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Antagonism, Resistance, and Peace in Syrian Political Discourse



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Package Politics

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Introduction: Antagonism as a Discursive Strategy

This paper examines ways in which regional conflicts, especially the relationship with Israel, have an influence on the resilience of the Syrian regime. It does so based upon the analytical notion of discourse, which examines the role of discursive assumptions and norms in framing social practices. The norms and mechanisms inbuilt within discourse contribute to the shaping of the choices and practices of political actors in many ways: by determining the range of possible action, by legitimising or 'normalising' behaviours, and by defining political correctness, thus enabling or disabling political practices. Therefore discursive mechanisms are directly relevant to political analysis.

Syrian political discourse is largely based on discursive mechanisms that I group under the label of 'antagonism'. Generally speaking, the word antagonism refers to the narrative construction of 'the enemy' as a pivotal element of political rhetoric. From a discursive perspective, antagonism is much more than a narrative expedient or a tool for semantic manipulation. Indeed, antagonism affects the ways in which political actors think about themselves and their roles. It influences their choices and their conduct whilst it fuels and guides practices in ways often unacknowledged by actors and political analysts alike. Therefore, I argue, antagonism is a 'discursive strategy'. The 'strategic' directness of discursive mechanisms cannot be reduced to the intentions and initiatives of a mastermind or a pre-determined agent who instigates conduct by manipulating political narratives. Rather it illustrates the role of such mechanisms in configuring a semantic and normative terrain within which both the choices of actors and their own agency are framed. This does not deny the (relative) autonomy of political actors, but suggests that they are at the same time the products of political discourse as well as acting as its agents, and points to the discursive nature of social practices in general.

Blaming an outside enemy for all wrongs and using it to strengthen internal cohesion was a mobilisational tactic adopted during the nationalist struggle against the French Mandate, and it was fuelled by the continuing conflict over Palestine. It was instrumental in the economic mobilisation cum indoctrination that accompanied the Ba'thist project of social revolution, and became a pillar of Hafiz al-Asad's state-building project, whose goal was to regain lost Syrian territory and national pride. After the October 1973 war, Syria became *bilad al-sumud*, 'the country of steadfastness', whose goal was to withstand the 'permanent aggression' of the Zionist enemy.¹ After the Camp David peace agreement between Egypt and Israel, President Hafiz al-Asad launched the 'strategic balance' strategy (*al-tawazun al-istratiji*), aimed at building up military capability with the help of Soviet and Arab support in order to 'regain usurped Arab rights'.² These can be seen merely as slogans rephrasing nationalist discourse. Yet in Asad's doctrine, a 'strategic balance' with the enemy required not only 'balancing a tank with a tank' but also 'balancing all aspects of life - the political, human, social, cultural, and economic aspects'.³ Therefore this doctrine acted as a discursive context for a culture of total war, economic austerity and irreducible antagonism combined as elements of the 'struggling experience' which characterised the identity of political actors in Asad's Syria. In this way,

¹ See *Rapport sur l'Économie Syrienne 1973-1974*, Damas, Office Arabe de Presse et de Documentation, p. A.1.

² Efraim Karsh, *The Soviet Union and Syria: the Asad Years*, Chatham House Papers, 1988, p.11.

³ Radio Damascus, March 8, 1986, in FBIS-NES March 10, 1986 pp H1H2.

the Arab-Israeli conflict, elevated in Syrian political discourse to a symbol of injustice, a 'clash of cultures and destinies'⁴ in an epic narrative of heroic gestures, became a building bloc of Syrian national identity, and a parameter of principled political action. Ultimately it legitimised a model of mobilisation that made it possible for the Ba'th to impose its crushing presence on all aspects of Syrian society, even among those who regarded its pretensions with cynicism.

