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Dabke and the Belly-Dance

Understanding the Symbolic Culture of Violence in the Syrian Arab Republic

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Introduction

In 2011, the world watched on as the countries in the Arab region erupted one after another, with the people taking to the streets, toppling governments, and changing the landscape of the region forever. The changes happened quickly, yet not fast enough, like the falling of dominoes, where you know that they are going to fall down, and affect chain reaction, yet there is not much that can really be done. After more than 7 years, we have seen a military coup in Egypt, a failed state in Libya, drastic repressions in Bahrain, prolonged strife in Yemen, a shaky democracy in Tunisia, and a bloody civil war in Syria. While none of these states have had an easy start to the new governments and administrations, none have had it quite so badly as Syria. This forms the central puzzle of the paper: why did the Syrian uprising not follow the lead of the other Arab uprisings, but instead turned into the violent war that we know today?

The conflict in Syria has been on the forefront due to the very nature of the crisis and the worldwide repercussions it has produced, with its effects reaching far beyond the borders of the country, to include the region as well as the rest of the world. The Syrian crisis has produced heinous crimes, terrorist acts, intentional humiliation of Syria, oppression and torture, targeted misinformation, deception, and unaccountable psychological abuses, manipulations, and the claimed use of chemical weapons (Weaver 2013). As Khashanah writes, "the Syrian Crisis is a highly complex socio-political problem developed by a combination of truly dissatisfied and angry Syrians, Western powers disgruntled and frustrated with Syrian governmental policies and its allies, an opportunistic and sympathetic 'East', vengeful Arabs, and thousands of Jihadists, opportunists and professional criminal" (Khashanah 2014).

Map No. 4204 Rev. 3 UNITED NATIONS
April 2012

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

As the conflict concludes its seventh year, Syria finds itself at an important intersection of political and strategic manipulations, both from within and from external actors, the impact of which would cross over to the Arab region, as it has already started with Iraq and Qatar. The reason for the centrality of the Syrian conflict in the eyes of the world, and more so for the region, is that the most important faultlines of the Arab region go through the country—the geopolitical location, the balance between the different ethnicities in the multi-ethnic society characteristic of the Levant, rise and role of radical Islam in the context of the multiple ethnic and religious groups, and the presence of oil and other resources. At the same time, it has become quite difficult to systematically analyse the conflict due to the continuous changes in the number of non-state armed groups, especially with them collaborating, and then separating.

Under these circumstances, especially given the targeted misinformation, it becomes extremely important to understand the nature of terrorism—is it only the non-state actors that can be labelled as terrorists? What happens when the international community supports these organisations? How can we distinguish and measure legitimacy, loyalty, and power in the complex situation that we see today in Syria? What are the reasons behind

the excessive use of force by these non-state armed groups and terrorist organisations? In trying to answer these questions, we will look at not only the political system and the conflict dynamics as it has been playing out in Syria, but also the effect of the regional politics on the prognosis of the conflict. Thus, through the focus on the mechanism of inter-group violence perpetuated by terrorist organisations and non-state armed groups, it is aimed to understand the particular nature of the conflict as it is playing out in Syria. Understanding the nature of terrorism and terror related violence as it differs in the Syrian Arab Republic from the other Arab countries during the uprising will become the central question of the paper.

While underlining the fact that all violence is political and therefore strategic, and whose strategy can be outlined, there is something quite peculiar about the case of the Syrian conflict. Many of the faultlines mentioned above run through many of the other Arab countries. However, it is quite curious to note that the level of destruction, crimes, killings, and oppression were not seen in the other Arab republics. In analysing the questions mentioned above, the paper would be using a culturalist comparativist approach, in order to fill in the gaps that other analyses have not been able to do. In doing so, we would be looking at the particular cultural aspects that differentiate the Levant (and Syria in particular) from the other Arab countries to discern the difference in the manner of repression, oppression, and the political dynamics of the conflict. A cultural model such as this one acts as an external representation of a culture created by the main agents of that culture (such as leaders, scholars, clerics, etc.) (Matusitz 2015). Such a framework of analysis functions as a mental template for understanding the world and organising knowledge about each domain (Siek, et al. 2010). It depicts the cognitive decision-making process of the people as defined by their particular world view, which is influenced by various cultural aspects such as folktales, and theological explanations about the world around us. In doing so, a cultural analysis, as being used in this paper, can help analyse the particularities in the development and conduct of strategies, particularly in situations of war (Johnston, 1995; Klein, 1991; Zaman, 2009). Thus the title of the paper: *Dabke and the Belly Dance*. These represent very particular dances that characterise the different cultures seen in the region. The paper argues that the nature and the choreography of the dances reflect the political culture and the cultural difference between the Levant and the other Arab countries, and can shed light on the different trajectories of conflict and violence of the countries, as well as indicate the direction of political developments in the future.

