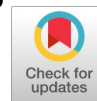


Pro-Syrian Regime Versus Anti Regime Outlets: A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis

Hussam Badawi



Abstract: *The Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011 became a global crisis and attracted the international social media attention, leading to the engagement of international superpowers. Based on the assumption that social media discourse is not neutral and impacted by social, political, and economic contexts [1], this paper employs van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach to investigate the role of social media discourse in protracting the Syrian conflict. It analyzes two main local, anti-, and pro-regime, social media outlets' posts, and tweets to expose their discursive strategies and embedded ideologies. This article exposes the manipulation practices on the discursive and linguistic level. It conducts a complex analysis to uncover hidden messages and manipulation techniques that has been delivered and utilized by conflicting parties in Syria, influencing people's minds, increasing their polarity, altering the Syrian revolution's conception, and protracting the tragedy. The findings indicate that social media discourse vis-à-vis the Syrian context is biased. Syrian conflicting parties, especially pro-regime outlets, manipulate discourse with the aim of influencing people's understandings and beliefs and hence actions. Anti-government actors are always stereotyped as foreign backed, extremists, and terrorists. International outlets, impacted by the local outlets, have contributed to altering the perception of the Syrian conflict, from a popular social movement to a violent civil war.*

Keywords: Social Media, Syria, Ideology.

I. INTRODUCTION

The expression 'Arab Spring' stands for the anti-authoritarian uprisings that occurred in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Syria. Uprisings, sectarian and nationalist, arise as an "organizing and modernizing medium" [2]; the purpose of such revolutions can be mainly for political, religious, economic, and social change. For instance, in 2010, a simple Tunisian man called (Mohammed Bouazizi) sparked the Arab Spring by setting himself afire while protesting the Tunisian government procedures. As a result, the Tunisian people rallied to oust the president Zine El-Abedin Ben Ali who escaped to the kingdom of Saudi Arabia [3]. Inspired by the 'successes' of the Tunisian revolution, many Arab countries, such as Egypt, Libya and Syria have become a world of revolutions protesting the dictatorial presidents.

Defending religion, uprooting corruption, fighting poverty, and assisting the downtrodden are examples of the religiously and emotionally infused slogans utilized to commence such revolutions.

These serial uprisings that erupted directly after the Tunisian revolution indicate that the stability in the Arab countries has been fragile before these political and social movements took place and that the liaison between those countries' people and governments has been vulnerable. This can be observed particularly in countries governed by the same family for tens of years, such as Syria, Egypt, and Libya. Of particular interest is the Syrian revolution. The unrest began on March 15, 2011, when anti-government slogans were written on some school walls by a group of boys. The Syrian authorities responded brutally to this incident by detaining many children, killing a 13-year-old child called Hamza Ali Al-Khatib, and ripping off many children's fingers [4]. For that reason, some of the Syrian notable figures in the city of Dara demanded the criminals be prosecuted, but in vain. Thus, the outraged Syrian people crowded the streets calling for reforms and freedom.

Notwithstanding there were many reasons that could have sparked the Syrian unrest, such as poor economy, high unemployment, corruption, the lack of political freedom, and religion.

II. REVIEW LITERATURE

The current paper provides a critical discourse analysis of social media discourse in the context of the Syrian revolution. To the researcher's knowledge, there has not been much research on the role of social media discourse in protracting the Syrian conflict, namely the application of van Dijk's CDA approach.

Therefore, the paper examines some related previous studies which investigated the topic of the current study, though they have different analysis methods and research questions.

A. Hanas Mohammad (2012)

In her study, Mohammad (2012) investigated the role of social media in riots, specifically the role of Twitter in spreading the direct democracy during the MENA riots. The data were collected during the first quarter of 2011 and analyzed through Fairclough CDA approach. The data samples were the most influential hashtags related to the Arab spring.

She found out that Twitter can be utilized for spreading information rapidly and issuing propaganda safely.

