
	(1)	(2)
Peace Talks	-0.022*** (0.004)	-0.043*** (0.004)
Constant	0.272*** (0.002)	0.276*** (0.002)
Observations	4,209	4,209
R <sup>2</sup>	0.008	0.026
Residual Std. Error (df = 4207)	0.114	0.113
F Statistic (df = 1; 4207)	32.662***	110.920***

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## Analysis of *Al-Thawrah*, 2005-2018

The results presented in the previous section suggest that discourse about Israel is common in the state-sponsored media. Discourse about Israel declines when relations between Israel and Syria have the potential to improve. This is potentially because Syrian discourse about Israel is uniformly negative and omission of discourse about Israel may have had decreased utility as a diversion in regime rhetoric during periods of normalizing relations.

In the 2000s, Syria underwent important changes in terms of access to the internet, development of the state-sponsored media, and public access to news sources. In particular, state-sponsored Syrian dailies began to publish their articles on-line in a bid to modernize their distribution mechanisms for state-sponsored news. As a result, for the period beginning in 2005, we are able to gather data that goes beyond hand-coded headlines. In particular, we downloaded 64,977 articles from *Al-Thawrah* that cover the period from January 3, 2005 through January 3, 2018. As this is an exploratory project, we rely on topic modeling to examine these texts. Topic modeling allows us to find and analyze topics in the articles, which are defined as probability mass functions over words (Grimmer and Steward 2013). Topic modeling uses the co-occurrence of words to find these topics by assuming that articles are “bags of words”—that is, that the ordering of words does not matter. To find the parameters of the model, it assumes that the articles were generated in a two-step process. First, the topic proportions are drawn in each article. Second, conditional on the topic proportions, the actual words are drawn. Structural topic modeling (Roberts et al. 2014) allows us to add covariates for articles to improve the estimation of the topics and their prevalence. As

such, we include an indicator for the Syrian revolution, which began on March 15, 2011 as a covariate. We specified 40 topics in the model.<sup>13</sup> Table 2 shows some of the topics and the top terms associated with each one as well as the expected proportion of these topics.

Topic Label	Highest Probability Terms	Expected Proportion
Diplomacy	relation, visit, state, delegation, meeting, foreign	0.05
Conspiracies And Plots	people, terrorism, resistance, enemy, zionist, conspiracy	0.05
Iran	Syria, state, crisis, Iran, foreign, dialogue	0.04
United States	America, United, States, president, Europe, Washington	0.04
Isis	terrorism, organization, Syria, ISIS, state, Iraq	0.04
Announcements	first, public, SANA, yesterday, thawrah, Damascus	0.04
Gulf	Saudi, west, terrorism, Qatar, U.S., Gulf	0.04
Israel And Palestine	Israel, Palestine, occupation, sect, Jerusalem, land	0.04
Ba'th Party	nation (watan; qawm), party, Arab, leadership, people, Ba'th	0.03
Lebanon	Lebanon, resistance, Israel, president, nation, enemy	0.03
Bureaucracy	council, project, work, public, manage, minister	0.03
Russia	Russia, Syria, Moscow, united, Foreign, Lavrov	0.03
Regional Politics	Arab, state, peace, Israel, decision, conference	0.03
Economy	economy, Syria, sector, trade, invest, tourism	0.03
National Unity	nation, Syria, unity, army, sons, people	0.03
International Community	states, united, nations, terrorism, council, security	0.03
Counter Terrorism	terror, army, armed, organization, destroy, kill	0.03
Iraq	Iraq, Baghdad, kill, America, injure, city	0.03
Speeches	said, politics, should, change, topic, president	0.02
Temperature	[regions in Syria], temperature, increase, averages, high, low	0.02
Assad	president, mister, Assad, Bashar, Arab, Syria	0.02
Finance	money, public, firm, Lira, bank, dollar	0.02
Media	media, investigate, channel, information, newspapers, report	0.02
Religion	Islam, religion, Patriarch, peace, Muslim, Christian	0.02
Government Services	Syria, governorate, citizen, assist, service, work	0.02
Culture	culture, France, Syria, world, exhibition, modern	0.02
Capitulation	Aleppo, city, people, army, terrorism, reconciliation	0.02
Education	university, education, student, study, higher, public	0.02
Natural Resources	oil, water, project, electricity, station, gas	0.02
Terrorist Attacks	armed, group, terrorist, car, fire, elements	0.02
Victims	children, camp, hospital, injured, relief, treat	0.02
Turkey	Turkey, Erdogan, party, government, regime, development	0.02
Election Winners	[winners' names], regional, doctor, MP, council, committee	0.02
Arab Uprisings	Egypt, Tunisia, security, protest (tazahur), people, protest (ehtija)	0.01
Legislation	article, law, decree, ruling, number, court	0.01
Transport	Jordan, sea, fly, chemical, border, transport	0.01
Elections	election, constitution, presidency, people, council, candidate	0.01
Yemen	Yemen, enemy, Saudi, army, raid, bombing	0.01
Weather	[regions in Syria], reach, rain, season	0.01
Communication	add, call, say, details, electronic, phone	0.01