My argument is that antagonism is still at the core of the modern Syrian political imaginary, and that it continues to shape the choices and practices of both Syrian state and non-state actors whilst it moulds the Syrian political agenda both domestic and foreign. Moreover, it delimits the arena of manoeuvre for Syrian leaders, and shapes the dynamics of Syrian civil society. Politics is still regarded as the business of putting preordained values into practice and eradicating wrongs, and unanimity is the only political position. The regime still conceives itself as a bastion of steadfastness and the sole guarantor of internal stability. This discourse not only denies the necessary friction of societal worlds: it structures the terrain in which political actors struggle for their identity and their values, as a space open to loyalty and compliance, but closed to contestation. As a result, collective action is geared to fulfil the moral responsibility to fight evil entities and measure deviance from political correctness whilst preserving the given architecture of power. Criticism of the Syrian regime is more than mere opposition to the ruling elite: it is tantamount to the sabotage of *bilad al-sumud* and its mission, and an attack on the moral foundations of the nation.

Thus a political analysis centred on the working of discursive strategies allows us to bring to the fore political mechanisms that traditional divisions – such as the separation of domestic and foreign policy – ignore. It also leads us to question accepted definitions and models, such as the nature and working of authoritarianism. It must be clear that a discursive perspective of Syrian politics does not deal with the array of presuppositions which usually underlie the definition of authoritarianism: the assumption that Syrian politics is dictated by irrational dynamics; the belief that the Syrian government is intrinsically unstable; and the expectation that Syrian leaders make unintelligent choices or engage in calculatedly deceitful moves. Rather, an analysis of political discourse starts from the assumption that such discourse has rationality and mechanisms that we can analyse, irrespective of such value-laden definitions as 'democratic', 'authoritarian', 'despotic', or 'liberal'.

Finally, it should be clear that I am not arguing for a Syrian exceptionalism in its use of antagonism, because political rhetoric about enemies to be overcome is typical of nationalism almost everywhere. Neither do I suggest that the use of antagonism is exclusive to authoritarian rule, as American political language in the Bush years has clearly shown. Yet by identifying antagonism as a pivotal strategy of Syrian political discourse, my aim is to contribute to the mapping of the configuration of power expressed by such discourse. We should search for the specificity of such a configuration of power, not in Syria's adherence to pre-defined abstract models of governance, nor even in its distance from equally abstract political ideals, but rather in the historical and discursive background that enables and frames patterns of authority, sociability and agency.

⁴ Ahmed Khalidi and Hussein Agha, 'The Syrian doctrine of strategic parity', in J. Kipper and H. Saunders (eds.) *The Middle East in Global Perspective*, Boulder, Westview Press, 1991, pp.186-218.

Resistance and the 'New Middle East'

Bashar al-Asad's first years in power were replete with political challenges: the awakening of domestic opposition; a deterioration in relations with the Western powers following the US-led 'war on terror'; foreign occupation and political chaos in neighbouring Iraq; international isolation after the assassination of Lebanese premier Hariri; the Israeli military campaign against Hizbollah in July 2006; and the 2008-9 Israeli attack on Gaza. International pressure was not successful in bringing significant change in Syrian regional politics and power structures. Hopes for change, awakened by the succession of Bashar al-Asad to power, were crushed by the regime in the name of a higher national-security interest endangered by the US-led democratization campaigns. The Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq, its fragmentation and the ensuing chaos made of democracy a sinister irony; reinforced anti-American sentiments;⁵ and confirmed the worldview of many Syrians, who equate democracy with the chaos and sectarian fragmentation of Iraq, or the instability of confessionalism in Lebanon.

The regime portrayed mounting international pressure on Syria as part of a broader US-backed conspiracy against Syria, and for the Syrian public, cast it as a choice between the stability that Syria has enjoyed in the Asad's years versus the chaos experienced by Iraq. Despite widespread criticism of the harsh conditions of repression, corruption and underdevelopment which have so far guaranteed such stability, Syrian popular opinion appears to endorse this equation. Uncomfortably squeezed between the double fear – of domestic oppression and external liberation – the Syrian public has accepted and internalized the idea that support for the current system is its only possible option.

