Political discourse of President Bashar Al-Assad after the Syrian revolution (analytical vision)

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Abstract

Purpose – There is no doubt that the political speech of the Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad is of exceptional importance in understanding the developments of the war in Syria, and clarifies the position of all parties involved in the war, whether local, regional or international. Accordingly, and based on the dismantling of political discourse, the identification of its core, as well as its variables and major themes of this discourse, this study aims to understand the levels of complexity, paths and the fate of the war in Syria that certainly does not come free of charge, the hardest of which is the human cost whether for the victims or the displaced persons.

Design/methodology/approach – After a careful study of all the resilient factors in the literature review to categorize the primary data based on Assad's discourses in the media, through a "qualitative research study" of his "interviews and discourses," it is found that the Assad's rhetoric is highly relevant to his tenacious presidency. The research reveals the themes that dominated Assad's interview responses and speeches and his strategy of framing the revolution as a foreign insurgency against his government. In fact, Assad delegitimizes any semblance of the uprisings as a "pro-democracy movement" or "revolution," denying the presence of a rebellion against his government.

Findings – By the analysis the study found out that Bashar Al-Assad continued to focus on certain reasons and issues that led to the crisis and the continuation of the war, such as the Muslim Brotherhood's involvement, considering the Syrian opposition abroad as agents of Western countries, Syria is subject to a regional and international conspiracy, terrorism is a major scourge that must be fought and that the army is essential in resolving the battles taking place there. Likewise, emphasizing the internal dialogue with all stakeholders and involved parties is the way to solve the crisis.

The Syrian President's speeches do not focus much on the accusations against his regime from the opposition or the international parties involved in the conflict.

Originality/value – Assad's resiliency has made him a distinct leader in the region. This paper analyzes the factors contributing to Assad's resiliency. The literature review consists of the existing theories on authoritarian persistence and Assad's power base in particular. The literature review discusses the factors that helped Assad adopts his resiliency strategies to the conflict environment. The research focuses on how Assad used the media as a platform for displaying his own manipulative narrative of the conflict. It concludes that Assad's use of the media as his propaganda tool legitimized his rule, making it highly relevant to his persistence.

Keywords Political discourse, Syrian revolution, Syrian crisis, Syrian opposition, Bashar Al-Assad, Syria

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The Syrians went out on their revolution on March 15, 2011, to express inclusive national aspirations and dreams, raising national slogans (freedom, dignity, justice). Their main demands were building the Syrian state, in which the values of democracy, social justice, the circulation of governmental and presidential authorities, freedoms are provided. All political, respect for human rights and equality shall be achieved in the president's political discourses to express their aspirations and demands (Nahar, 2014).

Instead of responding to these national aspirations of all Syrians, the Syrian regime, under the leadership of Bashar Al-Assad, launched a war against them. The aggression of Bashar toward his people is instilled in his political speeches and discourses, which bear false meanings and contents, such as: describing the Syrian strugglers as terrorists and agents, the deliberate distinction between the meanings of terrorism and the legal resistance to the violence of the Syrian regime and the confusion in his speeches between the concept of the state – which accommodates gathering of ethnic, religious, sectarian and tribal identities – and its authoritarian political system to which loyalists are considered honorable citizens, while opponents of his rule are traitors and agents (Hinnebusch, 2013).

What reinforced the confusion of the concept of the state after the 2011 revolution is the current authoritarian political system led by Bashar Al-Assad in his speeches and discourses toward the external bullying of Iran and Russia in the face of the 2011 Syrian revolution, under the slogan of fighting terrorism and preserving the state, i.e. his current authoritarian political system. Likewise, some parts of the Syrian opposition have also rushed to seek foreign assistance and adopted political speeches and discourses that legitimate the external bullying under the aim of toppling the regime (Fares, 2015).

The most important feature of political discourse in the era of Bashar Al-Assad is the language of insults and treachery in his discourses against his opponents. Concepts and meanings in his discourses are dispersed and unclear, and those Syrians with differing opinions are threatened by his speeches. The totality of Bashar al-Assad's political speeches does not discuss the form of the Syrian state that the Syrians would seek in the future, starting with the call to build a new social contract including all sects, that goes beyond other sub-identities, without eradicating anyone, which finally leads to crystallize all the Syrian identities in the frame of a future social contract (Abou Zeid, 2014).

Hence, the researcher believes that political speeches and discourses must reflect and define standards of Syrian patriotism by clarifying the meanings and ideas that support the peaceful transition process in the Syrian state and the formation of acceptable democratic positions and practices to all. The criteria for political discourse accepted by all Syrians must guarantee the rights of all citizens without excluding anyone, meeting the needs of all Syrian communities, ensuring that the political discourse should achieve high levels of social justice on the one hand and political and societal stability on the other hand, while political relations with any country of the world, which agrees or disagree with the Syrian shall be determined by the ongoing global political events that are changing, to serve national interests in the first place. These are the essence of the standards of Syrian patriotism that must be included in the text of any political discourse by the head of state (Van Dam, 2014).

The researcher studied and analyzed the content of all the speeches delivered by Bashar Al-Assad and concluded that all of them were unable to achieve the Syrian demands after the outbreak of the revolution.

In this context, the researcher analyzed the main characteristics and objectives of the political discourse of Bashar Al-Assad as follows.