Table 2: Topic labels, highest probability terms for each topic, and their expected proportion

Figure 2 shows the trends in coverage for four topics, before and after the Syrian revolution

<sup>13</sup>We also tried 20, 30, 50, 60, and 70 topics. The topic model with 40 topics was the most interpretable model. Models with 20 or 30 topics missed some relevant topics on diversionary threats while models with more than 40 topics often repeated the same topic multiple times. See the appendix for more details

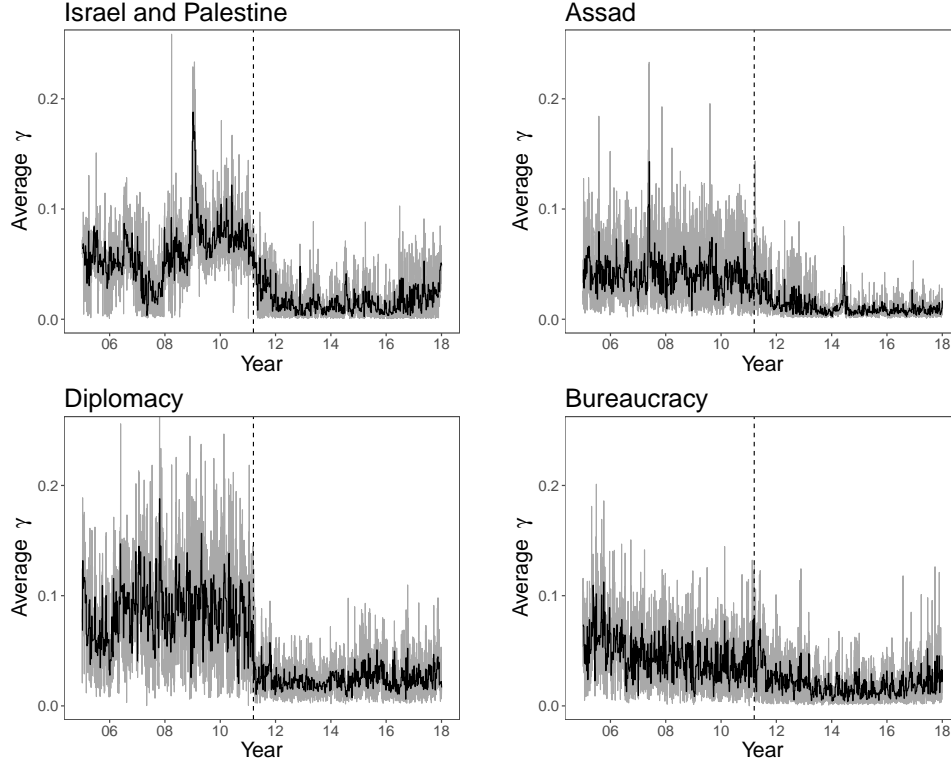


Figure 2: Decline of Historically Common Topics in *Al-Thawrah* from 2005 through early 2018

— Assad, Israel and Palestine, diplomacy and the economy. The x-axis in this figure represents the year and the y-axis is the daily average of  $\gamma$ , where  $\gamma$  represents the per-article-per-topic probability. The black lines represent the weekly averages of these probabilities. Looking at these trends before 2011, we observe that these four topics made up a relatively large percentage of the discourse. Discourse of this sort, which included a combination of everyday reporting on the diplomatic and other activities of the president along with anti-Israel writing and reporting of economic announcements, reflected the pre-2011 equilibrium in the Syrian media. As can be seen in Table 3, terms related to Assad and to Israel and Palestine have decreased following the revolution by an average of 0.028 and 0.038 following the revolution, representing 0.3 standard deviation.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup>Our measurement of focus on Israel differs in this analysis from the previous section. In particular, we examine a different newspaper in this section (*Al-Thawrah* instead of *Tishreen*) and we are focused on analysis of text from articles rather than headlines.

