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Between Sect and Secularism: The Mediated Ambiguities of the Syrian Nation State

Ehab Galal & Zenia Yonus

Abstract: This paper examines narrative discourses of the Syrian loyalist TV channel *Sama TV* in the light of Syria's current armed conflict, demography, and regional geopolitics. The focus is on the tense relationship between secularism and religious representations on the channel. Compared to state television, private channel *Sama TV* has more room for maneuver to embrace a new form of religious presence that challenges the ideological secularism of the Syrian nation state. The national "mythscape" of Syria, simultaneously a secular and (Sunni) Muslim nation, characterized by a certain ambiguity, are consequently reinforced.

Keywords: collective identity, cult, martyrs, mediated "mythscape", mobilization media, narrative discourses, national symbols, *Sama TV*, secularism, Syrian television

Author information:

Dr. Ehab Galal is an Associate Professor at Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. He has published widely on Arab Media, for instance the book *Arab TV-Audiences: Negotiating Religion and Identity* (Peter Lang, 2014). He is currently the leader of the collaborative and interdisciplinary research project "Mediatized Diaspora: Contentious Politics among Arab Media Users in Europe". The project is funded by Independent Research Fund Denmark (ID: 8018-00038B).

Website: <https://ccrs.ku.dk/research/centres-and-projects/mediatizeddiaspora/>.

Email: ehab@hum.ku.dk

Website: <https://ccrs.ku.dk/staff/?pure=en/persons/164164>.

Zenia Yonus is a Ph.D. student at the Department of Cross-Cultural and Regional Studies, University of Copenhagen. She has specialized in Syrian media coverage of the ongoing conflict, focusing on the dynamics of media, nationalism, sectarianism, and memory constructions. Her Ph.D. is part of the "Mediatized Diaspora"-project which examines the role of media in political action formation among Syrian diaspora groups in Europe.

Email: zenheyo@hum.ku.dk

Website: <https://ccrs.ku.dk/staff/?pure=en/persons/305509>.

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Introduction

The Syrian state and its president, Bashar al-Assad, have struggled to keep up their military superiority and political legitimacy, within and outside the Syrian nation, since the conflict in Syria broke out in March 2011. The military actions may have declined, but the fight for legitimacy is ongoing, both nationally and internationally. We particularly explore the post-2011 ideological and cultural formations created through what we – with Duncan S. A. Bell’s conceptualization – explore as mediated national “mythscape” (Bell, 2003). We investigate the specific articulation within a national mythscape, focusing on the religion-secularism tension in state discourses on the privately-owned, loyalist television channel, *Sama TV*. A national myth should be understood “as a story that simplifies, dramatizes and selectively narrates the story of a nation’s past and its place in the world” (Bell, 2003, p. 75). Bell introduces the concept to emphasize that the myths of the nation “are forged, transmitted, negotiated, and reconstructed constantly” (Bell, 2003, p. 75). This happens, for instance, when television makes use of a series of discourses and modalities, which collectively create a national mythscape of narratives. In other words, we explore how “media makes contemporary history” (Bourdon, 1992, p. 545).

Privately owned satellite TV is a relatively new phenomenon in Syria. The role of pan-Arab satellite channels like *al-Jazeera* and *al-Arabiya* have been contested by national leaders during the Arab uprisings, while state-supportive TV channels have received little or no scholarly attention (see e.g. Fares, 2015). Internet penetration in Syria itself was only 32.6 percent in 2017; by contrast, up to 95.8 percent of the population in Syria has access to satellite television (Fiedler, Veenstra and Spilker, 2016), thus exploring traditional media is still of great importance, taking into consideration that television reaches the illiterate sections of the population. According to a study by Media in Cooperation and Transition – a German non-profit organization supporting media development projects in crisis regions – the most popular Syrian television channel is the satellite channel *Sama TV* (Fiedler, Veenstra, and Spilker, 2016). *Sama TV* is also the fourth most popular news source among Syrians, after *al-Arabiya*, *al-Jazeera*, and *Orient*, and the sixth most trusted channel in Syria (Fiedler, Reimpell, and Maul, 2014). The privately-owned *Sama TV* is one of Bashar al-Assad’s strongest supporters. Launched on September 7, 2012, one and a half years after the conflict began in March 2011, *Sama TV* is a war-born channel. Together with other state and private loyalist media, it contributes to legitimizing the position of the regime and the long-term discourses of the post-war identity of the nation with its focus on nationalism and unity. *Sama TV* also differs from state television, as it puts a stronger emphasis on the role of religion.

The liberalization of media in Syria, as is generally the case in the Middle East, has led to contesting interpretations of the role of religion. The Syrian regime, under the former president Hafez al-Assad, promoted a firm secular identity, whereas his son and current president Bashar al-Assad, places himself in a more ambiguous position, in which religion becomes a tool for political mobilization. Loyalist media

can therefore be analyzed as an instrument for Bashar al-Assad's delicate tightrope walk between defending the national secular mythscape, and utilizing religion for sustaining legitimacy. Based on the study of the privately-owned *Sama TV*'s contribution to this walk, we argue that, private media in particular seem to have the possibility to embrace a religious and post-secular mythscape.

