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Deconstructing the Coverage of the Syrian Conflict in Western Media

Case Study: *The Economist*

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DECLARATION OF ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

I hereby declare that the study presented is based on my own research and no other sources than the ones indicated. All thoughts taken directly or indirectly from other sources are properly denoted as such.

Belgrade, 31 August 2018 Uroš Mamić

(*Signature*)

Content

1. Introduction

1.1. Statement of Problem

What began as a protest against the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad in 2011, as one within a wave of popular uprisings known as the Arab Spring, has transformed in a long and deadly conflict. The Syrian civil war has taken several hundred thousand casualties with many more wounded and displaced; it has devastated Syria and drawn in regional and global powers. According to an article from *The Guardian* and the statistics from the Syrian Centre for Policy Research from February 2016 – the conflict has taken 470 000 lives, with almost 45% of the total Syrian population displaced.[1] The article emphasizes that this amounts to about 11,5% of population either killed or injured, with the number of wounded put at 1,9 million people.[2] Besides the fatalities, the conflict has destroyed a large part of the infrastructure and left the people living in conditions that add up to a humanitarian crisis.

The conflict in Syria has drawn a lot of media attention. TV channels, print and online media outlets, in Europe as elsewhere, have devoted much media space to the conflict. This is due to several different factors, among which the relentlessness and the share of violence are just first among them. The proximity of the conflict to the EU borders is just one among many causes behind the Western media focus on Syria – but an important one nevertheless. One of the related consequences of this proximity was the refugee crisis in Europe – as displacement of the Syrian population resulted in larger numbers of refugees heading towards the European Union member states' borders, more media attention has been turning to the Syrian war. Additionally, the involvement of the Islamic State in the conflict and the increasing number of terrorist attacks in Europe linked to this terrorist organization has reinforced this attention. Given the strong interest of different types of media in this conflict unfolding at the Middle East, the research topic of this study is around the content of the coverage.

One of the defining characteristics of this conflict which journalists have had to deal with while creating news - is its overwhelming complexity. Analyzes of the causes of the conflict, the character of the conflict and the actors involved reflect that complexity. The conflict has only become ever more complex in the seven years since its outbreak. In an article for the *Council of Foreign Relations* webpage, Zachary Laub analyzes the actors involved the conflict saying how "*war is being fought on multiple fronts by an array of combatants whose alliances, capabilities, and in some cases motives*

[1] Black, Ian; *Report on Syria conflict finds 11.5% of population killed or injured*; in *The Guardian*; 11/2/2016; https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/11/report-on-syria-conflict-finds-115-of-population-killed-or-injured
[2] *Ibid*

have been in flux."[3] Variety of actors ranging from local social groups over regional states to global superpowers such as the US and Russia uncovers several layers of complexity in a conflict whose dimensions intersect on a complicated battlefield. The war in Syria shows dimensions of an intrastate, civil war as well as of a regional sectarian conflict and a proxy conflict among big superpowers.

The approach of this thesis is to problematize the coverage of the Syrian conflict by the Western media. For the reasons mentioned before, the Syrian conflict has been taking a substantial amount of media space in Western Europe and the US. Media have been crucial in formulating public opinion and general knowledge on this conflict – which by default involved grasping the complexity of the Syrian war. To this point, media have been central in framing the civil war in Syria, which refers to a systematic process in which they have highlighted and been giving meaning to certain events and processes while communicating them to the wider Western public. That has consequently affected how the public perceives and interprets events and processes in these countries. Following this line of argumentation, media thus have an important role in their governments' respective foreign and security policies as they shape the environment in which they operate and manage expectations of the political actors. All of this makes the problematization of Western media's place in the Syrian conflict worthwhile.

1.2. Research Topic

Public understanding of events taking place in remote parts of the globe hit by ongoing conflicts relies on media coverage. As stated above, public understanding of conflicts is important because it feeds into official foreign and security policies of governments and affects international politics. The topic of this study will be the coverage of the Syrian conflict in the British newspaper *The Economist* as a selected representative of the Western mass media.[4] The choice of *The Economist* as a representative Western media means this magazine would be used, on the one hand, as a source of information and, on the other hand, as a research topic and to reach conclusion on the media content about the Syrian war in more general terms. This is thought to be justified principally because of its

[3] Laub, Zachary; *Who's Who in Syria's Civil War*; on *Council on Foreign Relations*; 28/4/2017; https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whos-who-syrias-civil-war

[4] Western media are used as a term to depict the mass media in a US-led group of countries in Western Europe and North America. The designation of the West and the Western media as monolithic entities in this paper is based on the unified US-led effort in the Syrian conflict of countries such as the UK, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Norway, Canada, Denmark, Belgium and Australia. The United States and its allies have taken part in the conflict and supported both the rebel forces and the Kurds with a high level of consistency. Moreover, the Western media designation as if the media in the Western countries were a monolithic entity is thought justified due to their often used description as *free press*, as well as their highly uniform media content on this particular topic.

circulation statistics – average circulation of *The Economist* issue worldwide (including both print and digital editions) amounts to 1 444 936 readers, while the monthly average of unique browsers for *economist.com* is 11 372 596 – both during the period between January and June 2017.[5] While being a British media, more than a half of its average weekly circulation is sold in the US and Canada, having a large base of readers in the rest of Europe.[6] Furthermore, it is one of the most widely recognized publications on current affairs – and can generally be depicted as a mainstream media. According to the Audited Bureau of Circulation report, "*it provides a global perspective and rigorous analysis of world affairs*,"[7] which, adding to its public outreach, makes it a representative media outlet and ultimately possible to make conclusions about the coverage of the Syrian conflict by Western mass media in more general terms, based on the case study of *The Economist*'s articles.

Concretization of the topic of this study is done with regards to an additional layer of complexity of the Syrian conflict that can be attributed to its coverage by mass media. This refers to what Simon Cottle labels as *mediatization of a conflict*. Referring to mediatized conflicts means delving in "*the complex ways in which media are often implicated within conflicts while disseminating ideas and images about them*."[8] One of the goals of this thesis would be to capture and understand the complex, active and performative agency of *The Economist* with regards to the war in Syria.

The Syrian civil war has indeed been largely mediatized – it has been in the media spotlight for the last eight years or so. The way that mainstream mass media in the West have covered the conflict has arguably been highly uniform – the war in Syria has been a bloody fight for freedom and democracy against the brutal regime of Bashar al-Assad and a part of the global war against terror. The public has been provided with extensive coverage of the violence enfolding in Syria and wider Middle East. Intensive media coverage of the Syrian conflict has been the single most important source of informing Western public knowledge and understanding of the conflict, as well as informing the public debate on whether potentially stronger Western military involvement should be employed as an instrument for containing violence and conflict resolution. All of these notions represent a starting point in comprehensively studying *The Economist*'s coverage of the conflict.

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[5] *The Economist – World Brand Report – January –June 2017*; *Audited Bureau of Circulation*; 10/8/2017; http://economistgroupmedia-1530222749.us-east-1.elb.amazonaws.com/sites/default/files/ABC%20TE%20Worldwide%20Brand%20Report%20jj17.pdf

[6] *Ibid*

[7] *Ibid*

[8] Cottle, Simon; *Mediatized Conflicts – Developments in Media and Conflict Studies*; Open University Press; New York, 2006; page 8;

Importantly, the interdisciplinarity of the study relates to different aspects of the research topic to be tackled and reflects the combination of various academic disciplines. Knowledge and methodology will be drawn from several academic fields (such as peace studies, international and domestic politics, history, economics and international development, religion, culture and media studies, etc.) with hope to add additional value to the conclusions of this study. In principal, the time frame is determined to include the period from the beginning of 2011 until 2017 – this period is confined as the topic of the study.

1.3. Research Goals and Objectives

The epistemological standpoint and scientific goals of this study will be under influence of the poststructuralist tradition and interpretative approach. It will therefore not be said that the goal of this research is to *explain*, but to *understand* how *The Economist*'s narrative on the Syrian conflict is constructed and what are the main aspects that determine the content and form in which news about the Syrian civil war are delivered to *The Economist*'s readers. The general approach of the research has its focus beyond the text of news articles as the object of the study – but on the production of the overall narrative through the text of these articles in order to interpret their meaning. In line with the interpretative tradition, the goal here is scientific understanding. Ultimately, the starting point of the research is the perception of the narrative on the Syrian war as one where violence is promoted and reproduced; this has its repercussions, which this study tries to depict and understand. Looking into different aspects of narrative construction, rhetorical devices used and the orientalist overtone present in *The Economist*'s coverage is done in order to understand the profoundness of cultural violence present in the mass media coverage of the Syrian conflict.

In addition to understanding, scientific description will also be pursued as a scientific goal. The description of certain phenomena and their manifestations should not be underestimated, as it is a precondition and necessary step ahead of a more comprehensive scientific knowledge. Here, it will be important to identify important aspects which determine how the conflict is narrated, symbolic connections that influence the perception of the average news consumer of certain actors or events and further qualitative and quantitative features of the conflict coverage.

Scientific goals of this thesis are hermeneutic in their nature. By looking more carefully into the discursive relation between the text and the reality it depicts, the goal is to analyze some of the political, ideological and economic roles of media narratives in producing the informed public which most of Western news consumers consider themselves to be. Narratives hidden behind the notion of

objectivity are in fact heavily historically and culturally-influenced representations of the Syrian conflict. The conclusions drawn from the study can be important in a wider endeavor to recognize and theorize the role of media in contemporary conflicts.

1.4. Hypotheses

1.4.1. General Hypothesis

The narrative on the Syrian conflict in the British magazine The Economist in particular, as a selected representative among the Western mass media, and in the Western mass media more generally – has been one where cultural violence is promoted and reproduced. The Economist has a complex, active and performative role in reproducing a narrative of the conflict as a fight for freedom and democracy against the brutal regime – which makes it a representative Western mass media outlet.

1.4.2. Special Hypotheses

Special hypothesis number 1

The Economist, more than anything else, portrays the war in Syria as a fight for freedom and democracy of the opposition groups against the brutal regime. Alternative narratives are absent from The Economist's coverage of the Syrian conflict.

Special hypothesis number 2

The Syrian conflict is presented in The Economist's articles in a highly consistent and uniform manner, with no space for alternative inputs and sources which would potentially challenge the overall narrative. Sources for the information provided in the articles are rarely cited and information is presented as facts, while deeper critical reflection is delegitimized as immoral.

Special hypothesis number 3

Narration tools such as stereotypes, historical analogies and manipulation of facts and figures are identifiable in The Economist's coverage of the Syrian conflict.

Special hypothesis number 4

Simplifications and distortions are identifiable in The Economist's coverage of legal and historical aspects of the Syrian conflict.

Special hypothesis number 5

The political, social and cultural overtone of The Economist's narrative of the Syrian war is orientalist. The Economist's coverage of the conflict in Syria is reliant on the reproduction of orientalist historical, cultural and religious images and ideas.

1.5. Research Methodology

The preliminary condition for engaging in this kind of research is a more comprehensive knowledge about the research topic. This includes background information and knowledge in history, international and domestic politics, religion, culture and economics of Syria and the Middle East region, but also the knowledge in peace studies and culture and media theory. The interdisciplinary character of the research also feeds into the methodology used and the paradigmatic framework of ontological and epistemological premises of this study.

In the approach to setting up the hypothetical framework, this research is inductive. This refers to the basic method of logical and scientific reasoning and the path toward confirming the hypotheses of this research. The conclusions on the accuracy of the general hypothesis will be made on the basis of the conclusions about special hypotheses.

In general, the study draws from an interpretivist point of view that knowledge is largely socially constructed. The goal is thus to analyze the overall narrative – *interpret* the meaning of the media representation of the Syrian conflict and *understand* the way in which they might reflect on the public opinion, and, more indirectly, the political processes. In this study, narrative will be defined and understood as *the manner in which a story is presented to a reader*.

The methodological approach of this study towards understanding *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict will be qualitative content analysis of *The Economist*'s articles on the Syrian conflict. The specific theory and methodology of content analysis to be employed in this study is critical discourse analysis (or critical narrative analysis; two terms will be used as synonyms in this study). Critical discourse analysis leans onto the more general understanding of ontology and epistemology proposed by the interpretivist tradition and social constructivism in that it "*assumes that there exists a pattern of bidirectional influence between the media, the public and elite policy*."[9]

Critical narrative analysis is a method for systemic content analysis chosen for this research as it goes beyond only text, as it is usually the case with quantitative approaches to content analysis. The aim was going beyond content analysis notions such as for example how many times *The Economist* used terms like radical Islamists or terrorism has. The study will arguably follow a more Foucauldian understanding of discourse analysis, looking into how the narratives and language reflect social practices and power relations.

[9] Hällgren, Linda; *Peace- and War Journalism – A critical discourse analysis of newspaper editorials on the topic of Iran's nuclear program*; Umeå universitet, Department of Political Science. ; Umeå, 2012; page 5

"*Discourses cannot be studied without regard for the context in which they exist. Discourses are framed by the society – or culture – in which they occur, but are also seen as being able to influence or change that environment.*"[10]

The methodological positions of the critical narrative analysis should entail were formed on basis of some of the assumptions laid out in John Richardson's book *Analyzing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*.[11] The goal is to use the method to gain an understanding of communicational agency of *The Economist* with regards to the Syrian conflict. It is about understanding "*who says what to whom and with what effect*", but also understanding "*the very important issues of context that surround the formation of content*".[12] In different words, it is about understanding how readers derive meaning from articles and which tools are used by *The Economist* to construct the overall narrative. Importantly, different theoretical frameworks will be used in the study to build this understanding through critical narrative analysis. Some of those theoretical frameworks include Johan Galtung's concepts of *peace and war journalism*, the concept of *journalism of attachment*, Edward Said's concept of *orientalism*, etc.

This study will focus its research on the British magazine *The Economist* and its coverage of the Syrian conflict from the beginning of 2011 until 2017. The choice of *The Economist* as both the source of the information and the topic of the research is principally because of the character of the publication. Although not necessarily agreeing with some of *The Economist*'s editorial ideological stances and approach towards some specific socioeconomic or political topics, what is generally appreciated are tone, focus on analysis and targeting of more educated readers. Moreover, being that it is a weekly publication, the base of article, although still substantial, is not that overwhelming. One additional advantage of doing the content analysis of *The Economist* is the editorial anonymity as a rule, which offers the possibility to analyze the articles without talking into account personal positions of the authors too much – relying on the presumption of editorial consistency.

The access to the articles of *The Economist* has been done through its internet platform (it can be accesses through *https://www.economist.com/*), but generally requires subscription to enter. As for the approach to sampling, the platform offers the option to filter articles by topics. The initial evaluation of articles in order to assess their suitability for this particular research has been done by using the filtering option and *Syria* as a topic (*https://www.economist.com/topics/syria*), but has not been limited to this kind of filtering. Individual articles also offer hyperlink references to other relevant

[10] *Ibid*, page 10
[11] Richardson, John E; *Analyzing Newspapers: An Approach from Critical Discourse Analysis*; Palgrave MacMillan; Hampshire, 2007; pages 15-21
[12] *Ibid*; page 20

articles that might not necessarily have a *Syria* tag. This broadens the initial sample with articles not appearing through initial filtering. A general estimate is that the research sample consists of are around 1200 articles featuring Syria as a topic in the period between the beginning of 2011 and the end of 2016.

Evaluation of *The Economist* as a source of information has been done in accordance with the criteria provided by textbook on methodology of political science by professors Milosavljević and Radosavljević.[13] Other than the possibility off access to *The Economist* as a source of information, this publication additionally satisfies two more criteria which are very important for making conclusions in this research. The first one is adequacy - the source satisfies the necessity for content needed to make conclusions on the topic of the research. The second one is entirety – understood as the sufficient number of articles and manifestations of phenomena and processes which are in the focus of the study. To these points, *The Economist* fulfills all of the criteria usually put before a researcher engaged in this type of research – *The Economist* is what one would consider to be a mainstream mass media from a Western country which influences the public opinion and which follows the highest journalistic standards concerning sources and the quality of proofreading. With the kind of reach made through the significant magazine circulation and the internet platform, *The Economist* can arguably be depicted as a representative of Western mass media in general.

1.6. Research Structure – Chapter Outline

The first chapter represents the introduction to the research. It outlines the statement of problem and the formulation of the research topic, followed the research goals and objectives, the hypothetical framework of the study and the explanation of the methodology used.

Chapter 2 consists of the empirical part of the research – the content analysis of *The Economist*'s coverage of the war in Syria. The content analysis is structured around major topics and the events which had been in the general media focus in the first six years of the conflict. Every major event or topic will be analyzed through a series of selected articles from *The Economist*. The result of this kind of empirical research will be a short history of the Syrian conflict as written by *The Economist*'s journalists and brought to the public. The purpose here is to analyze how the conflict has been covered and narrated in order to make conclusions about the special hypotheses of this research.

[13] Milosavljević, Slavomir; Radosavljević, Ivan; *Osnovi metodologije političkih nauka*; Službeni glasnik; Beograd, 2008; page 496-498

Chapter 3 of the study deepens the critical narrative analysis of the material gathered through the previous chapter and includes features of Galtung's factors of newsworthiness and model of peace and war journalism and Lynch's and McGoldrick's expansion of the concept.

Chapter 3 will deal with the concrete aspects of *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict in order to confirm the hypotheses of this study. Using the findings gained through the content analysis, each of the several sections of this chapter will focus on one of the special hypotheses. Each of the special hypotheses deals with what have initially understood as main building blocks of the overall narrative of the war in Syria.

In the last chapter, the author will make concluding remarks on the general hypothesis of the study and make a case for generalization of conclusions with reference to how the conflict in Syria is covered by Western mass media more generally.

2. Major Themes of the Syrian Conflict in *The Economist*

This chapter will represent the backbone of research conducted as part of this MA thesis. It consists of content analysis of *The Economist*'s coverage of the war in Syria. The content analysis in this chapter, which will make the largest part of the research, is structured around major topics and the events related to the conflict which had been in general media focus in the first six years of the conflict. Major themes and events are to be analyzed through a series of selected articles from *The Economist*. The result of this kind of empirical research will serve to inform the understanding of the author of this thesis about the way the Syrian conflict has been covered and brought to public by *The Economist*. The purpose here is to analyze how the conflict has been covered and narrated in order to test the validity of specific hypotheses.

Given the fact that the research will exclusively focus on *The Economist*'s coverage, the aim of the conflict analysis is to be as comprehensive and all-inclusive as possible. This approach will result in a comprehensive history of the conflict through the lenses of *The Economist*'s editorial as a by-product of this research. Bearing in mind that one of the aspects of journalistic work involves what is in media theories called *gatekeeping*, compering *The Economist*'s history of the Syrian conflict to the actual timeline of events will reveal the extent of news selection performed by *The Economist*'s editorial. According to Linda Hällgren, who conducted a similar research concerning the Iran nuclear program, reporting inherently involves selection.[14]

"*It can - and often has been - argued to what extent media can tell us what to think, but most agree that it has a great influence on what we think about. If a conflict – or certain aspects of a conflict – is largely absent in the news, chances are the public's awareness and understanding of the conflict will be limited.*"[15]

The analysis of the Syrian conflict through the lenses of *The Economist*'s coverage will enable the identification of niches where active and performative agency of *The Economist*'s editorial in shaping the public discourse about the war is most evident. Again, comprehensive critical narrative analysis of the media content presents a precondition for understanding this agency. Atop of the need to analyze the media content in order to understand *The Economist*'s overall narrative of the conflict, there will be at times emphasis on analyzing the way in which meaning is derived from the text of the articles. The purpose of this is to capture and understand how meaning is influenced by naming, categorizing, using symbols and referencing, as well as other rhetorical devices that might be identified.

[14] Hällgren; 2012; *Op. cit*; page 3
[15] *Ibid*

The structure of the empirical research will be in function of trying to validate the hypothetical assumptions made in the introduction of the study. It will cover the following major themes and events of the conflict: roots of the conflict (section 2.1), protests and the early phase of the armed insurgency (section 2.2), the scope of local Syrian actors that take part in the conflict (section 2.3) followed by the analysis of the way how the involvement of regional and global actors is captured by *The Economist* (section 2.4). The event during the first six years of the conflict which probably had the strongest symbolic significance among the Western public was the battle for Aleppo – which will be in the focus of the content analysis in section 2.5. The comprehensive analysis of the media content conducted in this study will conclude with the analysis of the international peace efforts and peace negotiations framework which took place during the first six years of the conflict (section 2.6).