Table 3: Decline of Historically Common Topics in *Al-Thawra*

	Israel and Palestine (1)	Assad (2)	Diplomacy (3)	Bureaucracy (4)
Revolution (March 15, 2011)	-0.038*** (0.001)	-0.028*** (0.001)	-0.052*** (0.001)	-0.023*** (0.001)
Constant	0.057*** (0.001)	0.041*** (0.001)	0.076*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

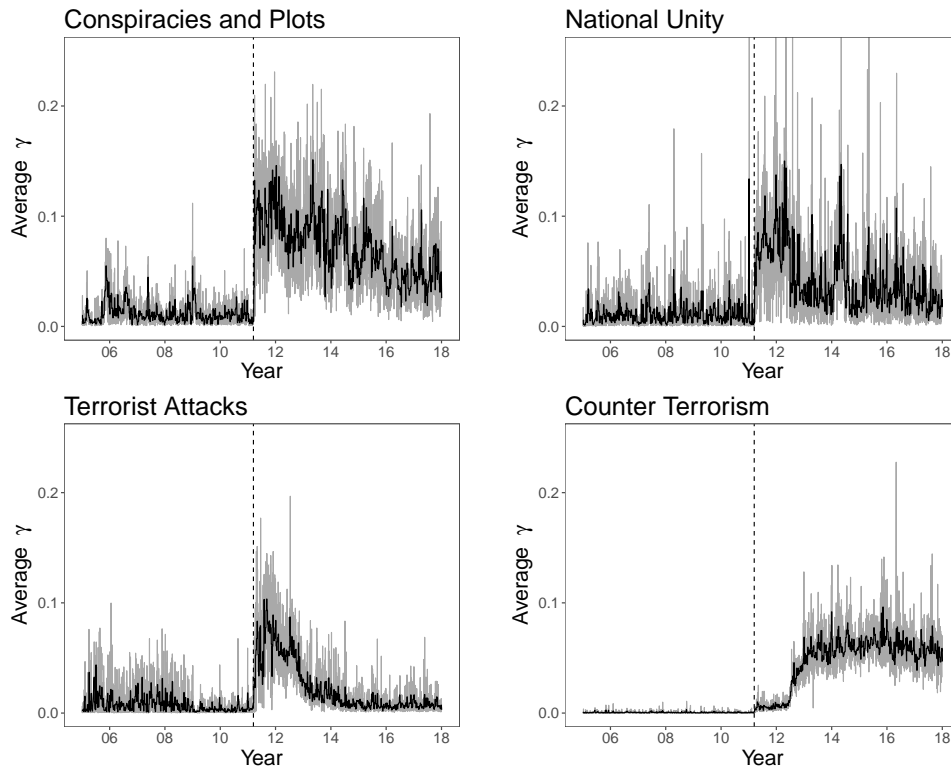


Figure 3: Rise of New Topics in *Al-Thawrah* from 2005 through early 2018

What types of topics were replacing the historically common topics of concern? After 2011, the regime pivoted in terms of areas of discussion. Figure 3 shows that topics associated with national unity, for example, increased considerably after the revolution. On average, the beginning of the Syrian revolution was associated with a 0.03 increase in the discussion of national unity, representing around 0.29 of a standard deviation. Given the decreasing popularity with al-Assad following the revolution with large segments of the population, the regime may have decided to switch mentions of him with topics that attempt to build up Syrian nationalism and unity in the face of threats. Increasingly, Syria's news agencies focused on claiming the existence of international conspiracies against the Syrian state (Scheller 2013, 2).

