Regime Strategy and Opposition Tactics: Ruumour in Syria

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Throughout history rumour has been part of the toolkit used by occupational, mandatory and dictatorial regimes to control the societies they govern. By taking a reading of society’s response to a given incident or rumour a regime can implement an approach to control this specific reaction, or otherwise — by mounting intensive rumour and propaganda campaigns — to guide society along a path determined by the authorities. The discourse of rumour deploys a carrot-and-stick technique; it frequently bears an implicit message containing vast quantities of symbolic violence with the aim of frightening society while simultaneously offering the hope of salvation and safety to those who change their ways. This type of rumour has a prolonged shelf-life in dictatorial regimes such as that in Syria, where stories of the regime’s violence, barbarism and power, and tales of what takes place inside its prisons (both in secret detention centres and regular prisons), are used to neuter society by invoking fear.

With time, this discourse of fear and intimidation enters popular culture in proverbial form. For instance, ‘Even the flies won’t know how to find his corpse’ is juxtaposed with other proverbs such as, ‘A hundred mothers mourn but not one tear in my mother’s eye’ and ‘Stick close to the wall and pray to God to keep you safe’. The first of these sayings is designed to intimidate, whereas the second two point the way to safety and security. Counter to what is commonly believed, the authorities work to orchestrate this balance on a daily basis by the discourse of rumour deploys of the machinations of power in the society in which they operate, so ignorant in fact that on numerous occasions it has helped the regime further its agenda instead of confronting it.

Rumour in the shadow of the uprising

The Syrian regime benefitted from the fact that the Arab Spring flared up in five countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain) before its flames reached their doorstep. It spared the regime the element of surprise, which otherwise plays such an important role in such affairs and allowed it to devise an emergency containment strategy. It was fully prepared, something that could be clearly sensed on March 30, 2011 in the dictator’s first public speech following the start of the uprising. Rumour is one of the components of the authorities’ strategy to forestall and distort the popular opposition movement. The authorities are experts in deploying rumour in a society whose secrets are in their control, unlike the opposition, which even now remains ignorant of the machinations of power in the society in which it operates, so ignorant in fact that on numerous occasions it has helped the regime further its agenda instead of confronting it.

Regime rumours

i) The Alawite sect’s partisanship

The very first rumours that the regime released painted the uprising as Sunni/Salafist, and as such were an attempt to win the support of minorities, with a clear focus on the Alawite community. Sayings and slogans attributed to the popular movement did the rounds, such as ‘Alawites to Beirut! Christians to coffins’ as well as the alleged demands of protestors, including ‘the separation of men and women’ and ‘reopening Islamic schools’ — without meaning that these purported demands were all untrue; indeed, one of the movement’s leaders in Baniyas, Sheikh Anas Ayrout, had made a number of religious demands, which gave the authorities the opportunity to exaggerate and shape events as they saw fit. Overnight, claims surfaced that protestors were demanding the establishment of a Salafist emirate and confining women to their houses, all of which were rumours aimed at minorities, secularists and other civilians with a simpler, folk religiosity, and designed to preemptively split them off from the uprising.