2.1. Roots of the Conflict

The analysis of what had triggered the violent conflict in Syria takes the author further in the past than the outbreak of violence of 2011. This broader search to see how the preface of the conflict had been covered is due to a need for more complex understanding of the roots of the conflict. The more obvious dimension of the conflict is the political dynamics in Syria in the years that preclude the conflict. The first aim here is to understand what had been *The Economist*'s take on the political environment of Syria and the rule of Assad's government.

In an article from as early as April 2005, *The Economist* compares Assad's regime with one of his predecessor and father Hafez al-Assad, who served as President of Syria and the head of Ba'ath Party from 1971 until 2000. The article titled *Son of a Gun* compares the two members of the Assad family – Hafez and his son Bashar with the Italian mafia family – Corleone:

"*If Hafez [al-] Assad bore a resemblance to Don Corleone in The Godfather, then his heir, Bashar […] could be the don's son. Like Michael Corleone, Bashar [al-] Assad is an improbable successor, who promised to make the family enterprise legitimate but who operates in an environment that obstructs any such transformation.*"[16]

Problematizing the Syrian politics in the wider regional context, which included the Syrian involvement in the conflict in Lebanon, the article describes the country increasingly isolated, with not much reforms actually taking place. The author of the article is not positive whether such lack of reforms is due to the fact that Bashar al-Assad is "*held back by the Old Guard—the entrenched power structure bequeathed to him by his father*"[17], or he is simply unwilling to engage in transforming Syria

[16] *Son of a gun*; in *The Economist*; 21/4/2005; https://www.economist.com/node/3886777?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[17] *Ibid*

and its foreign policy. The article concludes that the American administration is more inclined to the later argument – and, as the American relationship with particular states in the region is seen as the single most important determinant of the regional politics, Syria would continue to pose a problem, even if "*it enjoys more or less normal diplomatic relations with the United States and, so far at least, suffers only mild economic sanctions*"[18].

"*Syria has long been an awkward customer: a smallish, militarily weak country with no resources to speak of but with a disproportionate ability to annoy. It has been on the State Department's list of states that sponsor terrorism since 1979, it is said to pursue WMD in the shape of chemical weapons and it has little truck with democracy.*"[19]

In one of the articles from the same period, Syria is labeled as a "*decrepit*" country.[20] Analyzing the evidence of the reforms promised by Bashar al-Assad and his Arab Socialist Renaissance Party, widely known as the Baath party, *The Economist* states that "*Syrians were largely disappointed, if not confirmed in their belief that the party, said to be 2M-strong, is incapable of radical reform*"[21]. Some of the things described as to be factoring to such disappointment were the frequent arrests of the opposition activists, lack of freedom of the press and inability for new political parties and movements to emerge, etc.

Perceiving Syria as a factor of regional instability, *The Economist* suggests that (and this was as early as 2005 – a topic that is repeatedly appearing in the articles about the Middle East region) it might "*be the next stop for America's army after Iraq*"[22].

"*America accuses it both of undermining the Israeli-Palestinian peace process—by harboring and abetting terror groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad—and destabilizing Iraq by letting militants cross the long Iraqi-Syrian border.*"[23]

The notion of Syria being a regional trouble-maker is a reoccurring one – however, a strong point made by *The Economist* article is that the Assad regime is one without an existing viable alternative, and that due to the weakness of the Syrian civil society and fragmentation among the opposition groups, any attempt to destabilize the regime might bring just more instability.

"*America has its hands full in Iraq, and knows that Syria can help ruin talks between Israel and the Palestinians.*"[24]

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[18] *Ibid*
[19] *Ibid*
[20] *Still Baath-plugged*; in *The Economist*; 9/6/2005; http://www.economist.com/node/4064894?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[21] *Ibid*
[22] *A damning finger points at Syria's regime*; in *The Economist*; 21/10/2005; http://www.economist.com/node/5075459?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[23] *Ibid*

"*Flaunt Syria's friendship with Iran and its belligerent president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad*"[25], "*promoting the cause of Hezbollah, the fiercely anti-Israeli Shia movement-cum-militia in southern Lebanon*"[26] are some of the other issues mentioned in *The Economist*'s coverage of the pre-conflict Syria and weighing the possible approaches. Brief mentions of internal issues such as "*the drab economy, high unemployment, soaring housing costs, lack of individual and press freedoms, and the knowledge that the present oil windfall will end in eight to ten years when Syria's reserves are expected to run out*"[27] are used in order to contextualize the social feeling of resentment. The Muslim Brotherhood is seen as the potentially most powerful underground opposition to the regime.[28] This specific claim, however, is not further problematized in the context of what the Muslim Brotherhood, as a transnational Sunni political organization, is and what is its strictly religious approach towards social and political issues. Overall, in a lesser-of-two-evils tone, *The Economist* continuously depicts Assad as a problematic, still predictable political actor who manages the ethnic, political and economic peculiarities of Syria in a stable manner – "*the fear is that a post-Assad Syria would follow the course of a post-Saddam Iraq*"[29]. In May 2007, *The Economist* reports on Assad securing another seven-year-long presidential term following his electoral victory.[30]

Syrian economy is seen by *The Economist*'s editorial as an important aspect of the Syrian domestic politics.

"*Syria's economy, which has survived largely thanks to high oil prices, faces a double plunge from collapsing crude reserves and world prices. Foreign investment is vital to dampen unemployment that is unofficially estimated as topping 20%.*"[31]

That said, *The Economist* has repeatedly recognized the Syrian dependence on oil trade and the lack of any other competitive industries as a problem for the Syrian economy, while acknowledging the consequences of the economic sanctions which had been set in place back in 2003. Syrian regime had resisted conducting structural economic reforms which would tackle the rising unemployment by attracting investments.

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[24] *Ibid*
[25] *He doesn't know where to go*; in *The Economist*; 9/2/2006;
https://www.economist.com/node/5501080?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[26] *Ibid*
[27] *Ibid*
[28] In *Ibid*
[29] *Baath time in Syria*; in *The Economist*; 18/4/2007;
http://www.economist.com/node/9032177?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[30] *Assad's unsurprising victory*; in *The Economist*; 30/5/2007;
http://www.economist.com/node/9250198?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[31] *Where shall I go next?*; in *The Economist*; 11/12/2008;
http://www.economist.com/node/12773168?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

"*With population growing at around 2.4% a year, the economy will struggle to provide jobs to a rising army of unemployed youths.*"[32]

Additional dimension to the unemployment issue is brought up – the huge numbers of Iraqi refugees which arrived to Syria are without job.

"*Syria has taken in the lion's share of Iraq's refugees, about 1.5M of them. […]Many refugees are running out of savings, slipping into poverty, sometimes into crime and prostitution.*"[33]

The situation is especially problematic in large cities and is escalating to an "*urban crisis of such huge proportions*"[34]. The editorial stance is that the problem lies in Assad regimes' resistance in opening the economy and abandoning the socialist economic model in favor of a more market-oriented economic model (comparisons with the oil-rich Gulf states are often made[35]). Public subsidies and other programs to ensure access to basic commodities such as food, water, fuel, electricity and transport are identified by *The Economist* as obstacle to faster economic development. As claimed in the IMF reports, direct energy subsidies alone cost Syria around 5% of its GDP per year.[36]

Altogether, *The Economist*'s coverage in the period of 2005 until the end of 2010 is predominantly focused on the Assad regime. All of the political, social or economic issues that are discussed in its articles are mentioned in relation (and because their connection) to the regime. Even with the coming of Obama and the new US administration and their seeming repositioning towards Syria, *The Economist*'s coverage is fairly suspicious of Syria's "*truckling back into the moderate fold [of Arab countries]*"[37]. The article titled *Has it won?* is probably the strongest and most thorough analysis of pre-conflict Syria, yet the diagnostics of it are disconnected to the rising social pressure and the events which would ensue.

In partial contrast to previous coverage, Assad is written about in a positive manner. According to *The Economist*:

"*The position has drastically changed. Mr Assad is increasingly viewed as an essential part of the region's diplomatic jigsaw. He is fast coming back into the game. Even America would like to embrace him.*"[38]

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[32] *Is Syria a reforming character?*; in *The Economist*; 2/1/2007; http://www.economist.com/node/8482744?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[33] *The plight of the refugees*; in *The Economist*; 15/11/2007; http://www.economist.com/node/10137834?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[34] *Ibid*
[35] *Is Syria a reforming character?*; 2/1/2007; *Op. cit*
[36] *Hard choices for the government*; in *The Economist*; 20/1/2011; http:// www.economist.com/node/17963303?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[37] *Has it won?*; in *The Economist*; 26/11/2009; http://www.economist.com/node/14984967?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[38] *Ibid*

In a portrait form, Assad is described as a political maverick who had been winning against all odds.

"*This sudden popularity marks a triumphant turnabout for the 44-year-old Mr Assad. As a hereditary ruler in an ostensibly republican system, as a member of Syria's historically marginal Alawite minority, and as a second son with a background in medicine rather than war or statecraft, he looked unlikely to succeed when he took power nine years ago.*"[39]

Syria is depicted as a country which had gradually pivoted back into the center of regional diplomacy – "*Mr Assad has slowly regained many of the cards he appeared to have lost*"[40]. He is almost praised for his firm stance in regional quarrels and "*Syria's generous accommodation of Iraqi refugees, [which] improved Mr Assad's Arab nationalist credentials just when America's moderate Arab allies looked callow and spineless*"[41]. Both his regime and the Syrian economy are described as thriving. The GDP and foreign trade are said to have doubled in the last four years with the developing entrepreneurial environment.

"*For decades Damascus looked as dour as Bucharest under communist rule. Now it pulses with life. New cars throng its streets. Fancy boutique hotels, bars and fully booked restaurants pack its rapidly gentrifying older quarters, while middle-class suburbs, replete with shopping malls and fast-food outlets, spread into the surrounding hills.*"[42]

Obstacles for further development are identified in pervasive corruption, bad infrastructure and bad education system.

As for the political situation, it is said how the economic boom has not been followed by liberalization of the politics, as patterns of political repression prevail. "*The secret police remain unaccountable, ruthless and omnipresent*"[43], while freedom of expression remains highly problematic for human-rights and political activists, as well as "*members of the 1.5M Kurdish minority [who] all risk imprisonment*"[44]. But no risk of political unrest is identified and Syria is praised for its stability.

"*Punishment is harsh but at least the rules are clear. Syrian society is as complex in sectarian make-up as neighboring Lebanon and Iraq, and harbors similarly volatile groups, including jihadist cells that the government ruthlessly squashes. Yet it has experienced minimal unrest in recent years.*"[45]

Coverage of Syria remains similar in tone – it becomes less frequent and scarcer in information until 2011 and the forecourt of the social unrest which would become known as the Arab Spring.

[39] *Ibid*
[40] *Ibid*
[41] *Ibid*
[42] *Ibid*
[43] *Ibid*
[44] *Ibid*
[45] *Ibid*

Going through all of the articles predating the conflict in the period from 2005 to 2011, some parts of what had been going on in and around Syria are not covered at all. The two dimensions of the Syrian politics, economy and society which are absent from *The Economist*'s analyses are the great drought that hit Syria between 2006 and 2011 and the regional energy projects which include building gas pipelines through the Syrian territory. These two issues are discussed in a large numbers of not only studies, but also media outlets. However, their explanatory potential is not recognized by *The Economist*'s editorial.

Concerning the water issues, several experts have labeled the drought as one of the major factors in the complex of interrelated factors leading to the Syrian conflict.[46] The Middle East in general is a region where water is a scarce resource. Syria is dependent, to the largest extent, on the inflow of water from other countries, sharing the major river flows with the neighboring countries, as well as on the ground reserves of water. The PNAS study[47] highlights the unsustainability of the agricultural policies implemented by the Assads, where, due to the isolation of the country, production was incentivized – which led to the overexploitation of ground waters and increased the country's vulnerability to droughts. According to Kelley and his colleagues,

"*Despite growing water scarcity and frequent droughts, the government of President Hafez al-Assad initiated policies to further increase agricultural production, including land redistribution and irrigation projects, quota systems, and subsidies for diesel fuel to garner the support of rural constituents*"[48].

When the country experienced five successive years of drought starting in 2006 and lasting until 2011, the country was not prepared and experienced large pressure on its economy and society.

"*When a severe drought began in 2006/07, the agricultural system in the northeastern 'breadbasket' region, which typically produced over two-thirds of the country's crop yields, collapsed. In 2003, before the drought's onset, agriculture accounted for 25% of Syrian gross domestic product. In 2008, after the driest winter in Syria's observed record, wheat production failed and the agricultural share fell to 17%.*"[49]

Essentially, with almost no crops production and no livestock feed, the agriculture on the northeast of Syria was dying. The most affected part of the population was the farmers, but this crisis in agricultural production also affected the urban population. With dropping production, the food prices were rising in the cities. Additionally, Assad's move to liberalize the economy contributed to the

[46] See for example Kelley, Colin P, etc; *Climate change in the Fertile Crescent and implications of the recent Syrian drought*; Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America, 112 no. 11 (2015): 3241-3246; (https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/3fed/3360f0372b06b95ea73a540170ff4c792360.pdf); or Gleick, Peter H; *Water, Drought, Climate Change, and Conflict in Syria*; in *Weather, climate and society*; Vol. 6, July 2014; American Meteorological Society; Boston; pages 331-340
[47] Kelley, Colin P; 2015; *Op cit*
[48] *Ibid*; page 1
[49] *Ibid*

social pressure as the government had cut the energy and food subsidies, which the Syrians had grown dependent on.

Looking for work, the rural population started moving into the bigger cities.

"*Most migrated to the peripheries of Syria's cities, already burdened by strong population growth (~2.5% per year) and the influx of an estimated 1.2–1.5 million Iraqi refugees between 2003 and 2007. Estimates of the number of people internally displaced by the drought are as high as 1.5 million. By 2010, internally displaced persons and Iraqi refugees made up roughly 20% of Syria's urban population.*"[50]

The unemployment, the corruption and growing crime rates, the deteriorating infrastructure must all be analyzed in the context of the migration which started as a result of the drought and the crisis of the Syrian agricultural production. The conclusion of the PNAS research paper is that "*for Syria, a country marked by poor governance and unsustainable agricultural and environmental policies, the drought had a catalytic effect, contributing to political unrest*."[51]

However, in the years predating the conflict, *The Economist*'s reader would not know anything about the severe drought that hit, not only Syria, but the largest part of the Middle East. The information is simply not there. With the growing number of researchers pointing to the drought as one of the causes of the conflict, some space was dedicated to this topic, but again without any significant or detailed coverage. In an article from 2016, titled *Why Syria's war is concentrated in the north*[52], the article writer fails to acknowledge why the conflict started in the cities such as Daraa (the traditional breadbasket of Syria), Hama and Deir ez-Zor that had previously been the destination for many people without job. These cities, alongside cities such as Aleppo and Idlib, were the places where the social unrest started in 2011. Growing food prices and the widespread unemployment spilled over onto the interethnic relations, especially in the multicultural places where the lines of ethnic, religious and economic division coincided.

More to this point, the liberalization and the opening of the Syrian economy is repeatedly written about positively by *The Economist*. The effects of cutting the large number of subsidies and not spreading the burden of the crisis caused by the drought to the whole population by adopting redistributive policies are also not acknowledged by the traditionally economically neoliberal editorial of *The Economist*.

[50] *Ibid*, page 2
[51] *Ibid*
[52] *Why Syria's war is concentrated in the north*; in *The Economist*; 15/9/2016; https://www.economist.com/blogs/economist-explains/2016/09/economist-explains-3

Moreover, acknowledging the concentration of the conflict on the north of Syria (as *The Economist* does), and not reflecting to some of the "pipeline war" hypotheses is an indicator of superficial coverage. Several experts in international energy security and the Middle East region, as well as a number of magazines and publications[53] have pointed to the importance of energy as a factor in the emergence of this conflict. As centered as it might be on the American national security interests, asking if Russia is in Syria for the pipelines, and thus the Russian targeting of the Syrian opposition groups, *Foreign Affairs* article says:

"*One answer is natural gas. Specifically, most of the foreign actors in the war in Syria are gas-exporting countries with interests in one of the two competing pipeline projects that seek to cross Syrian territory to deliver either Qatari or Iranian gas to Europe.*"[54]

Interestingly, and in connection to the question *why the north*, the two competing pipeline projects intersect at the Syrian north. The thesis of the Syrian conflict being a proxy war about two proposed pipeline projects across the Syrian territory and the Middle Eastern energy resources deserves due consideration.

The so-called "pipeline war" hypothesis states that position taken by the Assad government concerning the regional energy relations is not in accordance with many of the regional stakeholders – mainly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, but also Israel, Turkey and ultimately the other NATO member states. In an article for *Politico*, Robert F. Kennedy Jr. also ties the rise of the Islamic State with US record of interventionism in the region.[55] According to the article, the conflict in Syria dod not begin in 2011 following the Arab Spring:

"*Instead it began in 2000, when Qatar proposed to construct a $10 billion, 1500 kilometer pipeline through Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria and Turkey.*"[56]

Qatar and Syria share the world richest repository of natural gas in the Persian Gulf. And while Iran's relations with the international community have been difficult and the international trade pressed by sanctions,

"*Qatar's gas can reach European markets only if it is liquefied and shipped by sea, a route that restricts volume and dramatically raises costs. The proposed pipeline would have linked Qatar directly to European energy markets via distribution terminals in Turkey, which would pocket rich transit fees. The Qatar/Turkey pipeline*

[53] E.g. Orenstein, Mitchell A; Romer, George; *Putin's Gas Attack – Is Russia Just in Syria for the Pipelines?*; in *Foreign Affairs*; Council of Foreign Relations 14/10/2015; https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/syria/2015-10-14/putins-gas-attack and Kennedy, Robert F. Jr; *Why the Arabs don't want us in Syria*; in *Politico*; 23/2/2016; https://www.politico.eu/article/why-the-arabs-dont-want-us-in-syria-midea st-conflict-oil-intervention/
[54] Orenstein; Romer; 2015; *Op.cit*;
[55] Kennedy; 2016; *Op.cit*
[56] *Ibid*

would give the Sunni kingdoms of the Persian Gulf decisive domination of world natural gas markets and strengthen Qatar, America's closest ally in the Arab world."[57]

The European Union is a large importer of oil and gas, while major part of the supply comes from the East – from both Russia and the Middle Eastern states. For reference, the cited *Foreign Affairs* article mentions how between a fourth and a third of gas in Europe is imported from Russia, while 80% of the Russian state-owned company - Gazprom's production is sold in the EU markets. However, following the Russian intervention in Georgia in 2008 and the deteriorating relations with Russia, European states have grown reluctant about their dependence on the Russian import. In words of a *New York Times* article: "*Russia has always used gas as an instrument of influence*."[58] Thus was the European interest in finding alternative sources of supply.

"*The EU was equally hungry for the pipeline, which would have given its members cheap energy and relief from Vladimir Putin's stifling economic and political leverage.*"[59]

"*Turkey, Russia's second largest gas customer, was particularly anxious to end its reliance on its ancient rival and to position itself as the lucrative transect hub for Asian fuels to EU markets [while] the Qatari pipeline would have [also] benefited Saudi Arabia's conservative Sunni monarchy by giving it a foothold in Shia-dominated Syria*."[60]

On the other hand, this kind of Sunni-led project would principally harm the economic and political interests of Iran, Assad's main ally, but also the Russian economic and geopolitical interests. Kennedy depicts the prospect of building the Qatari/Turkish pipeline as something that the Russian president Vladimir Putin would perceive as

"*NATO plot to change the status quo, deprive Russia of its only foothold in the Middle East, strangle the Russian economy and end Russian leverage in the European energy market*"[61].