The paper will first look at the writings and the discussions that have surrounded the Syrian conflict, going on to look at the different actors involved, their capabilities, and the mechanisms of performance of violence. This would then be used to look at the dynamics of the conflict, focusing on the acts and nature of terrorism, the question of legitimacy, and the regional dynamics and the implications for the Syrian conflict, finally concluding with the implications of such research and framework of analysis for policy and study.

Discussions on the Nature of the Conflict and Terrorism

The conflict in Syria has been at the forefront of much of the world news since the past few years, especially with the refugees' crisis, use of chemical weapons in the conflict, and the multiple terrorist attacks carried out by the non-state armed groups operating in Syria internationally, captivating and horrifying people all across the globe with their heinous acts. However, despite such a range of writings, ranging from scholarly books and articles to governmental and intergovernmental reports, to United Nations resolutions, and new journalistic articles appearing in our newspapers every day, we are still not able to control organisations such as the Islamic State (IS)[1] and individuals from committing such acts of terror.

The first big section of literature is dealing with terrorism. What started out with trying to understand the actors that are involved in armed conflicts, and how they emerge, and what their implications are, the literature has since then grown into an in-depth study of the aspects particular to terrorism.

With political violence becoming the staple in many of the new, developing countries, with many such non-state armed groups of varying types coming up in different countries, and this leading to the breakdown of the states, focus began to shift to the economic and political power of these groups, focusing also on the reasons why such groups would be coming up in a particular type of countries. This led to a great debate within the academia on whether such groups are based on notions of greed or grievance, with authors such as William Reno, Herbst, Collier, etc., leading the debate, so much so that even the World Bank funded research into the question area (Reno, 1998; Reno, 2009; Collier, Hoeffler and Rohner, 2008; Herbst, 2000; Wennman, 2010). While the debate did evolve from the simple expression of groups acting out of greed for natural resources or out of grievance against their governments, these arguments still remain important, and can still be used to effectively explain many of the conflicts in the African continent.

A similar trend could be seen in the progression and the issues of analysis in the case of the Syria conflict and the nature of the terrorism that

is being espoused by the various groups present in the country. Since the outbreak of the war, it has been mostly described as 'sectarian', focusing and understanding the conflict to be because of the growing master cleavage of ethno-religious groups. These authors argue that such demographic divisions are the main reason for the perpetuation of the conflict, since the geographical and the numerical distribution of these groups reflects the segregated nature of the society, especially in the rural areas, and has affected their grievances, interests and loyalties (Hokayem 2013). As Phillips noted, "12% of the population that are Alawi, a distant branch of Shia Islam, support the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, himself an Alawi who, like his father and predecessor, privileged his own sect. The 64% who are Sunni Arab, Syria's largest ethno-sectarian group, mostly support the opposition, having been marginalized under the Assads. Syria's other non-Sunni Arab religious groups, the Christians (9%), Druze (3%), Shia (1%), and various others (1%) back the regime, fearing discrimination under Sunni Arab majority rule. The 10% of Syrians who are ethnically Kurdish, though mostly Sunni, identify primarily with their own ethnic group and prefer neutrality" (C. Phillips 2015, 357).

While there seems to be some mobilisation around ethno-sectarian cleavages, especially the Kurdish groups such as the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), and many Sunni extremists supporting their sectarian groups such as Jubhat al-Nusra, there remains the large section of the participating population that have aligned themselves not on the basis of ethnicity, but political ideology. However, labeling the other side(s) sectarian has the strategic effect of discrediting them in the eyes of the larger public, echoing a trend seen in the recent Iraq war (Ismail, 2009; Haddad, 2011). As a result, scholars are now looking at the Syrian conflict in not purely sectarian terms, but rather have been arguing for the political assessment of the conflict which would show the political and strategic nature of the conflict behind the sectarian mask, arguing that, 'the longer the Syrians fight, the more sectarian the conflict becomes, the more savage the fighting, the more sectarian cleansing will occur, the greater the accumulation of reasons for revenge, the less likely there is to be a political solution', and that, "[w] hat began as a rebellion against the Assad regime has been transformed into an existential sectarian war in which none believe they can survive in a Syria dominated by their foes" (Jenkins 2014, 3).