1.1 Denying the presence of a rebellion against his government
In denying the presence of a rebellion against his government, Assad comforts the international community, hindering it from taking action against him. The qualitative research for this study focused on Assad's discourse through public speeches and interviews since the start of the revolution in March of 2011 through to the present days by following the progression of Assad's rhetoric to understand and analyze the changing messages that Bashar Al-Assad conveys to both his country and the rest of the world (Hinnebusch, 2019). Starting with the examination of the inauguration speech Assad had delivered when he first became President in 2000 a comparison was made to the discourse from the time of the conflict to baseline rhetoric. The researcher then studied a total of (three speeches) delivered by Bashar Al-Assad and (eight interviews) between Assad and various media outlets based around the globe. The main discourses for Bashar Al-Assad are:

- *The first speech* was delivered shortly after the uprisings began on March 30, 2011.
- *The second of Assad's Speech* addressed the state of the Syrian crisis as of January 2013.
- *The third was his inauguration speech* in July of 2014 after he was "re-elected as a President" (Krokowska, 2013).

The speeches, aimed for consumption by the Syrian people and the Arab world, were delivered in Arabic. The speeches were analyzed as given in Arabic and English translation.

1.2 Targeting both the domestic Syrian audience and the international audiences with his fluent English and Western-style
While the speeches were targeting Assad's domestic audience, the interviews conducted throughout the course of the conflict were targeting international audiences (Morten, 2018). The analyzed interviews include "three with American media" and "single interviews" with (British, French, Russian, Lebanese and German media) outlets.

The researcher gathered this data from Syrian regime-controlled news outlets, opposition news outlets and media outlets from various countries.

1.3 Manipulation of the crisis to legitimize his position of authority
Following the progression of Assad's rhetoric, keeping the targeted audience in mind, to discover how Assad uses the media to enhance his position as ahead of the Syrian State. The research proceeded to categorize the primary data based on their platform. The media outlet and language used in Assad's discourse indicated the audience whom Assad was targeting in that particular discourse. The themes that dominated Assad's interview responses and speeches were identified, revealing his own narrative of the Syrian conflict that he portrayed to the world (Kassab, 2015).

The reappearing themes revealed Assad's careful planning of the evolving nature of the conflict, as well as the way in which he manipulated the crisis to sustain and legitimize his position of authority.

1.4 Several incoherent and inconsistent themes compared to the reality on the ground in Syria but appealing to the interests of the Western allies
The analysis reveals several inconsistent themes that are incoherent with the reality on the ground in Syria, but at the same time appeal to the interests of the West and Western allies. Assad's discourse was minimal before the conflict; his inauguration speech on July 17, 2000, was one of his major speeches before the war. He referenced (the need for economic reform,

as well as the need for the Syrian people and the government to work together) to achieve this goal. Before the revolution, Assad made it seem as if he was willing to work with the people toward economic development and modernization; however, the time has proven that his dictatorial form of governance lacks concern for the fate of the people (Pierret, 2015).

But, the researcher identified "four main themes" that Assad fed to the media after the people rose in 2011, such as: (combatting terrorism, fighting rising sectarianism, uniting against a foreign threat and having the support of the Syrian people).

Although the rise in Islamism has allowed these frames to become more legitimate, Assad has spun the war to make his rule seem like the only legitimate alternate to extremist rule in Syria.

2. Analyzing the main concepts, meanings, rhetoric and ideas of Bashar Al-Assad political discourses at homeland and internationally

In an effort to go beyond the current data, the paper focused on Assad's discourse in the media. By analyzing Assad's interviews and speeches, Assad's rhetoric is revealed to be highly relevant to his tenacious presidency. Through a qualitative research study of Assad's discourse, Assad's strategy of framing the revolution as a foreign insurgency against his government rather than an uprising of the Syrian people to protest for freedom from the authoritarian rule could be identified. In fact, Assad delegitimizes any semblance of the uprisings as a pro-democracy movement or revolution. So, the researcher has tried to analyze the main concepts and ideas in his discourses, as follows:

2.1 Mobilization policy: enmity and resistance in the Syrian political discourse after the revolution

During July 2014, Bashar Al-Assad has indicated in his political discourse that: "there are those who are killing in the name of the religion and want to spread chaos under the pretext of religion" adding that "the state is like a mother or father [...] When a state affords clemency to those who erred it means it acts in a very responsible way".

Then Assad remarked that: "his recent discourse is essentially an update of his second address in the same month".

As a result of his previous discourse, in late July 2014, a group of defecting officers from Assad's army announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army, as the first formal rebel movement.

2.2 The monopoly of the Syrian national character: by holding on the authority with the assistance of foreign powers

In the beginning, he used to talk about reform, he used to talk about a foreign conspiracy and now he is talking about staying in power.

In July 2014, at a speech delivered after he took the oath of office for a new seven-year term as a president, "Bashar Al-Assad" slammed the 2011 "Arab Spring" as a "fake spring".

In mid-2015, the Syrian regime seemed to be losing its grip, amid gains by ISIS and other rebel groups. In a July 2015 speech, Assad said that: "his army" was "capable" after years of war, but was facing a "shortfall in human capacity".

He added that "we are not collapsing [...] we are steadfast and will achieve victory. Defeat does not exist in the dictionary of the Syrian Arab army".