Our aim is to look at the content of *Sama TV*'s discursive practices within the contextualization of the Syrian leadership's struggle for legitimacy. We look at the discursive practice of language and semiotics, which functions as a means for shaping the meaning-making process for the channel's viewers.

State of the art: Media studies about the Syrian conflict

The media play a key role in a conflict, by communicating explanations and interpretations of the war. News broadcasts especially offer important components as a "mediator of events, defining, shaping and representing the reality by the use of linguistic and visual codes" (Bignell, 2002, p. 10). The majority of media studies in Syria have focused on the functions of new media in conflicts or the media environment of misinformation. These studies have discussed three main subjects. First, the representations of war and media logics (e.g. Ahva & Hellman, 2015; Crilley, 2017; Hamdar, 2018; Wessels, 2019). The studies revolve around the coverage of the Syrian conflict, and how Syrian, Arab, and Western media compete to spread their stories by manipulation and propaganda, both deliberately, but also through implicit media logics tending towards sensationalism and conflict. Scholars such as Brownlee (2017) argue that media in the Syrian conflict is "performing" the conflict, not just informing about it. Second, the role of communication technology in conflicts and activism (e.g. Powers, & O'Loughlin, 2015; Al-Saqaf, 2016; Badran & Smets, 2018). These studies show how the new media, as a mobilizing component, foster civil engagement for democratic changes. Third, use of transnational media is the subject of studies which, among other aspects, examine the potential of transnational media creating transnational ties between Syrian diasporas on the one hand, and on the other, how people fear using internet media since the regime's control also becomes globalized (e.g. Aslan, 2015; Moss 2018).

Looking further into these studies, it becomes clear that the primary focus has been on opposition media, while loyalist television has been largely ignored. Furthermore, and as a consequence of the focus on the ongoing conflict, a "here and now" perspective has led to a lack of interest in how dominant ideological formations may be reproduced, strengthened, transformed, and carried forward by the media coverage of war. This has left room for a study of loyalist television in this paper, and its contribution to national mythscapes, particularly that of secularism.

After we will have presented our approach to mythscape, we introduce the Syrian mythscape as it has been constituted under the al-Assad regimes. This is followed by the analysis of *Sama TV*'s contribution to, and negotiation of, this mythscape

with a particular focus on its use of Islam in constructing a presidential cult, and glorifying the army and its martyrs. We examine the private satellite channel *Sama TV* in comparison to the state-owned satellite channel *al-Fada'iyya al-Sūriyya* (in the following named *al-Sūriyya*), and look at the various ways the mythscapes of secularism and religion are reproduced and negotiated on both channels, and how *Sama TV* as a private channel, has more room for maneuver. The conclusion of this paper emphasizes the revived priority and control of religious matters in order to uphold the narrative of national unity across sectarian divisions.

The New Syrian Mediascape

The main argument for choosing to focus on a loyalist TV channel is because it is still strong, despite the challenges brought about with oppositional competition in the battle over narratives. When Bashar al-Assad took office in 2000, he was presented as a modernizer with a moderate approach to governing, a supporter of democracy, and as a proponent of fighting against heavy bureaucracy and corruption. He introduced legislation in 2001 making private media possible, and fostered many new publications as well as some TV and radio stations. They all still needed licenses from the leadership as “media outlets cannot publish anything that affects ‘national unity and national security,’ which ‘harms the holy religions and beliefs,’ or ‘incites sectarian or confessional strife.” (Hunt, 2011). Licensed media are therefore typically affiliated with the state through “media tycoons”, usually wealthy businessmen with close connections to the regime’s political, military and business establishment (Daher, 2017), making the borders between the state and the owners of private media blurred and difficult to distinguish (Perthes, 2004).

Bashar al-Assad initiated reforms when the uprising began in 2011. A media council was established under the 2011 media law to license private outlets; applicants were even allowed to appeal to court, if their media license applications were declined (Institute for War and Peace Reporting, 2013). There is still no positive indication, however, of this law being operated or embraced by the authorities.

The revolt in 2011 changed the Syrian mediascape, despite state control, resulting in a more diverse mediascape characterized by a large number of grass-root media and citizen journalism (Fares, 2015). This development was partially supported by the ban of foreign journalists entering Syria: they therefore had to rely on citizen journalism and phone-recorded video footage from within the country. Several groups such as *Ugarit News*, *Aleppo Today*, and *Shaam News Network* have played key roles in telling their story to the world community in real time through social media platforms (Fares, 2015, p. 194). The more traditional oppositional media are based outside Syria such as the channel *Orient* from Dubai¹, and newly-opened *Syria TV* from Istanbul.²

1 <https://orient-news.net/> [accessed 17/04/2020].

2 <https://www.syria.tv/>. [accessed 07/04/2020].