We see a subtle shift in the analysis of the conflict with the above statements, which, while basing themselves on a sectarian understanding of the conflict, also look to the political nature of alliances and patronage extended to the ethnic groups. It is important to note here that while

the initial uprising against the regime was political, only demanding the removal of the President, the metamorphosis of this revolt into the civil war that we know today is organised more on the basis of identity rather than ideological commitments. These political strategies focusing on identity of the groups engaged in the conflict were used by the ruling regime as well as the external powers supporting either of the sides in the conflict, and was used as a political strategy to delegitimise the other side, and discount their ideological and nationalistic claims as representing the diverse country and culture of the Levant. As Berti and Paris argue, "The Assad regime's strategy for dealing with domestic opposition had a number of components: violent crackdown on the protests, mixed with vague cosmetic political changes, and a campaign accusing the opposition of takfiri[2] extremism and terrorism in order to rally minorities and other fence-sitters behind the regime" (Berti and Paris 2014, 24). In a similar vein, many "analysts assert that Assad allowed ISIS to grow inside Syria to present the West an alternative even less desirable than the Assad regime itself. Similarly, many suggest that Russia's actions are designed to assist Assad in eliminating the moderate opposition, thus leaving only the Assad regime and the ISIS standing" (Douglas C. Lovelace 2016, 9).

Other analyses tend to look at the crisis as simply being a chaotic situation, where they cannot fathom the changing alliances and the engineering of the mass mobilisations as they are happening in the country. The Arab Spring was seen as the realisation of political creative chaos delineated by the then US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, where the chaos was posited as "a revolutionary end game for the Middle East" (Khashanah, 2014; Al-Sharif, 2011). However, as 'chaos' can be defined as a pattern that is not periodic in nature, it is still possible to find the underlying pattern of violence in the conflict.

Some scholars look to the economics of the country prior to the uprising to see patterns of which sections of the society would participate in the violence. In his inaugural speech, Assad had adopted the language of economic reform and modernisation—he even alluded to political loosening. The aim was to move to a hybrid social market economy with administrative reforms to preserve systems of socialism (Hokayem 2013). However, economic liberalisation did not lead to substantial funds channeled toward boosting local industrial or agricultural production, and failed to generate substantial employment. As a result, sharp increases in income inequality emerged between the main urban centres and the ever more impoverished peripheries (Berti and Paris 2014). This macro level deterioration led to big changes at the micro level, compounded

by corruption and bad governance, and became "the embodiment of a predatory culture in which resources were not redistributed but skimmed off for the benefit of the few" (International Crisis Group 2011). While such analysis can point to the nature of the uprising in Syria in 2011, it becomes very hard to sustain these arguments in the phase of the absolute and bloody civil war that we are seeing today. The economic analysis alluded to above cannot explain the nature of violence and the large- scale participation that these non-state armed groups are seeing from around the globe. Dismissing the conflict from analysis due to its chaotic nature can only complicate the responses of the states.

In understanding the nature of violence in the terror activities carried out by such groups, the most major push came after 9/11, when specific focus was given to those groups that aim to create 'terror' in the people and in the state through their activities. Most of these writings focused on the type of formation of the terrorist organisation, or placing it within the political context to see and understand the rise of such groups as a new phenomena (Crenshaw, 1985; Jackson et al., 2005; Bapat, 2006). They claim to study some or all of the terrorist groups, how they are formed, the political context in which they function, and the lethality of their methods. In the particular case of the Syrian conflict and the analysis of the ongoing activities and capabilities of the terrorist groups, the best and most reliable sources for analysis and information remain those from the United Nations Organization, particularly the reports published by their Independent International Commission of Inquiry, and the Oxford series on commentary on terrorism and security related documents (Douglas C. Lovelace, 2016; Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic, 2017).

However, despite such a vast body of literature, Philips comments that there is no single definition of the concept of what constitutes a 'terrorist group', and says it to be a "concept with no definition" (B. J. Phillips 2015). To be able to understand the midset of the terrorist and the ritualisation of violence that we see in the Syrian conflict, it becomes imperative to undertand the meaning of these terms and how they can change the perception, and therefore the policy, in the international and regional level inetractions of the external actors with these groups. Thus, this paper analyses the dynamics of the conflict from a culturalist approach, based on the assumption that the socio-political culture of the region has shaped the way that the actors act. That is, the dynamics of conflict and violence as being displayed in the Syrian Arab Republic is of a particular shade due to their particular cultural understanding of in-group and out-group politics, exemplified by the dance

form of *Dabk*e, as elaborated below. Using such a lens for analysing a conflict, while not alltogether new, hopes to explore another dimension of conflict analysis of the Syrian Civil War.