In late September 2015, Russia responded to Assad's request for assistance and began to undertake air-strikes on militant groups in a bid to prop up the regime.

2.3 Cynicism and condescending opposition
Although the upcoming calls by the USA and the international community in 2013 against
Bashar Al-Assad to step him down, followed by several other powers. By November 2013,
many commentators had begun to predict Assad's departure (Darwisheh, 2013).

But, Bashar Al-Assad delivered upcoming many political discourses and saw himself as
the legitimate President in his discourse in 2017, by saying: "pointing out that the conspiracy
was carefully plotted to fragment Syria [. . .] but the people who concocted the conspiracy
forgot that Syria has unique characteristics that make it immune to conspiracies." According
to Assad's expressions in his discourse.

In June 2018, political discourse and address delivered by Bashar Al-Assad saying that:
"I am vowing to crush the uprising, blaming 'terrorists' and 'criminal killers' for continuing
the conflict".

Over the past nine years, expectations proved to be wrong. People used to say that
Bashar Al-Assad is beyond real facts, however, it is clear now that the Syrian opposition
itself does no more touch the reality and admits the existence of Bashar Al-Assad in office
has become a real fact.

2.4 Justification of repression and violent structure under the slogan of "patriotism"
In late February 2016, the UN-backed ceasefire between the regime and many rebel groups
took effect. Western powers were optimistic for a fresh round of peace talks, while the
Syrian Government refuses any discussion on removing Assad during a widely-discussed
political transition. Assad's upcoming discourses from 2016 to 2019 stressed on:

- "Let it be for strengthening the country rather than weakening it, for putting an end
  to sedition rather than enflaming it".
- "Let us act as quickly as possible to heal our wounds and restore harmony to our
  larger family and maintain love as our uniting bond."
- Assad's speech "we should keep rallying our country under a sense of patriotism,"
  "the real force which protects Syria at every juncture".
- "There are many foreign conspirators on our homelands, we should defend and
  protect our lands".
- So, the researcher here analyzed the main ideas and noticed that:

  – In blaming the killing on foreign conspirators, Assad was able to represent
    himself as the guardian of a unified Syrian population.
  – Syrian opposition groups confirmed that: Bashar Al-Assad may have become
    bolder, as the Russian intervention.
  – The broader contours of Bashar Al-Assad's rhetoric have not changed, he is still
    adamant and defiant and he has not changed his tone in discourses. Simply, he is
    increasingly showing signs of confidence.

2.5 Marketing his leadership by the illusion
An analysis of Assad's speeches purported that the conflict brought about a change in the
important narrative of Syria's ruling party "Baath party" and the tone of the president by
claiming some "false" information, <u>such as</u>:

- In address, the parliament on March 30, 2011, that was at times light-hearted in
  tone, Assad blamed conspirators with an Israeli agenda, by saying: "resistance

against Israel and Western Domination". However, this narrative has vanished after the escalation of the rebellion in the following years.

- In the following years, Bashar Al-Assad referred to his country's war by fault as "our state is witnessing a real war on terror".
- He tried to market himself as a "democratic and tolerate leader" by saying: "We have been flexible not out of naivety, but because we do believe in political work".
- He ignored the real revolution and stressed in one of his discourses on that: "there is chaos in the country under the pretext of reform".

However, after (nine years) into Syria's civil war, the reality seems completely different, as follows:

- The embattled President Bashar Al-Assad has kept up a defiant, uncompromising tone, through a conflict that has engulfed the country into a spiral of death, displacement and chaos.
- When protests have escalated, demonstrations were met with live fire from Bashar's security forces, which killed many people and Assad was silent.

2.6 Violence of ambush (luring, blackmailing and investing others' mistakes) for the promotion of "national unity"

Another common theme that was demonstrated through Assad's rhetoric is Syrian national unity against a foreign threat. As the presence of foreign fighters in Syria surged, the reiteration of this message helped Assad gain more traction – it gave the civil war meaning and legitimized the use of force by his regime (Ospina and Gray, 2014). By following his statements:

- On March 30, 2011, Assad expresses his willingness to bring the people that incited the violence to justice, stressing on:
  - He stressed: "we should bring about
  - national unity rather than disunite the Syrians."
  - Then ensured: "let it be for strengthening the country rather than weakening it."
  - Finally, he concluded: "putting an end to sedition rather than enflaming it".
- Furthermore, toward the end of Assad's speech on the state of the Syrian crisis in January 2013, Assad lays out a political solution to the crisis which revolves around: "Syrian-led dialogue among the people of Syria".
- In March 2013, Assad gave a speech in front of scholars and society figures, as a "reconciliatory attempt," by confirming:

  - "We will pursue tolerance with those misled, not those whose perpetrated bloodsheds, in parallel with striking at terrorists."
  - "The masks have fallen off and the international role in the Syrian events is now obvious," Assad said.
  - In another meeting during August 2015, "Bashar Al-Assad" also claimed that: "his regime had been flexible with plans for the 'Geneva II peace' conference to unite the Syrian people".

We can notice here that, Assad's message of unity against a foreign threat aided him in moving the world's attention away from his actions and toward ISIS.