Another challenge was the explosive increase of the number of Arab satellite television. To counter their influence, the Syrian state relied on state channels and the pro-Assad satellite channel *Addounia TV*, which was broadcast on *ArabSat* and *Nilesat*. The Arab League, however, decided to block it from broadcasting via its satellites in 2012, under the pretext that the channel incited regime terrorism. When *Sama TV* was launched it looked like a re-branded or new version of *Addounia TV* in terms of design and content and it has been very popular since it benefitted from *Addounia*'s popularity. Matar calls *Sama TV* a "new media outfit" as part of the various other pro-Assad media initiatives (Matar, 2019, p. 2404); despite the political turmoil surrounding its broadcasting, the new "outfit" made it possible to continue the work of *Addounia*. *Addounia TV*, and later, *Sama TV*, are examples of television channels owned by the above-mentioned phenomenon of businessmen turned "media tycoons".

Al-Assad's launch of an Islamic TV channel *Nūr al-Shām* in 2011, may be seen as the state's attempt to control and monopolize the national narrative of Islam. Administered by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, and in collaboration with the Ministry of Information, the channel is said to promote a moderate, modern, and tolerant Islam, that is, the "right way" on how to be a good Syrian Muslim. Furthermore, the launch may also be seen as a way of giving Islam its own space, without mixing it with other news and information relating to the state, defending secular principles as such, through a compartmentalization of religion in the media (Galal, 2009, p. 99). *Nūr al-Shām* is also seen as a political tool, in which the ideological mythscapes are presented through their news, debate programs, and broadcasts of the Friday Prayers.³ This appears to be an attempt to offer a "new" collective identity of being a "righteous Syrian Muslim", as opposed to one belonging to radical Islamist groups such as IS and *Jabhat al-Nusra*. The two Syrian state channels *al-Sūriyya* and *Nūr al-Shām*, along with the privately owned *Sama TV* are vehicles to offer their viewers the national narratives of the state.

National mythscapes and the media

Media provide a semiotic discourse that helps examine the frames of constructions, which are "culturally mediated within a symbolic space laid out by a variety of semiotic vehicles and devices." (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 25). As described by Elgenius, the national symbols function as the elements in the construction of national identity particularly by its contribution to the definition of boundaries (Elgenius, 2011, p. 1). The symbolic universe makes up the personification of the nation since a nation "must be personified before it can be seen, symbolized before it can be loved, imagined before it can be conceived" (Waltzer, 1967, p. 194). Through this symbolism the elite tries to create continuity and connections to the past with the goal of establishing legitimacy in the present (Elgenius, 2011, p. 17). Within the frame of nation state communication "only those historical referents were selected

3 <http://www.ortas.online/NourElshamTV/> [accessed 12/12 /2020].

which strengthened a positive self-image and supported specific goals for the future” (Assman, 2006, p. 217). Hence, the cultural memory construction is tied to the historical consciousness, whereas narratives are essential for the symbolic space and especially for the future outcome of the war and beyond.

In the context of the Syrian war, the mythscapes promoted by pro-state media are part of a top-down political discourse, in which “ideology formation and construction of collective identities [...] are geared towards political action” (Assman, 2006, p. 215) by means of a mobilizing narrative with visual and verbal symbols. Hence, the narratives are reconstructed into a single, seemingly univocal, story that undermines the complexity of history.

The Syrian mythscapes: past, present, and future

The Syrian national narrative has since independence in 1946, and in particular when the Ba’ath Party gained power in 1963, drawn on the ideologies of socialism and postcolonial nationalism. In 1971, the Alawi Hafez al-Assad seized power, and since then the Syrian nation has been described in the language of anti-sectarian nationalism orchestrated through a presidential cult accompanied by a multitude of national symbols in connection to the Ba’athist culture of communication disregarding the actual beliefs of the receivers (Matar, 2019, p. 2406). In 2000, when Bashar al-Assad assumed office, following his father, he was staged as a modern leader who endorsed modernity, secular democracy and development establishing a rule of renewal and continuity. This hope that Bashar al-Assad would be implementing real reforms was soon to be dashed. During the on-going war, he has increasingly been presented as the image of his father, a strong leader of the military forces, and the protector of a Sunni Muslim Syrian state.

The idea of nationalism has existed alongside Pan-Arabism in the shaping of Syrian identity. Zisser (1999) sees “a ‘dual’ power structure, which is composed of an inner core exercising dominant but informal power, made up of the Alawi security elites, and an outer formal structure of government. The formal structure incorporates wider social forces including other minorities, the Sunni peasantry, and the Damascene bourgeoisie, with al-Assad heading and the Ba’ath party bridging the two structures and the whole legitimized by Arab nationalism” (Hinnebusch, 2008, p. 270). The political discourse of secularism supported sentiments of national unity (Khatib, 2011, p. 18), relating secularism to state performance, and the separation of state and religion.