Articles such as this one have gone the distance to show how the energy-security interests of different countries might be important in analyzing the causes of the Syrian conflict. Most of them point to 2009 and the Syrian President Assad's refusal to give a permission for the Qatari/Turkish pipeline project to cross the Syrian territory as an important factor of why many of the regional and global stake holders are actually involved in the conflict. Many of the countries directly or indirectly involved in the conflict have links and/or interests connected to either of the two major energy projects which were envisaged to cross the Syrian territory. This line of arguments perceives the Syrian conflict as a fight for transitory routes of natural gas towards European markets.

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[57] *Ibid*
[58] Davenport, Coral; Erlanger, Steven; *U.S. Hopes Boom in Natural Gas Can Curb Putin*; in *New York Times*; 5/3/2014; https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/06/world/europe/us-seeks-to-reduce-ukraines-reliance-on-russia-for-natural-gas.html?_r=1
[59] Kennedy; 2016; *Op. cit*
[60] *Ibid*
[61] *Ibid*

In 2009, the Syrian government has essentially rejected the Qatari/Turkish pipeline project. Meanwhile, in 2012 Syria and Iran signed a memorandum of understanding on the pipeline project which involved Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. According to Kennedy,

"*Assad further enraged the Gulf's Sunni monarchs by endorsing a Russian-approved 'Islamic pipeline' running from Iran's side of the gas field through Syria and to the ports of Lebanon [in 2012]. The Islamic pipeline would make Shiite Iran, not Sunni Qatar, the principal supplier to the European energy market and dramatically increase Tehran's influence in the Middle East and the world.*"[62]

The Iranian project virtually opposes the international containment strategy against Iran and enables the creation of a Shia-dominated coalition involving Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, by also giving Russia a strong foothold in the Middle East. Building on this line of assumptions, the emergence of the conflict is analyzed through identifying all of the actors in the conflict as proxies of one of the competing energy projects. While the Syrian government and Hezbollah are seen as Iranian proxies, the uprising against Assad and the Sunni-dominated opposition groups are connected to the opponents of Iran-Syria energy deal. Strongly supporting this thesis and referring to *WikiLeaks*, Kennedy proposes that:

"*The moment Assad rejected the Qatari pipeline, military and intelligence planners quickly arrived at the consensus that fomenting a Sunni uprising in Syria to overthrow the uncooperative Bashar Assad was a feasible path to achieving the shared objective of completing the Qatar/Turkey gas link*"[63].

As explained, the drought and the pipeline projects as factors to the emergence of the conflict have some explanatory potential. By focusing exclusively on one factor (or a group of factors) and depicting it as the single most important and viable explanation for the conflict, a researcher or a journalist necessarily simplifies and contributes to the loss of additional layers of complexity, which are important in shedding light onto the social phenomenon such as the Syrian war. There is also the difference between the reason or the conflict (or how and when the conflict started) and the causes and roots of the conflict – which are more complex in their nature. *The Economist* totally neglects some of the dynamics which have been considered to be part of the problems which led to the Syrian conflict and opts for not including them into the discussion. As a consequence, *The Economist*'s reader would simply not be informed about these additional layers of the conflict and would be kept within this one-dimensional narrative where the democratic deficits of the Syrian society and fight against oppression are what caused the conflict.

Further to the notion on how informed *The Economist*'s reader would have been at the beginning of 2011, if his knowledge had been based solely on *The Economist* as a source of

[62] *Ibid*
[63] *Ibid*

information – based on the conclusions made in this section of the study – this reader would have been fairly surprised to hear about the spiral of violence unfolding later that year. Political and socioeconomic troubles of the Syrian society had been written about relatively seldom. Syria had been out of the media spotlight prior to what would become the Arab Spring. Structural and cultural violence present in Syria, as well as the additional factors of risk posed by the regional environment and politics and the economic situation, were not problematized by *The Economist*. Syria as a topic was touched upon occasionally and the aspects of the topic which were covered were handpicked relatively randomly by the editorial. One of the perceived reasons for this kind of coverage is the lack of events that meet some of the important factors of newsworthiness. One of those factors is lack of big stories that would have had major impact on the publication's base of readers. Besides not meeting that threshold, the ambiguity and complexity of the situation in pre-conflict Syria would require wider and more thorough coverage – something which would make the news on Syria harder to sell as a media product. Due to a professional prerogative to shrink these complexities in order to fit the news, Syria as a topic had not found a proper place in the news prior to the commencement of the Arab Spring. This lack of context will have influence the way Syria as a topic is covered once the protests, and later the conflict, have started.

2.2. Beginning of the Conflict – Protests and Early Armed Insurgency

The previously mentioned lack of contextualization of the Syrian political environment, if anything else, helps the overall research endeavor of this thesis by enabling a detailed examination of *The Economist*'s narrative-construction with regards to the revolving spiral of violence. This involves analyzing the way in which images and information about the developments in Syria have been conveyed to *The Economist*'s reader – informing his knowledge and creating a wider understanding the events taking place from scratch. In conducting the content analysis, this part of the study will look to identify key aspects of mediatization of the conflict to the point where it would become a prime news topic by the end of 2011. The subject of content analysis of this section will be the coverage of the emergence and the very early stage of the Syrian conflict by *The Economist*. Following the political developments, which had been gradually evolving from peaceful protests and civil disobedience (directed towards modifying or overthrowing what had been perceived as a repressive regime) to a full scale civil war – in this section the author would look to understand how a reader is introduced to what has previously been identified as a fairly disregarded topic within the larger Middle East news section. How the initial phase of the conflict was narrativized and, to a minor extent, visualized will enable the identification of indicators of moral charge and symbolic and cultural resonance.

Most of the articles on the Middle Eastern countries in *The Economist* starting from 2011 were connected to the Arab Spring. This revolutionary wave among Arab countries of the Middle East and Northern Arica started in Tunisia in December 2010, and spread as protests and demonstrations, somewhere even gaining a violent dimension. As of the late 2010 and the beginning of 2011 the coverage of Syrian and the political developments unfolding were covered in the context of the Arab Spring as a sociopolitical phenomenon.

In an article from February 2011, *The Economist* analyzes the impact of the already-swinging Arab Spring on the state of the Assad's regime.[64] According to the article "*Syria's president has not been entirely immune to the unrest sweeping the region around him*."[65] The article identifies the growing presence of "*motely crews*" of secret police as a sign of weakness of the regime that feels the growing danger of social unrest – "*surging population and high unemployment, as well as [regime's] curbs on freedom of expression, may appear to make [Syria] ripe for revolt*."[66] Syrian army and secret police are mentioned to have stepped up arrests and imprisonments of political and social activists. But the general tone in the eve of the unrests that will have led to the conflict is one of stability – Assad's regimes is described to have a tight grip on any of potential sources of rebellion – be it any of the ethnic or religious groups such as Kurds or Sunnis, be it external contenders such as the Muslim Brotherhood, be it public intellectuals, etc. Ironically, the article dismisses the youth as particularly challenging for the regime's stability, describing it depoliticized due to having been "*brought up on a diet of Baathist propaganda*"[67] and convinced in the value of security due to the regional experiences of civil wars and foreign interventions in Lebanon and Iraq. Although cautious in its tone and right in identifying some aspects of decreasing confidence of the regime, the article's diagnostics fall far from a clear red alert in midst of a regional crisis. And this is not saying that the indicators of what would ensue were evident – on the contrary. On February 17, *The Economist* reports about the issuing of almost $64 million in government bonds by the Syrian regime as part on attempt to generate capital or internal infrastructure projects.[68] Pre-insurrection reports from Syria were pointing to "business as usual", not that frequent and actually telling of the relatively tranquil situation in comparison to the rest of the region which has seen regime changes in Tunisia and Egypt by February and with either protests and civil disorder or serious attempts of regime change (such as Libya or Yemen).

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[64] *An alternative is sighted*; in *The Economist*; 10/2/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18114575?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[65] *Ibid*
[66] *Ibid*
[67] *Ibid*
[68] *Captive market*; in *The Economist*; 17/2/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18182252?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

The initial "*spark that lit the Syrian flame*"[69] escaped *The Economist*'s initial coverage. *The Economist* reports on the outbreak of protest in much less detailed. It was on March 6 that a group of children in the city of Daraa was detained for painting slogans against the government. In retrospective, the *CNN*'s article states how

"*Community's blunt outrage over the children's arrests and mistreatment, the government's humiliating and violent reactions to their worries, and the people's refusal to be cowed by security forces emboldened and helped spread the Syrian opposition*"[70].

Due to the fact that this *primum movens* is not given detailed consideration by *The Economist*, another media is used to get an impression of the initial social unrest. *CNN* article compares this event to Tunisian street vendor setting himself on fire – the event which is considered to be the beginning of the Arab Spring. The protest allegedly started after Daraa residents became aware of children being beaten and tortured in prison for their political messaging. The article continues by saying how when the families of the children approached the authorities to ask for their children's release, they were told:

"*Forget your children. If you really want your children, you should make more children. If you don't know how to make more children, we'll show you how to do it.*"[71]

Describing the following events and the beginning of protests against the police brutality, the article states how "*Daraa residents broke the people's 'wall of fear' by defying what he and others call a police state and taking to the street*"[72]. March 18 saw the first victims of the protests when "*security forces opened fire, killing at least four protesters and within days, the protests grew into rallies that gathered thousands of people*"[73].

It is not until March 21 before *The Economist* had picked up on a story about the protests in Syria, calling them "*the biggest unrest in Syria since Bashar Assad inherited power in 2000*."[74] According to the article, protests took place in the capital Damascus, as well as Homs, Deir ez-Zor and notably Daraa – where it gathered around two thousand people. After the security forces had tried to take control and had shot at least 4 people, their funeral sparked more protests. The article offers an insight in how protests are arising in a number of cities around the country. It also refers to the arrest of

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[69] Sterling, Joe; *Daraa: The spark that lit the Syrian flame*; on *CNN*; 1/3/2012; https://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/01/world/meast/syria-crisis-beginnings/index.html
[70] *Ibid*
[71] *Ibid*
[72] *Ibid*
[73] *Ibid*
[74] *The Arab awakening reaches Syria*; in *The Economist*; 21/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/protests_middle_east?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

teenagers as a tipping point contributing to the social anger turning the relatively remote and dormant city into the source of unrest. The article describes the requests of those taking to the street against "*abuse of power, exaggerated security presence, corruption and lack of prospect for the country's burgeoning, and increasingly globally connected, youth*"[75]. At this point of time, *The Economist*'s editorial conveys the sentiment that "*there are signs the crisis in Deraa could be solved [and that] many want change in an orderly fashion*"[76]. The overtone of the article is one of a news agency report – without any judgments or partiality towards the actors of the story whatsoever. *The Economist* is, at this point, an observer of collective violence mounting up in major Syrian cities.

More commentary is given just three days afterwards in the next article. Assad is described as no longer being able to sit in Damascus imperviously to the upheavals against regional autocracies.[77] As Dara had reportedly "*been cordoned off by troops from the rest of Syria, [with] communications and electricity cut*,"[78] the article compares this military backlash with counterinsurgency against the Muslim Brotherhood, ordered by Assad's father in 1982, which saw up to 20 thousands casualties. In emphasizing the split among those from Assad's governing circle advocating for repression and those advocating for political reforms, the article points to the continuity in the country's security structures as one of the principle factors as to why it is more probable to expect violent attempts to crush the unrests. Further to this point, it is stated how "*fear of sectarian strife lurks under Syria's surface [as] Mr Assad's power is concentrated among his own Alawite sect, a Shia breakaway minority that numbers barely 6% of Syrians*"[79] – which, in case of further violence, might lead to "*wobbling of Assad's throne*."[80] Following articles bring more prejudice towards the unfolding of political dynamics taking place in cities around the country. Analyzing the demands of the protestors and the current unwillingness of the government to meet them, the writer of the article offers a prediction that "*more Syrians are yet to join the protest, and [that] their demands may grow*"[81] – an apparent insinuation that a natural request for the protestors would be to ask for Assad to step down. Concessions promised by the government are written about in a dismissive manner.

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[75] *Ibid*
[76] *Ibid*
[77] *Next on the list?*; in *The Economist*; 24/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18446885?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[78] *Ibid*
[79] *Ibid*
[80] *Ibid*
[81] *Road to Damascus*; in *The Economist*; 26/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/protests_syria?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

The Economist continues to follow what is described as an "*increasingly messy situation*"[82] in the following month, while violence is said to be stirring up "*deep-seated Syrian fears of sectarian strife*."[83] According to some of the following reports, Kurdish groups had also risen against the regime – chanting and calling for the change of government, while damaging the statues of Assad and his father.[84] Moreover, the government is said to have blamed the foreign governments for the conspiracy against Syria.

In an opinioned article about the Arab Spring, *The Economist* depicts religion as a growing force behind the Arab awakening. This is by no means problematic by default and presents a legitimate enquiry into the causes of spreading violence around the Middle East. However, there is an underlying message that there is a dialectical contrast between freedom and religion. "*The sight of corrupt old Arab tyrants being toppled at the behest of a new generation of young idealists, inspired by democracy, united by Facebook and excited by the notion of opening up to a wider world*"[85] is contrasted with Islam as a growing force behind the Arab revolutions. Adopting a patronizing manner of addressing readers, the article tells the reader – "*Don't despair [because] Islamic does not mean Islamist*."[86] Acknowledging that Islam is bound to have a more significant role in government in the Arab world than elsewhere, and that most of the Muslims do not believe in the separation of state and religion in comparison to the US and France, the article however delivers the conclusion that younger Arabs, who are largely responsible for the protests, are more prone to the achievements of the modern world. With "*some Muslim countries on the road to democracy, or already there*" the article warns that "*still, Muslim countries may well make choices with which the West is not comfortable*."[87] However, "*those inclined to worry should remember that no alternative would serve their interests*."[88] As a conclusion:

"*Islam will never find an accommodation with the modern democratic world until Muslims can take responsibility for their own lives*."[89]

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[82] *A bloody mess*; in *The Economist*; 28/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/03/syrias_unrest?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[83] *Ibid*
[84] *Holding the fort*; in *The Economist*; 31/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18488544?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[85] *Islam and the Arab revolutions*; in *The Economist*; 31/3/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18486005?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[86] *Ibid*
[87] *Ibid*
[88] *Ibid*
[89] *Ibid*

The article is followed by an image of a jihadist on top of a sand dune with a crescent-and-star symbol on the sky. Although not solely and exclusively under the topic of Syria, the article makes conclusions and strong statements based on the logic and symbolism fitting the orientalist tradition.

Further dynamics of what can be labeled as the civil uprising phase of the Syrian conflict and the response of the Assad's government is covered by *The Economist* through April and May 2011 as the cycle of violence was taking hold of Syria. Thugs are mentioned to have been brought in from the countryside to beat the protesters, while snipers and other kinds of gunmen are used around the cities to bring down the opposition to the regime.[90] Before serious protests have reached Damascus or Aleppo, the second of the two largest cities in the country and the capital of the industrial production, *The Economist* mentions the rising stakes for the government in contrast to its general willingness to offer only modest and unconvincing concessions to the opposition.

"*He has offered mild concessions to Islamists and Kurds, freeing prisoners from both lots, promising to allow new religious institutions to be set up, and saying he would look into the question of granting nationality to some 300 000 stateless Kurds. It was also mooted that he might repeal a ban on the niqab (the veil that covers a woman's face) in universities.*"[91]

The prevailing tone of the articles is one of uncertainty:

"*Western governments, for their part, are wary of what might fill the vacuum if Mr Assad's regime fell. But if the protests persist, especially if they get bloodier, the momentum for radical change could quickly resume.*"[92]

Thuggish armed groups *Shabiha* – Alawite armed para-militias that support the regime are seen as the extended arm of the government in trying to silence the demonstrators. Importantly, an additional aspect is added to the narrative – whether the conflict is caused by a sectarian divide and religious differences.

"*With Iraq to the east and Lebanon to the west, fears of sectarian strife loom large in Syria. The regime has long sought stability through dividing and exploiting different religious and ethnic groups […] Mr Assad repeatedly used the word fitna, an Arabic term for discord that often refers to religious dissent. An increasingly creative state media report that sectarian and religious tensions are rising, saying that people have been caught trying to remove female students' headscarves.*"[93]

Flirting with the notion of a sectarian conflict, although ultimately recognizing that Syrian uprising is not about religious or ethnic divisions, the cited article emphasizes the country's diversity

[90] *A cycle of violence may take hold*; in *The Economist*; 7/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18530543?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[91] *Ibid*
[92] *Ibid*
[93] *No end in sight*; in *The Economist*; 12/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/04/unrest_syria?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

as a fact which is being used by government-held media to frame the unrest as a sectarian strife. Elsewhere it is said that "*Kurdish groups have been careful not to frame their grievances as a bid for autonomy or independence*"[94], adding to the forth mentioned point. The article concludes:

"*As in the other Arab uprisings, economic woes and political repression, not sectarian strife, lie behind the discontent. The biggest divide is between the haves, many of them linked to the regime, and the have-nots. Fewer than ever now believe that Mr Assad will do much to change this.*"[95]

One of the common places in pretty all of the articles is addressing the Syrian president as Mr Assad – seemingly denouncing him the legitimacy of an elected leader by avoiding mentioning his title.

The focus of *The Economist*'s coverage is ultimately more on direct violence as an aspect of the uprising than on the dialogue or anything else. The government is described as having "*signaled [that] violence may increase further by issuing a warning that no tolerance or leniency will be shown*", while protesters are said to have reached a point where they "*see little chance of dialogue and are concluding that taking to the streets is their only option*".[96] Every article could be described as a step in the gradation of violence in ever more embattled Syrian cities, similar to the other countries hit by the Arab spring.

"*Bashar Assad must decide whether to copy the tactics of Hosni Mubarak, who tried too late to appease the protesters, or those of Muammar Qaddafi, who killed many hundreds of his people when they turned against him.*"[97]

As the violence continues and the number of deaths grew, *The Economist* has been gradually introducing the notion of a country heading to a conflict. As the massive anti-government protests were meeting the increasing police and military resistance, the violence in the major Syrian cities had slowly been amounting to an armed insurgency – the crucial factor being the formation of the Free Syrian Army as the organizational framework for the Syrian opposition in July.

The populous revolt and government repression were gradually leading to the escalation of violence. "*The crack down on anti-government protesters with renewed and desperate vigor*"[98] led to the gradual organization among the opposition and arming – for the purposes of retaliation to the rising

[94] *At boiling point*; in *The Economist*; 14/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18561829?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[95] *No end in sight*; 12/4/2011; *Op. cit*
[96] *At boiling point*; 14/4/2011; *Op.cit*
[97] *Ever more embattled*; in *The Economist*; 20/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18587518?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[98] *Could the Assad regime fall apart?*; in *The Economist*; 28/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18621246?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

death tally. With hundreds of casualties and many more wounded before the end of April 2011, it was increasingly clear that situation was getting out of Assad' regime's control and that pacification of the opposition was not going to work. *The Economist* writes about how parts of the country were almost under siege, with electricity and communications cut off.[99] In spite of the previous emphasis that sectarianism is not behind the discontent with the regime and the growing conflict, *The Economist* provides a lot of article space to these sectarian considerations:

"*Some say that military units in Deraa actually turned against each other. But a large-scale defection is unlikely. Many officers hail from the Assad's' own Alawite branch of Shia Islam and from other minorities, all owing a special allegiance to the regime. For the sake of appearances, the defense minister has usually been a Sunni. But in 2009 Ali Habib Mahmoud became the first Alawite in years to hold the post*"[100].

"*For the sake of appearance*" is a largely dismissive way to depict the consensual mechanisms for governing Syria that have been in place for quite some time. Despite acknowledging the complex political reality, *The Economist* adopts a black-and-white stance in talking about the Syrian governance model under Assad family. The readiness to dismiss particular regimes as undemocratic, while not even mentioning some other regimes in the same contexts shows an amount of double standards. And while the popular revolt is seen as a "*bug of democracy that began to spread*", one of the article ends with a fairly strong plea for a foreign intervention.

"*If the West deems it right to bomb Libya in an effort to force the murderous Muammar Qaddafi from power, why not do the same to Syria?*"[101]

At this early stage of the conflict, where it was even early to depict it as an armed insurgency, *The Economist* openly promotes the idea of using coercive means to pursue political changes in a foreign country.