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*Correspondence Author(s)

Hussam Badawi*, MA Student, MA in Applied Linguistics, Sham University, Syria. Email: hussambadawisam@gmail.com, ORCID ID: [0000-0003-2625-4271](https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2625-4271)

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Therefore, it enables the spread of direct democracy. By analyzing two main Twitter discourse themes, namely: democracy and anti-west discourse, Mohammad highlights the fact that the discourse discusses some very appealing issues to most people regardless of the race, religion and geography, such as the call of the elementary democracy values and the importance of the government listening to the people. However, Twitter users in the MENA region are very limited and it is difficult to measure Twitter discourse's effect precisely.

B. Farid Shirazi (2013)

Shirazi (2013) investigated the role of social media in the uprising waves in the MENA countries (the Middle East and North Africa countries, Such as Syria). Employing van Dijk's approach to CDA, Shirazi analyzed 3635 Twitter, Facebook and YouTube messages, statements, videos, and pictures. The content was related to the people demands for freedom and democracy and the government's response to those demands.

Shirazi conclude that in the MENA region, during the Arab spring, the dictators and the elites in power utilize similar discourse strategies, such as denial for the political change demands, and calling the citizens "Germs, Terrorists" and "criminals, Outlaws" by Assad and Ghaddafi respectively. Moreover, the social media has been found to be effective, for social activists, in organizing protests in the region, mobilizing people, encouraging them to challenge the elite's narrative, and exposing the dictators' discursive strategies.

C. Olesya Tkacheva (2013)

Tkacheva conducted three case studies on Syria, Egypt, and China to examine whether and how the freedom of accessing internet-based platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter can empower citizens to make their governments more trustworthy and how access to online websites may affect the political processes and the freedom of expression and assembly.

In Syria, she focused on how the opposition and the regime employed the internet to contest the political space covering the period from the spring of 2011 until the summer of 2012.

She argues that social media platforms, specifically Facebook, were severely censored by Assad's regime. That is why no visible impact of social media on political freedoms has been noted before the outbreak of the Syrian revolution. Notwithstanding, during the Syrian revolution, social media undermined the non-democratic Syrian regime where a huge number of internet users managed to use anonymizing tools, such as Tor and were able to access and share censored information, document Assad's atrocities, publicize elite defection, organize protests, and attract the international attention. As a result, the pressure, and the political cost on Assad's supporters, such as Russia, have increased; however, this did not oblige them to stop supporting Assad.

D. Ansam Ghazal (2015)

Ghazal compared the headlines and subtitles of two media leading channels (the Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) and Al- Jazeera English (AJA)) regarding the coverage of the Syrian events between 2014 and 2015. She

employed Fairclough CDA approach to highlight the impact of ideology on those outlets' news.

Ghazal found out that ideology is reflected in both channels' texts, headlines and subtitles. While both were covering the same events, they delivered different messages. For example, SANA used the term "terrorist" while Al-Jazeera used "opposition" to describe the anti-Assad forces while reporting the same event "capturing Idlib" in 2015. Moreover, SANA always blames anti-Assad forces of killing innocent civilians while AJA usually blames Assad forces of committing war crimes.

E. Kais Amir Kadhim (2018)

Kadhim investigated how the online media represent the rebels and the government during the Syrian revolution. The focus is on a pro-regime online news outlet called Al-Sham. Employing Wodak approach to critical discourse analysis, the researcher examined 397 reports released online by Al- Sham agency between 2012 and 2013.

Kadhim's study revealed that the revolutionary members and organizations have been negatively represented. For example, the rebels are always described as terrorists, gangs, out of law, and foreign fighters. Moreover, the rebels were blamed for the massacres and destructions in the country. The government forces, in contrast, were portrayed as the protectors of the land. Such strategies can be clearly noticed in the following example from an article published on Al- Sham pages:

*"**The brave soldiers of the Syrian Arab Army** cleared the whole area of hundreds **of terrorists** who were provided with various advanced weapons."*

Thus, the pro-regime social media outlets have manipulated discourse to direct the international community and the citizens' attention towards certain events emphasizing certain aspects and ignoring others with the aim of minimizing the support provided to the revolution and legitimizing Assad's brutal actions.