*2.7 Spreading rumors and promotion of "threat of sectarianism" and the official
propaganda against the sectarian attacks at home and internationally*
Assad introduced official propaganda that added to the threat of sectarianism by
highlighting rumors of sectarian attacks among various communities and villages to tip
them over one another. Assad exploited "sectarianism" when he released Sunni Islamist
militants from prison to fight alongside the opposition. As a result, the Free Syrian Army as
a legal opposition found itself fighting not only against the regime but also against Islamist
militants (Heydemann, 2014). We can follow the statements of Assad in this regard, as
follows:

- Through an interview with the Lebanese Al-Manar. Assad blames the terrorists for
  attempting to divide Syrian society with sectarian slogans. Assad states that "even
  though they were able to infiltrate certain pockets in Syrian society, pockets of
  ignorance and lack of awareness that exist in any society, they were not able to
  create this sectarian division. Had they succeeded, Syria would have been divided
  up from the beginning".
- Additionally, in Assad's interview with CBS in September 2013, Charlie Rose asks
  Assad: if the civil war is transforming into a "religious war?" Assad responds by
  reiterating the following statements:

  - "The war started partly as a sectarian war," but now shifted to "sectarianism war."
  - He stressed on: "the increasing sectarian tensions is damaging the Syrian society."
  - Therefore, Assad depicts himself and said: "he is the moderate force working to
    counter pervading sectarianism associated with the rise of ISIS".

Here, we can conclude that despite the fact that Assad fostering sectarianism; he is now
trying to validate his efforts to counter it through his international interviews.

*2.8 The slogans of resistance against terrorists' acts of sabotage as a tool to strengthen his
authoritarian regime*
The Syrian authoritarian regime has raised some fake slogans as an attempt and a platform
allowing Assad to convey some messages regarding his current fight in Syria, we can easily
found these slogans in the following statements:

- President Assad delivered a speech before the "People's Assembly of Syria" on
  June 3, 2012. The main focus of his speech was:
  - He stressed on: "the growing terrorism in Syria aimed at undermining the
    homeland."
  - He asserted that: "there must be a distinction between terrorism and the political
    process to move forward in Syria and discredit the terrorism."
  - Assad classified the destruction of infrastructure and the declining provision of
    basic resources on "acts of sabotage by terrorists" (Assad's People's Assembly
    of Syria discourse, 2012).
- In January 2013, Assad delivered his first speech on the Syrian crisis since June 2012
  to a crowd of his supporters at the "regal Opera House" in Syria. He expressed his
  concerns about terrorist groups attacking his homeland, by saying:
  - He claimed that: "Syrians were rebelling against these groups," not his
    government, labeling the crisis as a "fake revolution."

- Assad pledged to continue residing as President of Syria "as long as there is one terrorist left despite some international demands to step him down".
- So far, Assad's message is consistent to both the West and his own people, by saying in the "American ABC TV channel" in 2017 that: "the war is not between the government and the Syrian people, but between the Syrians and terrorists".

However, analyzing the following international official document has proven his false justifications:

According to Global Terror and Insurgency Threat Analysis Center (Jane) in October 2016, it has stressed that: (Only 6% of regime counterterrorism operations targeted ISIS. While Assad claims that he is combatting terrorist-affiliated organizations in Syria in all his interviews and speeches, the evidence proves the contrary) (Report: Jane's Terrorism and Insurgency Center, 2016).

We can notice here that, Assad continues to reiterate these themes throughout the entirety of his discourse until this day.

2.9 Reluctance to market leadership by the exploitation of the "Western media" to promote his false theories
He is still representing himself as the only alternate to the Syrians, as he purported that "he is the main force in defeating ISIS. For that reason, evidence shows that they have been strategically ignoring each other on the battlefield." Assad has been "targeting the moderate opposition and avoiding ISIS." It was his general strategy in front of foreign media.

- Assad's first interview applying the combatting terrorism frame was with the American-based "ABC's Barbara Walters" on December 7, 2011. Assad claimed that "from the very first few weeks we had those terrorists. They are getting more and more aggressive, they have been killing." Throughout the interview, Assad repeatedly referred to terrorism as the force he is fighting.
- One month later, "German media" conducted an interview with Assad on July 5, 2012. Unlike the Barbara Walters interview, this interview was an apology to Germans, by saying the following statements:
  - "JurgenTodenhofer," which is known in Germany as "I apologize for being an anti-war advocate and critical of Western policy toward the Middle East."
  - He clearly stated that: "the rebels are an amalgam of Al-Qaeda and other extremists and outlaws who have escaped the police."
  - He went on claiming that: "the highest percentage of people is being killed by gangs, Al-Qaeda and other outlaws or extremists".
- Only a few months later in 2012, Assad was interviewed by (Russian-based RT). The interviewer, Sophie Shevardnadze, who described Assad as "a well-educated man who has fallen victim to media demonization." Assad was asserted that "terrorism is his enemy".
- In Assad's interview with (Lebanese-based Al-Manar on May 30, 2013), Assad stated that "the Syrians were deceived to believe that there was a revolution occurring against the failings of the state".
- Assad did another exclusive American interview with CBS's Charlie Rose presenter on September 10, 2013, after it was proven that Assad had used chemical weapons on civilians. Assad was relentless in his position by stressing that: "the majority of

his opposition is extremist foreigners." Despite the facts and research that the presenter "Rose" showing him.

Here, Assad is given the opportunity to speak to the "American public" and justify his violence against the moderate opposition in Syria.