Table 4: Rise of New Topics in *Al-Thawra*

	Conspiracies & Plots (1)	National Unity (2)	Terrorist Attacks (3)	Counter Terrorism (4)
Revolution (March 15, 2011)	0.051*** (0.001)	0.030*** (0.001)	0.017*** (0.001)	0.045*** (0.001)
Constant	0.012*** (0.001)	0.012*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.002*** (0.000)

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

Following the revolution, discussion of conspiracies increased by 0.051 on average, representing about half a standard deviation. This tendency may have been particularly salient in the early period of the conflict, blaming the country’s problems on “foreign-sponsored conspiracy” (Scheller 2013, 14). Saleh (2017, 59) sums up this perspective when he argues that the Syrian regime had a tendency to fling “accusations of treason in every direction” in order to “foster an atmosphere of collective paranoia, putting the majority of the population on permanent guard against the many conspiracies allegedly being planned against them.”

Part of this involved the branding of protesters associated with the Syrian uprisings as saboteurs and terrorists. In particular, discussion of terrorist attacks increased significantly almost immediately as the 2011 revolution began suggesting a strategy in which activists and insurgents were labeled as terrorists by the regime. By linking terrorism to protest, Athamneh and Sayej (2013) argue that rebellion becomes part of a foreign conspiracy. Saleh (2017, 59) writes that in such a context “the patriotism of every citizen can be questioned at any instant, and the world around him is an evil and dangerous place to be guarded against the distrusted.”

Shortly after protests began in Damascus in March 2011, a new set of foreign threats emerged for the Syrian regime. Several countries came to endorse the protesters before offering them support.<sup>15</sup> In addition, as the conflict grew in size, regional actors began to endorse rebel or state actors. While the Gulf states and Turkey typically supported the rebels, Iran and Russia offered material and other support for the Syrian regime. As a result, all four of these actors began to figure more prominently in the media. Figure 4 reflects some of these trends. Since threats from these countries became more salient, regime papers seemed to substitute discourse about Israel with threats from these countries. This perspective is summarized by Fawwaz Traboulsi who suggests:

“The regime has a penchant for what used to be known as ‘externalizing crises,’ i.e., placing responsibility for them on foreign parties — either accusing them of pulling strings behind the scene or bringing them in as mediators in the conflict between the regime and significant segments of its population.”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>For example, Gulf countries, like Qatar, were accused of relying on film studios to generate propaganda against the regime (Scheller 2013, 2).

<sup>16</sup>Conflict & Intl. Politics, Fawwaz Traboulsi interviewed by Mohammed Al Attar Heinrich Boll Stiftung

The outside culpability for crisis continued to be theme despite the fact that the target changed. Israel was no longer a high-salience target of regime rhetoric but the basic tactics of the regime have remained largely the same through this process of “externalizing crises.” This is consistent with scholars who have characterized Syria as a “bunker state” (Athamneh and Sayej 2013, 170).