Yet Israel remains by far the prime strategic concern of the Bashar regime, for wider reasons than the occupation of the Golan Heights. It was the Israeli role in the region that instigated the real turning point in Syrian policy as well as in popular sentiment: the emergence of what has been called 'a resisting Middle East' and a radicalisation of public opinion.⁶ Following the victory of Hizbollah in the 2006 Lebanon war, which has exposed the weakness of the Israeli military machine and changed perceptions of the regional strategic balance of forces,⁷ the Syrian leadership embraced the resistance front composed of Hizbollah, Hamas and Iran. In August 2006, President Bashar al-Asad presented the prospect of a new Middle East 'whose essence is resistance'.⁸

The strategy of resistance (*muqawama*) means the rejection of an 'unjust' status quo, and the celebration of people's defiance against oppressive forces coupled with their ability to withstand injustice through constant armed combat. In the discourse of Hizbollah, resistance is linked to the Shi'a political culture of martyrdom and rebellion against oppression, whose object is another world

⁵ Author's interviews, March 2010.

⁶ Khaled Hroub, 'The Arab system after Gaza', in *Open democracy*, 27 January 2009, available at www.opendemocracy.net

⁷ Author's interviews, Damascus, March 2010

⁸ President Bashar al-Assad speaking at the Syrian Journalists' Union on 15 August 2006; see also President Asad's speech at the Arab Parties Conference, 11 November 2009, SANA, 12 November 2009

order in the spirit of Islamic justice.⁹ Yet resistance as 'a celebration of defiance, heroism and sacrifice'¹⁰ is hardly new to Syria: in many ways, *muqawama* is a continuation of *sumud*, the pillar of Syrian political mobilisation under Hafiz al-Asad. Both slogans emphasise a call for justice and a continuous effort for the annihilation of the enemy, regardless of how remote the prospect of victory seems to be. By establishing the historical and ideological link between *sumud* and *muqawama*, the Syrian leadership could claim the victories of the Lebanese resistance as a vindication of Syrian confrontational politics. As *bilad al-sumud* and now the pillar of *al-muqawama*, Syria's message remains that it will never give up its national rights, interest and pride. Moreover, the Syrian 'secular' leadership is signalling that the national interest in the context of conflict takes precedence over the various religious allegiances and ethnic identifications of the resistance camp.

With the victory of Hizbollah, 'the Arabs have found their leader, a hero who can challenge Israel'.¹¹ As many Syrians put it, 'in Lebanon we won'.¹² Yet the Israeli assault on Gaza in 2008-9 really shook Syrian public opinion. The collusion of Western powers with Israeli plans; the failure of Arab states to do more than issue harsh criticism despite the carnage of civilians trapped in a strip of land without escape nor help¹³ – all of this shocked the Syrian population into rallying behind President Asad, who accused Israel of perpetrating a Palestinian genocide that 'will produce generations of Arabs imbued with hatred for Israel'.¹⁴ Yet the most dangerous regional development might not be the reinforcement of hatred for Israel and anti-Americanism: the religious allegiances of new political actors; or even the emergence of non-Arab regional powers. This is because there is implicit in the new 'resistance' culture a celebration of the guerrilla fighter; a preference for close relations with the street and the people; and contempt for institutions and regimes that have proved unable to defend popular rights and Arab national interests. It is the failure of interstate warfare to impose a solution of regional conflicts that put the initiative in the hands of non-state actors, thus skirting closely – and dangerously – to the encouragement of popular unrest.

Thus for Arab governments, whose central concerns are regime survival and control of popular mobilization,¹⁵ the really explosive regional development is the emergence of non-state actors, whose success in confronting the enemy and closeness to popular concerns could turn into a model of mobilisation for the embittered masses. For Arab public opinion, solving the Palestine-Israel conflict – not bringing about democracy – is seen as the real priority, together with promoting real and sustainable development with social justice. The Arab regional system has not delivered the first, and Arab regimes cannot deliver the second. Thus the spectre of an uncontrolled mass mobilisation, one likely to wipe out 'enemies' without and within, is a worrying scenario that might well have played

⁹ On the assassination of Imad Mughniyeh, see al-Manar television at www.almanar.com.lb

¹⁰ Barry Rubin, 'The resistance strategy', in *GLORIA Center*, 19 January 2009, available at www.gloria-center.org/Gloria/2010/01/resistance-strategy

¹¹ Marwan Kabalan interviewed by Darren Foster, 'Syria's delicate Balancing Act', in *World Dispatches*, 22 September 2006, available at www.pbs.org/frontlineworld.