Dynamics of Violence

This section will now outline the nature of terrorism and terrorist acts as they manifest in the Syrian conflict. As can be seen from the discussion above, it is not simply a debate of which terms do we use and its political implications, but also that the way we use a particular term can change the way that we look at and analyse it. Geddes writes that in order for research to be useful, conceptual criteria should be "concrete, unambiguous, and public, so that other scholars can understand the basis for the analyst's judgments" (Geddes 2003, 145).

The most important definition, then, is that of a 'terrorist'. Yet in the study of terrorism, explicit definitions have not been used. This could be attributed to the inherently political aspect of defining a terrorist or terrorist organisations, captured in the famous phrase—one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter. However, it remains crucial that we define the term, since this can change the way that cases, groups, and areas that can be analysed under this rubric. This can also lead to overlapping of concepts that can reduce the importance of such writings and make it essentially useless—an example can be given of the lack of conceptual clarity between terrorist groups, insurgent groups, and other armed actors that may be engaged in the 'conflict'..

One can use the example of different definitions of terrorist to understand against whom sanctions should be placed and against whom international actions be taken by looking at some kind of official definition of terrorist groups such as the US State Department's list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations, the US Treasury's list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists, or the United Nations' Consolidated or 1267 list of actors associated with al-Qaeda and the Taliban. Each of these give somewhat similar, and yet different results, such as the first including charitable organisations such as the BIF as a terrorist organisation, while others do not.

Generally, terrorism has been used as "a tactic of war that that is intended to provoke fear beyond the physical target of a particular violent attack" (Wittig 2011, 17), with the term being used to describe a range of actors from governments to individual actors to groups acting against other groups or against the state. However, today, the term is exclusively used to describe negatively the actions of a particular group that uses the tactics of terror to intimidate a state or a society into fearing the group,

mostly to achieve a particular goal, captured perfectly by Alex Schmid in his seminal definition of terrorism as "the peacetime equivalent of a war crime" (Schmid 1993, 7). Philips argues that while there is no one definition of terrorism, most of the definitions and examples have three key elements: "(a) intentional violence; (b) that the violence is used to spread fear in a wider audience; and (c) political motivation" (Phillips 2015, 227). Thus, terrorism can be understood as the end product of a group or an individual, which aims to create this act of terror specifically among certain groups of people in certain spaces at specific moments in time, which is quite often (but not always) directed for political purposes and expected to have a lasting psychological impact that goes beyond the physical act of terrorism.

If we take this definition for the purpose of analysis for this paper, then who can we label as a terrorist in this case? Would it only be the non-state actors which are recognised by the United Nations as terrorist organisations (they primarily recognise only three non-state armed groups, those being Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), and Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG))? Or should we also label the Syrian Arab Republic as a terrorist, seeing the various excesses committed by the regime and noting its various crimes against humanity, despite it being recognised by the United Nations as the legitimate state, and still a part of the Human Rights Council? And how would we classify the role of the external states which are supplying arms and ammunition, and financial support to any of these actors?

Looking first at the actions of the government and pro-government forces, we see that the patterns of attacks carried out in the country strongly suggest that pro-government forces intentionally and systematically target medical facilities, repeatedly committing the war crime of deliberately attacking protected objects (A/HRC/27/60, 2014, paras. 109-111; A/HRC/33/55, 2016, paras. 42-65; A/HRC/34/64, 2017, paras. 30-40; A/HRC/36/55). This can be seen in the case of August 19, 2016, when one week before the evacuation agreement of Damascus, the Syrian government helicopters bombarded the centre of town, directly striking the only hospital in Damascus (Darayya). The hospital was hit by barrel bombs containing napalm. This happened when the armed groups were in the outskirts of the city, and none inside that day (A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 2017, paras. 17). Or when October 26, 2016 saw a series of airstrikes hit a complex of schools and its surroundings, killing a total of 36 civilians (of which 21 were children and six were women), and injuring another 114 people. Evidence analysed by the UN confirms it to have been

FAB-500 ShN bombs, including remnants of their parachutes, dropped by either Sukhoi 22 or 24.[3] Soon, thereafter, the Russian Federation denied involvement in the incident, and later through a report via the Syrian State media, the government claimed the attacks on Hamas. Moreover, it is only the Syrian government that would know the location of all the schools in the country as they are the employers of the teachers there, and the attack was planned during the particular time when the school was in session, and there was also the notable absence of any military target in the vicinity, thus making these attacks, among many others, a war crime (A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 2017, paras. 20-31).