F. Hanan Ismaeel (2019)

Employing van Dijk's approach to CDA, Ismaeel (2019) conducted a qualitative study aimed at investigating how the Syrian uprising was covered and how power relations were reproduced through media discourse, particularly media reports and television journalism.

The news reports were taken from the American CNN, the Russian RT TV, and the Syrian pro-regime SSC channel. The research detects the discursive strategies used by those channels to transmit their ideologies to the audience.

Ismaeel stated that headlining, dominance, elimination, access, and control are the most four strategies used by those channels. Thus, Ismaeel focused on those strategies when analyzing the selected data. Headlines, for instance, were structured to match the political ideology of each channel. For example, SSC's headlines (The Syrian Channel) were loaded with positive implications towards the Syrian presidential elections (the fair elections).

Ismaeel also indicated that SSC is unprofessional, and ineffective regarding covering the events, since it depends mostly on the elimination strategy in its reports and has minimal access to influential discourse. SSC is also found to lack credibility since its reports miss statistics and numbers. CNN and RT, in contrast, are more credible.

G. Amaal Algamde (2019)

Algamde's study conducts a comparative study on social media portrayal of the Syrian uprising in the Iranian Fars news corporation to UK Reuters news agency. It examines the online reports covering the chemical attacks events, posted between 2013-2015.

It investigates the construction of anti- and pro-authority powers in the Syrian conflict employing a corpus-based van Dijk's approach to critical discourse analysis.

Algamde concluded that Fars is biased since it excludes the Sunni social actors, suppress the Islamic identity and rebels, and describes the revolution subduing process as a war against the foreign-backed terrorists. Reuters, in contrast, presents the anti-government actors more critically. The rebels are not stereotyped and categorized as Takfiri or ISIL members.

Algamde asserted that Fars holds an ideological perspective and is highly affected by the political stance of the Iranian government which supports the Syrian regime. Reuters, conversely, has been proved to be independent and not influenced by the UK political stance.

H. Mohammed Kadalsh (2021)

Kadalsh conducted a recent study, in 2021, that aims at comparing the anti-regime and the regime usage of social media. It also investigates how both are competing to deliver different narratives for the same events in the same country.

Kadalsh claimed that Assad's outlets post fabricated stories, such as, 'the sectarian rebels will terminate the other sects,' particularly the Alawi sect, to spread fear among the supporters and justify the violence against the rebels.

However, social media has freed the protesters from Assad's sanctions allowing them to organize protests, express themselves, documenting Assad's atrocities, and sharing their narratives that challenge the regime's narratives.

Kadalsh alleged that both, the pro- and anti-regime outlets, exploit social media targeting different audiences, using different strategies while covering the same events with the aim of legitimizing their actions, and polarizing more followers.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach for critically explaining the ways in which discourse constructs and legitimizes social inequality. It investigates the relationship between discourse and other social components (power control, ideologies, values, and attitudes). The importance of CDA stems from the fact that power control, for example, can be enacted through action (e.g., police violence against protesters) and cognition (e.g., through manipulation, persuasion). Van Dijk argues that the major purpose of CDA is to critically investigate the language

produced by people who have the power, responsibility, and access to handle social problems [5].

In a nutshell, CDA focuses on the relationship between language and social elements, such as power, ideology, hegemony, dominance, and social injustice. Discourse, therefore, should be profoundly examined to bare the hidden ideologies and reveal the discursive practices aiming at raising the typical readers' awareness of such practices.

B. Modus Operandi: Dijk's Ideological Square

A fundamental factor in Van Dijk's model [6] is ideology as it forms the structure of discourse and can be expressed explicitly and implicitly. If implicitly expressed in discourse, it is not easy to identify ideologies. Van Dijk, therefore, introduces the term "ideological square" for ideologies analysis in which he identifies four discursive strategies. The square components are positive-self representation, negative-other representation, self-identity description, norms and values description. Positive-self representation is to emphasize one's own good characteristics while negative-other representation is to reveal the others' defects. Self-identity description means constructing or manufacturing a positive identity of the threatened group. Norm and value description focuses on the marginalized group's emphasis of equality and justice, and the other's violation of norms and values.