The publication has covered the next period of the conflict in a similar tone as new developments were unfolding. As new demonstrations were taking place in towns and cities throughout Syria, with more people joining the crowds, the authorities were getting increasingly violent in their efforts to suppress them.

"*After nearly two months of protests that have spread to a score of cities, at least 800 people, nearly all of them civilians, have been killed. Parts of several cities remain locked down, including the country's third one, Homs, where there have been unconfirmed reports of mass graves.*"[102]

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[99] *Ibid*
[100] *Ibid*
[101] *Not so easy*; in *The Economist*; 28/4/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18620700
[102] *More stick than carrot*; in *The Economist*; 15/5/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18682540?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

Attempts of dialogue failed "*with almost all of the government's opponents unwilling to enter talks and the government showing a notable absence of sincerity*."[103] Meanwhile, the international pressure was steadily growing, with US, EU and Turkish officials getting increasingly vocal in voicing their concerns about the situation in the country, while Arab countries had remained ominously silent. It is said that "*Barack Obama called for Mr Assad to lead a political transition or 'get out of the way', words echoed two days later by the Turkish foreign minister, Ahmet Davutoglu*" and that "i*t is hard to imagine Mr Assad doing either*"[104]. The French government had declared the rule of Assad and his government illegitimate, while editorial delivers a plea that Assad must not get away with murders:

"*nor should he bank for ever on his old friends in Russia (with China standing by) to fend off condemnation in the UN Security Council*."[105]

Protests have been, in this initial phase, unarmed – "*peaceful*" according to *The Economist*[106], dismissive of Assad's claims that the protestors are using "*modern four-wheel-drive vehicles on which they had installed sophisticated weapons capable of dealing with helicopters*."[107] Appearance of weapons among the opposition is not significantly problematized. To this point, at the beginning of June 2011, it is said that the "*armed revolt may be brewing*" and that "*people are responding to the security forces with force*".[108] With protesters gradually becoming insurgents, this effectively meant the next phase of the conflict was approaching. *The Economist* insightfully points to the predominantly Sunni composition of the Syrian military (while trying to maintain the position that sectarian division bare no large importance and are only a tool for the government to stigmatize the protesters).

"*Big question is whether the security forces, on which the regime was founded when Assad père took over in 1970, will stay loyal. If the army's middle and lower ranks, drawn mainly from the country's Sunni majority, which comprises some 75% of the population, begin to turn against the senior ranks where the Alawite minority (10%, including the Assad family) predominates, the regime could begin to fall apart.*"[109]

By the end of July a group of defected military officers, together with a significant number of armed soldiers, grassroots movement leaders and political voices from the exile will have established

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[103] *Not over yet*; in *The Economist*; 23/5/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/05/protests_syria?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[104] *Ibid*

[105] *Who will take on Assad?*; in *The Economist*; 16/6/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18836088?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[106] *No end in sight*; in *The Economist*; 2/6/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18775959?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[107] *Wooing the middle*; in *The Economist*; 23/6/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18867462?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[108] *No end in sight*; 2/6/2011; *Op. cit*

[109] *The balance of power is shifting*; in *The Economist*; 9/6/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18805738?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

what became known as the Free Syrian Army and began an active insurgency campaign which would evolve into a civil war.

During July 2011, *The Economist* features the developments turning the city of Hama into a focal point of growing violence around Syria. Hama, the fourth largest city in the country, was a place of 1982 Hama massacre, a fearsome crackdown on the Muslim brotherhood-led uprising against Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad which killed some 20 000 people. *The Economists* reports about the biggest protests yet – which saw 300 000 people taking to streets and Hama "*assuming a familiar role as protest capital*."[110] The article describes the tactics of the regime in reacting to these protests which include initial withdrawal of forces, followed by heightened use of force. Using multiple comparisons to the situation in 1982, the set of articles on the siege of Hama during July 2011 is written through a strong lens of historical analogy. Assad could, according to the article, just like his father, "*be forever tainted by the bloodshed in Hama - the city has unmatched reserves of defiance that make it the most likely site of an eventual bid by protesters to win control of territory and hold on to it*"[111]. One of the next articles praises the citizens of Hama for their "*ability to organize quickly and effectively*"[112] in creating blockade with little awareness of what that kind of organization entails in terms of international law regime.

"*While protests happen organically, they do have organizers."*[113] *Annihilation of Assad's legitimacy among the citizens of Hama is brought to the reader by mentioning how "a plinth where a statue of his father, Hafez, once towered stands empty*"[114].

In the eve of what will have been labeled as the evolution of the conflict to the beginning of the civil war, *The Economist* also predicts that the violence will continue, at least in the short run, seeing the end of Assad's rule as a natural development.

"*The regime of Bashar Assad is tottering. His fall would probably trigger a short-term surge in violence, but a better government would emerge.*"[115]

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[110] *Sledge Hama*; in *The Economist*; 7/7/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18929220?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[111] *Ibid*
[112] *Hama stands firm*; in *The Economist*; 11/7/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/07/syrias-uprising-0?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[113] *Hoping for peace, bracing for violence*; in *The Economist*; 15/7/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/07/correspondents-diary-day-two?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[114] *Hama stands firm*; 11/7/2011; *Op. cit*
[115] *The squeeze on Assad*; in *The Economist*; 30/6/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/18895586?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

"*More than 100 000 people now demonstrate every Friday and the regime cannot rein them*" – Friday being the day for congregational prayer in Islam. In a rarely analytical article, *The Economist* predicts the change in momentum of the Syrian conflict:

"*Ramadan begins in early August and many Syrians will then start to visit their mosques, rallying points for the demonstrations, daily, rather than weekly. The protest leaders think this may prove a turning point: 'Friday every day,' they say*"[116].

These predictions were met just before the start of Ramadan when "*Assad launched a series of coordinated attacks, unprecedented in their brutality, on protest hubs around the country*,"[117] including Hama.

"*The majority [was] shot, often in the head; others were run over by tanks. Government forces fired on at least one mosque. Amateur footage showed smoke rising from the city and scenes of carnage.*"[118]

The so-called Ramadan Massacre, which resulted in more than hundred casualties in Hama alone is not followed through in detail by *The Economist* and is in later articles used as a strong symbolic reference of violence of the one side in the conflict and towards the symbolic victimization of the protestors. Next set of articles simply does not bring a follow up to this event – something that would be expected from the perspective of routinized journalistic practices.

Rhetorical devices are widely used as a tool to provide emphasis or add drama to *The Economist*'s articles on Syria. Given that the places within the articles where these rhetorical devices were used – there is room to doubt that these devices bring additional value to the reader's sense of context and understanding of the concrete topics or events covered. Additionally, the inclination towards tabloidization of coverage at times brings *The Economist*'s honest attempt at journalistic objectivity into question. For instance, one article begins by posing the following question – "*Time is running out, but for whom?*"[119] This question is a strong introduction to an article, it is very suggestive in a way that any answer would function towards what can be clearly be identified as the journalist's position in the Syrian conflict. If the answer is Assad – the angle is that the "*rolling campaign of assaults [in which] Mr Assad's men have shot and blasted their way into one rebellious town or city after another, swiftly adding some 300 more dead to the 1,500 Syrians killed since March*" and in which the regime has shown "*brute force [towards] unarmed protesters" has "stoked mounting*

[116] *Ibid*
[117] *Hama is hit again*; in *The Economist*; 1/8/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/08/syria-0?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[118] *Ibid*
[119] *Unfriended*; in *The Economist*; 13/8/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/21525917?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

disgust at home and abroad, leaving Mr Assad more isolated than ever"[120]. If, on the other hand, the answer is the opposition, the conclusion is defeating. The reader is faced with a rhetorical question and called to be a judge and incentivized to follow what is imposed as a morally correct answer – the end of Assad's rule should be the moral solution to the Syrian crisis. This is a misleading question to a reader, it is close-ended and it is not put within the article as a conversation opener. Equally dismissive of any sort of input from the official regime's side, another article calls Assad's official interview to the Syrian national television "*more hot air*" and rejects it as old story and irrelevant montage to anyone but an older generation of Syrians.[121]

Towards the end of 2011, the coverage of the situation in Syrian losses some of its intensity – both in tone and in frequency. The situation is being described as "*a downward spiral*" with the first designation of a civil war.[122] Reportedly, according to the UN estimates which *The Economist* cites, the death toll during the first seven months of the conflict had been around 3000 people, with many more injured and imprisoned. Kurds are increasingly mentioned as becoming more restive after the initial reluctance to join the uprising, especially after the assassination of the Kurdish activist Mashaal Tammo in October 2011. In other major cities, *The Economist* apologetically reports about the proliferation of weaponry among the opposition.

"*In some areas there are signs of a low-level civil war beginning.*"[123]

The Free Syrian Army, officially formed on 29 July 2011 is rarely mentioned – much more coverage is dedicated to the political wing of the opposition under the umbrella organization called the Syrian National Council and its leader Burhan Ghalioun. The Free Syrian Army, under its leader Colonel Riad al-Asaad, is said to be growingly "*audacious*", with some 15 000-plus men who are not under "*tight military control*".[124] Armed struggle is increasingly introduced to the narrative as a legitimate political means of the opposition. *The Economist* reports that "*protesters are getting frustrated with the Syrian National Council*"[125] and that "*some civilians now are buying weapons and being trained by defectors from the army*,"[126] while "*most male Syrians have a basic knowledge of*

[120] *Ibid*
[121] *More hot air*; in *The Economist*; 22/8/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/08/bashar-assad?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[122] *A downward spiral*; in *The Economist*; 16/10/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/10/syrias-uprising-1?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[123] *Ibid*
[124] *Gaining ground*; in *The Economist*; 17/12/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/21541847?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[125] *No closer to a solution*; in *The Economist*; 8/11/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/11/syrias-uprising?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[126] *Ibid*

firearms thanks to military conscription,"[127] implying a change in the complete evolution of the rebellion and its transformation into an armed conflict.

Last new development towards the end of 2011 concerning the conflict in Syria was the increasing involvement of the regional Arab countries and the Arab League through discussions, imposed sanctions and the prospect of a monitoring mission and mediation. Arab League condemned the developments in Syria and suspended Syria from the organization in protest of Assad's regime's increasing usage of force against the opposition, in addition to imposed political and economic sanctions to the country. Increasingly isolated, Assad is portrayed through a picture of himself trying to visit his *Facebook* account where he finds out he has zero friends – he is typing his keyboard with his fingers soaked in fresh blood, while the city is seen burning through his window.[128]

At the end of the content analysis of *The Economist*'s coverage of the beginning of the Syrian conflict during 2011, there is one more article to be included, which this author finds important for the narrative-construction at large. One of the most common approaches of journalists in animating their readership is through personal stories. One personal story of *The Economist* in this early stage of the conflict is *Bang, bang, you're dead*[129] from 11 November 2011 and Eid al-Adha, a big holiday in Islam. The subtitle for the article states how "i*n Syria, where the killings continue, even children are playing with guns*."[130] Among traditional gifts such as clothes and sweets, plastic guns have become favorite toys for most of the Syrian boys. The article brings the impression of the manner in which the violence has been normalized in Syria as a part of everyday life and even for children. Children are victimized, which they ought to be in every conflict, but are also used as a symbolic tool for narrative construction, given their symbolic impunity. Most uncommon sentence constructions are pursued by the author of this article, seriously bringing into question journalistic ethical standards. For instance:

"*This year's [guns] are mainly cheap plastic versions imported from China which, along with Russia, has blocked a UN Security Council resolution condemning Syria's crackdown on its protesters.*"[131]

This sentence is used to create symbolic connection between lethal reality which these children leave in and Russia and China as partially responsible. Furthermore the article states:

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[127] *The tide turns against Bashar Assad*; in *The Economist*; 19/11/2011; https://www.economist.com/node/21538780?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[128] Drawing by Peter Schrank; *The tide turns against Bashar Assad*; 19/11/2011; *Op. cit*
[129] *Bang, bang, you're dead*; in *The Economist*; 11/11/2011; https://www.economist.com/blogs/newsbook/2011/11/eid-syria?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[130] *Ibid*
[131] *Ibid*

"*'I do have one,' says a fifteen-year-old boy from one of the towns near Damascus, showing off his new plastic gun and its tiny sugary pellets. 'But I know shooting is not right,' he says, anxiously eyeing his father, who says he wants the regime to go. […] Back in his home town, the guns are not toys.*"[132]

Ultimately, reaction to this kind of article is not one of indifference, which points to a more activist role assumed by *The Economist*'s editorial – positively related to manufacturing outrage among its readership.

2.3. Local Actors

From a perspective closer up the timeline, in this and the next section of the thesis the aim will be to look into how the actors of the Syrian conflict are depicted. In this section specifically, the focus will be on the autochthonous armed groups and actors taking part in the internal conflict. The logic behind looking into the way the actors of this conflict are portrayed and written about is pretty straightforward – all media forms have their narratives: be it a novel, a Hollywood blockbuster movie or a newspaper article – a notion of a narrative refers to the way in which elements of the story are put together, organized into a meaningful content and presented to an audience. If the whole coverage of the war in Syria is taken in its totality and as a fairly consistent sequence about the conflict, then it is important to go deeper into analyzing who the main characters of the story actually are and how they are profiled through a network of relationships towards each other.

The differentiation between local and international actors is done so that local actors include all opposing forces from Syria. By and large, internal actors taking part in the fights are grouped so to include the following actors: Assad and Syrian government forces, Syrian opposition (as a general term for all opposition-affiliated rebel groups), Kurdish forces and ISIS. Importantly, these actors are different in the level in which they are institutionalized and, again to different extents, may consist of ranges of most different groups and organizations. Moreover, with the conflict in Syria only getting increasingly complex over the course of its duration, different local groups and organizations have emerged as distinctive actors at different stages of the conflict.

"*Syria's civil war is being fought on multiple fronts by an array of combatants whose alliances, capabilities, and in some cases motives have been in flux.*"[133]

[132] *Ibid*

[133] Laub, Zachary; *Who's Who in Syria's Civil War*; in *Foreign Affairs*; *Council on Foreign Relations*; 28/4/2017; https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/whos-who-syrias-civil-war

The 4-tier analysis of the actors is thus conditional and presents a significant reduction of reality, but is derived from the way they have been covered by *The Economist* and most of the Western media.

2.3.1. Syrian Government Forces

First internal actor to be looked into will be the government forces. The pro-Assad side in the conflict streams from the official pre-conflict state structure and refers to institutionalized armed forces and security agencies. By virtue of holding the official position as head of state of Syria, Bashar al-Assad is the commander-in-chief of the Syrian armed forces, holding the highest command over the Syrian military and reservists. This capacity has provided Assad with significant capacity to wage war against the opposition. Even after the previously mentioned drop-outs from the lower-level echelons of the military who are predominantly Sunni, the regime has been able to fill in the void by relying on the support and (self)organizing of volunteers, local- irregulars and militias.

This kind of control over state institutions, principally the monopoly over the use force through armed forces, naturally presents a significant advantage for the pro-Assad side of the conflict. The relative strength of the pre-conflict Syrian army, its organization and military capacities, have been an important factor in the regime's crackdown on the insurgents during the early phase of the conflict, but also against other actors in the conflict such as ISIS or Kurdish forces. Syrian armed forces have possessed sophisticated weapons including tanks, helicopters and heavy weaponry. This advantage in weapons and organization has been pivotal for regime's survival and probably made the government the single most powerful internal actor in the Syrian civil war.

Overall, however, the outcome of specific field operations and battles has not been covered through relating the outcomes to military capabilities, but as mere brutality. "*Mr Assad's brutal tactics*" have brought to "*army's tactical victories against bands of poorly armed rebels*."[134] Military success on the battlefield is actively used as an argument against regime, against the logic that more violence would most likely bring little additional value to the oppositional attempts to topple the regime, thus perpetuating the cycle of violence and further radicalization of the opposition. More so, the military success of the regime forces is used as a reason for preaching interventionism writing that "*Syria would be better off if the regime is decapitated before descending into sectarian chaos*."[135]

[134] *Bashar's pyrrhic triumphs*; in *The Economist*; 24/3/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21551085?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[135] *Is there an alternative to chaos?*; in *The Economist*; 4/8/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21559951?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

Comparative military capabilities are only mentioned in the context of the Western governments needing to add military leverage to the opposition's efforts by intervening militarily – usually in an inquiring form ("*Is there an alternative to chaos?*"[136]) and in comparison with other instances the West had militarily intervened – most recently in Libya.

"*Despite the defections of a score of generals and hundreds, perhaps thousands, of soldiers, Mr Assad's forces are not yet facing the kind of wholesale switches of loyalty that dished Qaddafi […] The rebels' small arms are still no match for the regime's artillery, tanks and helicopter gunships.*"[137]

The use of heavy weaponry from the regime's side escalated over the course of conflict with reports of shelling and dropping barrel bombs on urban areas held by opposition. Furthermore, the reports have also focused on sieges of urban areas where the pro-government forces have been pairing the heavy bombing with cutting supplies from the rebels. One aspect of the regime's military capabilities has had relatively highest media focus and the strongest symbolic significance is the regime's alleged use of chemical weapons on opposition. *The Economist* has repeatedly reported on evidence about the use of nerve gas popularly referring to it as the "*crossing of the red line*"[138] and calling the Western leaders to own up to their promise of not going to allow any use of chemical weapons and would act against the regime.

Overall coverage of the pro-government forces by *The Economist* has been generally overwhelmingly negative – with the sole exception of talking about the regime in its relation to the Islamic State, when it is generally portrayed as lesser then two evils. In line with the general Western media narrative, there is a strong symbolic equalization of all pro-government forces with Assad – or in other words, the strong personification of the regime and the large part of society in one person. By pursuing this symbolic link, and unlike other Sunni opposition groups or Kurds, large parts that still support the regime are left dehumanized – and this is an important fact. No personal stories from families supporting the regime are presented by *The Economist*'s editorial. It is evident that some parts of the population favor the current regime for various reasons; however the reader would not have the same kind of understanding of an average regime supporter in a way that he could relate to a rebel. *The Economist* fails to engage into more discussion on why large parts of Syrians are not protesting or rebelling. Is that due to the largely clientelistic nature of the regime or are there deeper social and cultural reasons for which Assad is still seen as acceptable to many? By continually looking at a person Assad as the single source of violence dehumanizes Syrians who perceive his regime as legitimate and

[136] *Ibid*
[137] *Ibid*
[138] *Crossing a red line - Chemical weapons in Syria*; in *The Economist*; 27/4/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/04/27/crossing-a-red-line?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

counter the opposition's narrative by understanding it as a guarantee of political participation or an obstacle to majoritarian Sunni-controlled religiously-dominated political system.

One specific social group that is mentioned in the context of supporting the regime is Alawites. Ethnic and religious sectarianism being an important part of the Syrian social fabric is an important aspect of the conflict. Bashar al-Assad himself is an Alawite. Alawites are a Muslim offshoot practicing a unique form of Islam, who has a history of societal isolation and a number of periods when they have been persecuted by the Sunni majority. For purposes of contextualization, they have historically inhabited the mountainous hinterland alongside the Syrian coast at the northwest of the country, including the cities of Latakia and Tartus, but also live in large numbers in cities such as Damascus and Homs. Importantly in recognizing the distinctiveness of Alawite religious tradition, they have only been recognized as Shia offshoot in 1974 by Musa al-Sadr – the affiliation used to symbolically cement the Assad family's closeness to the Iranian regime. By pursuing this affiliation, Assad's regime is denied legitimacy and placed in the "axis of evil" discourse. This linkage pinpoints Syria among the group of rogue states that sponsor international terrorism and threaten to use weapons of mass destruction. Historically, Alawites do not have much religious affinity towards Shiites from Iran, but one of being an autochthonous religious and ethnic group living in Syria alongside Sunnis – moreover, they are ethnic Arabs, while Iranians are not. Overall, their distinctiveness is exemplified by the facts that they believe in divine incarnation, allow alcohol and celebrate New Year. They have a history of being regarded as among the most moderate Muslim groups, opposite to orthodox Sunni and Shia groups.