The term “secularism” needs some explanation in the Syrian context. Secularism is part of the political language often followed by tropes of Syrian democracy, citizenship, Arab nationalism, and national unity. However, the relationship in the practices of the Syrian leadership towards secularism is ambiguous. The more radical interpretations of secularism under Hafez al-Assad have been downplayed since the 1970s, especially after the crushing of the Muslim Brotherhood rebellion

of 1982 in Hama (Khatib, 2011, p. 4). In its aftermath, the state promoted a religious Arab nationalism to gain the support of the Sunni majority in the country, and the more pious areas in particular (Matar, 2019, p. 2408). Secularism has been an integral part of what is referred to as the “Syrian model of democracy” under Bashar al-Assad’s rule, in which political pluralism and Human Rights are also explicitly articulated. This means that, both the conception and practice of secularism have changed due to both national and international events and movements, thus making the Syrian state adopt more outspoken power over the religious institutions. Lina Khatib describes secularism in Syria as a “complex ideology that is transforming Syrian society and pulling it in many directions that cannot simply be categorized as ‘religious’ or ‘secular’” (Khatib, 2016, p. 41). She argues that there is a new formulation of the intertwined relationship between secularity and religiosity (p. 41). This symbiosis began in the 1970s as a way of handling the religious opposition. This meant “drawing closer to a secular model of religious recognition and co-habitation” (Khatib, 2016, p. 52) as opposed to the previous hardline secularism. That meant a secular model respecting all religions without an official state religion (p. 53). What is strikingly evident on *Sama TV*, and the environment around the channel, is that “religion becomes an instrument of secular power” (p. 42). Khatib proposes the understanding of a new type of secularism that is still “vibrant though is changing as the country witnesses the reformulation of Sunni religious discourse” (p. 42).

Official discourses of secularism in the post-uprising period have also been studied by Dina Matar (2019) and Rahaf Aldoughli (2020). Aldoughli argues that “the official political rhetoric has become explicitly religious and anti-secular, ending an era of official secularity (...)” after the uprising (2020, p. 1). She explains that religion has become a strong tool in the battle for legitimacy and maintaining power and describes the relationship between state and religion as a “Ba’athification of Islam” (p. 6), and even “a deviation from secularism” (p. 12). She explains “Ba’athification” as “a configuration of the ‘revolutionized’ and ‘progressive’ notion of Islamic faith that focuses on aligning with Assad’s views of the uprising” (p. 2). In this formulation, she captures what Khatib described in 2016: that the secularity of the state is highly interrelated with the religious sector both of state and society. Aldoughli counters Khatib’s notion of just a ‘reformulation’ of secularism but says that “the relationship between secularism and religion is not only a matter of reformulation of the religious discourse but a perpetuation of the Ba’athified version of Islam that sacrifices secularism” (Aldoughli, 2020, p. 4). Though they do not seem to concur on the status quo of secularism, they agree on the development of a sort of Islamization of nationalism as a means to create a new type of collective Syrian identity in order to unite people across sectarian and ethnical divisions (Aldoughli, 2020, p. 12; Khatib, 2016, p. 45). From these studies, it becomes clear that the notions of (religious) unity and Syrian nationalism have been essential in the Syrian state discourse.

When looking at the question of religion and secularism in a conflict with sectarian divisions, among many other divisions, we understand sectarianism in this article

as the processes surrounding the politicization of religious identities (Zarras, 2019, p. 51). This is explored mainly through the anti-sectarian discourse which entails attempts to streamline a collective Muslim identity through the state narrative. The scope and understanding of sectarianism, and different forms of anti-sectarianism, is beyond the scope of this article.

Methodology

We now look at how the war, its subsequent struggle over truth, and the presence of a diverse Syrian mediascape have influenced state-supportive media's communication of national mythscapes. We draw on research on *Sama TV* conducted in 2014 mainly around the presidential elections in May. The channels were watched during the evening for five consecutive hours for a week, as well as 3 June, the day of the elections, to include the evening news and the features in between the programs. We gathered material from three Fridays (11 April, 9 May, and 16 May 2014) and 17 April 2014, the national holiday Independence Day. Fridays were chosen to observe the Friday prayers on both *Sama TV* and state-owned satellite channel *al-Sūriyya*. *Al-Sūriyya* is chosen for a comparative perspective since it contains news broadcasts, shows, and some features in between, similar to *Sama TV*. The research covered around 80 hours of footage in 2014. We watched *al-Sūriyya* for one week in October 2013, and on three Fridays in spring 2014 (same dates as *Sama TV*), and during the elections on 3 June 2014.

The programs on *Sama TV* comprised different genres: news, documentaries, debates, drama series, culture, lifestyle, youth TV, history, sport, economics, and pop songs praising Bashar al-Assad and the Syrian nation. The programming itself was not solely political, but all programs included various political agendas. This was visible in the course which programs took, as well as a variety of small sequences in between, transmitted historical narratives and future visions that were specific to the leadership. We focused on the news broadcasts, the political debate programs, and the features between programs.

The data were gathered by focusing on positioning as described by Harré and Langenhove: “The act of positioning (thus) refers to the assignment of fluid ‘parts’ or ‘roles’ to speakers in the discursive construction of personal stories that make a person’s actions intelligible and relatively determinate as social acts” (1999, p. 17). The leadership in authoritarian states defines the national identity by imposing its metaphors (or the ‘mythscapes’ as we call them), on others. We therefore looked closely at the linguistic dimension as proposed by Brockmeier, and inspired by Wittgenstein, since all kinds of human practices are described by language (Brockmeier, 2002, p. 38). By watching the programs, the first thing was to obtain an overall impression of the discourse; we then selected the most politically relevant programs and analyzed them by focusing on the use of symbols and language, paying special attention to how Bashar al-Assad was described, both in the chosen programs but also in the channel’s interfaces. We also looked at how the army and

the state were depicted. We included how other, anti-Assad media, were portrayed for insights on the war of narratives.