C. Methodology, Data Collection and Procedures

This paper adopts the qualitative approach and employs Van Dijk's three-dimensional (discourse, cognition, and society) approach to deconstruct the linguistic structures of the excerpts taken from the social media platforms.

The data collected will be examined through an open and interfaced analysis process in which this paper focuses on the three dimensions of discourse (microstructure, superstructure, and the macrostructure) in light of Dijk's model. However, the macro-structure will be more highlighted since the majority of social media users can recall the main ideas and topics discussed more than the lower levels of discourse. The paper also utilizes Van Dijk's "Ideological Square" to investigate the hidden ideologies in the targeted date.

The original talks/posts will be transcribed first and then translated. After translating the original excerpts, the researcher will deconstruct these posts using the socio-cognitive theory above.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

A. Lexical Choice

The deliberate or undeliberate choice of words to match speakers or writers' beliefs can explicitly expose their ideology. [7] As Van Dijk states, the analysis of the selection of certain words over others can show the relationship between ideology and language. Lexical manipulation is, thus, a technique used to manipulate discourse with the aim of convincing the "others" with "our" preferred message.

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This section, therefore, investigates how and for what purposes pro and anti-Assad social media outlets manipulate online discourse on the lexical level.

The following are typical examples selected from the Syrian official news agency (SANA, the Syrian Formal news agency).

SANA Facebook:

1. “*Terrorists’* attacks and shells target al-Suqaylabiyah vicinity, Hama countryside” [8].

SANA Website:

2. Al-Nusra terrorists with White Helmets filming fake videos of air strikes at civilians in Idlib [9].

SANA on Twitter

3. #*Extremist* groups #presence in #Idlib source of destabilization, #Syromolotov says [10].
4. Czech President: There's no moderate opposition in Syria, only *extremist* groups.

[11] Foucault argues that a text should not be analyzed as a separate document from other relations, such as power and identity relations. Texts, tweets, and posts, hence, should be analyzed in relations to other social components, such as shared cognition, social injustice, collective prejudice, and political inequality. Thus, it could be deduced from the Syrian context that pro-regime outlets utilize the words *terrorists* and *extremists* to refer to the opposition’s actors or share posts and tweets that have those words attributed to the opposition.

The same utilized cluster of lexicons (*terrorists*, *extremists*,) by all pro-regime outlets expresses their radical view about the rebels. This salient pattern of lexical choices frames the identity of the rebels as violent, illegal, and notorious. For instance, the use of the adjectives *terrorists* and *moderate* is not a random choice of words, it denotes that the opposition actors are not even moderate, they are extremists who hold radical ideologies and may threaten the social structure and people’s interests, denying them as political opponents. Accordingly, categorizing the rebels within terrorism imposes two semantic macrostructures: religious radicalism and anti-liberalism. It also reinforces the impression of otherness and division.

B. Polarization, Self-favoring and Others Derogation

Polarization is also established by such choice of lexicon. Attributing negative aspects such as *terrorists*, *violence*, and *extremists* to the “others” means, hypothetically, that “Our” government has the counter positive aspects such as democracy, freedom, and peace. Consequently, it constructs certain mental models in the followers’ minds. The preferred mental model is affirming Assad’s narrative about the conflict in Syria in which Assad ignores the existence of any peaceful protests or political parties which call for political reforms and social changes. Accordingly, such outlets discourse contributes to influencing and framing the social cognition in the interest of the dominant group (Assad’s government).

C. Negative lexicalization

Negative lexicalization, the use of strong negative lexis to describe others, is involved as an ideologically based device applied by Assad outlets to foreground the government good attributes and the others bad features. The following examples include a cluster of negative lexis such as *fake*,

siege, *abducted*, *so-called*, and *cross-borders obedient servant* attributed to the opposition actors who mainly presented as “terrorist groups”.