Alawites are reported about as the backbone of the regime:

"*Alawites, an esoteric Muslim sect living mainly in Syria's coastal hinterland, number only a few million, but they make up a disproportionate part of the state apparatus. Bashar Assad and his father before him, themselves Alawites, used this to shore up their rule; indeed Mr Assad would not still be in power had his co-religionists not stuck by him.*"[139]

Alawites make up around 10% of Syrian population, but are described as institutionally omnipresent and basically in control of the Syrian political system. Syrian regime is often referred to as the Alawite-regime and rarely does *The Economist*'s coverage provide the reader with some details and social contextualization. Only on a single occasion has the author of this study found some reporting on Alawites beyond religious sectarianism, clientelism and political oligarchy.

[139] *Paying the price*; in *The Economist*; 9/7/2015; https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2015/07/09/paying-the-price

"*Only the Assads and a handful of families (Alawite and others) became rich and powerful. Most Alawite villages are still muddy outposts [while] bureaucrats and security men often live in shabby areas of cities such as Damascus and Homs. Today Alawites in the army are dying in droves, and many of their families are disgruntled with Mr Assad.*"[140]

The general overtone of covering Alawite, while portrayed as hugely important, is one of stigma and negativity.

"*Alawites, a heterodox offshoot of Shia Islam, are disproportionately represented in the civil service, the armed forces (especially the senior ranks) and thuggish militias sponsored by the regime. They have overseen the bloody crackdown on the protesters.*"[141]

The notion that the reluctance of ethnic and religious minorities to recognize and support the protests, then the insurgency, is due to fear of dire consequences was the regime to fall has been disregarder by *The Economist*.

"*Beyond Alawites, [pro-regime groups] include Christians, other minorities, and Sunnis who have benefited from the regime.*"[142]

Rightly so, Syria also has around 10% of different Christian groups among its population, including Arab Christians, Christians of Greek dissent, Armenians and Assyrians. *The Economist* coverage generally attempts to create a positive image of Christians in Syria, while providing justification for those who support the regime. One of the lines is that while the people are generally not involved in the conflict or disavow the regime; only the opportunistic Christian leadership has stayed alongside Assad. Christian minority is reported to have "*generally stayed on the sidelines, though most of their leaders have backed Mr Assad implicitly, and some more openly*."[143]

"*Many fear that, after four decades of secular autocracy, a Sunni Muslim takeover would prompt a wave of persecution, perhaps even driving them out of the country. They watched with dismay as their co-religionists fled from neighboring Iraq, most of them to Syria, after 2003. Attacks against Egypt's Copts after the fall of Hosni Mubarak have buttressed such fears.*"[144]

Despite this kind of rare insights into the extent of social fear from fundamentalist tendencies of Sunni insurgency, there are not many attempts to create a wider understanding of the general siding of Christian with the regime. That kind of understanding would naturally go against the widely present journalistic engagement present in *The Economist*'s coverage against the regime and disrupt the legitimatization of interventionism among the general public on the West. There are no reports of the

[140] *Ibid*
[141] *Jangling sectarian nerves*; in *The Economist*; 7/1/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21542425?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[142] *Tough, but bowing*; in *The Economist*; 18/10/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/10/18/tough-but-bowing
[143] *Jangling sectarian nerves*; 7/1/2012; *Op.cit*
[144] *Ibid*

gradual radicalization among the opposition. The more liberal-leaning *New York Times* has published a piece citing the protestors chanting "*Christians to Beirut, Alawites to their graves!*" in order to contextualize the ideological shift and radicalization of the opposition.[145]

2.3.2. Syrian Opposition

Syrian opposition is a generic, umbrella term for a number of self-organized groups that were established from the initial protestors-then-armed-insurgents. Groups that have started the anti-government protests at the beginning of 2011 in different parts of Syria have established territorial control over different areas and bigger or smaller urban centers. Although developed from grassroots movements, different groups have managed to establish different levels of political and military organization. However, the term has been used by media and international actors as a general point of reference, while in reality the oppositions have failed to create a unified and rigid political structure. These different groups comprising the Syrian opposition differ among themselves in their ideology and wider vision for the Syrian state, which by no means eased their coordination on the battlefields and within the international peace-talk frameworks. It remains disputable if is fairly straightforward to use the term for reference, as there might not be an entity to refer to in reality – the term is to some extent a response to a need to have a simplified point of reference to pinpoint. *The Economist* in general adopts the term Syrian opposition in its articles. Falling under the umbrella term are different groups of predominantly Sunni population, a number of Syrian intellectuals and public figures in exile abroad and a significant portion of foreign fighters from abroad, who have join the armed insurgency alongside these groups.

Concerning the opposition's ability to wage war, *The Economist* fails to go deep into explaining to the reader what their capacities actually consist of. During the early phases of insurgency and the civil war, the opposition's relatively poor military capacities are to a certain extent self-explanatory – insurgents were simply under-equipped.

"*The rebels are still poorly armed. Until now, they have been relying on equipment from rogue regime soldiers.*"[146]

The editorial, however, fails to relate the early success of the opposition with the regime's wariness of the fact that a strong, disproportionate and indiscriminate violent response – especially the extent of possible civilian casualties would probably trigger stronger involvement of international

[145] Adams, Simon; *The World's Next Genocide*; in *The New York Times*; 15/11/2012; https://www.nytimes.com/2012/11/16/opinion/the-worlds-next-genocide.html
[146] *It looks like civil war*; in *The Economist*; 28/1/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21543538?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

actors in the conflict. Channels of gradual, but expeditious armament are not given almost any coverage – but in small segments of reporting on gun smuggling and arms trade.

"*Arms dealers and smugglers are seeing a sharp increase in demand. A gun that cost $800 a year ago now costs $3,000.*"[147]

A debate on arming the opposition has been a part of the public discourse about the Syrian opposition – given their lack of heavy weaponry and relative inability to respond to the regime's attacks by tanks and planes. Proponents of the argument of arming the opposition have put forward the idea that anti-tank and anti-aircraft equipment would enhance the opposition's ability to defend itself. However, "*some fret over who among the rebels would end up with the weapons. Others fear that sending any weapons would make the conflict even bloodier, particularly if Mr Assad's backers decide to intensify their support.*"[148] In one article, *The Economist*'s comes out strongly in supporting the arming of the opposition calling it "*the least bad choice*,"[149] same time criticizing the Obama's administration's reluctance to intervene more strongly in Syria. The beginning of the article is as follows:

"*Nothing in recent years epitomizes foreign policy's 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' dilemma more bloodily than Syria. All options for the West – and especially Barack Obama – are fraught. Do nothing, and the civil war could become twice as murderous, spill into fragile neighboring states, and even result in victory for the loathsome regime of Bashar Assad. Do everything, from arming the rebels to attacking Mr Assad's forces directly, at least from the air, and America could be dragged into a quagmire reminiscent of Afghanistan or Iraq. Yet doing something hesitantly in-between, by helping the rebels a bit, but not enough to bring down Mr Assad, may be the worst of all worlds. It risks emboldening potential waverers around Mr Assad to cling on at the same time as prolonging the catastrophe while extremists come to dominate both sides on the battlefield. This middle course is the one that Mr Obama has chosen.*"[150]

The article clearly surpasses the standard journalistic professional norms on journalists' (dis)engagement.

"*Arms are bound to intensify the violence in the short run, but the country is already in flames and the regime is doing most of the burning.*"[151]

Mentioned as an additional argument for arming the opposition, but generally fairly disregarded is the constant existing arms trade and influx of weaponry to the Syrian opposition – more so in the context of its radicalization. Support in funding and sales of weapons from the Gulf states, mainly Qatar and Saudi Arabia, have enhanced competition among opposition groups, creating an

[147] *Ibid*
[148] *Argument and arms – Syria's war and diplomacy*; in *The Economist*; 1/6/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/06/01/argument-and-arms
[149] *The least-bad choice*; in *The Economist*; 18/5/2013; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2013/05/18/the-least-bad-choice?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[150] *Ibid*
[151] *Ibid*

impetus for adopting more fundamentalist religious and political positions. Inability of the international community to agree on imposing and enforcing a universal embargo on arms sales and the arming of radical opposition groups by the Gulf states has been an important factor to the radicalization of opposition to the extent where Western media outlets begun distinguishing between moderate and extreme opposition elements. The role of the Gulf states is, however, not critically addressed. Moreover, the oil trade as source of money has been disregarded as well – although the existence of some evidence of funding conflict through selling oil is admitted to exist – especially in the case of Al-Nusra.

"*Though Jabhat al-Nusra says it gets most of its weapons from the spoils of battle, it also enjoys murky sources of private funding, including regular payments from al-Qaeda in Iraq. Since it captured oil wells and grain silos, it has been able – more effectively than other outfits – to set up basic services and a rudimentary administration in the areas it controls, as well as sell off goods and oil for cash. It is probably the most disciplined of all its rivals.*"[152]

Distinguishing among moderate and extreme rebel groups is a way forward for *The Economist* to simplify the array of diverse actors present under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition. According to the already cited *Foreign Affairs* article, "*at the most extreme are groups whose political program or governing style can hardly be distinguished from that of the Islamic State.*"[153] This adds backing to the notion that using the Syrian opposition as a term of reference comes out normalization of Islamism fundamentalists and extremists.

The Free Syrian Army had been the single most visible rebel group since it emerged not long after the beginning of the rebellion. Among the groups to fall under the tier of moderate rebels, the Free Syrian Army is the only group to be given somewhat of an independent profile by *The Economist*. The group was formed by defecting army officer during the early insurgency phase of the conflict in July 2011. Throughout the coverage of the internal conflict, the Free Syrian Army is referred to as the "*largest umbrella group*" among the Syrian opposition, pro-democratic and "*secular-minded*".[154] It is portrayed as a loose military alliance of armed insurgency groups from various parts of Syria, from the northwest around Aleppo and Idlib, to central parts of the country around Homs, to the very southwest parts of the country surrounding Damascus and Daraa. In 2012, they were said to include "*about*

[152] *The hard men on both sides prevail*; in *The Economist*; 18/3/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/05/18/the-hard-men-on-both-sides-prevail?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[153] Laub; 28/4/2017; *Op. cit*
[154] *Jihadists on the way*; in *The Economist*; 4/8/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21559968?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

50,000 fighters against a largely conscript government force of around 280,000"[155] and were under no real control on the ground.

"*There are too many of them. The culture of martyrdom means that some no longer know what they are fighting for*."[156]

Despite the agreement and announcement of military structures, without the kind of resources needed to support a strong and coordinated insurgency effort, the leadership of the Free Syrian Army in reality never managed to centralize control and establish a hierarchical chain of command over the many groups and armed militias it affiliated itself with, which in practice meant many of the groups begun operating as what could be depicted as criminal outfits, still under the umbrella of the Free Syrian Army.[157] With that depiction also went the number of alleged international humanitarian law violations and crimes, including violence against civilians. In a more detailed report by the American NBC News, US government's growing concern about growing extremist elements that are beyond the control of a centralized Free Syrian Army command.

"*While the U.S. already is providing money, equipment, training and limited weaponry to the Free Syrian Army (FSA), some U.S. military officials are growing increasingly concerned about the presence of extremist Islamic groups within the overall force. […]The difficulty determining where the FSA's sympathies lie resides in the fact that it is an army in name only. It is made up of hundreds of small units, some secular, some religious – whether mainstream or radical. Others are family gangs, or simply criminals.*"[158]

"*Reservations over the FSA's makeup, which may account for the United States' half-hearted embrace of the group, have undercut the ability of Idris' faction to set the agenda for the organization*,"[159] General Salim Idris being the Free Syrian Army's effective head. With the partial collapse of the opposition's war effort in the north, including the fall of Aleppo, Free Syrian Army saw several of its affiliate groups collapsing and realigning with the more radical opposition groups, due to which the affiliation with the Free Syrian Army has been marginalized on the north of the country and concentrated among the rebel units on the south.

On the other side of the moderate-extreme-opposition spectrum is Jabhat al-Nusra or al-Nusra Front. Al-Nusra has been portrayed as an al-Qaeda offshoot, thus had a largely terrorist depiction, however fallen under the Syrian opposition umbrella.

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[155] *Ibid*
[156] *Ibid*
[157] Laub; 28/4/2017; *Op. cit*
[158] Engel, Richard; Miklaszewski, Jim; Balkiz, Ghazi; Windrem, Robert; *Extremist element among Syrian rebels a growing worry*; on *NBC News*; 10/9/2013; https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/extremist-element-among-syrian-rebels-growing-worry-flna8C11115141
[159] *Ibid*

"*Jabhat al-Nusra, has long occupied an awkward middle ground in the country. It is accepted as part of a wider rebellion against the rule of Bashar Assad, the president, despite its links to al-Qaeda. That is because most of its members are Syrian, unlike its jihadist rival, Islamic State, which has an Iraqi leadership and foot soldiers from a variety of countries. And it has mainly fought against Mr Assad, rather than trying to control territory.*"[160]

It is repeatedly described as one of the most powerful opposition groups in the conflict:

"*The influence of Islamist groups has grown, none more so than the most extreme of the lot: Jabhat al-Nusra. The group, which boasts about 7,000 fighters, has declared a global jihad and is the only battalion recognized by al-Qaeda.*"[161]

This was the case until 2016, when the group changed its name to Jabhat Fatah al-Sham or translated The Front for the Conquest of the Levant, dissolving its relation with al-Qaeda to demonstrate non-affiliation with terrorist and enhance its acceptability to the West. Subsequently, the group merged with several other groups to form Tahrir al-Sham – adding to the narrative of worsening sectarian strife among opposition.

Al-Nusra adheres to Salafist jihadist ideology with the professed aim of establishing theocratic Islamic governance. The Salafi jihadism refers to Sunni originalism which advocates the establishment of a highly conservative social order, Sharia law and transnational Islamist unity. *The Economist*, rather seldom, delves into the values and social aims of the most radical wing of the Syrian opposition.

"*Some ban cigarettes, sport the short trousers of the type worn by the Prophet Muhammad's companions, and send suicide-bombers to blow up government checkpoints. Others joke about growing beards to butter up rich conservative donors from the Gulf. Welcome to the eclectic world of Syria's Salafists, so far only a minor strand of the rebel forces fighting to overthrow President Bashar Assad's regime, but one that is growing.*"[162]

Rather jokingly, *The Economist* on few occasions tries to introduce its readership with the kind of life style and values parts of the opposition stand for, occasionally normalizing it:

"*Cash from Gulf benefactors who favor religious fighters has given the Salafists a high profile. Some fighters exaggerate their religiosity. 'We grow beards and act more religious to get money,' admits a fighter with al-Farouq, an Islamist group. 'But many of us drink beer.' Although the opposition in general has failed to present a clear vision of Syria after the Assad regime has fallen, Salafism, with its glorification of death in the cause of jihad, has provided its fighters with an identity.*"[163]

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[160] *With the rebels or against them*; in *The Economist*; 14/3/2015; https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21646257-local-franchise-has-choice-make-rebels-or-against-them

[161] *Syria's jihadists*; in *The Economist*; 17/12/2012; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2012/12/17/syrias-jihadists

[162] *Syria's Salafists - Getting stronger?*; in *The Economist*; 20/10/2012; https://www.economist.com/news/middle-east-and-africa/21564912-salafists-are-rise-have-not-dominated-opposition%E2%80%94so-far?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[163] *Ibid*

One striking conclusion on *The Economist*'s reports covering al-Nusra is the relative normalization of its affiliation to al-Qaeda in comparison to ISIS, framing the radicalization of opposition as a way to equip and fund the war effort, in absence of substantial support from the West.

"*Some call themselves Salafists, disciples of a puritanical version of Islam that harks back to the Prophet Muhammad's original comrades, to attract money from rich religious networks in Turkey, the Gulf and farther afield.*"[164]

"*Some among Nusra's ranks would certainly like to cut ties with al-Qaeda, whose star has fallen since IS appeared. Many of its fighters feel little loyalty to [al-Qaeda's] leader, Ayman Zawahiri, and his brand of jihad. They joined Jabhat al-Nusra mainly because it was a strong alternative to IS.*"[165]

Generally, although the nominal separation of al-Nusra from other opposition group is maintained, its radicalization and rise to prominence among the Syrian opposition at-large is normalized, confirming its integration into the overall insurgency effort to topple the Assad's regime – all despite wide reporting of al-Nusra's claiming responsibility for different atrocities and terror attacks and the proclaimed long-term strategy to establish theocratic caliphate-like system of governance.

In the middle of the moderate-extreme-opposition spectrum is a number of different jihadist groups. Largest and most prominent among them is Ahrar al-Sham or translated the Free Men of Syria, estimated to be the second largest affiliation of rebels amounting up to 20 000 fighter and leads more through the Syrian Islamic Front.[166] *The Economist* labels it as a group to watch as it "*seems to have overtaken all the others; […] has become the most powerful outfit battling against President Bashar Assad*."[167] During 2012, at its inception it operated primarily around the city of Idlib in the northwest, but has expanded ever since to add efforts in other major cities.

"*By January [2013] Ahrar al-Sham had 83 units spanning the whole country, including Damascus and Aleppo. In March it led the attack on the north-eastern town of Raqqa, the largest one now under rebel control.*"[168]

Despite the lack of formal affiliations, the group is largely sympathetic to al-Qaeda.

It is portrayed by *The Economist* as a well-equipped and well-organized group which manages to attract new fighters and translate its operational advantages to success in the battlefield. This portrayal has positive connotation in comparison to a wider picture of opposition being unable to unify their efforts in order to be more successful in fighting the regime.

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[164] *Jihadists on the way*; 4/8/2012; *Op. cit*
[165] *With the rebels or against them*; 14/3/2015; *Op. cit*
[166] *Competition among Islamists*; in *The Economist*; 20/7/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/07/20/competition-among-islamists
[167] *Ibid*
[168] *Ibid*

"*Ahrar al-Sham's success is partly due to its fighters' discipline and ability, qualities that have enabled Syria's Islamist rebels to outgrow the fractious secular ones.*"[169]

Absence of fanaticism which is stereotypical for the jihadists is one additional aspect of *The Economist*'s reporting of this group's activities.

"*It was one of the first groups to use improvised explosive devices and to target the regime's military bases in order to capture weapons. […] Ahrar al-Sham does not go in for suicide-bombings, preferring to use remote-controlled car bombs. It also carries out public works, mending roads and providing food, in contrast to other groups, whose predations upset the locals.*"[170]

Concerning their ideology and goals, Ahrar al-Sham is a Sunni Salafist organization depicted as nationalist jihadists (unlike ISIS or al-Nusra, their campaign is predominantly limited to Syria).

"*Politically Ahrar al-Sham has been clever. It sees the war in Syria as a battle between Sunnis and Shias and wants a Sunni-led Islamic state, but emphasizes that its campaign is for Syria, not for a global jihad.*"[171]

However, *The Economist* fails to acknowledge Ahrar al-Sham's strong inclination towards the extremist spectrum of the Syrian opposition, pinpointing their share size and relative operational capacities among the Syrian opposition.