Results: Between state, people, and religion

The reformulation of secularism on Sama TV

Sama TV had the explicit agenda of mobilizing support for Bashar al-Assad and the Arab Syrian army. *Sama TV* represents a position loyal to the Syrian leadership since the ownership is held by politically elites, described by Volker Perthes as the ones who “wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate in decision making on a national level, contribute to defining political norms, and values (including the definition of ‘national interests’, and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues)” (Perthes, 2004, p. 5). Both political and sectarian affiliations have a direct influence over media production, and, at first sight, the programs on *Sama TV*, although varying in content and form, all conveyed the state narrative of the conflict.

The national narrative was reproduced on *Sama TV* forged by symbols such as national celebrations, rallies for Bashar al-Assad, singing the national anthem, waving the Syrian flag, images of the Unknown Soldier, the Damascene Sword and the Umayyad Square, and the explicit use of verbal symbols of the nation - symbols which did not necessarily make people think of ideology. The verbal symbols most frequently used are for example unity and honor. The narrative discourse is what Gabriella Elgenius calls a “symbolic regime”, in which celebrations of nationhood might appear as signs of consensus and unity, although with no guaranteed result of cohesion and solidarity (Elgenius, 2011, p. 397). This is in line with Lisa Wedeen’s notion that Syrians might be contrived or even forced to act as if they believed. By letting ordinary people speak publicly, *Sama TV* tried to establish the appearance of voluntary submission or obedience to the rules or to the system of symbols expressing the leadership’s dominance over the state and national identity (Wedeen, 2007, p. 15).

The national narrative on *al-Sūriyya* is remarkably similar to the one presented by *Sama TV*. An overall difference, however, was that it paid Bashar al-Assad and doings of the state more attention. It covered new decrees, speeches, or doings of the president to a higher extent than *Sama TV*. The news broadcasts prioritized political national news on both channels, but, whereas *al-Sūriyya* informed about news from parliament or about the elections, *Sama TV* more often included reportages of local areas torn by war or areas freed by the army, sometimes exclusive to *Sama TV*. The reportages regularly started with footage of destroyed cities, then unfolded the story in terms of dead or injured and rounded off by how the army established peace and stability. International news on both channels often revolved around Syrian issues and regional powers such as Russia and Iran, Syria’s allies, and both channels agreed on the interpretation of the war being the result of an attack

from outside against Syria rather than a civil war. They both blamed a regional crisis that was caused by the quest of American economic interests, while the turmoil in countries within the region was used to prove that fanatical Islam was on the move everywhere. The solution, in the channels' view, is resistance in order to legitimize the offensive role of the Syrian military. The tomb of the Unknown Soldier was a popular illustration of the soldiers who died for Syria. The language used to describe the conflict was very loaded, either negatively or positively, and nourished fear and hate towards certain actors: Israel, the U.S., the Gulf States, and armed religious Islamists. The two channels followed the same story line when explaining the war and role of the leadership; however, *al-Sūriyya*, by its explicit coverage of state activities, and despite references to daily sufferings of the common people, primarily told the story from the perspective of the state, whereas *Sama TV*, to a larger extent, appeared to take the position of the Syrian people by including the coverage of life and opinions by ordinary Syrians. *Al-Sūriyya* more directly explained and defended the policy of the al-Assad regime, while *Sama TV* symbolically indorsed and reinforced the identity between the Syrian people and the Syrian state.

The place of religion also differed in the two channels' coverage. *Al-Sūriyya* made a clear point in positioning itself as anti-sectarian, emphasizing that there was room for all religions and ethnicities in Syria. Islam was not as conspicuous as on *Sama TV*. There were many religious figures appearing on *al-Sūriyya*, there were no religious programs *per se*, nor any broadcasts of Friday prayers. There were no female anchors or hosts wearing a Muslim headscarf on *al-Sūriyya*, whereas *Sama TV* had two female hosts or anchors wearing headscarves. *Al-Sūriyya* represented the national strategy of keeping religion separate from political affairs and also depicted Islam as the distorted faith of the enemy of terrorists, who were represented as fanatical unbelievers. This division of labor illustrates the ambiguous strategy of the state which, on one hand, took a more direct rule over religious affairs from around early 2008 by imprisoning "undisciplined" clerics, and trying to canonize religious institutions, while on the other, trying to reassert secular values (Pierret, 2013, p. 102).