- Assad's most important interviews were arranged with American-based Foreign Affairs and the UK-based BBC. The Foreign Affairs interview was on January 26, 2015, in which Assad blatantly denied the existence of moderate opposition. Assad stated in the interview that "what's left, what Obama called the 'fantasy', what he called the 'moderate opposition' – it is not an opposition; they are rebels. Most of them joined the Al-Qaeda [. . .]."

- On February 10, 2015, almost four years after the revolution, BBC correspondent "Jeremy Bowen" was still asking questions about how the conflict began? As his first interview, Assad's responses to those have remained consistent.

So, the researcher reached the analytical results by following the interviews of "Bashar Al-Assad" to the Western media, as follows:

- The West's media classification of Islamist opposition groups in Syria as terrorist-affiliated organizations allowed Assad to use the term as a political tool as well, justifying his regime's actions by labeling them counter-terrorism operations.

- Even the mere fact that American Channel "ABC" provided Assad with his first platform to feed Western media, but his narrative contributed to his "international legitimacy as head of the Syrian state."

So, it is clear that Assad is framing the revolution as a war against terrorism in front of the Western media to justify his continued fight against the Syrian opposition.

3. Bashar Al-Assad's "fake steps" to implement promises in his discourses and manifestations of their failure

The authoritarian regime under Bashar Al-Assad's rule responded to protests and the Syrian revolution after 2011, not only with actions but also with deliberate language choices through political discourses and speeches that revealed the complex attitudes toward protestors, nationalism, democracy, opposition, war on terror, economic and political reforms and unity between opposition movements as an attempt to justify Assad's own presence, actions and policies during a period of intense turmoil. Focusing on public speeches delivered by Bashar, paying particular attention to specific themes and the use of dialectal Arabic as strategic attempts to reach the masses through vernacular language (Kesseiri, 2015), as follows:

3.1 Domestic policy directed toward the "privatization and liberalization of the social economy" without real "structural, institutional and legal" reforms

When President Hafez Al-Assad died in 2000, his son Bashar inherited an authoritarian state but he lacked the power to control enough resources that would help him to rule alone. However, before he assumed office, Bashar Al-Assad had an inner circle of loyalists that was already formed by his dying father. This close circle was a coalition of the old guards and the new guards that consisted of (business elites, officials from the ruling Baath Party and high profile commanders in the army and the security forces) (Svolik, 2012).

After the revolution against Bashar Al-Assad's rule in 2011, he gave a political discourse initiating a project that aimed to restructure the regime's social base and to modernize

authoritarianism in Syria. Consequently, Al-Assad's domestic policy directed the authoritarian power toward the privatization and liberalization of the social economy, as well as creating crony-capitalist networks of privilege (Hinnebusch, 2013).

But, the researcher concluded that the new policy to modernize the state after the 2011 revolution by opening most fields and the public sector to private investments, it revealed as well the fatal effects of economic liberalization policies without real reform at the structural, institutional and legal levels under Bashar Al-Assad, which had a tremendous impact on continuing Syria's revolution until now.

3.2 Misunderstanding of the power structure and lacking of a stable democratic system in Syria
After the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in 2011, President Bashar Al-Assad promised in his discourses before the Syrians at home to deepen the political and institutional reforms in all levels, but the meticulous examination of the very nature of the Syrian regime under Bashar Al-Assad's rule, immediately disclosed his false promises, as lack of the basic conditions for achieving a stable democratic system revealed a misunderstanding of the power structure in Syria. All fundamental conditions that facilitate democratic changes or the transition to a stable democratic system were missing in the Syrian case under Bashar. That included the lack of both two dimensions: Liberalization (public contestation) and Inclusiveness, as well as competition as a major condition to emphasize the process of transition. The authoritarian upgrading had only benefited regime crony capitalists who developed their partnership with the new bourgeoisie, but it impoverished the masses and middle classes in poor neighborhoods around the cities, especially those who depended on agriculture (Ismail, 2013).

So, the researcher noticed that some new economic policies that benefited his close circle without producing a political transition and consolidated the power of the authoritarian regime under Bashar Al-Assad.

3.3 Limited constitutional amendments parallel to violence committed by the regime to face the opposition hard-liners in Syria
When the Syrian Uprising started to spread across the country, the mass-driven protests, which were dominated by what is called "soft-liners", demanded democratic reforms in a way that matches the gradualism approach. In the beginning, the Syrian regime responded to the opposition "soft-liners' demands" and implemented three main reforms, according to his promises in his political public discourses:

(1) *First*, the Bashar Al-Assad's government issued an amnesty regarding political prisoners (May 31, 2011).
(2) *Second*, it lifted the country's 48-year emergency law (April 21, 2011).
(3) *Third*, it amended the constitution (February 26, 2012) (Moustafa, 2014).

However, although the gradual democratic transition in Syria, widespread violence committed by the regime when opposition hard-liners started to be visible and worked to arm the uprising. This caused the regime hard-liners to push further for abandoning the reforms and instead implementing violent military repression of the uprising.

3.4 Weakening the "civil-society organizations" to stop their ability to peacefully organize and articulate the demands of the protesters in Syria
The popular mobilizations of "non-elite opposition" failed to moderate their demands within the border power structures of the movement in Syria, due to the further challenges that were raised by the regime and intended to weaken the political and social institutions and

civil society organizations, that have the ability to peacefully organize and articulate the demands of the protesters (Lynch and Aday, 2015).