5. Sponsors and supporters of *terrorism* in Syria have tried to give the group’s activities a *fake* “humanitarian nature.
6. Three *terrorists* of the so-called “*White Helmets*” terrorist organization killed in Hama countryside.
7. *White Helmets*... cross-borders *obedient servant*.
8. The Syrian Arab Army breaks ISIS siege on Deir Ezzor city.

Formal Assad outlets with the aim of spreading fear among the international communities warn people that such dangerous groups are expanding even outside Syria. Those outlets’ reports, tweets, or posts ignore any sort of peaceful protests or political parties which stand against Assad, the dictator. As such, pro-Assad outlets not only aim at deluding the local and international community, but they deliberately spread the fear of such groups (*terrorists/oppositions*) to obtain local and international support and legitimacy, and to justify Assad’s power abuse.

Contrary to SANA, *Orient News on Twitter*, a prominent anti-Assad media corporation with more than two million followers, is selected as a sample of the anti-Assad outlets, labels the rebels as *activists*, *demonstrators* or *opposition fighters* as illustrated in the following posts:

9. Syrians, activists mark anniversary of Assad chemical #*massacre* in #*Khan* Sheikhoun [12].
10. Opposition fighters liberate Idlib’s #*Saraqib*.
11. #*Opposition* fighters tour in #*Hama* countryside's #*Hememiat* after defeating #*Assad* militiamen.
12. #*Daraa* demonstrators condemn Assad #*massacre* in al-Sanamayn.

This cluster of adjectives, nouns and verbs introduces the rebels positively. For instance, presenting the rebels as *activists*, *demonstrators*, and *opposition fighters* affirms their peaceful and political presence as a legal counterpart to the regime. *Demonstrators*, *activists*, and *condemn*, for instance, denote that those actors are unarmed, and peaceful protestors who call for their rights democratically, they are not foreign, extremists or radicals as the government claims. *Defeat* and *liberate* are strong verbs that express the rebels’ power over Assad. They are the powerful party that helps the civilians (the victims) to be liberated.

Unlike SANA, Orient avoids using the word *army* to describe Assad forces, it uses *militiamen* instead. Semantically, *Militiamen* in line with other negative words like *massacres* revoke the legal actions of the government and defend the opposition calls for freedom.

More examples from SANA show how Assad is introduced as a legitimate and strong leader. Example 13 below shows that positive adjectives and verbs such as, President, develop, expand, and rehabilitate are carefully selected to emphasize his legitimacy and power. Assad is always attributed as *President*, affirming his legitimacy as the country leader.



Moreover, attributing verbs such as, *rehabilitate*, *issues*, *develop* to Assad presents him as a strong actor who has the power to set laws and plans for a brighter future, implying a reassuring message for the people who fear the terrorist's threat raised by the others (the opposition actors). Moreover, using the collective noun *army* denotes that the government is strong and united unlike the others who are described as scattered and weak *groups*.

13. "President al-Assad: We are able to develop, expand and rehabilitate what has been destroyed by terrorism".

Orient, in contrast, mentions Assad without any formal attribute like *President*. This implies that Orient does not consider him as a legitimate president but a dictator person who responds violently to the people demands, example 11. It is worth mentioning that Orient does not utilize extreme words to describe Assad and his forces unlike SANA that employs strong negative words to describe the rebels which denotes that Orient portrayal of the conflict is more neutral than SANA's.

D. Negative prejudice reinforcement

Not only by the choice of words overt and unstated negative presuppositions are expressed, Assad's outlets also employ implied and explicit **propositions** (units of meaning expressed in one clause) to pass hidden messages. Typical and obvious propositions that Assad outlets prompt are *anti-Assad groups are foreigners*, *oppositions members are terrorists*. Noticeably, in the previous examples, those outlets do not modify such propositions by modalities; this repeated pattern of proposition with no use of modalities has a strong impact on the message receivers, leaving no doubt that those are terrorist not *possibly* terrorist and they are all foreigners not *some* of them. Implied propositions can be noticed in the following example:

14. Our armed forces continued *hunting* members of the terrorist groups in Homs and its countryside, inflicting heavy losses upon them.