¹² Author's interview with Imad Fawzi al-Shuaibi, Director of the Data & Strategic Studies Centre, Damascus, 13 March 2010.

¹³ Even though the diplomatic reaction on part of Qatar and Turkey was of such vehemence that it aligned them – at least temporarily – with the Syrian-Iranian 'axis of resistance'.

¹⁴ See *al-Ba'th*, 17 January 2009, *Tishrin*, 5 February 2009, and President Assad's speech at the Doha summit on Gaza, 16 January 2009 on the growing 'culture of resistance', available at www.sana.sy/eng/22/2009/01/16/pr-283519.htm

¹⁵ As an opposition figure put it, 'they spend more on repressing us than fighting Zionism'. Author's interview, Damascus, March 2010.

a part in the Syrian embrace of the resistance and the launching of a new strategy for the reorganisation of the regional system.¹⁶

In sum, by embracing the resistance, the Asad regime achieves a number of objectives: it gives due recognition and voice to rising public anger at regional conflicts; it frames such anger within a state-centred nationalist rhetoric; and finds a common voice with Muslim activists. By doing so, it stifles anti-regime discourse whilst defusing the power of a politically uncontrollable 'social sphere'. At the regional level, it refashions the historical role of Syria and its regime as leaders of the confrontation and sends to Israel and to other international actors the message that, unless Syrian interests are taken into consideration, 'this is what you get'.¹⁷ Finally, by brandishing the 'resistance' slogan whilst seeking international recognition of Syria's regional role, Syrian leaders also signal that only a strong regime in Damascus will be able to deliver peace in the face of the intransigence of the Syrian and Arab masses, whilst its strong connection with resistance groups and emerging regional powers makes of Syria the pivotal interlocutor in any regional settlement.

¹⁶ Since mid 2009, Bashar al-Asad's vision of the Five Seas (the Mediterranean, Black Sea, Red Sea, Arab Gulf, and the Caspian Sea) has become a pillar of Syrian foreign policy, allegedly not to substitute but to complement the Arab system. This strategy would put Israel back into its natural position of a small state, whilst Syria would become the core of this new world order. Author's interview with Imad al-Shueibi, 3 March 2010. See also President Bashar al-Asad's interview in *La Repubblica*, (Italian daily newspaper), 24 May 2010, available at www.repubblica.it/esteri/2010/05/24/news/assad_24_maggio-4290367

¹⁷ Author's interview, Damascus, March 2010. Syrian dailies published threats that Syrians will fight Israel in every part of the Golan - 'just as the Lebanese resistance fought you'. See *al-Thawra*, 16 August 2006.

A Genealogy of Peace

The new 'resisting Middle East' has been openly conceived in antagonist terms vis-à-vis Israel. Thirty seven years after the last open conflict, Israel is still portrayed in Syrian media as an aggressive foreign entity implanted in the heart of the Arab world, plotting to take over the entire Arab homeland. The Lebanon and Gaza wars, Israeli attacks targeting Syrian territory, and the 'Lebanization' of Iraq – which according to many in Syria, is intended to weaken the anti-Israel front – only confirm this view.

Despite praise for the change in the Middle East strategic environment brought by the victory of Hizbollah, and acknowledgment of the encouraging results of five rounds of indirect talks held during 2008 with Turkish mediation,¹⁸ nobody in Syria is optimistic about immediate prospects for regaining the Golan Heights. It is common wisdom in Syria that 'Israel – not Syria – has never really wanted peace'.¹⁹ The Israeli attack on Gaza has frozen all peace initiatives as well as any talk of possible 'benefits' of a peace settlement with Israel, which had circulated in Syrian intellectual and business circles.²⁰ The current US and Western position, although not openly articulated, is to out-wait Syria in order to take advantage of a deteriorating economic situation that will inevitably weaken the Syrian position whilst developments on the Golan Heights will in time turn Israeli occupation into a fait accompli.