Religion had a prominent and visible place on *Sama TV*, signifying that the secularism of the Syrian state was, indeed, not without religion. *Sama TV* not only transmitted Friday prayers from the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus but seemed to use the footage of the religious channel *Nūr al-Shām*; the speaker even welcomed the viewers to *Nūr al-Shām* in the beginning. Sheikh Mamun Rahma had led the Friday prayers from the Umayyad Mosque for many years, his highly politicized speeches endorsed the dominant national mythscape embraced by the Syrian regime that "Syria wants its own history, its own democracy, moral, science, love, brotherhood, nation, and Bashar al-Assad. We say yes to the leader and after Assad, there is an Assad and yet another Assad".⁴ He was, however, suddenly removed from his position in April 2019. According to the website of the Ministry of Religious Endowments, it would be different preachers who would lead the Friday prayers in

⁴ Sama-tv.net, Friday May 16, 2014 at 11:15 am GMT (1:15 Syrian time).

the Umayyad Mosque with effect from Friday April 26, 2019.⁵ There was no explanation for his removal given, but rumors said that his politicization had dissatisfied the regime, since pro-Assad Muslim clerics were not happy about some of his statements attacking other parts of the religious communities in Damascus. This suggests that the depiction of religion on *Sama TV* was not free from politics, in line with the strict censoring of content even in religious practices. There is a *de facto* power over religious institutions, and the right to dismiss religious leaders, already established in the 1960s (Khatib, 2016, p. 50). Another example of regime supportive religious leaders shown by the channel was State Mufti Hassoun, who also commented on political affairs on the channel. He was featured, for instance, along with people from The Ministry of Religious Endowments, and Bashar al-Assad declaring an oath on the Quran. These connections between the religious and political leadership were similar to *al-Sūriyya*'s depiction of religion as a state affair and a political tool, but on *Sama TV*, the actual religious practices were more predominant; for example, the broadcast of a Sufi *hadra*-session on *Sama TV*. It is interesting to mention here that, although the common offered identity was Muslim, the channel also gave space to the representations of Christians, portrayed as brothers and sisters in religion. Bashar al-Assad was shown with Christian clerics, or for example, in a church destroyed by Islamist fighters. The collective identity shown is nevertheless (Sunni) Muslim, which in this case is depicted as tolerant and inclusive for all. It is interesting that references to Alawism to which the al-Assad's belong, were almost absent from the channel's discourse. Alawism was rather represented through focusing on local areas such as Tartous, a place mainly inhabited by Alawis, and through people speaking the Alawi dialect, exemplified by the pronunciation of the letter *qaf*. We once saw a direct reference to a Shi'a mosque in Esfahan, Iran, but other than that, no direct references to (Muslim) denominations were visible. The conscious absence of confessional markers can be understood as an explicit fight against the ideas and actions of the fanatical Islamist; a reference to Bashar al-Assad's speech in December 2020. He described it as a battle to be waged together with the Ministry of Religious Endowments at the forefront.

The Syrian state ideology of the specific Syrian-style secularism was supported by *Sama TV* on one hand, by presenting images of Christian clerics or Druze from Sweida or the Golan Heights – not as a proof of any religious foundation – but as proof of the Syrian mosaic making up the union of Syrian peoples. Christian worship services on Sundays were not transmitted, in contrast to the transmission of the Muslim Friday prayer. Shi'a Islam was almost entirely absent, except for images of mosques from Esfahan in Iran. The word “Alawi” was not used at all, and representations of the Alawi minority only happened through footage of Alawi areas or the usage of the Alawi dialect in Arabic. There was footage of songs on the channel about al-Assad, and him shaking hands or talking to Christian clerics. He gathered pieces of a broken statue of Virgin Mary in a church which had been destroyed in

5 <https://www.facebook.com/awkafsyrian>. [accessed 23/12 /2020].

one sequence.⁶ The narrative about Syria's beautiful mosaic of different faiths living tolerantly together was one of the main pillars in the mythscapes, directly reflected in the depiction of the president reaching out for a plural and inclusive Syrian society. The ambiguities in relation to representations of minorities were many, but most obvious was the absence of the Alawi religion or culture, which many high-ranking people represented. The war was not a new phenomenon, but it made sectarian differences remarkably more explicit, and placed further ambiguity on the absent articulations of the informal power structure, even though it was broadly discussed among oppositional forces.

Sama TV also contributed to the use of religion as a political tool for establishing legitimacy and criminalizing al-Assad's opponents on the other hand (Fares, 2015, p. 190). The channel emphasized value-loaded enemy images of fanatic Islamists, who killed women and children, deprived children of their right to education, brutally murdered innocent Syrians, smashed houses of worship (including churches), and violated human rights. Religion was used in this way to create fear of radical Islamism. A clear antagonism between a believing self and an unbelieving other was constructed, and a coherent belief system orchestrated through symbolic resources in which religious unity, al-Assad as a pious (Sunni) Muslim, and the state control over religion were some of the main factors contributing to the ambiguous image of religion in a declared secular nation.

Sharing the denouncement of radical Islamism with *al-Sūriyya*, to a higher degree, *Sama TV* connected the Muslim identity with the national mythscapes trying to bridge the ambiguities between a religious and secular identity of the nation. *Sama TV* was able to adopt a more populist approach by trying to reflect the daily lives of common people in all its aspects, with higher visibility of Islam as the result. This strategy was furthermore strengthened by *Sama TV*'s construction of Bashar al-Assad and the army as political and religious symbols of the nation which went hand-in-hand with the Syrian "mobilizing system" of support for the leadership and its reforms, and literally making men serve in the army.