In the first months of the uprising, the rumours focused on gaining the Alawite community’s total support for the regime by encouraging it to think of the revolution as a Sunni phenomenon, which would target the very existence of the Alawites. To achieve this it first had to cut off the Alawite opposition to the
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Seeking to isolate activists and opponents from their communities, the regime's reserves of support and influence were numerous rumours to the effect that, 'The Syrian people are one' , even as Sunnis would attack Alawites with guns in Baba Amr; the militants there killed a security officer and a doctor treated by the regime to strike at sectarian, ethnic and tribal fault lines and thus to prevent this communities from coming together as a single nation capable of mounting a unified revolution. The sub-nationalism (i.e. the sectarian, confessional, tribal, ethnic, etc.) is promoted at the expense of a national identity that expresses itself through slogans of freedom and democracy. As the Syrian opposition analyst Salama Kella says, 'The authorities' obsession centered around preventing this by frightening the Alawites with Sunni fundamentalism. Look at their discourse being destroyed by refugees from the city of Hama. On June 29, 2014, the Facebook page salamehilve (which many activists believe is run by the security services), posted the following, According to the Electricity Board, the reason for the black-outs in #Salamiyeh is the governorate of Hama! Now you can see who wants you to go out and demonstrate! The folk from Hama have realized that the people of Salamiyeh have provided 4,000 martyrs and heroes to Syrian Arab Army and have taken in some 250,000 refugees from every governorate in Syria, and many in Hama don’t like it…'. Since Salamiyeh is part of the governorate of Hama, Hama can mess with the daily lives of Salamiyens as they please… How much longer will the people of Hama go on stealing our daily crust and basic services?! This was followed by a second post on June 30, ‘Young men and boys… Could someone please explain to me why the electricity in Hama is out 3 times in 3 days but 7 times in 1 day in Salamiyeh? It is noted the incendiary language and the attempts to exacerbate regional tensions between the residents of Salamiyeh and Hama, using rumour to incite Salamiyans to expel those from Hama and refuse to rent them accommodation, the residents of Hama can mess with the daily lives of Salamiyens as they please… How much longer will the people of Hama go on stealing our daily crust and basic services?!’ This was followed by a second post on June 30, ‘Young men and boys… Could someone please explain to me why the electricity in Hama is out 3 times in 3 days but 7 times in 1 day in Salamiyeh? It is noted the incendiary language and the attempts to exacerbate regional tensions between the residents of Salamiyeh and Hama, using rumour to incite Salamiyans to expel those from Hama and refuse to rent them accommodation, the residents of Hama can mess with the daily lives of Salamiyens as they please… How much longer will the people of Hama go on stealing our daily crust and basic services?!’

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Salmiyeh and the surrounding countryside have been targeted by a high volume of rumours. We were told by one locally-based intellectual that when the Syrian army entered the village of Al Safa and began looting, rumours went round that it was residents from Al Safa who were committing the thefts and not the soldiers—all in an effort to preserve the army’s reputation!

i) Isolating minorities

Returning to our earlier theme, once the authorities were certain that the Alawite community had been secured—especially after it had managed to force the majority of Alawite opposition figures to leave their communities—it turned to other minority sects such as the Christians and Druze. At first it pumped out a high volume of rumours to the effect that what was happening in the country was only between the Sunnis and the Alawites, and concerned no one else. These were accompanied by the usual slogans demonizing the popular movement, with a particular focus on rumours about women wearing the hijab, Islamic clothing and Jihadist Salafism. All this left a mark. Today one still finds people who say, ‘This conflict is between the Sunnis and Alawites, and if the Christians and Druze are smart they’ll stay out of it!’ This is precisely what the authorities want. What these minorities consider ‘smart’ is nothing less than the result of a strategy perfectly executed by the regime which began with rumours in the provinces claiming that the war was between Sunnis and Alawites. Initially, the regime desired only that these minorities display a bias in its favour, while it completed the business of establishing the Alawite sect in its ranks and diminishing the popular movement. In the next phase minorities were encouraged to lend their support, though often at a remove. In both cases the regime used religious figures to encourage the different groups to conform. It should be noted that the regime has not been able to sway minority opinion totally in its favour, minority participation in the popular movement is noticeable, though somewhat tokenistic, in Qamishli, Amouda, Salamiye, and certain towns and villages around Suweida.

This approach has been accompanied by a parallel effort to incite members of minority sects against the Sunni majority, particularly within the security services and armed forces. Shortly after the uprising began, a security officer in one military unit assembled minority servicemen and openly incited them against the Sunnis. He encouraged them to remember that minorities must stick together. At first this went hand-in-hand with preferential treatment for members of minorities within the various branches of the security services, and at checkpoints, though this situation is not stable and changes as the uprising evolves. When the armed opposition attempted to draw the Druze-majority city of Suweida into the war with the regime, observers noted that city residents were being tortured to death while alarmist rumours circulated that the Nusra Front was threatening to shell the city and enslave women—this had certainly not happened at an earlier stage.