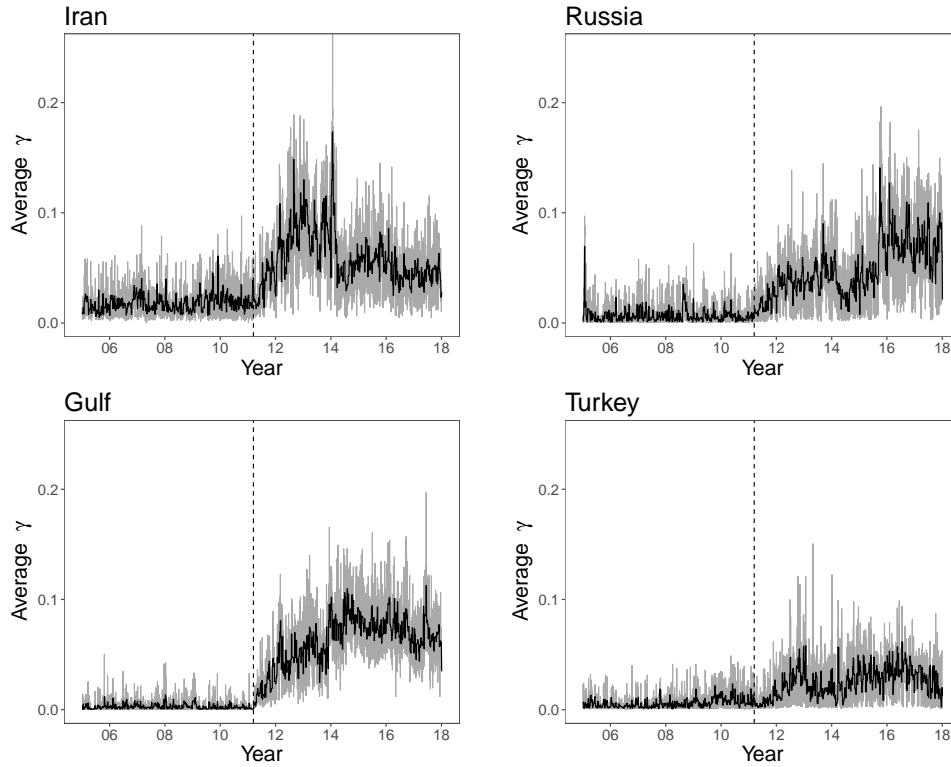


Figure 4: Changing Focus on International Actors in *Al-Thawrah* from 2005 through early 2018

Table 5: Changing Focus on International Actors in *Al-Thawra*

	Iran (1)	Russia (2)	Gulf (3)	Turkey (4)
Revolution (March 15, 2011)	0.034*** (0.001)	0.039*** (0.001)	0.053*** (0.001)	0.017*** (0.001)
Constant	0.019*** (0.001)	0.009*** (0.001)	0.003*** (0.001)	0.008*** (0.001)

Note:

\*p<0.1; \*\*p<0.05; \*\*\*p<0.01

## Syrian Rhetoric during the Arab Uprisings, 2011-2012

Protest activities associated with the Arab Spring represent the most important challenge to the stability of the Syrian state in decades. This section examines state media coverage of protest during 2011 and 2012 in a more fine-grained way. We analyze news coverage from the online editions of the Syrian dailies, *Al-Thawrah* and *Al-Ba'th*. In this section we seek to qualitatively explain how regime shifts in discourse occurred with a more focused discussion about the precise language used during this critical period of regime crisis.

Large-scale protests associated with the Arab Spring first erupted in Syria on March 15 in the southern city of Der'a. The first mention of events in Der'a did not appear in *Al-Ba'th* until March 22 when the newspaper reported that a commission had been established to investigate destroyed property; the article was accompanied by a photograph of a burned and mangled car. The next day, *Al-Ba'th* published a photo of people walking casually in the streets of Der'a. In one photo, a man carried a plastic shopping bag, insinuating markets were functioning normally. On March 29, *Al-Thawrah* ran an article with a headline stating, "What is going on is an attempt to destabilize Syria and its national unity." The article suggested that various plots were seeking to destabilize national unity but that these plots would only make Syria "more steadfast, proud, and united." On March 30, a number of articles in *Al-Thawrah* pointed to the role of foreign actors in conspiring against Syria. According to one article, "Lebanese personalities" told *Al-Thawrah* that subversive acts in Syria were done in the service of Israel as part of the "Zionist enemy's project" to divide Arab countries. On the same day, *Al-Ba'th* ran an article with the headline "The People Want Bashar al-Assad" and an image which showed citizens celebrating and waving Syrian flags under a huge poster of the president.

On March 31, *Al-Ba'th* reported that Assad delivered a speech which claimed that Syria was the subject of a foreign plot. On the same day, *Al-Thawrah* published an article entitled "Widespread condemnation of the conspiracy targeting Syria and its national unity" which discussed conspiracies to support resistance emanating from overseas. Throughout April, *Al-Ba'th* reported on the activities of armed gangs while also discussing foreign conspiracies. On April 13, *Al-Thawrah* reported on confessions from a terrorist cell funded by Lebanese actors. Indeed, *Al-Thawrah* reported on conspiracies against Syria on nearly a daily basis while simultaneously emphasizing national unity.

These themes continued in the months to follow. On May 18, *Al-Ba'th* first reported on attempts by demonstrators to meet with an advisor of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. On May 26th, *Al-Ba'th* reported that the US and Israel were trying to control the Arab revolutions and referred to Netanyahu as the Zionist enemy. On June 9th, *Al-Ba'th* ran an article which blamed recent terrorist attacks within Syria on the US and Israel. Similar themes — particularly Israeli involvement in Syrian violence and the US role in a conspiracy against the regime — were repeated on June 28. On September 4, *Al-Thawrah* ran an article that named a little-known Jordanian "political activist" and described him as "member of the proceedings committee of the Jordanian People's Assembly to support Syria against conspiracy and external interference."