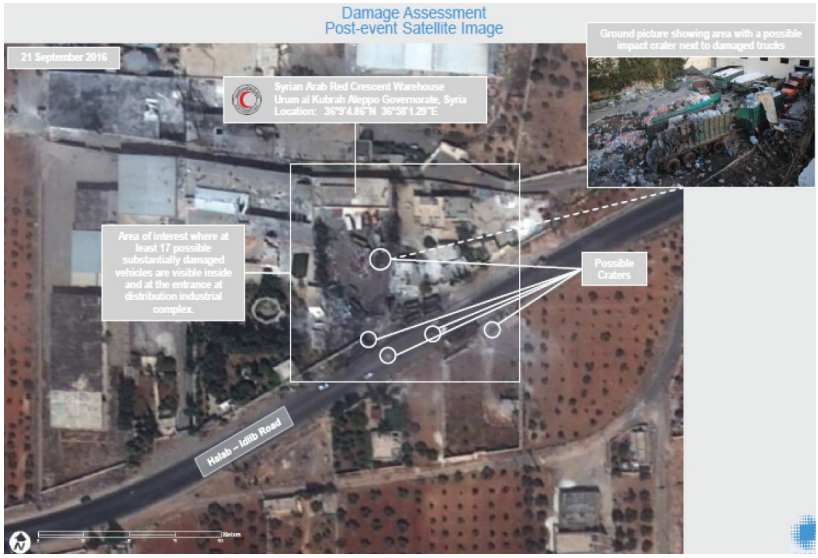
The Syrian state was also involved in numerous chemical attacks against its own citizens, the most recent of which was conducted on April 4, 2017. The chemical weapons used during this attack in the Khan Shaykhun area of Idlib, which resulted in at least 80 civilians killed, including many children, was confirmed on May 12 to be sarin[4] or sarin-like substance by the OPCW. This comes just a few weeks after the confirmation of the use of sulfur mustard by the Assad regime against its own people in an attack in September 2016 (Security Council Report 2017). Such chemical weapons are being produced by the Syrian state in the backdrop of international and UN efforts in the elimination of the country's stockpile of chemical weapons.

Apart from these violations against its own citizens, the Syrian government has also carried out attacks on UN personnel, such as the massive attacks on September 19, 2016. These attacks on the United Nations/SARC convoy, which lasted about 30 minutes, killed 14 workers and injured another 15 (UNOSAT images below). These attacks were carried by several S-5CB unguided air-to-surface anti-personnel rockets produced by the Soviet Union, at least one RBK-500 series air-delivered cluster bombs and at least two OFAB 250-270 unguided aerial bombs. These particular munitions, as well as the aircrafts used are available only with the Syrian government. The type of munitions used, the breadth of the area targeted, and the duration of the attack show that the attacks were carefully planned and ruthlessly executed by the Syrian government. Since medical and humanitarian relief personnel are protected under the International Humanitarian Law, these attacks constitute a gross violation of international laws that the Syrian Arab Republic, as a recognised state, is party to (A/HRC/34/64, 2017, paras. 79-88).

Image 1: Syrian Arab Red Crescent warehouse; picture dated September 18, 2016.

Source: UNOSAT satellite imagery analysis, available from the website of the OHCHR, dated December 19, 2016.

Image 2: Post attack assessment of the damage at the warehouse; picture dated September 21, 2016.



Source: UNOSAT satellite imagery analysis, available from the website of the OHCHR, dated December 19, 2016.

On the other side of the conflict are the armed groups, which continue to launch indiscriminate attacks with indirect fire artillery system, Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), and other armaments acquired through force or trade with external actors. There were multiple indiscriminate attacks, such as those by the Free Syrian Army (FSA) in al-Bab to capture the city from ISIL on October 10, 2016, and those by Jabhat Fatah al-Sham in Dara'a al-Balas, al-Moukayyan, and al-Sad districts against the government-controlled neighbourhood on December 22, 2016.[5] January 13, 2017 saw inter-group clashes between Jabhat Tahrir al-Sham (supported by Jaysh al-Nasr) and Liwa al-Aqsa (supported by ISIL), which saw detonations of two Vehicle Borne IEDs (VBIEDs)[6] (A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 2017, paras. 61-66).