In one article, *The Economist* encloses the following tabular review of the biggest rebel groups and their alliances:[172]

[169] *Ibid*
[170] *Ibid*
[171] *Ibid*
[172] *The hard men on both sides prevail*; 18/3/2013; *Op. cit*

Who's who in Syria's battlefield

Key rebel groups, their leaders and ideology

Name	Leader	Aims
Main fronts:		
Supreme Military Command (SMC)	General Salim Idriss, a defector	Set up in December 2012 under the Syrian National Coalition in an effort to unite rebels backed by Western and Arab Gulf governments. Has limited control on the ground
Syrian Islamic Front	Collective leaders' council: chair is Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi	Syrian Islamists. Includes Ahrar al-Sham and other Salafist groups. Co-operates with SMC
Syrian Liberation Front	Sheikh Ahmed Issa, head of Saqour al-Sham	Coalition of Islamist groups. Independent of mainstream fighters, but works closely with them. Some leaders sit on SMC
Fighting groups:		
Jabhat al-Nusra	Abu Muhammad al-Golani	Salafist jihadists with a global vision of an Islamist state. Mainly foreign leadership, Syrian soldiers. Linked to al-Qaeda
Ahrar al-Sham	Abu Abdel Rahman al-Suri, Abu Abdullah al-Hamawi, Abu Ayman (political leader)	Salafist jihadists with national aims. Co-operate with other groups. Strongest component of Syrian Islamic Front
Farouq Battalions	Osama Sayeh al-Jinidi	A mixed bunch, ranging from devout to mild Islamists. Started in Homs, now nationwide; includes Farouq al-Shamal in the north. Controls some border crossings
Liwa al-Tawhid	Abdulkader Saleh (Haj Marea)	Umbrella force in Aleppo, included in the Syrian Liberation Front. Its leader sits on the SMC
Saqour al-Sham	Sheikh Ahmed Issa	Most powerful fighting force in Idleb. Islamist. Its leader heads the Syrian Liberation Front
Ansar al-Islam	Abu Moaz al-Agha	Umbrella for Islamist factions around Damascus, including powerful Liwa al-Islam
Ahfad al-Rasul	Ziad Haj Obeid	Part of Ansar al-Islam in Damascus, where it has carried out assassinations; also has offshoot in Idleb
Ghurabaa	Omar Hilal	Islamist group with growing presence in Aleppo and Raqqa; works with all other groups
Democratic Union Party (PYD)	Salih Muslim	Syrian offshoot of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Neither with the regime nor with the rebels. Its militias control Kurdish areas in north-east Syria

Sources: Institute for the Understanding of War; *The Economist*

With regards to the actors of the Syrian internal conflict, *The Economist*'s coverage is predominantly focused on armed group of rebels, while different formats of political grouping are generally neglected, even though these groups have been recognized as parties in dialogue and have taken part in international peace talks. These groups have, with different levels of success, claimed to be the legitimate representatives of the Syrian opposition and have been inclusive of pre-conflict political-opposition leaders and intellectuals in exile, as well as the armed groups. In reality, these entities present attempts to organize and unify the opposition – however, the mere number of formats – with similar names and crosscutting membership. The already mentioned Syrian National Council was the first among those formats, attempting to act as an exile government and trying to gain international recognition. In 2012, it unified with several other opposition groups to form the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, also known as the Syrian National Coalition. The National Coordination Committee for Democratic Change, the Syrian Democratic Council, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, the Local Coordination Committees of Syria and the Supreme Council of the Syrian Revolution are some of the other national opposition groups. Understandingly, it

would be hard to construct a narrative built around this kind of myriad of formats and actors. But on the other hand, it is worthwhile noticing that a far larger deal of coverage is dedicated to the battlefield and the armed groups as actors, than it is on the peace talks and the political groups taking part.

In concluding the section on the Syrian opposition and returning to the armed groups, rivalry between these groups is described by *The Economist* as one of the keys to their lack of success.

"*Rebel commanders in Syria have warned of a future reckoning with Islamist extremist groups, who have grown increasingly dominant among the myriad forces fighting President Bashar Assad's regime*."[173]

With the civil war becoming increasingly complicated in terms of different groups fighting each other, as well as the regime, the amplitude of violence has been increased as a consequence of their activities.

"*That calculus has changed as the group has become more hostile to other rebels and intent on imposing strict Islamic law, including executions.*"[174]

One of the consequences of these developments moving beyond the earliest of stages of the conflict has been the fact that *The Economist*'s narrative of the conflict has lost a great deal of its straightforwardness contained in the us-versus-them logic. The acknowledgement of the chaotic reality exists:

"*Uprisings are a messy business, but Syria's has been messier than most. […] The opposition seems only to grow more fractious. Syrian politicians in exile remain disconnected from local activists inside. While rebels of a moderate, secular bent warily eye Salafist fighters, emerging civilian and military leaders tussle over who should administer liberated towns and villages.*"[175]

One of the conclusions of the content analysis of the rebel groups is that there is editorial resistance towards deconstruction of the notion of the Syrian opposition as one of the single most important elements of the general Western narrative of the Syrian civil war, all in spite of a growing sense of distrust, competition and outright hostility among the opposition groups at large. It, however, becomes increasingly difficult to retain the affiliation to only a portion of the opposition, while denouncing others, more so without a clear criteria of what makes an opposition group moderate and acceptable and creating this sort of silver lining. It becomes hard to maintain the narrative of a fight of disenfranchised against the brutal regime, when the reality of the conflict is increasingly one of all-against-all.

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[173] *Another front*; in *The Economist*; 20/9/2013; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2013/09/20/another-front?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[174] *Ibid*

[175] *Get your act together or we won't help*; in *The Economist*; 10/11/2012; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2012/11/10/get-your-act-together-or-we-wont-help?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

"*The more decent rebel groups"* – is said in one of the articles – *"are being squeezed between the regime's forces and extremists on their own side*".[176]

Without the highest instance atop of a functioning chain of command, responsible for coordinating the insurgency effort and securing responsibility and accountability concerning the respect of the norms of humanitarian law, and the established organizational hierarchy to support the notion of a Syrian opposition, the impression is that sectarianism and competition should overall be the more prevailing aspect of the narrative – which is not the case.

Last note on the coverage of these groups is the editorial overall inclination towards legitimizing the use of violence. In being inclined to support the goals of the rebellion in what is seen as a fight against an undemocratic and brutal regime, *The Economist* helps perpetuate the regional instability in normalizing violence. Violence is reinforced as legitimate means to achieve political goals, adding flammability to the regional political rhetoric and not recognizing the intrinsic value of achieving peace by peaceful means.

2.3.3. ISIS

"*Three years of turmoil in the region, on the back of unpopular American-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, have benefited extreme Islamists, none more so than the Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria (ISIS), a group that outdoes even al-Qaeda in brutality and fanaticism.*"[177]

The Islamic State is another actor in the array of organizations taking part in the Syrian internal conflict – arguably the one which has had most international media coverage in spite of the fact that the narrative of the Syrian conflict is dominantly constructed around the conflict between the government forces and the Syrian opposition groups. Islamic State has been portrayed by *The Economist* and Western media at large as the most vicious, brutal and ideologically-radical actor. One of the typical coverage attributes used by *The Economist* in the article introductions to describe who the journalist are actually referring to (*Who* as one of the five fundamental *Ws* (*Who*, *What*, *When*, *Where* and *Why*) – questions that journalist are addressing in every article to tell a story) describes the Islamic State as "*al-Qaeda-minded extremist group [known for] chopping off the heads of its adversaries, crucifying miscreants and committing acts of genocide*."[178] They are widely considered to

[176] *The hard men on both sides prevail*; 18/3/2013; *Op. cit*
[177] *Two Arab countries fall apart – The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria*; in *The Economist*; 12/6/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/06/12/two-arab-countries-fall-apart
[178] *The Islamic State – Can it govern?*; in *The Economist*; 25/8/2014; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/08/25/can-it-govern?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

be "*the world's most dangerous terrorist organization*"[179] – holding territorial control over large parts of Syria (around 1/3 of Syria was under ISIS control in summer 2014) and Iraq and fighting to establish a transnational state-like organization which would rule over Muslims according to Sharia law. The Islamic State has established itself as one of the most powerful regional actors in the Middle East, adding to the spiral of violence in both Syria and Iraq:

"*extreme Islamist group that seeks to create a caliphate and spread jihad across the world has made dramatic advances on both sides of the Syrian-Iraqi border*."[180]

In the West, the jihadi organization Islamic State is known under several names, most recognizably ISIS, ISIL and Daesh. *The Economist* touches the subject of the name of this organization, also giving the short history of the Islamic State.

"*The group has been variously dubbed ISIS, ISIL, IS, SIC and Da'ish. Why the alphabet soup?*"[181]

Indeed the group is referred by many names and abbreviations in the media coverage. In the next several paragraphs, the study will deal with the gradual evolution of the name in line with the evolution of the Islamic State, as covered by *The Economist*.

The organization started as a spinoff of al-Qaeda in Iraq. It was founded as early as 1990s by Salafi jihadist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and named *Jamā'at al-Tawḥīd wa-al-Jihād* (meaning the Organization of Monotheism and Jihad), encompassing mostly the poor, less educated layers of the Iraq's society.[182] According to a research paper by *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, al-Zarqawi and bin Laden had occasionally-overlapping agendas, which led to al-Qaeda providing Zarqawi some financial assistance. It was not until 2004 that al-Zarqawi's organization came under the wing of al-Qaeda by al-Zarqawi swearing loyalty to al-Qaeda and its mission under the name of al-Qaeda in Iraq. The group has gained prominence during the armed insurgency against the USA-led intervention in Iraq after 2003, however the connection between the intervention and occupation of Iraq and insurgence of different terrorist outlets in the Middle East is not given due consideration by *The Economist*'s editors.

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[179] *The caliphate cracks*; in *The Economist*; 19/3/2015; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/03/19/the-caliphate-cracks?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[180] *Two Arab countries fall apart – The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria*; 12/6/2014; *Op. cit*

[181] *The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)*; in *The Economist*; 29/9/2014; https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2014/09/28/the-many-names-of-isis-also-known-as-is-isil-sic-and-daish?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[182] Zelin, Aaron Y; *The War between ISIS and al-Qaeda for Supremacy of the Global Jihadist Movement*; in *Research Notes*; N. 20 (1); The Washington Institute for Near East Policy; June 2014; page 1

"*It started as a small but viciously effective part of the Sunni resistance to America's 2003 invasion of Iraq that called itself al-Qaeda in Iraq, or AQI. In 2007*[183]*, following the death of its founder, AQI rebranded itself the Islamic State in Iraq, or ISI.*"[184]

Following the intervention in Iraq,

"*Zarqawi became a household name for his brutal personal beheadings and fast-paced suicide bombing campaign against Shiite religious targets and Sunni civilians, among others. As a result of these successes, many foreign fighters wanted to join […] AQI controlled the future generation of the jihadist movement. One of the key factors now separating ISIS from al-Qaeda relates to this generational difference. Those who came of age and fought or trained with al-Qaeda in the 1980s and 1990s in Afghanistan and those who came of age and fought or trained with AQI and now ISIS in Iraq and Syria in the past decade.*"[185]

Concerning the relation between al-Qaeda and AQI, *The Economist* covers only the notion of "*criticism from al-Qaeda of AQI for being too bloodthirsty*"[186]. In his research, Zelin writes how al-Zarqawi was advised by al-Qaeda seniors to "*tone down the violence and over-the-top enforcement of sharia, which they correctly argued was alienating Sunnis and hurting the long-term goals of the global jihadist project*."[187] *The Economist* simply refers to name changes, without analyzing and creating a wider background of changes of allegiances among jihadi organizations and their relations following the occupation of Iraq. An average reader would have little understanding about swift uprising of ISIS in the context of the Syrian conflict, as well as its relation with other jihadi organizations taking part in the conflict, most notably Jabhat al-Nusra.

According to Zelin, ISI had spent next several years in focusing "*on taking territory and governing in Iraq's Anbar province*."[188] during which time ISI was reconsolidating their internal organization, relations with other jihadi groups and in relative decline.

"*While Zarqawi may have had hardcore supporters, his successors in ISI still lost major local support in Iraq, and the group contracted and was squeezed as a result.*"[189]

The organization started its resurgence when Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi assumed the leadership position in 2010. *The Economist* perceives the internal Syrian conflict as the single most important reason for the rise of ISIS.

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[183] Zelin's study, as well as several other open sources place al-Zarqawi's death on 7 June 2006 – this must be an editorial mistake (other sources: Stanford University – internet platform *Mapping Militant Organizations* – the Islamic State; http://web.stanford.edu/group/mappingmilitants/cgi-bin/groups/view/1)

[184] *The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)*; 29/9/2014; *Op. cit*

[185] Zelin; 2014; *Op. cit*; page 2

[186] *The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)*; 29/9/2014; *Op. cit*

[187] Zelin; 2014; *Op. cit*; page 3

[188] Zelin; 2014; *Op. cit*; page 3

[189] *Ibid*, page 4

"*This group suffered setbacks on its home turf, but as Syria descended into civil war in 2011 it spotted an opportunity. By 2013 it had inserted itself into eastern Syria and adopted a new name to match, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS).*"[190]

This formative phase of the Islamic State's coming into Syrian has been defined by its struggle or prominence with al-Qaeda and its Syrian affiliate Jabhat al-Nusra, following the adoption of the name Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. According to Zelin,

"*This did not sit well with Jabhat al-Nusra's leader Abu Muhammad al-Jawlani, who rebuffed the move into Syria and reaffirmed his allegiance to [al-Qaeda leader] Zawahiri. In turn, Zawahiri later tried, but failed, to nullify Baghdadi's power play by telling ISIS to return to the Iraq front and leave the Syrian front to JN. Neither Jawlani nor Zawahiri was allegedly consulted in advance about the expansion of the Islamic state.*"[191]

The notion of this divergence was already mentioned in the section dedicated to al-Nusra. Origins of this feud related to organizational hierarchy, ideology and methodology of fighting have taken place long before *The Economist* started reporting on the Islamic State's rise in Syria. However it provides solid contextualization of this initial power struggle between ISIS and al-Nusra.[192]

As for the name, there are, as said, several different abbreviations used for reference. ISIS refers to the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq – a name appearing most frequently in international media. This name is one of two most common translations of Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham, translating to the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant.

"*The group sought to challenge 'colonialist' borders by using an old Arab geographical term—al-Sham—that applies either to the Syrian capital, Damascus, or to the wider region of the Levant; hence the official American preference for calling it Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL, rather than ISIS. The Arabic for this, al-Dawla al-Islamiya fil 'Iraq wal-Sham, can be abbreviated to Da'ish.*"[193]

Daesh is widely used among Arab and French speakers, although it has a negative connotation. In explaining the word game behind the acronym Daesh, *The Economist* also makes historical parallel between the Islamic State and Nazism.

"*There is a long history of pinning unpleasant-sounding names on unpleasant people. Rather as the term Nazi caught on in English partly because of its resonance with words such as 'nasty', Da'ish rolls pleasurably off Arab tongues as a close cousin of words meaning to stomp, crush, smash into, or scrub. Picking up on this, France has officially adopted the term for government use, with its foreign minister, Laurent Fabius, explaining that Da'ish has the added advantage of not granting the group the dignity of being called a state. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary General, has cast similar aspersions, denouncing the group as a 'Non-Islamic Non-State'.*

[190] *The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)*; 29/9/2014; *Op. cit*
[191] Zelin; 2014; *Op. cit*; page 4
[192] *Will the jihadists overreach?*; in *The Economist*; 12/10/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/10/12/will-the-jihadists-overreach
[193] *The many names of ISIS (also known as IS, ISIL, SIC and Da'ish)*; 29/9/2014; *Op. cit*

Rather than obediently adopting the acronym NINS, this newspaper has chosen for the time being to continue calling the group simply Islamic State."[194]

The most recent development in the evolution of the name has been the change to "*the State of Islamic Caliphate*"[195] or simply the Islamic State. However, it is still globally referred to as ISIS/ISIL.

The Islamic State is probably the most ideology-driven actor taking part in the Syrian conflict with their war goals closely connected to their understanding of the contemporary global order and preferred model of societal organization. ISIS rejects the notion of the contemporary world order organized around sovereign states and democracy as a preferred model of governance. Their understanding of the world streams from an originalist understanding of holy Islamic scriptures and perceives regional states as an obstacle for establishing a caliphate which would include all Muslims under the rule of a conservative Islamic regime. Although regional states such as Syria and Iraq, but also others, are understood as a part of unjust imperialist heritage (e.g. Sykes-Picot Agreement) and generally being against the concept of states, there is a peculiar inclination of the Islamic State to be recognized as a legitimate international entity by the international community due to their effective control of territory and population as a way of self-determination. This aspect of their ideology is not given any coverage by *The Economist* whatsoever. The coverage is focused on their radical beliefs and methods of governing. The author would argue that deeper understanding of every actor's beliefs and goals, and its communication to the public, would add additional value to public understanding of the conflict and finding ways and means for its peaceful transformation. This also refers to the issue whether all actors should be considered legitimate parties in conflict resolution.

Although Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi has been recognized as the Islamic State's leader, being a secretive figure and not appearing in ISIS videos of beheading and acknowledging responsibility for terrorist attacks, a person dubbed Jihadi John became the most recognized face of ISIS[196] and, in a way, a personification for ISIS's terrorist activities and culture of violence. Jihadi John was a masked Islamist with a British accent, delivering the Islamic State's messaging following some of the worst, yet most symbolic atrocities committed by the ISIS fighters. He is portrayed as conservative, cruel and indoctrinated by Salafi jihadism, yet changing the representation from a typical Wahhabi apparel of an old bearded extremist to a young and modern Westerner-alike with radical beliefs and values.

"*Boastful combatants post well-scripted videos to attract their foreign peers, promising heaven for those who leave their lives of Western decadence to become 'martyrs'. They tweet 'selfies' holding the severed heads of*

[194] *Ibid*
[195] *Ibid*
[196] *The unmasking of "Jihadi John"*; in *The Economist*; 16/2/2015; https://www.economist.com/news/2015/02/26/the-unmasking-of-jihadi-john?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

their enemies after photos of the luxuries, such as Red Bull, an energy drink, that are available to the fighters. And they issue threats to the West while using emoticons—smiling faces, for instance, formed by punctuation marks—and internet acronyms such as LOL."[197]

Having been featured in several videos of the Islamic State showing a number of beheadings of captives and Western hostages, he had become voice and image of ISIS, before being identified as a British citizen named Mohammed Emwazi and ultimately reported dead in 2015. Overall, the character of Jihadi John can be described as carefully ISIS-produced character, while the media coverage of his atrocities and humanization of terror using his character have contributed to the wider Islamic State's propaganda effort and radicalization of Westerners. Coverage and dissemination of imagery of Jihadi John's atrocities have contributed to the stereotypical image of an Islamist beheading a Christian. Despite the fact that beheadings probably represent only a disproportionately smaller portion of total killings conducted by ISIS, they have been a way for ISIS to generate more coverage, enhancing its name recognition and recruitment effort[198] – given the publicity that international media gain from reporting these atrocities, it can be argued that the coverage of these atrocities has been instrumental, not only for spreading the Islamic State's message globally, but also for the very sustenance of a successful propaganda mechanism for ISIS.

Besides and before the infamous imagery of cruel atrocities, *The Economist*'s general coverage of the Islamic State's involvement in the Syrian conflict began in 2013 when ISIS managed to expand itself to Syria following military offensives practically against all other actors involved in the conflict – the government forces, the opposition groups and organizations and the Kurds in the north. These offensives were followed by large territorial gains that saw its establishment as one of the main actors of the internal conflict.

"*Syria's power vacuum has given it an ideal base. Since expanding into the country in April, ISIS has spread across the northern and eastern provinces.*"[199]

During 2013 and 2014, the Islamic State conquered large swathes of territory in the east and north of Syria. And while it had direct control over an extensive territory, most of this territory was largely sparsely inhabited desert. This, however, does not diminish the fact that ISIS had control over strategic roads and oil fields, which greatly enhanced its capability to attract foreign fighters and smaller groups, as well to finance effort in both Syria and Iraq. In Syria, ISIS managed to gain control over the cities and infrastructure in provinces of Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor.

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[197] *It ain't half hot here, mum*; in *The Economist*; 1/9/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/09/01/it-aint-half-hot-here-mum
[198] *Ibid*
[199] *Will the jihadists overreach?*; 12/10/2013; *Op. cit*

One of the more important moments in the construction of the narrative around the Islamic State was the fall of the city Palmyra in May 2015. Beyond the more strategic roads and cities in Iraq and Syria, with the most notable example of Mosul in Iraq, the moment when ISIS managed to take the city of Palmyra under its control was especially important. The destruction of cultural heritage was mediatized to a great extent to show the counter-civilizing core of ISIS values and ideology. The fall of Palmyra and subsequent destruction of cultural heritage, as well as the ancient statues in Mosul's museum earlier in 2015 – had brought much more tangible and symbolically more significant framework of pictures and ideas about ISIS to an average reader. Cultural heritage destruction has demonized ISIS, transforming it from this distant and mystic entity to a close danger to Western values and the way of life, much like the 9/11 had done with al-Qaeda or any other terrorist attack committed by ISIS in European major cities or San Bernardino in California. ISIS fighters demolished major temples and other buildings and artifacts that were part of the UNESCO world heritage site – fifth world heritage site in Syria out of the total number of six and which are now lying in ruins.[200]

"*Syria's famous ruined Roman city has meant many things to many people. […] all over the archaeological site at Palmyra you see the same symbol […]Romans, who built Palmyra and decorated its monuments with the egg, meaning life or rebirth, and the arrow, war or death. For centuries the two were carved together, signifying the duality of human existence.*"[201]

The West constructs – ISIS destroys. There is a certain level of cultural appropriation of Syrian cultural heritage present in *The Economist*'s coverage of this topic. *The Economist* and the media more generally, come vocally forward in showcasing the importance of centuries, or even millenniums, old cultural artifacts and buildings and the threat to western values and identity posed by their destruction. Equal articulation is rarely found for the value of peace or the singularity of human life. It also has a lot to do with familiarity – lessons learned at history classes or scenes from familiar movies are being obliterated by ISIS – thus touching the Western identity core.