The oppositions social actors not only presented as terrorists, but also as animals deserve death. Such proposition is triggered due to the use of the word *hunt* which literally means chasing animals to kill them. Polarity is also manifested by such examples in which the government actors are categorized to be human, legal, and local while the opposition actors are animals, savages and foreigners.

Clearly, pro-Assad outlets, by deliberate lexical manipulation, aim at gaslighting users to logroll Assad's narratives that there is a global conspiracy against Syria implemented by foreign terrorists, not a political movement in Syria erupted by local citizens. Accordingly, by explicitly and implicitly, intentionally, and repeatedly practicing lexical manipulation strategy, those outlets forefront Assad narrative that is "Assad is, competently, standing against the terrorist global conspiracy on Syria" and deny anti-Assad narrative that is "Assad is, brutally, breaching the international law (norms and values) in Syria.

Evidently, pro-Assad outlets, by positive self-representation and negative other-representation, function as a persuasive tool that aims to construct, in people's mind, a positive mental model about the ingroup and negative one about the others. They aim for controlling people's minds by

framing the social cognition (social representation, knowledge, and learning) in the interest of the controlling group (Assad's government).

E. Actors Description

The analysis of the actor description is essential since it reveals how the oppositions and Assad social actors are represented in the social media outlets. Actors can be represented collectively or individually, as ingroup (Us) or outgroup actors (Them), identified by their profession or name [13]. The ideological background of discourse producers can also be revealed by actors' analysis. This study argues that Assad's social media outlets discourse always classifies the opposition actors as Them, belonging to the outgroup. The opposition members are terrorist groups, extremist groups, but never a political party. Moreover, the opposition members appear, in Assad outlets, as scattered fragile illegitimate tools using a plural lexis (*groups*) whereas the government actors appear as a unified strong formal actor using a collective noun (*army*). This is clearly noticed in many examples cited in this study, such as the following:

15. The *Syrian Arab Army* breaks ISIS siege on Deir Ezzor city.

As overtly expressed in the following examples, anti-Assad outlets present Assad' army as militia and his government as regime. Describing a government as a regime is a negation of its legitimacy and democracy. [14] Channel points out that the word "regime is used to attack one's opponents". In addition, Describing the army as *militia* is a denial of its officiality and unity. Even though Orient describes the opposition members positively as activists, freedom fighters, these attributes still have negative implications. That is the opposition still represented as dispersed groups not a united party.

16. Assad regime, Russia committed 77 #massacres in Idlib since April 2019 [12].
17. Khaled Shikhmos Kassem *killed* under torture in *Assad militia prisons*, 5 years after his arrest.
18. Syrians, activists mark anniversary of Assad chemical #massacre in #Khan Sheikhoun.
19. Opposition fighters liberate Idlib's #Saraqib.

Based on the previous analysis, this study argues that Assad's outlets are biased in respect of representing the opposition members. The opposition social actors are negatively represented as an outcast outgroup whereas Assad followers are represented positively as a good ingroup. The opposition actors are positively represented in anti-Assad outlets; however, they are not represented as one party able to lead the country and replace Assad. Thus, the only shared fact exported from local outlets to international outlets is the fragility of the opposition. Such representation of the opposition in social media discourse may undermine its opportunity to gain sympathy and support. Most importantly, its narrative may not prevail as Assad's. Ultimately, Assad may obtain more sympathy, support, and trust, enabling him to continue committing more crimes.