Understanding the dynamics of terrorism as practiced by ISIS needs special attention. Its well-planned, coordinated, and effectively executed attacks on the Paris restaurants, concert hall, and soccer stadium on November 13, 2015, clearly demonstrated not only ISIS's intent to export its terror beyond Syria and Iraq, but also its ability to do so (Douglas C. Lovelace 2016, 9). This brought ISIS to the global front stage, with the limelight now focused on its actions around the world. However, it is the actions and the violence perpetuated by ISIS at its home front that remains important for this analysis. Building on its high-profile offence in Iraq, IS now needed to show the complete and absolute control that it has over its territories in Syria.

ISIS thought to do so by not only carrying out disproportionate attacks against the civilians and the other groups by way of suicide bombing and other forms of asymmetrical warfare, but managed to create a psychological environment of fear based on its actions of executions, stoning, and other vicious forms of corporal punishments. This was seen in how a 16-year-old boy was arrested by al-Hisbah, the ISIL branch responsible for identifying infringers of the group's rules, on charges of smoking in July 2016. Two weeks after being detained, the boy was accused of sodomy and killed as a punishment by being thrown off a building. In the same moth, al-Hisbah also executed a woman by stoning her to death, with her hands tied behind her back and made to stand in a hole in the ground, while her father and son watched on, on the basis of an accusation of adultery by a male relative (A/HRC/34/CPR.3 2017, paras. 75-81).

With these and other excesses done by the different warring parties in the Syrian conflict, both the government and pro-government forces, as well as the non-state armed groups, we see that it complicates the labeling of any one group as a 'terrorist'. ISIL has certainly committed grave crimes against the people of Syria and around the world with the multiple terrorist attacks that can only be named as such. The same can be said of

the many other non-state armed groups. But what about the excesses of the State of the Syrian Arab Republic? Can the international community actually declare a state to be a terrorist state? If so, then would they have to acknowledge ISIS too as a 'state' that it claims to be, despite being a 'terrorist' organisation?

We see from the above data and questions that in taking the particular course of action of terror that the state of the Syrian Arab Republic has, it has ensured that there can be no other regime which can now be seen as a legitimate actor in the matters of representing the people and the state internationally, apart from that of Assad. While fully realising the extent of the excesses, war crimes, and crimes against humanity committed by the Syrian Arab Republic under the reign of al-Assad family, the international community will have to accept this as the best possible solution for any political order in the country, with the other strong opposition to the regime being ISIS. This, I argue, was the plan all along, as can be seen in the patterns of violence.

Understanding the Conflict Dynamics

The Syrian crisis thus posits to be an interesting case of a destruction that is self-inflicted, self-targeted, and self-contained. In politicising and radicalising the peaceful demonstrations which were started in 2011, the opposition allowed for foreign intervention, pleading a case similar to that of Libya. This could only be done in the case of a civil war—so that is what was done. In bringing in the other states for external support (troops, armaments, funding, etc.), however, the Syrian uprising, I argue, changed the balance of the game, allowing for the escalation in the conflict to become a pretext for countries such as Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Russia, and others to intervene in the internal affairs of the country, making it a civil war which cannot be dialled back.

The possible responses of the Syrian government under Assad at the time were not just repression and oppression, but also political change and reformation. However, as Khashanah notes, "the path of reform would not allow external stakeholders to exercise a dominant role in shaping of the outcome. The second choice, i.e., regime change had to be the only choice regardless of the efforts by the government to reform" (Khashanah 2014, 6). Such a regime change would not be possible by the people themselves, and thus they would have to rely on external support, ensuring that the 'winner' would get a say in the running of the country post-conflict. Given the strategic geopolitical location of Syria, this could prove to be very useful in handling the political direction and stability of the entire region. At the

same time, if such an experiment were to fail, then the brunt of the war would be borne by the Syrians, transferring the cost and risk of war back to them. In the words of Khashanah, "the carnage is totally Syrian" (Khashanah 2014, 3).

It seems that the Syrian government understood these tractions before they even manifested. It has often been questioned as to why the Syrian government responded the way it did. Knowing that ISIS was being set up in the region, with their declarations going back as far as 2004, it could have been reasonably expected that the al-Qaeda offshoot would try and wrestle for control of the country with the government, as they had done in other parts of the world. As Kenneth Pollack notes, the Syrian government was highly motivated, informed, and had the advantage of having the remnants of the Syrian Armed forces made of the 'elite' Alawis and the loyal minorities (Pollack 2013).