Over the course of 2012, news articles in *Al-Thawrah* began to describe foreign enemies of Syria with more specific details. On February 2, *Al-Thawrah* published an article which stated that Qatar has been pushing for the "shedding the blood of Syrians and undermining stability



by pumping money, weapons and media hysteria” into Syria. The article also discussed how Qatar’s policy of money spending “cannot bring [the Qataris] political glory... and will only bring them the indignation of everyone as well as God’s wrath and anger.” The article criticized Qatar for allowing “American and Western planes to fly from their national territory to destroy Arab cities and kill thousands of Arabs.”

On March 14, an article in *Al-Thawrah* asserted that the United States had pit Saudi Arabia and Qatar against one another to see which would “lead the American-Israeli conspiracy against Syria and the Syrian people.” The article described the “ferocity of the evil war on Syria” and further threatened the “fall of the Al-Saud and Al-Thani regimes” when the Syrian people proved their firmness against the foreign plots. On May 15, an article in *Al-Thawrah* claimed that Saud al-Faisal, the Saudi foreign minister at the time, had attacked the Syrian media for “exposing his conspiratorial role.” The article stated that Saud al-Faisal was sending terrorists to Syria but failing to achieve his objectives, leading al-Faisal to be in a “state of hysteria.”

Turkey also appeared featured in media discourse during 2012. On April 11, *Al-Thawrah* cited a Turkish opposition figure as saying that “the Turkish government is pursuing serious provocative policies against Syria” and that Turkey is sending its agents to the border with Syria in order to fabricate excuses to cross the border and intervene in Syrian affairs. On August 29, *Al-Thawrah* cited an opposition figure in Turkey who claimed that the Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party (AKP) was responsible for “the bloodshed in Syria,” asserting that “history will record this crime.”

## Conclusions

On the eve of the Arab uprisings in December 2010, few Arab citizenries had grievances as long-standing and legitimate as those held by Syrians living under the authoritarian regime of first Hafez, and later, Bashar al-Assad. Among the most repressive regimes in the world, the Assad dynasty all but banned political parties and organized elections which made plebiscites in neighboring autocracies, like Egypt and Jordan, appear genuinely competitive. As rulers were challenged and began to step down in Tunisia and Egypt, there were doubts that revolt would ever reach authoritarian Syria. But in the spring of 2011, the rebellion in Syria began on a small scale, eventually growing in size and reaching major population centers like Aleppo. Despite the tremendous pressures faced by the Assad regime, including high-level military defections and widespread international condemnation, the regime has maintained its position by waging war against segments of its civilian populations and relying on the material and political support of international allies, like Iran and Russia.

Since 2011, the Assad regime has also made use of discourse on the need to maintain national unity in the face of foreign threats and conspiracies. Discussion of plots against the Syrian state sowed confusion and may have damaged support for oppositional forces in ways that played to sectarian divisions. While it is impossible to assess the impact of the diversionary threat rhetoric on the durability of the Assad regime, thus far Bashar al-Assad has avoided the fate of his fellow Arab leaders who were deposed after the Arab Spring. Scholars of the Syrian regime have argued that the regime has made use of an evolving set of grand narratives, or master frames, which are not meant to accurately document political events, but rather

mobilize relevant political constituencies; since the Arab Spring the most important of these narratives has been focused on the existence of a violent terrorist conspiracy (Leenders 2016). The Assad regime maintained its “insistence that imperialist powers are conspiring to harm Syrians” (Athamneh and Sayej 2013, 170). This is consistent with the idea that the regime has presented itself as the “the protector and defender of the Syrian people against external hostilities” (Scheller 2013, 40).

The use of diversionary threat rhetoric in Syria predates the Arab uprisings and has long been part of regime discourse. Before 2011, Syrian media coverage of external actors, particularly Israel, sought to divert attention to Syria’s external environment. The regime’s rhetoric consistently gave the impression that Syria was “in a constant state of war with the ‘Zionist enemy’...[where] any form of internal opposition is framed as an attempt to emasculate the nation or to collude with the enemy” (Saleh 2017, 96). In this setting, the narrative about confronting the Israeli enemy became a “main pretext for controlling the Syrian people” (Saleh 2017, 98). We believe that this project represents a first attempt to quantify some of these ideas. And although the Arab Uprisings forced a recalibration of the regime’s political strategy, across all periods of analysis diversionary threat rhetoric features prominently in Syrian state-sponsored discourse.

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