F. National self-glorification

The general objective of presenting the ingroup positively and the outgroup negatively can be implemented by different forms of national self-glorification; this can be done by praising the own country’s principles, figures, and history [13]. This kind of practices is very popular in Syria and is repeatedly and explicitly utilized in social media discourse as shown in the following typical stances taken from Assad’s outlet SANA:

20. #Syrian students in #Slovakia: Syrian Arab Army an example to follow in #sacrifice for sake of homeland.
21. Haidar: Syria an example to follow in national reconciliations despite all obstacles.
22. In a speech addressed to armed forces, President al-Assad: Syrian Army an example to follow in nationalism and sacrifice.
23. President Bashar al-Assad with the heroes of Syrian Arab Army at the front lines in Eastern Ghouta.

The pre-modifier *Syrian* is frequently attributed to the government army to ascertain the semantic macrostructure of its identity and legality and stress its right to represent the Syrian people. Since Assad’s outlets categorize the others as non-Syrians and foreign-backed and the Syrian Arab army is an example to follow in sacrifice and nationalism, the opposition is meant to be an example of malice and un-nationalism. This may be the implied message that such outlets intended to engrave on people’s mind: glorifying the government while dishonoring the opposition is a must in order to sustain power imbalance and social injustice.

Anti-Assad’s outlets, on the other hand, apply the same linguistic and discursal devices in terms of glorifying the country and its national army. However, it is worth noting that the national Syrian Arab Army mentioned on Orient News outlets (the opposition free army) is different from the national Syrian Arab Army mentioned on SANA’s outlets (Assad’s regime army) as illustrated in the following examples:

24. Free Syrian Army fighters continue fighting despite the snowstorm.
25. Free Syrian Army causes heavy losses among regime forces.

V. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The contents Based on the complex critical discourses analysis conducted, this study findings can be summarized as follows:

- 1) This study finds out that social media outlets discourse is apparently biased in which pro-Assad outlets, such as SANA, depict the conflict in favor of the government, Assad’s government. Anti-Assad outlets, such as Orient, depict the conflict in the interest of the opposition. Examining how those outlets address the same events, groups, and organizations, reveals that those outlets address and consider these events differently. Pro-Assad outlets categorized opposition members as terrorists or foreign-backed extremists while anti-Assad outlets categorized them as activists or freedom fighters. Assad’s outlets depict the White Helmets organization as servants and terrorists while anti-Assad outlets portray

them as brave and heroes.

- 2) Moreover, this study finds out that the conflicting identities and ideologies embedded in social media discourse by the conflicting parties in Syria have polarized the Syrian people and divided the international community. Anti-Assad outlets’ discourse main concern is documenting Assad’s crimes and delegitimizing his actions while pro-Assad outlets’ discourse central focus is covering Assad brutal nature and legitimizing his bad actions. However, social media algorithms leverage pro-Assad outlets discourse more than anti-Assad discourse owing to the algorithms’ inclination towards spreading fake news and disinformation.

The above findings reveal that Syrians social media outlets (pro and anti-Assad outlets) do not abide by the main principles of trust and independence, this paper, therefore, asserts that social media outlets function as political tools and serve the undemocratic governments.

VI. CONCLUSION

This paper recommends conducting more research on the social media posts and tweets written in Arabic or other languages, such as the Kurdish due to the diversity of the sects and countries involved in the Syrian case. Future studies may pay more attention to headlines analysis since the current study findings stress headlines’ role in influencing people’s perception and understanding of events and themselves.

Overall, this research, despite the limitations, is meant to reveal the conflicting parties’ ideologies by conducting a deep and complex critical discourse analysis on the online discourse and its impact on the people polarity and the war period.

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AUTHORS PROFILE



Hussam Badawi is a researcher in Applied linguistics interested in exploring the role of social media discourse in the Syrian conflict. He is an English Language Trainer and Teacher. A member of the Syrian Academic Trainers Union. He is also a search and rescue volunteer and trainer since 2013. Born and raised in the north-west of Syria. He studied English language literature at both Aleppo and Idlib university and went on to pursue a career as an English language trainer. He is currently working on his M.A. thesis, in Applied Linguistics, *The Role of Social Media in Protracting the Syrian Conflict: A Critical Discourse Analysis*. He has trained hundreds of students in Syria. His primary interests are Critical Discourse Analysis, and English Language Teaching.

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