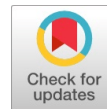# Pro-Syrian Regime Versus Anti Regime Outlets: A Comparative Critical Discourse Analysis

Hussam Badawi

Abstract: The Syrian conflict that erupted in 2011 became a global crisis and attracted international social media attention, leading to the engagement of international superpowers. Based on the assumption that social media discourse is not neutral and is 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 analyses the posts and tweets of two prominent local, anti-regime, and pro-regime social media outlets to expose their discursive strategies and embedded ideologies. This article reveals the manipulation practices on both the discursive and linguistic levels. It conducts a complex analysis to uncover hidden messages and manipulation techniques that have been delivered and utilised by conflicting parties in Syria, influencing people's minds, increasing their polarisation, 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 to influence people's understandings, 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's 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.

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Defending religion, uprooting corruption, fighting poverty, and assisting the downtrodden are examples of the religious and emotionally infused slogans used to initiate such revolutions.

These serial uprisings that erupted directly after the Tunisian revolution indicate that the stability in the Arab countries was fragile before these political and social movements took place, and that the relationship between the people of those countries and their governments was vulnerable. This can be observed particularly in countries governed by the same family for decades, 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 notable Syrian figures in the city of Dara demanded that the criminals be prosecuted, but to no avail. Thus, the outraged Syrian people took to the streets, calling for reforms and freedom.

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

II. REVIEW LITERATURE

This paper presents a critical discourse analysis of social media discourse within the context of the Syrian revolution. To the researcher's knowledge, there has been little research on the role of social media discourse in prolonging the Syrian conflict, specifically the application of van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach.

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

A. Hanas Mohammad (2012)

In her study, Mohammad (2012) examined the role of social media in riots, focusing specifically on the use of Twitter in promoting direct democracy during the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) riots. The data were collected during the first quarter of 2011 and analysed using the Fairclough CDA approach. The data samples were the most influential hashtags related to the Arab Spring.

She discovered that Twitter can be used to spread information and disseminate propaganda safely and rapidly.

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Therefore, it enables the spread of direct democracy. By analysing two main Twitter discourse themes —namely, democracy and anti-West discourse —Mohammad highlights the fact that the discourse addresses some very appealing issues to most people, regardless of their race, religion, and geography, such as the call for elementary democracy values and the importance of the government listening to the people. However, Twitter users in the MENA region are limited, making it challenging to measure the effect of Twitter discourse 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 addressed the people's demands for freedom and democracy, as well as the government's response to those demands.

Shirazi concludes that in the MENA region, during the Arab spring, the dictators and the elites in power utilise similar discourse strategies, such as denial of the political change demands, and calling the citizens "Germs, Terrorists", and "criminals, Outlaws" by Assad and Gaddafi, respectively. Moreover, social media is effective for social activists in organising protests in the region, mobilising 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 political processes and the freedom of expression and assembly.

In Syria, she focused on how the opposition and the regime utilised the internet to contest the political space during the period from spring 2011 to summer 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 vast number of internet users managed to use anonymising tools, such as Tor and were able to access and share censored information, document Assad's atrocities, publicise elite defection, organise protests, and attract international attention. As a result, the pressure and the political cost on Assad's supporters, such as Russia, have increased; however, this has not obliged 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 their coverage of Syrian events between 2014 and 2015. She employed the Fairclough CDA approach to highlight the impact of ideology on the news of those outlets.

Ghazal discovered 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 for killing innocent civilians, while AJA usually blames Assad forces for 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 the Wodak approach to critical discourse analysis, the researcher examined 397 reports released online by the 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, outlaws, and foreign fighters. Moreover, the rebels were blamed for the massacres and destruction in the country. The government forces, in contrast, were portrayed as the protectors of the land. Such strategies can be 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, emphasising certain aspects and ignoring others to minimise the support provided to the revolution and legitimise 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 sourced from American CNN, Russian RT TV, and the Syrian pro-regime SSC channel. The research identifies the discursive strategies employed by these channels to convey their ideologies to the audience.

Ismaeel stated that headlining, dominance, elimination, access, and control are the four most common strategies used by those channels. Thus, Ismaeel focused on those strategies when analysing 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).

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Ismaeel also indicated that SSC is unprofessional and ineffective in covering events, as it primarily relies on the elimination strategy in its reports and has limited access to influential discourse. SSC is also found to lack credibility, as its reports often lack statistical and numerical data. CNN and RT, in contrast, are more credible.

G. Amaal Algamde (2019)

Algamde's study conducts a comparative analysis of the social media portrayal of the Syrian uprising in the Iranian Fars News Corporation and the UK's Reuters News Agency. It examines the online reports covering the chemical attack events, posted between 2013 and 2015.

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

Algamde concluded that Fars is biased since it excludes the Sunni social actors, suppresses 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 insurgents 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 proven to be independent and not influenced by the UK political stance.

H. Mohammed Kadalah (2021)

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

Kadalah 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 organise protests, express themselves, document Assad's atrocities, and share their narratives that challenge the regime's narratives.

Kadalah alleged that both pro- and anti-regime outlets exploit social media, targeting different audiences and using various strategies to cover the same events, thereby legitimising their actions and polarising more followers.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Theoretical Framework

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a qualitative analytical approach that critically explains how discourse constructs and legitimises 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 both action (e.g., police violence against protesters) and cognition (e.g., through manipulation and persuasion). Van Dijk argues that the significant 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 brief, CDA focuses on the relationship between language and social elements, including 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 ideological analysis, in which he identifies four discursive strategies. The square components are positive self-representation, negative other-representation, self-identity description, and norms and values description. Positive self-representation is to emphasise one's good characteristics, while negative other representation is to reveal the others' defects. Self-identity description refers to the process of constructing or manufacturing a positive identity for a threatened group. Norm and value descriptions focus on the marginalised group's emphasis on equality and justice, and the other's violation of norms and values.