Thus, the authoritarian nature of the Syrian regime hindered the achievement of a stable and peaceful democratic transition through a mass social movement.

3.5 Dividing the Syrian opposition at home between "secularists, Islamists and armed" movements to successfully control them

The escalation of violence had two major consequences that fundamentally changed the nature of the social movement and the demands of the protestors. On one hand, the division between "hard-liners" opposition, such as: (Islamists and pro-military intervention) and on the other hand the "soft-liners" opposition, such as: (secular and pro-peaceful transition) was deepened (Khan, 2014).

Hence, we find that the Syrian authoritarian regime under the auspices of Bashar Al-Assad succeeded in weakening the opposition forces and not uniting them against him to facilitate controlling them and eliminating them by assassination or by throwing them into the regime's prisons.

3.6 Presenting himself as the main player in the global "war on terror" to gain sympathy for some sectors in Syria

The Syrian regime started to stress its legitimacy especially after the rise of Islamist groups as major players in the conflict (as early as January 2012), and to promote itself as the main player in the global war on terror. Therefore, in contrast to the reductionist explanation that attributes the underline causes of the Syrian uprising and the consequent conflict to ethnic/sectarian incited the "Sunni" groups who revolted against the "Alawite regime" (Salamandra, 2015).

The researcher emphasizes here on the importance of understanding the political and economic dynamics in instigating and transforming the massive protests in Syria.

4. The required common acceptable standards for the Syrian national discourse

The Syrian crisis entered a new path after the recent developments and after the Geneva and Vienna meetings (1 and 2), with the aim of ending this crisis. Here, it seems necessary to draw the attention to points as the framework through which the Syrian opposition (internally and externally) looks at the "acceptable political discourse" to solve the Syrian crisis and ways to get out of it (Athamneh and Sayej, 2015). Generally, the Syrian opposition agreed on the (following accepted principles) in any political speech by the Assad regime, as follows.

4.1 Opposition to the "foreign intervention" to impose the wishes of foreign players on the Syrian people

Everyone in Syria agrees that prolonging the tragic Syrian crisis and the tragic conditions this country is currently experiencing, in addition to, the bad and unhelpful internal conditions, are the product of a broad external intervention, including the Russian involvement as a supporter of the Assad's regime against the Syrians themselves. Drawing some dangerous results from foreign intervention, as follows:

- Some foreign policies rely on encouraging: (violence and terrorism) methods as tools to "settle scores" with the government and the Syrian people.
- Unfortunately, some foreign governments are still seeing that "ISIS, the Al-Nusra Front and other terrorist atonement groups" or the other various and modern forms of them

do not constitute a general danger to the Syrians, but rather they see them as a helpful factor and player to collaborate with them against the Syrian people (Salem, 2015).

- So, linking between the atonement terrorism groups and the legal demands of the Syrians to determine the political fate of Syria by the Western powers, it is a dangerous indicator for those who promote this strategy regionally and internationally (El-Abidine, 2015).

While the penitential groups revealed the implementation of their sinister intentions and that they do not have mercy on even the former and current allies with them, the foreign protectors of this group have unfortunately not yet understood this fact.

4.2 The unified and harmonious confrontation against terrorism, in parallel with the progress of the path of "political dialogue" and "comprehensive consensus"
The effective and long-term fight against terrorism, and this of course, along with the unavoidable necessary military and security actions, require comprehensive, deep social, cultural and economic solutions, which are not addressed, so military and even political solutions will remain temporary and not permanent. This requires achieving the following steps:

- The first step in the solution to the crisis is the immediate cease-fire, an end to the bloodshed and comprehensive international coordination to combat terrorism and this will pave the way for the subsequent parallel steps.

- In the short term, until reaching a political solution, the unavoidable necessity is to meet the immediate needs of refugees outside Syria and the internally displaced (Roj, 2015).

- All players, partners in the process of ending the crisis, must put an end to sterile and non-existent policies based on the exploitation of terrorism, all forms of terrorism can be considered a pariah and the players who spent huge sums and provided support to groups who lost their legitimacy in Syria and the region and caused a state of instability and insecurity, should put an end to their policies in this regard. The priority here is to refrain them from buying the oil that ISIS sells, and to stop the financial transfers to this terrorist organization and to prevent foreign terrorists from entering the region (Tawadros, 2019).

- Unification of all Syrian opposition groups under a unified leadership to easily negotiate internally and internationally. The division of the Syrian opposition was observed from the first days of the Syrian revolution, such as (the National Council, the Coalition, the High Commissioners Commission [. . .], etc.), in addition to the calls of the international conferences to unify the opposition groups to settle the Syrian crisis, such as (Geneva, Astana, Sochi, Vienna [. . .], etc.) So, the demand for the formation of a political body that expresses the revolution for reaching a common acceptable opposite leadership to negotiate on the political solution and the future of the Syrian state is a prerequisite condition for any solution (Rajab, 2016).

So, the researcher recommends that the foreign players, especially Russia, instead of seeking to intervene and impose their conditions, must, within the unconditional confrontation against known atonement groups, extend a hand of assistance to the government and the Syrian opposition to begin the process of the Syrian-Syrian dialogue and work to take the first steps for political accommodation to achieve national reconciliation and move toward an exit from the current crisis by resorting to the Syrian public opinion.