Moreover, the response of the Syrian regime to the uprising and its continuous escalation was extremely subdued. I am not arguing they had to shoot people, but rather pointing to the fact that their response was quite restrained in comparison with its previous responses to such unrests, and the fact that at the end of the day, it was an authoritarian regime. If they had the kind of resources as Pollack mentions, and they certainly seem to, given the fact that the conflict has now dragged into its seventh year, it seems quite surprising that the Assad regime did not suppress the rebellion like it could. It seems almost as if it knew that if they fester, and the government then gets the 'legitimacy' to bombard the people and the 'opposition', including ISIL, they would be able to restore a particular legitimacy as the sole governing power that the world could want in Syria, especially given the carnage laid to by the other non-state actors.

Taking from Pollack, we argue that Assad can no longer be seen as an authoritarian master in Syria, but as their most legitimate political power and as a warlord ruling over the regime coalition. "He could be killed or overthrown tomorrow and it might have no impact on the fighting whatsoever. Although it is possible that his death or downfall would throw the regime coalition into chaos and create an opportunity for a quick opposition victory, that is unlikely. The opposition lacks either the combat capabilities or the unity of command to properly take advantage of such a situation, and the Alawis would doubtless quickly select a new leader for fear that allowing a power vacuum to develop would lead to precisely such a Sunni victory – and the massacres of their community … Thus demanding that 'Assad must go' or predicting that 'Assad's days are numbered' has absolutely nothing to do with the realities of Syria today" (Pollack 2013, 2-3).

Putting this in context of the symbolic culture of the region, we find the above description to seem quite like the dance *Dabke*. *Dabke* is a dance that is particular to the Levant, in which the people dance together with their arms across each other's shoulders. This then ensures that even if one person were to falter and fall while dancing, the others can continue—the show will go on. Seen in the political context, we can see this in the political culture of Syria, where, even if Assad was to fall down (killed or overthrown), the others of the clan and those loyal to it would soon find a way to close the gap so as to not disrupt the dance of political power of the regime and allow the opposition to come to power in any way possible.

In contrast, we saw the performance of *Belly Dancing* in the countries such as Tunisia and Egypt, where the people could simply topple the dancer (the hated dictator) and establish a new regime (or a new dance with a new central figure).

These comparisons of the symbolic culture reflects in the politics and in the strategies of terrorism. Similar comparisons can be drawn between the operation of the terrorist activities in Syria by the government and pro-government forces, and the non-state armed actors such as ISIS and Jabhat Fatah al-Sham, where we see a continuity, and even an escalation of activities by these actors, despite the fact that many of their strongholds and top leaders have fallen down (replaced, killed, or disassociated), and the activities of, for example, the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

Looking at the culture of the country/region can thus prove to be quite useful in the analysis of the trends and methods of their politics and violence. This is not to disregard the strategic analysis of the same, but rather to add those factors that can explain more of the intricacies of action and inaction taken by actors in the face of crisis and the situations such as we saw above. By using such a culturalist comparativist approach, we can then adequately understand the reason why the Assad regime did not suppress the masses during the uprising as it could, or allowed foreign states passages to send support to these various non-state armed groups, or the particular abandon with which it attacks its own people and infrastructures, knowing that the al-Assads would remain in power, and that even if it commits these crimes, it will still be seen as the most desirable regime in the country by most, if not all of the members of the international community.

Methodological Issues

While using the culturalist approach in a comparative analysis certainly has its advantages, it also proves to be a slippery slope towards having an orientalist viewpoint. As was mentioned in the beginning, using such an approach

focuses on how the particular culture that a person belongs to can orient their viewpoint of the world around them and their actions in it. While there is such an effect of cultures as transmitted to us via folktales and norms and rules of behaviour, it cannot be simplified to an understanding that the entire world view of a person and groups is based on that. Societal interactions and knowledge formations can have a mediating effect of such a culturalist way of thinking. However, using such an approach can be extremely helpful in explaining the *strategic culture* of the people and in explaining those 'altruistic' or non-rational decisions that people sometimes take, and cannot be explained in any other way.

Secondly, in writing about a conflict such as Syria, that is so prolonged and chaotic in nature due to the changes in military alliances, military capabilities and balances, and the politics of international intervention, it can be quite difficult to concentrate and find out the 'truth'. While a lot of care was given in choosing of the sources that would be expected to be unbiased, yet detailed, biases in the selection process can creep in. In the reports mentioned above, for example, more space was given to the violations of international law and crimes committed by the Syrian Arab Republic. While this can be seen as a way to balance the information available on the actions of the different actors involved, caution should be exercised in absorbing all that they say.