A peace treaty is not a priority for the Syrian government either. By joining the resistance front, Syrian leaders are signalling that Syria could wait until an 'honourable peace' is attainable,²¹ and that the regime is ready to take large risks rather than compromise from a position of weakness.²² Moreover the leadership might have considered that a peace agreement, in the absence of an acceptable solution regarding Jerusalem, might produce a Muslim outcry and thus greater domestic stress.²³ Indeed the 'no war no peace' situation, which over the years has legitimised emergency laws; brought pervasive intelligence infiltration throughout society and induced a rigid social discipline in the name of national cohesion against the enemy, might be the best solution for Bashar al-Asad's Syria, as it was for the Syria of his father. Yet the Syrian regime is bound by its own rhetoric, and 'cannot say no to a peace treaty' if Israel is ready to return the Golan.²⁴

If the regime requires conflict and radicalism as tools for maintaining internal control, one could posit that success in the peace process would be profoundly destabilizing for Damascus.²⁵ This is the opinion voiced by many critics of the regime, who point out that the regime needs an enemy.²⁶ This could be a simplistic view of the ways in which antagonism works, one that ignores the subtlety of power mechanism in Syria. An analysis of Syrian political discourse suggests that peace could

¹⁸ Turkish facilitation – rather than mediation – of the five rounds of indirect talks during 2008 did produce changes, Syria placed six points on a map showing their own definition of boundaries. See International Crisis Group, Europe Report n. 203, 'Turkey and the Middle East: Ambitions and Constraints', 7 April 2010, available at www.crisisgroup.org

¹⁹ Author's interviews, Damascus, March 2010. Bashar al-Asad has offered peace negotiation to Israel several times since 2003, but for years has received no constructive response.

²⁰ Author's interview with Syrian political analyst Samir al-Taqi, Director of the Orient Centre for International Studies, who was involved in Syrian negotiations with Israel. Damascus, 15 March 2010.

²¹ Radio Damascus, October 2000.

²² Faruq al-Shara's speech, in Barry Rubin, 'Understanding Syrian Policy: An analysis of Foreign Minister Faruq al-Shara's explanation' in *MERIA Journal*, vol. 4, no.2, June 2000.

²³ Author's interview, Damascus, March 2010.

²⁴ Bashar al-Assad's interview with *La Repubblica*, 24 May 2010.

²⁵ Ely Karmon, 'Analysis: Does Syria want peace?', ICT, 25 November 2007, available at www.ict.org

²⁶ Author's interviews, Damascus, March 2010.

become part of an operation of 'authoritarian upgrading', rather than triggering the collapse of the Syrian regime, or the crumbling of its governmental strategies. We cannot predict future scenarios, but we can 'interpret the war that is going on beneath peace'²⁷ within the framework of Syrian political discourse. We can ask what kind of peace is embedded in the *tawazun* equation and in the *sumud/muqawama* strategy; and what discursive power strategies disciplining Syrian state-society relations are likely to be re-inscribed in a future peacetime.

In Asad's 'strategic balance' equation, peace was conceptualised as a process imbricated with power, a condition which carries with it the imbalances that characterized the conflict from which it emerged. This explains why, according to many Syrians, the Syrian-Israeli peace will be a cold peace, 'colder than the one between Israel and Egypt'.²⁸ The reason is not merely psychological – although it is understandable that people's hostility will not be instantly healed by a treaty – but lies in the widespread expectation that a 'real' peace can only exist among equal parties, willing and capable of redress imbalances and reinstalling justice at the national and regional level. Peace cannot be detached from the rights and virtues for which Syrians have struggled since the birth of their nation. Any partial or selective settlement would only seal and freeze existing structures of power, which, in the embattled Middle East region, involve authoritarian regimes waging patriotic wars in the name of a people mobilised to defend artificial boundaries. Thus the fact that few in Syria expect real change from an Israeli-Syrian peace treaty, speaks volumes for popular disillusionment, and shows how deeply antagonism is embedded in Syrian political discourse.