4.3 Supporting the legal political demands by the political discourses without imposing prerequisite conditions on the Syrians

Syrian sects agreed on the nature of the acceptable political demands such as: setting democratic structures and principles, designing the constitution and free elections. Some analysts confirmed that even if the Assad regime is now willing to tolerate some limited opposition, there is no indication it is actually interested in sharing power or engaging that opposition in any substantive political dialogue (Ahmed, 2017). The most important common political demands are:

- Calling for real national integrity of Syria and unifying all identities under a unified leadership.
- Building Syrian political organizations as democratic organizations, encouraging democratic communication among its members and translating their knowledge into procedural recommendations, revolving around the way in which these organizations can practice democratic behavior in the reality of living.
- Adopting the issue of democracy and human rights, on the theoretical and practical levels, where many political formations still complain about the shrinking frameworks of democratic practice, other opinion and dialogue, within and with others and the travesty and verbal language is only tangible evidence of that (Kleib, 2018).
- Adopting the strategy of building the future of a Syrian state of law (the state of legal and constitutional institutions) with sovereignty and independent decisions internally and externally.

Here, the researcher adopted the view that: the Syrian regime under Bashar Al-Assad can only think in terms of concluding deals in closed rooms. The regime is transactional; its more amenable, constructive-minded domestic opposition has nothing to offer in trade and so the regime seems comfortable disregarding it.

4.4 Working together to achieve the (five acceptable principles) agreed upon at home and abroad

In short, we can analyze the accepted demands of all Syrians, and addressing all attempts of external hegemony that targeted the existence of Syria as a state, by mobilizing the energies of the Syrians and their popular groups in a long struggle and multiple methods and tools, at all levels. Here, the researcher tries to summarize the common demands and standards for the Syrian political leadership discourse, as follows:

- *First*: Respecting the demands and will of the Syrian people in determining their destiny, managing and adjusting their affairs on their own and expediting the process of transformation and political transition.
- *Second*: Opposing external interference to impose foreign conditions on the Syrian people, in all shades and doctrines.
- *Third*: Refusing to use terrorism as a tool to achieve political goals in internal conflicts in Syria, and rejecting all previous speeches of Bashar al-Assad in linking them to the legitimate and moderate Syrian opposition to terrorism.
- *Fourth*: Reaching a multi-disciplinary and unified political discourse at the same time on the basis of the Syrian national constants that include all Syrians, through which the National Compass has served the Syrians at all levels. It is the Syrian national discourse (Mahfoud, 2013).

- *Fifth*: Achieving the Syrian Openness around the world, Opening up to all the world powers (countries, organizations, parties, [. . .] etc.) that support the Syrian people, in their struggles, by ridding them of tyranny and occupations and benefiting by their multiplicity, differences and political contradictions in favor of the Syrian cause (Bishara, 2013).

Hence, the researcher after a deeper analysis of the Syrian crisis could easily reach to the main target as a solution for the current crisis, which is represented in respecting the opposite discourses to the regime and reaching to comprehensive solutions on contentious issues by adopting a national political discourse by the Syrian opposition, which includes all colors of the political and cultural spectrum for all of Syrians and avoids sectarian, ethnic, national and geographic groups.

5. Discussion on the "future scenarios" and potential transformation paths of the acceptable political discourse for all Syrian sects

The ruling Syrian regime believes, at the level of the mind behind its violent behavior, which determines its way of thinking, the deliberate confusion on its part in all subsequent political speeches after the outbreak of the 2011 revolution in Syria between (the state, the country, the authority and the symbolic leader) and other concepts through which it seeks to secure the elements of strength necessary to exercise his convictions (Heidmann, 2013). From here, one can set future scenarios to control acceptable concepts in political speeches addressed to the Syrian masses, regardless of their affiliation, as follows:

5.1 Eliminate the ambiguity and confusing concepts in President "Bashar Al-Assad's speeches" after the Syrian revolution

The ambiguity and mixing of concepts in the discourses of President Bashar Al-Assad post the Syrian Revolution are his problem to practice power on the level. *So, one can suppose here*:

- *Change the current authoritarian regime, by using the same revolutionary weapon of Bashar's discourses against the material and moral system violence*: Systematic concepts under the auspices of authority do not see a difference between the authority, the state and the system. Language of the discourses of Bashar al-Assad was always the way of his deviation to control the Public opinion, and the country is considered personal property. It appears – from this point – that the mentality of Bashar al-Assad while delivering his speeches is structurally stable and therefore, any penetration made by the opposition in the path of clarifying an accurate confirmation of concepts is a path toward freedom (Seifan, 2015). This process is an important intellectual goal as a tool for change of the current authoritarian regime.
- This process of changing the concepts of the discourses is based on two levels, the first: thinkers and intellectuals on the theoretical frame, the second: the public opinion, to the formation of features of the common Syrian political collective mind that finally lead to the foundations of the social contract and methodologies of thinking; more accurate approach to the concepts of (homeland, state, power, political system, power transfer, equal distribution of wealth, civil society, the state's relationship to religion and ideologies, control of the concept of patriotism and citizenship) [. . .], etc (Keela, 2015), to the end of this list.