The presidential cult of Bashar al-Assad

The personality cult of Bashar al-Assad was regularly reconstructed on *Sama TV*, featuring the president as a father and a protector of the nation. Inheriting the presidential cult from his father, after his father's death in 2000, Bashar utilized the cult to establish and preserve ties between the leadership and the people by using historical, traditional, and religious symbols (Sassoon, 2012). With its strong disciplinary effect, a cult is also a mechanism of social control; it instructs people on how to behave, and it incites people to control each other. This is one component of social control in Syria together with severe punishments for disobedience, including imprisonment and torture. A cult can be based on fear, people feigning belief as Wedeen (2007) describes it, or it can be actual genuine commitment. The cult aims

6 Sama-tv.net, May 1, 2014, 20:24 pm GMT (23:24 Syrian Time).

at cultivating a sense of national membership generating a story of shared identity and past experiences (Wedeen, 2007, p. 157).

Wedeen describes the cult of former president Hafez al-Assad, and she argues that it was similar to that of Stalin in terms of structure of the spectacles that discipline the participants, organize ritual gestures, and show political obedience (Wedeen, 2007, p. 27). Büchs argues that the continuous functioning of the cult was embedded in the context of the Ba'athist ideology, which possesses some degree of Gramscian hegemony (Büchs, 2009, p. 24). The party nevertheless lost its ideological grounding with its loss of political and economic power, and it was no longer a big part of official rhetoric. The party itself did not seem important in the quest for legitimacy, which was reflected in the lack of representations on *Sama TV*. The cult was visible primarily through songs, spectacles, and people expressing their support for the president. Bashar al-Assad was being depicted as a hero, leader, savior, father, pious Muslim, well-educated doctor, symbol of resistance and Arabism, and not least, a unifier of Syria's mosaic. He was described in songs, seen on the channel in 2014, as a symbol of resistance, hope, the spring of humanity, beloved by millions, and master of the proud ones.⁷ This is reinforced by sentences such as “the people chose you, the people love you, and your people do not want anyone but you.”⁸ By addressing him with the word “you”, the songs create a sense of familiarity or intimacy between the leader and his people. He was also put in an exalted, almost sacred place by sentences such as “God and your hand, we want you,” or in the slogan often heard “Only God, Syria, and Bashar”.

A sentence that captures the essence of the descriptions of al-Assad is from a 2011 song which was repeatedly used during the presidential elections in 2014 and remains popular: “You are the title (i.e., symbol) of dignity, the will, the martyrdom, the determination and the persistence”.⁹ The word for dignity, *karāma*, was used as one of the words describing a true Syrian, who wholeheartedly believed in the nation, and naturally, Bashar al-Assad is dignified. The “will” could refer to the will of the people, which he was said to represent better than any other. The word “determination” describes a strong leader, who walks the righteous path and does not settle, staying true to his ideology and not bending to pressure or economic benefits. The words “persistence” or “insisting” are a symbol of what we have described above regarding resistance in Syria.

Al-Sūriyya, similar to *Sama TV*, paid much attention to Bashar al-Assad and his presidential deeds. The cult on *al-Sūriyya* was, however, more engaged in state affairs than *Sama TV*, focusing on legislation, economics, and constitutional changes. The programming on *al-Sūriyya* was largely represented by officials from

7 I.e. Oh Master of the Heroes (Yā sayyid al-'Uba'), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CzIlQ7aYRiU> [accessed 19/12/2020].

8 I.e. We want to Preserve (Bidna Nhāfez), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Faq9qYA9Ic> [accessed 23/12/2020].

9 I.e. Your forehead is high like the sun (Mitl al-shams jbīnak 'Aāli), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R_UoWORA4k [accessed 14/01/2021].

ministries, ministers, and state councils. Al-Assad and the representations of him were tied to state performance. He was “Mister President”, leader of the state, and the one who carried out new legislation as well as national and international strategies. The channel did not always refer to him by name but simply “the leader” in relation to political affairs. The cult is definitely present, although *al-Sūriyya* was less populist and more factual in its tribute compared to *Sama TV*.

The army and the martyrs

Sama TV gave the army a notable amount of airtime, supporting the more practical side to the term “mobilization media”. The army appeared during military training, fighting, or listening to the words of their president. The news also screened small clips such as *God’s Men in the Field*,¹⁰ indicating that the army was fighting in the name of both Allah and al-Assad’s Syria. The army had shaken the dust across the land,¹¹ meaning that the army was defending all parts of Syria. The soldiers had devoted their lives to the country, and those dying in combat were being exalted to martyrs. The martyrdom on *Sama TV* united the religious and political dimensions inseparable in martyrdom: the religious one, when a person dies fighting against unbelievers for a religious cause, and the political, when a person dies defending a political cause (Soboslai, 2017). In times of war, martyrdom is an important tool of the leaders in trying to affect the behavior of the people.

The martyrs were popular figures on *Sama TV*, and they symbolized the good, pure, and honor of dying in a battle for justice, as seen in a clip with the slogan of the army: *nation, honor, and loyalty*.¹² Their stories were often narrated through their families, especially their wives or mothers, or their local community. An example is on Martyr’s Day on May 6, 2014, when a wife desperately called her husband and he did not answer. The camera then moved to a photograph of her husband with their two children along a text saying: “Who amongst us are not affected by terrorism?”¹³ This example illustrates how the nation was symbolically connected to motherhood. It was seen as a womb from where brotherhood could grow (Wedeen, 2007, p. 56), and where the focus had moved from defending the nation against terrorism to rebuilding society.