"*The jihadists of Islamic State understand the meaning of symbols better than most. Over the past year they have projected fear across Iraq and Syria, posting footage of people they have beheaded. In February they released videos of ancient statues being smashed in the museum at Mosul in northern Iraq and, later, the bulldozing of the ancient Assyrian capital, Nimrud. IS wants to do away with 'false idols', promising instead an Islamic caliphate that threatens to be as extreme as it is thuggish.*"[202]

Here, concretely, *The Economist* provides the reader with really extensive historical and cultural background, pinpointing the claim just made. The narrative around the destruction of cultural

[200] *The caliphate strikes back*; in *The Economist*; 23/5/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/05/23/the-caliphate-strikes-back
[201] *Stones that speak*; in *The Economist*; 30/5/2015; https://www.economist.com/books-and-arts/2015/05/30/stones-that-speak
[202] *Ibid*

heritage is one corresponding to a cultural genocide – however, strongly contextualized beyond acts of terror and given a religious connotation, referring to an article in ISIS's official monthly gazette:

"*The destruction 'served to enrage the kuffar (unbelievers)', declared its March issue, 'a deed that in itself is beloved to Allah'.*"[203]

On the other hand, destruction of cultural heritage is also described as marketing for selling the confiscated artefacts on black markets in order to generate funds.

"*Tellingly, the jihadists ransacking Mosul's museum with chainsaws earlier this year did not show the destruction of its most precious artefacts, says an archaeologist from Mosul—because they had already been spirited abroad.[…] antiquities trafficking is now a prime source of IS revenue. And as Western air strikes bomb the oil installations IS has captured, the need for antiquities-dollars will only rise.*"[204]

One part of the article goes far to discuss if the destruction constitutes a war crime or cultural genocide and whether widening the responsibility-to-protect doctrine to cultural heritage would be counterproductive:

"*Military action for the sake of antiquities might only further turn the region against Western powers, after they stood by while tyrants with chemical and conventional weapons killed hundreds of thousands of human beings*."[205]

Another important aspect of the general narrative of the Syrian conflict has been the Islamic State's ability to create a sustainable and efficient model of administrative and financial governance, something that other opposition groups have struggled with. Other than the already mentioned trafficking of cultural artifacts on the global black market, ISIS has in reality created a multi-source model for raising revenue which had enabled it to "*pay fighters around $400 a month, which is more than Syrian rebel groups or the Iraqi government offer*"[206] and function as a proto-state servicing its population through for example "*paying schoolteachers and providing for the poor and widowed*."[207]

"*Unlike other terrorist groups, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, IS largely funds itself rather than relying on rich supporters.*"[208]

The Economist reports about multiple ways of how ISIS funds its efforts:

- Some part of revenue is generated through sponsorship, especially from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait. *The Economist* reports that ISIS has "*tapped into the pool of funds from Gulf Arab donors*

[203] *Save our stones – Jihad and vandalism*; in *The Economist*; 13/6/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/06/13/save-our-stones
[204] *Ibid*
[205] *Ibid*
[206] *Where Islamic State gets its money*; in *The Economist*; 4/1/2015; https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/01/04/where-islamic-state-gets-its-money?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[207] *Ibid*
[208] *Ibid*

to Salafist and jihadist groups in Syria,"[209] a model of financing similar to other oppositions groups. However, their beliefs and relatively more efficient fighting efforts can be argued to have contributed to the inflow of relatively larger funding, incentivizing the recruitment of fighters. The Gulf States have for long been accused for aiding terrorism, either through direct state-financing or through allowing the low of money from these states to terrorist organizations through pseudo-charity private-citizens-funded organizations.

- ISIS has funded itself through sales of oil and gas since the early days of AQI.

  "*Bulk of its money comes from oil revenues from fields under its control in western Iraq and eastern Syria. American officials estimated that it was making $2m a day from oil before air strikes started (locals reckon it was more).*"[210]

  Following successful military operations, ISIS managed to capture large oil fields in Iraq and Syria, most notably following the success of the Mosul campaign in 2014. Oil production and trade have represented significant source of revenue for ISIS, especially prior to US-led airstrikes against oil-production sights and refineries in 2014 and, not much less significantly, decline of the global oil prices. These have effectively made generating revenue through production and sales of oil harder and less lucrative. The topic of international smuggling and trade of ISIS-produced oil has been a subject of critical analysis of some of the Western media, but has not been picked up by *The Economist*. Most of the allegations of cooperating with ISIS when oil-trade is concerned have been aimed at Turkey and its involvement in transport of oil to the Mediterranean by trucks or oil pipes.

- "*Like other jihadist groups, it has learned that kidnapping can be profitable. IS earned at least $20m last year from ransoms paid for hostages, including several French and Spanish journalists. America and Britain, which have a strict policy against paying ransoms for hostages, are pressuring European countries to stop paying up (something they deny doing).*"[211]
- "*IS also depends on established infrastructure. Most of the electricity generated in Syria comes from power stations in regime-controlled areas and is transmitted through a national grid, which covers IS-held zones. These plants run on natural gas produced from fields under regime control.*"[212]

  This means that ISIS has managed to benefit of its control over the electric grid network and sell the electric energy produced in the north of the country, sometimes even by regime-held power plants, back to the regime, but also the opposition groups, adding notion to the strategic position of the Islamic State.

- Extortion and taxation in the areas under its control.

  "*Revenue comes from taxing farmers in both Syria and Iraq, and from various forms of extortion in the towns it controls, including levying jizya (tax) on Christians.*"[213]

[209] *The Islamic State – Can it govern?*; 25/8/2014; *Op. cit*
[210] *Where Islamic State gets its money*; 4/1/2015; *Op. cit*
[211] *Ibid*
[212] *Ibid*
[213] *The Islamic State – Can it govern?*; 25/8/2014; *Op. cit*

The valleys of Tigris and Euphrates have historically been the most fertile area of the Middle East. The Islamic State's effective control over this area means that enough food can be produced to feed the population, while it also opens a window for taxation of agricultural production. Moreover, taxing non-Muslims and foreigners also has its roots in the Arab and Ottoman rule, and represents additional source of revenue.

"*Money that IS extorted from contractors, businesses and institutions ultimately derived from the expenditure of the central government in Baghdad [and Damascus]. In both countries, IS's 'subjects' include thousands of employees of the respective central governments, who are still drawing their salaries from the government and carrying out their functions.*"[214]

ISIS has been relatively successful in extracting state funding through government-paid salaries and other types of entitlements.

"*IS model of stealing from and feeding off the Syrian and Iraqi states has worked well so far. But it will become much more difficult for IS to rule its territory if the Damascus and Baghdad governments stop being so helpful.*"[215]

- Seizing assets and weaponry from areas under its control. Particularly important was the fall of Mosul, Iraq's second largest city, when managed to get a hold of significant amounts of modern military equipment and take money from the Mosul Central Bank. *The Economist* estimates that ISIS managed to take around 430 million worth of money in cash, while also seizing "*huge stores of American-supplied arms, ammunition and vehicles, apparently including six Black Hawk helicopters*".[216] Other larger cities in Syria and Iraq that ISIS had control over include Raqqa, Deir ez-Zor, Palmira, Falluja, Ramadi, Tikrit and Samarra – which all, not only went through horrific prosecution and mistreatment of civilians, but also wide plundering of assets.

For the sake of reference and clearer sense of the share size of territory and population the Islamic State has actually controlled – the territory under ISIS has been reported to encompensate as much as up to 8 million people, with estimates of fighting capacities of ranging from around 11000 (out of which up to 5000 in Syria)[217] to between 20000 and 31500 fighters[218], many of which foreigners.

In general terms, the overall approach of *The Economist* does not differ much from most of the Western media, and international media at large for a matter of fact. There is a wider consensus on how the Islamic State is depicted and covered as an actor of the Syrian conflict – that it is an organization of radical jihadi fundamentalists and general widely recognized to be a terrorist

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[214] *Ibid*
[215] *Ibid*
[216] *Two Arab countries fall apart – The Islamic State of Iraq and Greater Syria*; 12/6/2014; *Op. cit*
[217] *Ibid*
[218] Yeginsu, Ceylan; *ISIS Draws a Steady Stream of Recruits from Turkey*; in *The New York Times*; 15/9/2014; https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/16/world/europe/turkey-is-a-steady-source-of-isis-recruits.html

organization, and, as such, an illegitimate negotiating partner. The focal aspect of *The Economist*'s coverage of ISIS is unprecedented expression of violence and its medialization as a propaganda tool. The Islamic State's attitude towards display of violence is something that sets it apart from other actors involved in the conflict – not the share percentage of victims. War crimes and crimes against humanity (that would most probably legally qualify as genocide), public beheadings and mass executions, destruction of cultural heritage, etc. are connected to the Islamic State's ideology and religious beliefs – sustaining the symbolic connection between violence and Islam as source or legitimization of violence. While *The Economist*'s narrative concerning the Islamic State is generally overwhelmingly negative and in line with how ISIS is general covered, the attempt was to capture the additional, more specific layers of the narrative. One of these layers is the underlying notion of ISIS as uncivilized and, more so, irrational – in opposition to the Western capability to pursue the concept of rationality in governing and conduct interstate foreign politics, and not violence. Could the mediatized insanity be translated into concrete *realpolitik*? The conclusion of this section is that *The Economist* has largely missed an opportunity to attain an intellectual and critical high ground and live up to the promise of wider and deeper contextualization and understanding of underpinning processes that have shaped the Islamic State as one of the most media-covered contemporary phenomena.[219]

2.3.4. Kurds

Kurds are, for purposes of clearer classification, designated as the fourth among major groups fighting in the Syrian civil war. The author of this study would argue that not including them under the umbrella of the Syrian opposition, but treating them as a distinctive and independent actor, is justified due to their separate ethnic identity (1), territorial compactness (2), level of organization and governance (3), special cross-border relations with Kurds in the Middle East region and Anatolia (5) and distinctive war goals and strategy (6) – among other reasons. *The Economist* follows this path, designating them as a separate actor in the Syrian internal conflict.

Kurds are one of the largest ethnic groups in Syria, with estimates that they "*make up around 10% of Syria's population*."[220] Regarding their relationship with the Syrian central government, they have a history of turbulent and negative relations and human rights abuses and harassment. In one of

[219] For the author of this study it is especially important to refer to the explanation of the adaptation of extremely violent patterns of behavior by terrorist groups as an indicator of weakness rather than strength. Analyzing terrorism as a communication strategy, it is possible to intellectually challenge some of the media paradigms in covering ISIS and shed different light on their involvement in conflicts in both Iraq and Syria. Louw, Eric P; *The Media and Political Process*; SAGE Publications; London, 2005; pages 238-251 – *The Media and Terrorism*

[220] *The precarious state of Rojava – Can Syria's Kurds keep control of their territory?*; in *The Economist*; 25/1/2018; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2018/01/25/can-syrias-kurds-keep-control-of-their-territory

the more recent articles, *The Economist*'s editorial makes broader contextualization of the history of this relation – notably, more in the light of the Turkish involvement in the conflict against the Kurdish side, than the Kurdish-Syrian relationship. Arguably, during the earlier stages of the conflict, relative lack of context would leave a reader under-informed, causing a possible lack of understanding of why the Kurds have stayed out of the Syrian opposition organizational frameworks.

"*For decades the Kurds in Syria suffered under the oppression of Mr Assad and, before him, his father. Many were stripped of their citizenship and denied the right to own property. Others were booted off their land to make way for Arabs. Kurdish publications were banned and private schools were prohibited from teaching the Kurdish language. Little investment flowed into the oil- and gas-rich region. Instead the regime in Damascus milked the fertile northern plains to feed the rest of the country. As a result, the Kurds are desperately poor.*"[221]

This paragraph in one of the articles pinpoints some fundamental factors behind the Kurdish war effort and summarizes the long-standing grievances of the Kurdish minority in Syria within the wider social and economic context. For one thing, one of the major issues of Kurdish history of living in Syria and being governed from Damascus is when a relatively large number of Syrian Kurds was aborted of their citizenship and civil rights by the regime of Bashar al-Assad's father. According to a report from Human Rights Watch, in 1962, around 20% of the Syrian Kurds were stripped of their Syrian citizenship as part of an exceptional popular census in the Hasakeh governorate in northeastern of the country.[222]

"*The census was one component of a comprehensive plan to Arabize the resources-rich northeast of Syria, an area with the largest concentration of non-Arabs in the country. Decree No. 93, issued in August 1962, ordered that a census be carried out […] for the purpose of identifying 'alien infiltrators'. The stated purpose of this census was to discover how many people had illegally crossed the border from Turkish Kurdistan. Kurds had to prove that they had lived in Syria at least since 1945 or lose any claim to Syrian citizenship.*"[223]

During this period of suppression of the Kurdish ethnic identity in Syria, part of the Kurdish minority had de facto been left stateless, facing difficult living conditions which have influenced the social and economic development of the whole Kurdish Syrian population. People have lost their voting rights, rights to own and inherit property, etc. Their systemic capacity to influence politics through the Syrian political system had been diminished. Policies and practices of the central government in Damascus have been historically discriminative towards Kurds in many forms. According to the same report:

"*Restrictions have included: various bans on the use of the Kurdish language; refusal to register children with Kurdish names; replacement of Kurdish place names with new names in Arabic; prohibition of businesses that*

[221] *Ibid*
[222] *Syria – Silenced Kurds*; Human Rights Watch Report, Vol. 8, No. 4 (E); October 1996
[223] *Ibid*

do not have Arabic names; not permitting Kurdish private schools; and the prohibition of books and other materials written in Kurdish."[224]

This has influenced their ability to gain recognized diplomas and have quality education – further influencing both their horizontal and vertical social (im)mobility. Kurds have been systemically kept out of military and medical schools and rarely been appointed as judges or prosecutors, or for most of the public offices as a matter of fact, influencing the group's capacity to develop sustainably. Overall, *The Economist*'s coverage the history of Syrian-Kurdish relations lacks necessary depth and fails to inform and educate the reader about the historically distinctive position of the Kurdish minority in Syria in comparison to Syrian Arabs and the Syrian opposition. The notion of their distinctiveness is introduced more subtly and intuitively for the reader – based on stereotypes and symbolic linkages: in the early articles, their stance to the conflict is described as "*a canny game*."[225]

"*In the Arabic dialects of Iraq and Syria, a man who is unreasonably stubborn is said to have the mind of a Kurd. Perhaps such hardheadedness explains how the Kurds, buffeted for centuries between Persian, Arab, Turkish and Russian empires, have sustained a proud sense of nationhood. It may also explain why Syria's 3m-odd Kurds, despite suffering more than other minorities during 40 years of rule by the Assad clan, are only now, and hesitantly, joining the fight to overthrow it.*"[226]

In the early stages of the conflict following the Arab Spring, Kurds are described as, basically, merchants by *The Economist* - who does not recognize their reluctance to enter the conflict as a strategy and wider divergence from the oppositional vision for post-conflict Syria, but deems it as trading values of the oppositional uprising for political goals, almost as cowardice. They are also described as tribal and politically fractioned.

"*Partly as a result, the Kurds have until now failed to respond to pleas from other rebel groups to throw their weight behind the uprising.*"[227]

Factionalism *The Economist* had been referring to is one between the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and other smaller Kurdish movements and parties under the Kurdish National Council. Only a couple of smaller parties accepted to take part in negotiations around forming the Syrian National Council in 2011. Majority of Kurdish parties perceived the Syrian opposition as closely tied to Turkey, which they saw as an obstacle for cooperation. In mid-2012 they all joined to form Kurdish Supreme Committee, also establishing People Protection Units (YPG), which were basically armed battalions. This marked the beginning of the Kurdish effort of self-governance in the northern part of Syria, with People Protection Unit groups gradually taking full control over Kurdish-inhabited towns. Kurds are

[224] *Ibid*
[225] *Hedging their Syrian bets*; in *The Economist*; 4/4/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21559959
[226] *Ibid*
[227] *Ibid*

geographically concentrated on the north of Syria, along the border with Turkey, sharing a border with Kurdish population in neighboring states of Turkey and Iraq, which to some point also enabled the inflow of Kurds from the region. Their ability to control territory and defend themselves, enabled them to take effective control over Kurdish-inhabited areas along the Turkish frontier – Afrin on the northwest, Kobani on the north-central and urban centers such as Amuda, al-Malikiyah, Qamishli and Hasakah on the northeast –forming three core part of Kurdish-controlled territory – cantons of Afrin, Kobani and Jazira.

As said, Kurds had started to organize themselves and establish autonomous institutions from 2012 under the leadership of the Democratic Union Party.

"*As well as setting up Kurdish-language schools and Kurdish outfits, the PYD is busily arming itself, forming three battalions so far. It claims this is to defend against the chaos that may ensue after Mr Assad's fall.*"[228]

Kurds had started relatively peaceful establishment of an autonomous system of governance, while gradually arming themselves and taking control of different towns and public infrastructure such as roads and government public facilities, largely following the withdrawal of the government forces. This expansion and grip over a growing number of towns brought them in clash, principally, but not exclusively, with some of the Syrian opposition groups at the north of the country and ISIS. *The Economist* connects the volatile relation between the Free Syrian Army and Kurds with possible conditioning from the Turkish side of weapons inflow to the Syrian opposition with beating down of the growing Kurdish autonomy.[229]

The notion of Turkey sponsoring radical opposition groups has been reinforced with the appearance of ISIS and growing violence between Kurds and the Islamic State, culminating with the battle for the city of Kobani in 2014-15.

"*[ISIS] has come up against one unusually tough opponent. Syria's ethnic Kurds have stubbornly clung onto three separate enclaves along Syria's border with Turkey and even pushed back into lands captured by IS.*"[230]

During late summer of 2014, the Islamic State had been:

"*concentrating its forces for an all-out offensive to take the central enclave around the Syrian Kurdish-majority town of Ain al-Arab, known as Kobane in Kurdish, on the border with Turkey. IS sees the territory as strategic*

[228] *South by south-east*; in *The Economist*; 20/10/2012; https://www.economist.com/europe/2012/10/20/south-by-south-east?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[229] *A third party joins the fray*; in *The Economist*; 23/11/2012; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2012/11/23/a-third-party-joins-the-fray?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[230] *Islamic State, Turkey and Syria's Kurds – Murky relations*; in *The Economist*; 22/9/2014; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/09/22/murky-relations?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577f0e

because it lies close to the edges of its 'caliphate' and to a supply route used by foreign fighters joining the group."[231]

The siege of Kobani was particularly brutal, provoking the air response from the US. The articles about Turkey's role in the Islamic State's offensive are speculative in tone:

"*Turkey's leaders may have given a green light to the IS offensive with the aim of weakening the troublesome Kurds. Turkish officials deny such claims.*"[232]

The Economist perpetuates moral ambiguity of Kurdish strategic decision of not joining the Syrian opposition's war effort against Assad, basically hinting that Kurds have only themselves to blame.

"*In 2012 Bashar Assad, Syria's president, largely handed over rule of the Kurdish north-east to Kurdish forces, probably to avoid his forces being overstretched. That attracted the wrath of Syria's rebels, who accused the Kurds of doing dirty deals with the Assad regime to protect themselves or, worse, of siding with it. Some Syrian rebel groups even fought alongside Jabhat al-Nusra, al-Qaeda's affiliate in Syria, in an attempt to take Ain al-Arab from the Kurds in July 2013.*"[233]

By drawing this notion – *The Economist* finds itself on a position which also allows it to be apologetic towards Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict – predominantly against Kurds – a position disenabling victimization of the Kurdish side. Kurds in Syria are simply not portrayed as the victim of the conflict in same manner as the Syrian opposition – there is no similar editorial affiliation to them. During late 2014 and early 2015, Kurdish force units, helped by the US airstrikes, had managed to retake Kobani and push ISIS into a retreat.