Conclusions and Implications

The paper set out to answer two primary questions: why did the Syrian uprising not follow the lead of the other Arab Spring uprisings of 2011, and the question of the labelling of terrorism. Through the course of the paper, we have seen through multiple examples that it is not sufficient to label a group or organisation as 'terrorist' if they are non-state armed groups. While noting the multiple terrorist activities carried out by the non-state armed groups involved in the Syrian conflict, both domestically and internationally, we also saw the range of terror tactics and activities that were being carried out by the Syrian State itself against its people, with the concerted aim of creating an environment and psychology of terror that would outlast the physical impact of such attacks. With the attacks by the Syrian State against its own people and the rebel groups, we can argue that it is trying to create an environment where the last remaining actors would be the state as recognised today, and the ISIS. In such a scenario that is being made, it is highly probable that all international actors would then support the Assad regime, contrary to even the current statements made by the US Government. With this political aim, we can then expect the Syrian state under the rule of the Assads to continue, keeping with the notion of *Dabke*.

We saw that there can be many, and sometimes all, groups being terrorist organisations in a conflict; being a recognized state is not an exempt. At the same time, we saw how and why the Syrian uprising did not follow the path of the other rebellions in the region, as explained with the cultural analysis of *Dabke* and the *Belly Dance*. Political cultures and symbolic cultures can therefore help us understand the dynamics of terrorism, violence, and conflicts in a manner that many other strategic analysis cannot.

In terms of looking at the conclusion, or the possible conclusion of the conflict, there are cases made for both a strong as well as limited interventions in the conflict for multiple parties. We can note interesting new political maneuvers being done by both the Syrian regime in making it the key end opponent to ISIS, and with ISIS creating new sense of kinship bonds among the Muslims of the world with a desire for a caliphate, we can expect that the conflict shall produce new waves of terrorist groups, which might be more potent and deadly than the current version of ISIS that we see today, even if the current Islamic State gets completely defeated. At the present moment, though, with the renewed interest and role of the United States in the conflict, we can expect to see a decrease in the level of active violence, but the conflict is far from over.

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Notes

1. Henceforth, Islamic State (IS), Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) will be used interchangeably.
2. The doctrine of *takfir* reserves the right to declare other Muslims to be apostates. They believe that political authorities that do not abide by their interpretation of Islam are illegitimate and can therefore be killed and overthrown (Vincenzo 2002). The word takfir has origins in medieval Islam (Ibn Tamiyaa, 13th century). The main contemporary proponent of the takfiri ideology is al-Qaeda's Ayman al Zawahiri. Takfirism is the distinguishing ideological characteristic of al-Qaeda and its many offshoots; every Islamist group on the UNSC list of terrorist organisations is declared takfiri. The adoption of takfirism is also central to the transformation of Salafists into terrorists. For example, the original founder of Boko Haram, Mohammed Yusuf, broke from his fellow Salafists in Nigeria over the issue (Thurston 2016). In a 2012 study by Barlett & Miller of 61 'homegrown' Western terrorists showed that engagement with takfiri ideas and texts was a key issue distinguishing violent extremists from mere radicals (Bartlett and Miller 2012).
3. The FAB-500ShN is an unguided 500 kg-class 'dumb' bomb, meaning it has no on-board guidance capabilities; it is a blast weapon and approximately half of its weight is high explosive. The parachute slows the descent of the bomb so it can be dropped from a low altitude and allow the aircraft time to avoid the blast caused by the explosion. Both the Syrian and the Russian air forces have the said bomb in their arsenal and Sukhois 24 in their fleets. However, the Russian Federation has no operational Sukhois 22, and the international coalition does not use these bombs or aircraft (A/HRC/34/CRP.3, 2017, paras. 27).
4. Sarin is a highly potent chemical which is used as a nerve agent. Chemically defined as a chiral molecule, it has strong phosphorus bonds, which affects the relay of nerval signals, confining the target's actions to that which it was conducting before; that is, if a person was breathing out, they can now only breath out, and not in, since the nerve conductors cannot break the strong bonds. Sarin has a lethal dosage of 1 mg.
5. Indiscriminate attacks do not mean that they were not strategically calculated, but should rather be seen as calculatedly indiscriminate, in wanting to hurt, kill, or maim the largest possible number of people.
6. This particular incident did not result in any civilian deaths as the attacks were directed against the members of the other group and there were loudspeaker announcements made by the groups telling the people to stay inside. Incidents such as these, where the non-state armed groups act with more responsibility towards the protection of the civilians than the government raises the question on legitimacy of use of force and the labeling of 'terrorist'. These questions shall be looked at in the next section.