One song seen in 2014, began as follows: “My will to you, if I am not returning, I’ll meet you in the Heaven of immortality, I will draw the borders by blood and roses”.¹⁴ Artistic manufacturing, or popular culture, was used to reinforce the mythscapes

10 Arabic (Syrian dialect): Rijjāl Allāh fī ‘al-mīdān, *Sama TV* May 4, 2014, at 5:15 pm GMT, 8:15 pm Syrian time.

11 From the song Salute to Syria (ḥayyū sūrīyyā),

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R4Ik_NvLtqI [accessed 04/11/2020].

12 It is the slogan of the Syrian army, and was seen during fieldwork in 2014 (see the whole clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P46c_k4B6HE [accessed 31/01/2021]) and on *Sama TV*’s YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdvYopD5NNo> [accessed 22/12/2020].

13 Arabic (Syrian dialect): mīn minna mā ādhāh al-‘irhāb? *Sama TV*, May 6th 2014, at 8 pm GMT, 11 Syrian time.

14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BAwQ8xK9JA> [accessed 17/12/2020].

through what Hinnebusch calls “populist authoritarianism”. The songs function as a means of letting groups of the population support the political leadership as the other end of the authoritarian repression of punishment (Hinnebusch, 2008, p. 269). The large amount of time given to the army and the martyrs was clearly to use martyrdom as a political tool for recruiting men, appealing to young men’s nationalist sentiments or religious obligations in joining the army.

The Syrian national anthem, “Guardians of the Houses” (*ḥommāt al-diyār*) was, not surprisingly, another popular song on both *Sama TV* and *al-Sūriyya*. *Al-Sūriyya*, however, also had a show called *Guardians of the Houses* depicting the activities of the army as protector of the nation.¹⁵ The army appeared on both *al-Sūriyya* and *Sama TV*, either in combat gear or during military training. These clips were often seen in relation to children, flowers, people carrying the Syrian flag, people waving at the army, and songs about the army on *al-Sūriyya*. The martyrs were mentioned, mostly by relatives of the ones who were killed; however, they did not receive the same attention as on *Sama TV*. Focus was more on the army as protector of those who were alive, and in relation to the rights of families who had lost their sons, which shows how state performance is crucial.

The dominant presence of the army and the martyrs on *Sama TV* using martyrdom as a politicized religious tool for army recruitment of men, was an integral part of the Syrian mythscape and exemplified how the state utilized religion as an engine for creating support and establishing legitimacy. The aim of glorifying the moral deeds of Syrian soldiers by portraying them as God’s ambassadors on earth – not just fighting in the name of true Islam, but a more inclusive concept of God that unified the Syrian ethnic diversities under the umbrella of sacrifice.

Conclusion

The private-owned *Sama TV* is together with other state-supportive Syrian media such as *al-Sūriyya* contributing to the national mythscapes. This happens by promoting nationalism as state loyalty, secularism hand-in-hand with a state Islam, and unity as a state principle – contrary to what the opposition believes – and resistance towards internal (and external) enemies. *Al-Sūriyya* tells the narrative of the state through the coverage of state activities, whereas *Sama TV*, to a greater extent, pretends to tell the narrative of the people, and to voice their opinions. The private and state channels differ in their contribution to the ambiguities of the national mythscapes. They promote a modern and secular ideology on one hand, and on the other, secularism goes hand-in-hand with Islam. This is a clear example of the reformulation of secularity that Khatib discusses. Secularism still exists, and has not disappeared, although we have witnessed an Islamization of the state’s narrative and of the Syrian society. *Al-Sūriyya* primarily depicts Islam as part of

¹⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aIWX5coHopU>. ‘Guardians of the Houses’ (Ḥomāt al-Diyār) is also the title of the Syrian national anthem [accessed 20/11/2020].

state affairs, leaving Islam as religion to another state channel *Nūr al-Shām*, whereas *Sama TV* emphasizes Islam when framing al-Assad as being representative of the Sunni Muslim majority, and by commemorating the fallen soldiers as martyrs, thus conflating religion and a strong military. Islam is presented as a core integral part of the national collective identity, at the same time as Syria is depicted as a beautiful mosaic of different faiths living in tolerant harmony. The national unity across sectarian divisions is a central discourse within the mythscapes on both channels. *Sama TV* promotes this tolerance when claiming to be anti-sectarian, while simultaneously creating the image of a strong enemy of terrorists defined as fanatical non-believers, extremist radicals without morals or respect for the Syrian quest for national pride. These mythscapes on *Sama TV* can be summarized as a mix of ideology and history and as manufactured content targeting the emotions of the viewers and their remembrance of the near past. *Sama TV* can more easily bypass the secular claim of the Syrian state because it is not a state channel. Despite the success of the channel in terms of viewers, Bashar al-Assad and the leadership are left with mythscapes that defy the possibilities of peace, since they clearly support the demonization of the enemies based on sectarian narratives. The mediated ambiguities may help in times of conflict, but may lead to reinforced problems in times of peace.

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