C. Methodology, Data Collection and Procedures

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

The data collected will be examined through an open and transparent analysis process, focusing on the three dimensions of discourse (microstructure, superstructure, and 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 utilises Van Dijk's "Ideological Square" to investigate the hidden ideologies in the targeted data.

The original talks and posts will be transcribed first, and then translated into other languages. 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 to convince 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 on civilians in Idleb [9].
SANA on Twitter
3. *#Extremist* groups #presence in #Idleb 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 analysed 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 utilise 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 rebels' identity 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 threat the social structure and people' 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 specific mental models in the minds of its followers. 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 lexicalisation, the use of strong negative lexis to describe others, is employed as an ideologically based device by Assad outlets to foreground the government's 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-border 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-border *obedient servant*.
8. The Syrian Arab Army breaks the 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 in a positive light. 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 those who condemn, for instance, argue that these 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's forces; instead, it uses the term 'militiamen'.* Semantically, *Militiamen*, in line with other negative words like massacres, revoke the legal actions of the government and defend the opposition's 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 emphasise his legitimacy and power. Assad is consistently referred to as President, affirming his legitimacy as the country's leader.

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Moreover, attributing verbs such as "rehabilitate," "issues," and "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 threat posed by 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 can develop, expand and rehabilitate what has been destroyed by *terrorism*".

Orient, in contrast, mentions Assad without any formal title, such as *President*. This implies that Orient does not consider him a legitimate president but a dictator who responds violently to the people's demands, as seen in example 11. It is worth mentioning that Orient does not utilise extreme words to describe Assad and his forces, unlike SANA, which employs strong negative words to describe the rebels, which denotes that Orient's 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, but 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 promote are that anti-Assad groups are foreigners, and opposition *members are terrorists.* Notably, in the previous examples, these outlets do not modify such propositions with modalities; this repeated pattern of propositions with no use of modalities has a substantial impact on the message receivers, leaving no doubt that those are terrorists, not possibly terrorists, 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 opposition's social actors are not only presented as terrorists, but also as animals who deserve death. Such a proposition is triggered due to the use of the word hunt, which means chasing animals to kill them. Polarity is also manifested by such examples in which the government actors are categorised to be human, legal, and local, while the opposition actors are animals, savages and foreigners.

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 that erupted among 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.

Pro-Assad outlets, by positive self-representation and negative other-representation, function as a persuasive tool that aims to construct, in people's minds, a positive mental model about the ingroup and a negative one about the others. They aim to control 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, as it reveals how oppositions and Assad's social actors are represented in social media outlets. Actors can be described collectively or individually, as ingroup (Us) or outgroup actors (Them), identified by their profession or name [13]. Actors' analysis can also reveal the ideological background of discourse producers. 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, opposition members appear in Assad outlets as scattered, fragile, and illegitimate tools, using a plural lexicon (groups). In contrast, government actors appear as a unified, strong, and formal actor, using a collective noun (*army*). This is noticed in many examples cited in this study, such as the following:

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

As overtly expressed in the following examples, anti-Assad outlets present Assad's army as a militia and his government as a 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 *a militia is a denial of its official status* and unity. Although Orient describes the opposition members positively as activists and freedom fighters, these attributes still carry 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 was *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 their representation of 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.

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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 one's own country's principles, figures, and history [13]. This kind of practice is very popular in Syria. It is repeatedly and explicitly utilised 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 the sake of the homeland.
21. Haidar: Syria is an example to follow in national reconciliations despite all obstacles.
22. In a speech addressed to the armed forces, President al-Assad said the Syrian Army is an example to follow in nationalism and sacrifice.
23. President Bashar al-Assad with the heroes of the Syrian Arab Army at the front lines in Eastern Ghouta.

The pre-modifier *"Syrian" is frequently attributed to the government army to establish the semantic macrostructure of its identity and legitimacy, and to* 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 minds: glorifying the government while dishonouring the opposition is a must to sustain power imbalances and social injustice.

Anti-Assad's outlets, on the other hand, apply the same linguistic and discoursal 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, the findings of the study can be summarized as follows:

1) This study finds that social media outlets' discourse is biased, in which pro-Assad outlets, such as SANA, depict the conflict in favour of the government, Assad's government. Anti-Assad outlets, such as Orient, depict the conflict in the interest of the opposition. Examining how these outlets address the same events, groups, and organisations reveals that they approach and consider these events differently. Pro-Assad outlets categorised opposition members as terrorists or foreign-backed extremists, while anti-Assad outlets categorised them as activists or freedom fighters. Assad's outlets depict the White Helmets organisation as servants and terrorists, while anti-Assad outlets portray them as brave heroes.

2) Moreover, this study finds that the conflicting identities and ideologies embedded in social media discourse by the conflicting parties in Syria have polarised the Syrian people and divided the international community. Anti-Assad outlets' discourse primary concern is documenting Assad's crimes and delegitimising his actions, while pro-Assad outlets' discourse central focus is covering Assad's brutal nature and legitimising his evil 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 Syrian 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 further research on social media posts and tweets written in Arabic or other languages, such as Kurdish, due to the diversity of the sects and countries involved in the Syrian case. Future studies may pay more attention to headline analysis, as the current study's findings emphasise the role of headlines in influencing people's perception and understanding of events and themselves.

Overall, this research, despite its limitations, aims to reveal the conflicting parties' ideologies by conducting a thorough and nuanced critical discourse analysis of online discourse and its impact on the public's polarisation and the war period.

DECLARATION

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Authors Contributions	I am the sole author of the article.

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AUTHORS PROFILE

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