5.2 Separating between the ideology and reverence of Bashar's personality in his discourses in dealing with the Syrian people demands

It is necessary to work on separating the ideology of Bashar's discourses from the reverence of his personality. Syrian sects should work as much as possible to separate the personality of Bashar al-Assad from the subject of politics, and dealing with the issues in his discoursed after the 2011 revolution objectively, non-ideologically, to achieve the comprehensive Syrian national interest for the good of Syria and the Syrians. *Supposing that*:

- The acceptable and comprehensive discourse – if achieved by the Syrians – will certainly set the stage for an inclusive national discourse capable of creating a solid Syrian agreement ground: in such case, the new language in discourse will wrap in the existential instinct which all Syrians should build, to replace the solid sectarian nucleus that the regime created for itself and through which it ran the country.

- Points of identifying the acceptable language in the political discourse should adopt a professionalism method of the politician and the objectivity: a distinction must be made between the social, cultural and political levels, with a good definition for terminologies and terms. Thus, Syrian policy becomes the craft of building a new country, in the philosophical, political, social and functional sense of the state (Barout, 2014).

- The acceptable collective comprehensive discourse cannot be achieved in Syria without exceeding the local view of thought, awareness and orientation: to benefit by the experiences of the world and human history on the stage of successful revolutions and to form a collective Syrian awareness, close to reality and understand it accurately and seek to develop and change it (Fakhr El-Din, 2014).

- Finally, Syrian sects should distinguish between a group of concepts in discourses that need to be controlled and to be specific, and others need sculpting and formation: The semantic field of concepts should differ according to the new demands of all Syrians after the revolution for the new reality that makes the Syrian citizen becomes the aim of addressing any upcoming policies.

6. Conclusion

As much as the theories in the literature have contributed to explaining Bashar Al-Assad's resiliency, the influence of Assad's narrative in keeping him in power continues to increase. His rhetoric delivers the impression that he is the solution for Syria. Assad aims to show the world that he is a moderate force against Islamism. He presents himself as Syria's guardian, the only agent willing and strong enough to reverse the effects of the war and unite a peaceful Syria.

Unfortunately, this message resonates with the international community, saving it the effort from intervening in a messy situation. With the world so focused on defeating Islamic extremism, there is no one left to watch the Assad regime. *The researcher has reached to the following aspects*:

- Assad's abilities to both communicate effectively in English and dodge tough questions in an eloquent manner are unparalleled in the region. Besides, Assad's persistence throughout his discourses during the years of revolution ensured his competence as a manipulator.

- Assad has maintained a Western appearance in his international media interactions as a tool to market himself internationally, unlike other Arab

leaders, who appeals to Western countries and their perception of Assad's legitimacy, which aided Assad in gaining international legitimacy through his use of the Western media.

- Assad's political discourse also impacts his audience inside Syria, as it aims to rally internal support around him and reassuring his current Alawite supporters that he is the leader they need for a prosperous Syria.

- Promotion for his willingness to defeat the influence of terrorism for a political solution to be determined in Syria.

- His portrayal of the conflict in Syria as a war against terrorism to both domestic and international audiences in the media established him as a necessary agent in defeating terrorism.

- Assad constructed his discourses strategy of nurturing the terrorist opposition since the initiation of the revolution in 2011.

- Assad's successful promotion as, the more the influence of Islamic extremism grew in Syria, the more ability of Assad to legitimize his rule, as a more viable alternate away from "ISIS" or any other "Jihadist group" seeking power in Syria.

- He claimed that the sectarianism has permeated in the Syrian society as a result of the influence of Islamic extremism; however, sectarianism in Syria existed long before the revolution.

- Assad consistently propagated that the sole solution would be determined by the Syrian people and the Syrian unity throughout his discourses and his claims internationally that the Syrian people are his allies in the conflict, to justify his authority to the international community.

- Foreign media outlets have been eager to provide Assad with the platform to spread these fake messages, which also helped legitimize his image.

- The international community shifts its attention away from the actions of the Assad government and shifted toward combatting hardline Islamic radicalism.

- The study confirms that Assad's image and utilization of the media contribute to his regime's authoritarian stability in a way that no other Arab dictator has attempted to emulate. Assad tailored this strategy to work effectively with his personal characteristics.

- Despite the Assad regime's monopoly over the (means of coercion, patronage networks, international allies, a fractured opposition and ability to adapt to the dynamic forces of the Syrian conflict), Assad's resiliency may be threatened without the manipulation of his ability to effectively spread his narrative of the conflict to the world.

- The focus on ISIS terrorism in the Western media has done Assad the service of removing his name from the headlines in the media and contributed to crushing the influence of ISIS.

- Hence, the final result is that: people who are watching the daily news in Syria now believe that Assad may not be as harmful as presumed and that the downfall of ISIS is a top priority to the USA and its alliances. This has benefited Assad's strategy to maintain his power, and prove that the successful manipulation of his discourses during the "Syrian Revolution was effective".

Notes

1. The researcher has deeply analyzed many discourses and interviews for Bashar Al-Assad, since the beginning of the revolution in 2011 until 2019 at homelands and internationally, they are available at: www.sana.sy/?cat=431

2. You can find all updates about the Syrian crisis on the constantly updated Syrian political map. On the official link: https://syriancivilwarmap.com/

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