ii) Rumours after the militarization of the revolution

As the revolution transitioned into an armed movement the rumours changed. The authorities became more certain of their ability to persuade large swathes of the population of their point of view, particularly since they had, at an earlier stage, circulated many rumours about the presence of weapons. The movement’s militarization served to convince minorities and regime supporters that these rumours had been true, and put an end to the spread of even more, while the opposition remained incapable of countering them—or at the very least of proving to those who had joined the movement that they were untrue. During this period in chief of the peaceful opposition, Ibrahim Amin, told a Lebanese newspaper that, ‘There’s great progress has been made, right up to the recent battle in Yabroud.’ This was played as a decisive role in achieving a rapid victory and enabled the Syrian army and fighters from the Lebanese resistance to reach their objectives with minimum losses and without exposing their target areas to excessive destruction. The media-psychological battle is a massive security and intelligence operation and makes every fighter on the opposition frontline believe that his task is to deceive, and thus prevent them from uniting, and has left them on the verge of civil war. Rumours have even impacted on the course of actual battles, with daily claims that such-and-such an area had surrendered its weapons or had agreed to a truce, or was about to. This was done with the aim of sowing mutual distrust between the armed groups, and between them and the communities in which they operated. These communities then began to worry that if the militias were making deals without consulting them they would be left at the regime’s mercy. Other rumours spoke of the ‘supernatural’ or ‘highly organized’ power of Hezbollah units and the pro-regime Aboul Fadl Al Abbas Brigades, and the crimes they committed in areas that they had entered. These raiments aimed to encourage the different sects to conform. It was a decisive moment to take revenge and the regime knew just how to manage this situation, by keeping them apart. The regime knew how to manage this situation, by keeping them apart.

The opposition and revolutionary forces

The use of rumour is not the sole preserve of the regime, but has also been practiced by the opposition and the revolutionary forces on a number of occasions.

i) Opposition rumours

Over the course of the Syrian revolution many rumours have circulated with the aim of impacting the regime, its infrastructure and supporters. Initially, they were of the type, ‘The president has fled from his palace’. There’s been a palace coup’ or ‘Top political and military figures have defected’, which were quickly rejected. These rumours included claims of the defection of President Assad’s political and media advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, the defection of the head of the Syrian army’s logistics corps, Mohammed Khalilouf, and finally that of deputy president Farouq al-Shara—a rumour that was confirmed by opposition activist Hasham al-Maleh before being shown to be untrue.

Rumours were also circulated about the imminent collapse of the Syrian economy, the regime’s inability to pay the wages of employees in state agencies, the decline in the central bank’s currency reserves, inflated figures of the number of soldiers and air force defectors. These were in addition to numerous rumours surrounding atrocities and massacres (not so much the massacres themselves, but the figures, precise events and their circulation in...
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The regime would frequently generate rumours as a way of dealing with the opposition’s achievements, which were making the regime feel insecure and threatened. The regime would then disseminate these rumours to the public in an attempt to undermine the opposition and its successes. The regime would then use these rumours to deflect attention from its own failures and shortcomings. The opposition would then use these rumours to challenge the regime and its credibility. The regime would then respond to these challenges by generating more rumours, thus creating a cycle of rumour and response. This cycle would then continue, with each side attempting to outdo the other in the generation and dissemination of rumour.

The regime’s use of rumour is often seen as a way of maintaining control over the population and suppressing dissent. The regime would use rumour to create a climate of fear and insecurity, which would then be used to justify its actions and policies. The regime would also use rumour to divert attention from its own failures and shortcomings, and to deflect attention from the opposition’s successes.

The opposition would also use rumour as a way of challenging the regime and its credibility. The opposition would use rumour to challenge the regime’s claims and statements, and to expose its corruption and inefficiency. The opposition would also use rumour to mobilize its supporters and to create a sense of solidarity and resistance.

The regime and the opposition would both use rumour as a way of manipulating public opinion and controlling the media. The regime would use rumour to control the media and to shape public opinion in its favor. The opposition would also use rumour to control the media and to shape public opinion in its favor.

The regime would also use rumour as a way of influencing the international community. The regime would use rumour to discredit the opposition and to portray itself as the victim of a conspiracy. The regime would also use rumour to influence international opinion and to gain support for its policies.

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