Second, peace will be an achievement of the regime. It will be presented to the Syrian public as the culmination of a long process orchestrated by the wise and astute Syrian leadership. Thus the recovery of the Golan Heights will mark an historical victory and a triumph of justice, which will serve as a pillar of the regime legitimacy for years to come. Moreover, with the recovery of the Golan, decades of sacrifices, austerity, militarisation and repression will find a sort of justification. Therefore peace will provide an occasion to celebrate popular steadfastness and regime achievements together, thus legitimating and strengthening the 'security pact' between regime and society.

Third, and more importantly, the leaders of *bilad al-sumud* and *al-muqawama* will not exhaust their historical role with the recovery of Golan. The *tawazun* equation indicates that even a peace sanctioned by the sovereign still indicates a contingent disequilibrium of force relations: therefore this peace needs to be defended. Thus the old mechanisms of social discipline will still be instrumental in guaranteeing that the architecture of power in Syria will not change. In such a discursive context, peace will re-enforce the autonomy, ideological credentials, legitimacy and power of the regime, and criticism of 'victorious' leaders will become unthinkable as it would be a betrayal of the entire history of Syrian victorious confrontation.

Finally, the decision to sign a peace treaty must be, and be seen to be – both domestically and internationally – as a decision independent of foreign pressure, but at the same time to some extent 'above' the popular will. In this way, peace will enhance the regime legitimacy at home – as the champion of Syria's national interest and patriotism – and abroad as the strong government able to

²⁷ Michel Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, London 2003, pp 15-16, 48-48, 50-51.

²⁸ Author's interview, Damascus, March 2010.

impose peace on the turbulent 'Arab street'. Sources close to government circles already point to Israel's 'golden opportunity' to achieve peace, so long as a strong and non-democratic regime is there 'to impose it on the people'.²⁹ Regional and international powers must learn that not only the survival of the regime, but its stability and its very strength are a precondition for the viability of such peace and for regional stability. Defend the peace for the people, defend it from the people: either ways, the real winner is the regime, and antagonism.

²⁹ Author's interview, Damascus, March 2010.

Conclusion

Antagonism is the real winner in Bashar al-Asad's Syria, and indeed in the new Middle East. In spite of ongoing reforms and new regional strategies, antagonism remains the core of the Syrian political modus operandi: it informs political practices in war and peace; it lays a set of conditions for change; and it constrains any imagining of Syria's future. Thus Syrian politics remains locked into a paradigm that curbs the possibility to pose the question of locating spaces of friction and mediation – which is the very stuff of politics.

This analysis suggests that the possibility of Syria's moving beyond the present impasse as well as its ability to do so needs more than 'redesigning the regional order and a new geopolitical map'³⁰ – which might well contribute to the upgrading or maintenance of the existing regime and its power strategies. Rather, it requires a move away from a discourse centred on antagonism to one which allows re-negotiation or mediation amongst the various forces and interests present in the country and in the region.

An analysis of antagonism also highlights ways in which non-state actors are drawn into spheres of power. Thus another suggestion of this study is that an appraisal of the discursive mechanisms underpinning Syrian politics is a prerequisite for a reflection on effective tactics for civic engagement in Syria. An understanding of such mechanisms is important for civil-society supporters as well, if they are to devise strategies and circuits of support for Syrian groups that would not merely reinforce the red lines and exclusionary paradigms that are entrenched in existing practices.

³⁰ Bashar al-Asad's interview with *La Repubblica*, 24 May 2010.

About the Author

Aurora Sottimano holds a PhD degree in Politics from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, and a Laurea degree in Oriental Studies from the University of Turin (Italy), where she pursued a second Laurea in International Political Science. Her research focuses on Syria and Middle East politics; the political economy of development and liberalisation; and authoritarian governmentality. Her publications include *Changing Regime Discourse in Syria*, Lynne Rienner 2008.

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