There is some focus on their self-governance – which is framed as irredentism, but in a more dismissive manner than it has historically been the case, with examples such as Bosnia or Kosovo. Syrian Kurdish project is largely not referred to under its widely recognized name – Rojava (Rojava meaning *west*, with the full name of the Kurdish region in Syria being *Rojavayê Kurdistanê* or *West Kurdistan*), nor its name for official usage – Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. Three Kurdish cantons have been de facto autonomous since 2012 under the principal leadership of the Democratic Union Party, while the autonomy was officially declared in 2014, with constitution being adopted by popular assemblies of three cantons. This declaration of autonomy was denounced both by the Damascus government and the Syrian opposition. The Kurdish political project has not been covered by *The Economist* – whose editorial predominantly opted for focusing on the conflict. The peculiarity of this fact lies in the fact that the Kurdish political project remains a part of one of the more comprehensive and viable post-conflict solutions for the future of Syria as a state – more so that it

[231] *Ibid*
[232] *Ibid*
[233] *Ibid*

envisages the survival of Syria as a state as a whole, following a federal model of governance and autonomy for all major actors involved in the internal conflict – minus ISIS. This disregard comes in spite of occasional recognition of Rojava being a positive and sustainable model of governance.

"*The Syrian Kurds' ability to go it alone is in large part due to the skill of its fighters against IS. The People's Protection Units (YPG), the armed forces of the PYD, are reckoned to include some 40,000 men and women, although the majority are part-time fighters. Minorities, including Christians, as well as Arabs have joined them. […]Syria's Kurds have done rather a good job of governing themselves more generally (helped by the fact that Mr Assad refrains from bombing Kurdish areas as he does zones held by mainstream Sunni Arab rebels).*"[234]

The author of this study would argue that part of this disregard streams from the fact that Rojava's ideology and vision of governance differs from *The Economist*'s editorial's ideological stance, but also a need to distance itself from the controversy of supporting Kurdish self-governance.

"*The PYD's leadership and ideology—an odd mix of socialism, ethnic nationalism, and feminism, capped by a devotion to the leader—closely copy the PKK's, whose leader, Abdullah Ocalan, has been in prison since 1999.*"[235]

Core leftist political agenda is seen as an obstacle for a viable political project. For reference, the political agenda of the PYD is translated into the constitution of Rojava – named the Charter of the Social Contract – highlighting the bottom-up nature of Kurdish politics. The political, social and economic make-up of the Kurdish political project includes strong notions of political, religious and cultural pluralism and freedoms, gender equality and women emancipation, direct democracy, environmentalism, cooperative economy and social responsibility, etc. The positioning of the PYD on the far left edge of the political spectrum has arguably been one of the factors of *The Economist*'s disregard of the Syrian Kurdish political peace proposal.

Overall, however, the coverage of Syrian Kurds by *The Economist* has been most straightforward of all actors involved in the Syrian civil war. Albeit the criticism of the Kurdish lack of readiness to join the Syrian opposition against the Assad's regime, their coverage within the narrative of the Syrian conflict has been predominantly neutral-to-positive. Kurds are, interestingly, supported by all international actors involved in the conflict – minus Turkey – which puts international Western media in a peculiar position of having to deal with the complexity in narrative construction which has to encapsulate Turkish membership in the Western military alliance around NATO and its conflictual relation towards Syrian Kurds. This fact is also recognized by the editorial of *The Economist*:

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[234] *Syria's Kurdish areas – Striking out on their own*; in *The Economist*; 29/10/2014; https://www.economist.com/news/2014/10/29/striking-out-on-their-own?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577f0e

[235] *A third party joins the fray*; 23/11/2012; *Op. cit*

"*Kurdish areas are some of the most stable and well-governed parts of the region, despite endemic corruption. This, and the central role Kurds are playing in the international fight against Islamic State, may make it harder to ignore Kurdish pleas for greater autonomy, if not independence. Yet many obstacles remain.*"[236]

Western support to Kurds has been creating tensions between Turkey and the rest of the Western coalition against ISIS and Assad. This can also be identified as the main factor preventing the narrative simplification from positive imagery of Kurds to moral exclusiveness in condemning Turkey's involvement in the conflict the same way it exists in the case of some other internal and external actors (Syrian government, Russia, Iran and the Islamic State). Politics of naming is visible when Turkish bombing of Kurds is labeled as just "*adding to the chaos*."[237]

2.4. External Actors

The list of internal actors is exhausted with these four actors, however, as mentioned earlier multiple regional and international actors have also been taking part in the conflict, transforming it from an exclusively internal conflict to a complex international conflict. Mapping the internal actors, as reported by *The Economist*, has so far been a thorough analytical effort. Due to the fact that *The Economist*'s narrative of the war in Syrian has predominantly centered around and constructed on premises of a civil war, more focus will have been given to the internal actors. However, in order to obtain a complete picture of the way the conflict has been covered by *The Economist*, it is essential to look into the ways how regional and global powers are depicted in the context of the Syrian conflict and how the interlacing of their motives and strategic goals has been explained. Although the conflict has been predominantly framed as a fight for freedom and democracy against the brutal regime with side-elements of terrorism streaming from the involvement of the Islamic State, important part of the coverage has consisted of reports on, among other things, Turkey's, Iran's, Russian and US role in the conflict. It will be important to see how their and other's role in the conflict is understood and if their involvement has transformed the narrative to the extent of Syrian conflict being understood as a regional or a proxy conflict. Based on the understanding that *The Economist*'s editorial perceives their role as secondary to the one of the internal actors, the content analysis of *The Economist*'s coverage of the external interference in the war will be far more condensed and aiming to encapsulate their role.

[236] *Who the Kurds are*; in *The Economist*; 28/10/2014; https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2014/10/28/who-the-kurds-are?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577f0e
[237] *Turkey and Syria – Erdogan's dangerous gambit*; in *The Economist*; 30/7/2015; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2015/07/30/erdogans-dangerous-gambit?zid=309&ah=80dcf288b8561b012f603b9fd9577f0e

2.4.1. Regional Actors

The editorial seems to be aware of the negative potential that could derive from the involvement of regional powers – "*the rival camps will fuel a worsening conflict that could destabilize the entire region*"[238] – however, often fails to acknowledge the magnitude of existing involvement. One thing that it does acknowledge is the diverging interests of regional powers/entities on the Syrian battleground.

On one side of the Syrian conflict, Iran (as the strongest Shia regime in the region) and Hezbollah have supported the Assad regime and government forces both politically and militarily.

"*While complaining about what it describes as an international conspiracy against Mr Assad, Iran continues to supply him with arms, military expertise, fuel and money, helped by its Lebanese militia protégé, Hezbollah, and the Shia-dominated and increasingly sectarian-minded government of Nuri al-Maliki in Iraq.*"[239]

Iran and Assad's Syria have a history of strategic alliance in the Middle East region and maintenance of friendly regimes in both Iraq and Syria is perceived as a strategic interest by the Iranian theocratic government in its wider regional geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Arabia. Iran also has economic interests in Syria – connected to the trade of oil and gas as mentioned in the section about the roots of the conflict. Iranian support for Assad has come in many forms, ranging from military support and logistics, over direct financial support to political support on the international stage. *The Economist*, like most of the media in the West, also relates Iran's support to Syria with their nuclear program and politics of (de)proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East. The official Iranian narrative of the Syrian conflict which Iran uses as foreign policy rationale is looking at the Syrian conflict as Assad's regime's anti-imperialist fight against Western-sponsored regime change paired with the notion of regional interest involved against Shia Muslim population and the conflict being fueled by Sunni neighbors. *The Economist* perceives Hezbollah as no more than an extended hand of the Iranian regime. Hezbollah's involvement in the Syrian conflict has been more extensive and direct, with several thousand belligerents taking direct involvement in the fights – primarily against the opposition forces.

Hezbollah involvement has served as a motive for the entanglement of Israel, which also has some stake in the Syrian conflict, more so given its control over the Golan Heights. Israel has conducted multiple military operations on the Syrian territory over the course of the conflict.

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[238] *Hold your horses*; in *The Economist*; 28/1/2012;
https://www.economist.com/node/21543542?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[239] *The neighbours – Meddling at their peril*; in *The Economist*; 15/9/2012;
https://www.economist.com/node/21562918?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

"*How long can Israel keep striking Syria and get away with it? […] Israel's military establishment continues to insist that their targets remain missiles bound for Lebanon's most powerful military force, Hezbollah, not the Assad regime. […] But while apparently driven by the operational calculations of its generals, Israel's repeated strikes on Damascus risk dragging the country into Syria's civil war.*"[240]

Israel has largely seen its limited involvement in the conflict as an effort of containment against Iran's influence in the Middle East region. Israel had officially remained neutral in regards to the Syrian civil war, before having acknowledged limited involvement in previous years in 2017, first and foremost through missile attacks against weaponry storages and military facilities on Syrian soil. Israel's involvement in the conflict can be summed up as carefully planned and conducted targeted air strikes, without the intention of escalation.

"*Israel's prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, has studiously sought to steer clear of the Arab awakening, preferring a posture of splendid isolation. 'We wish success to both sides,' was how Amos Harel, the military correspondent of Haaretz, an Israeli daily newspaper, described Israel's approach of letting Syria's multiple forces debilitate and weaken each other.*" [241]

As for Jordan's and Lebanon's role in the Syrian conflict – it has been even more limited. Both countries have seen growing social tensions, partially due to the growing inflow of refugees which, on one hand, present additional social burden to sorrowing political and socioeconomic environment, and on the other hand, add to the already diverse and complex social picture. Overall their involvement has been minor and both of the countries have been on the receiving end of influence from the Syrian conflict, which has exacerbated social tensions in both countries.

"*Tripoli has repeatedly flared up in communal violence.*"[242]

"*There is no love lost between Alawite and Sunni quarters of Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city. It lies just half an hour by car from the border with Syria, where violence increasingly pits the sects against each other. Here, bullets have often flown across the road that divides them, the aptly named Syria Street.*"[243]

Same could be said for Iraq, which has its own internal conflict – but has shared comparably similar dynamics to the ones of the Syrian conflict – due to the Islamic State's cross border effort and even similar interethnic strife between Kurdish, Shia and Sunni groups.

The most regional involvement arguably comes from Turkey and the Gulf states, who all side with various Syrian opposition groups.

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[240] *Israel in Syria – Explaining the airstrikes*; in *The Economist*; 6/5/2013; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2013/05/06/explaining-the-airstrikes?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[241] *Ibid*

[242] *The neighbours – Meddling at their peril*; 15/9/2012; *Op. cit*

[243] *Lebanon's Syria worries – Balance of fear*; in *The Economist*; 17/3/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21550323?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

"*The region's Sunni powers, bolstered by a network of private individuals, many with a fiercely anti-Shia outlook, finance and arm Syria's rebels via a compliant Turkey, and with the enthusiastic help of Sunni factions in Lebanon and Iraq. Western countries chip in with cash and 'non-lethal' aid – which may include radios, intelligence and night-vision gear – yet their shyness bolsters rebel suspicions that the West, at the bidding of Israel, deviously seeks to prolong Syria's misery.*"[244]

The involvement of the Gulf states – principally Saudi Arabia and Qatar is especially peculiar in a sense that their role is clearly related to understanding their effort to aid the Syrian opposition and other, more radical, groups as a foreign policy involvement against influence of Iran as the strongest Shia regime. Looking at Syria as a battleground for shifting the regional balance of power between regional proponents of Shia and Sunni version of Islam and regional regimes as their political embodiments – offers a different understanding of the Syrian internal conflict as a proxy war of regional power-holds. The content analysis of *The Economist*'s reporting on the involvement of Saudis and Qataris in the Syrian war shows evidence of this narrative, but only in traces and completely sidelined by the internal conflict and anti-Assad narrative. Dismissing the notion of insufficient awareness, the author of this study would argue that has largely been an editorial decision and choice to position Saudi Arabia and Qatar as basically supporters of democratic upheaval effort. With the Gulf states' interests occasionally acknowledged, the two states particularly are not recognized for their role in exacerbating the conflict by being the largest providers of arms and financial assistance to the Syrian opposition groups beyond the line of distinction between moderate and radical rebel groups.

"*The Saudis see themselves as protectors of Sunni Muslim orthodoxy, locked in a long-term struggle to contain Iran, a rival power they view as both politically and religiously subversive. They have sparred before with Iran in proxy fights in places such as Lebanon, Iraq and Bahrain, so the war in Syria would seem a natural extension.*"[245]

The assistance in money and arms, as well as training and logistical help, are framed as a foreign policy reflex, not as a conscious foreign policy agenda which is exacerbating violence. For what is worth, *The Economist* makes a distinction between Saudi Arabia on one side with Qatar and private donors and foundations on the other as more willing to fund radical jihadi groups and Muslim Brotherhood – whom "*the Saudis detest.*"[246] As far as the Gulf states' regimes are concerned, the Syrian conflict presents a battleground between various fractions inside the global Wahhabi movement. Overall, the assistance which the Gulf states have been providing to the opposition has not been recognized for what it is by *The Economist* – the single most effective factor of radicalization of the opposition groups, as described in the section about Syrian opposition. "*On paper the league's*

[244] *The neighbours – Meddling at their peril*; 15/9/2012; *Op. cit*
[245] *Syria's civil war – Foreign meddlers*; in *The Economist*; 4/9/2013; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2013/09/04/foreign-meddlers
[246] *Ibid*

members agree on the need to defeat terrorism. But they disagree on who is a terrorist,"[247] is one of *The Economist*'s articles blunt conclusion describing internal rift among the states of the Arabian Peninsula. Importantly, Qatar is also home to the largest Arab-language media which is state-funded and a strong pro-opposition international voice.

Turkey, the Syrian northern neighbor has had the strongest involvement in Syria among all regional powers – which has deteriorated from a relatively positive relationship from the pre-Arab-Spring era to a Turkish military interventions in Syria. *The Economist* has emphasized the fact that the Syrian conflict had fundamentally affected Turkish foreign and security agenda, making it impossible for the Turkish government to maintain its "*zero problems with the neighbors*" strategy.[248] In the time before 2011, Turkey's approach to the region had been cultivating and enhancing good neighborly relations, which was conceptualized by Ahmet Davutoglu in 2004, later to become Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs and Prime Minister. In contrast to tensions that marked Turkish-Syrian relations during the 1990s, 2000s have seen the rapprochement between two countries with a lot of direct Turkish investments to Syria, visa liberalization, foreign policy discourse of brotherhood and deep bonds, etc. However, once the insurgency started, in the words of Gencer Özcan, "*policy [of zero problems with the neighbors] failed to deliver what it was supposed to do when regional circumstances transpired to be less than conducive to such alignments*."[249] Turkey had been relatively muted when the insurgency began.

"*When unrest erupted in Syria, Ahmet Davutoglu, the foreign minister, spent hours pleading with Mr Assad to stop the violence and begin reforms. Yet the slaughter went on and Syrian refugees poured into Turkey [...].*"[250]

As a general note, the refugees are especially emphasized as a factor in Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict and its foreign policy by *The Economist* – a focus shared with most of the Western European media outlets who perceive refugees as a possible threat to European security. *The Economist* adopted a critical tone in this very first phase of insurgency towards Turkey's lack of involvement – generally, the supportive editorial position towards military interventionism being a reoccurring subject.

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[247] *The Arab League – An unfraternal lot*; in *The Economist*; 26/3/2014; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/03/26/an-unfraternal-lot?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[248] *Turkish foreign policy – Problems with the neighbours*; in *The Economist*; 28/1/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21543591?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[249] Özcan, Gencer; *Policy of Zero Problems with the Neighbours*; on *Observatory of Euro-Mediterranean Policies*; 2012; http://www.iemed.org/observatori-en/arees-danalisi/arxius-adjunts/anuari/med.2012/Ozcan_en.pdf-en

[250] *Turkey's foreign policy – Growing less mild*; in *The Economist*; 14/4/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21552602?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

With the changing of Turkish policy towards Assad came the change of narrative towards Turkey's involvement. "*Turkey's Western friends are delighted that Mr Erdogan has dumped Mr Assad,*"[251] writes *The Economist*. However, Turkish involvement is rarely given due background and context, which to some point enables the relatively incoherent narrative on Turkey. Turkey had provided training and military equipment to the insurgents- basically sponsoring insurgency, which had a positive connotation. However, coverage of allegations of Turkish support to more radical military groups like Ahrar al-Sham, and possibly Jabhat al-Nusra and the Islamic State has been either absent from reporting or negative. The editorial position is to report mildly or critically only of the fact that radical groups are being supported without demonizing an important ally who is supporting them. As relations between Turkey and Syrian regime deteriorated after Assad's forces took down Turkey's jet, multiple border clashes and Assad's tolerance of Kurdish de facto autonomy on the north of Syria, Turkish involvement became more intense. Without aiming to provide comprehensive analysis of how *The Economist* covers the Turkish involvement in the conflict, it is important to encapsulate the main aspects of Turkish role in the conflict around which their place in the wider narrative is constructed. They include: (1) Syrian refugees in Syria; (2) Turkey's military effort against the Islamic State in Syria, including cooperation with NATO and permission to NATO to use the Incirlik Military Air Base in Turkey; (3) Turkish political and military effort against Kurd-controlled territories on the north of Syria; (4) Turkish support to the Syrian opposition, including its more radical wing; (5) Turkish-Russian relation in Syria.

Overall, *The Economist*'s coverage of regional actors' role in the conflict does not recognize their involvement to the fullest extent. Despite the understanding of their role, there is an attempt to sustain the narrative of the Syrian conflict as a primarily internal conflict, even though it meets the definition of a proxy war to the letter. The overall narrative of the regional involvement is that every regional power has vested interests in the Syrian conflict – yet they are not sufficiently acknowledged as direct actors in the conflict. Their place in the conflict as covered by *The Economist* is either on the receiving end of influence from the conflict or as protection of their interests in the region. The way they are covered is generally parallel to the way internal actors are covered – states supporting the Assad's regime and ISIS receive negative coverage, while states which support the opposition and the Kurds are reported positively. The coverage of Turkish involvement is inconsistent and more complex – for the purposes of this study it will be descried as *intersectional*. This concept was historically first developed by black feminists to analyze multiple factors of identification of women of color. Using the same concept that social sciences use to analyze intertwined personal and social identities, the author

[251] *Ibid*

will point to the potential of using the concept of intersectionality as an analytical tool for understanding the coverage of the Turkish complex foreign-policy identity and Turkey's involvement in the Syrian conflict. The reason behind inconsistent and incoherent coverage of Turkish role in the conflict is because of complex relations between Turkey and each of the internal and other external actors in the Syrian conflict. Although the way, for example, Turkey is covered by *The Economist* can be criticized as a conscious editorial choice, it is also important to understand how difficult it is to construct a narrative around the complexity of this conflict and intersectional foreign policy agendas of regional powers.

The notion of intersectionality and the example of Turkey's representation in the wider narrative opens up one more question. How justified and viable is it to maintain the narrative of the Syrian conflict as separate from the rest of the things going on the Middle East region? At the same time, Yemen and Iraq are struggling with conflicts, with the region at large being generally unstable. Every country has what could be understood as intersectional foreign policy identity in relation to all other regional countries and different non-state entities. The fact that the Syrian conflict can be understood as only a part of the larger regional conflict and that internal actors only act as proxies is not sufficiently recognized by the media. As a conclusion to the section about the regional actors, coverage of wars in Iraq and Syria is artificially separated, with distinctive narratives being constructed, in a similar way as it had been the case with the Yugoslav conflict and its separate Bosnian, Croatian, Kosovo and other episodes.

2.4.2. Global Actors

The war in Syria has drawn in multiple powers beyond the immediate Middle East region – which had only added to the complexity and violence of the conflict. To this point, probably the most significant involvement from the non-regional actors has been the one of the United States of America and the Russian Federation. In what could be understood as global repositioning of these big global powers, the Syrian conflict has been, alongside the conflict in Ukraine, a reminiscent of Cold War international relations dynamics. Ian Bremmer, columnist for *Time* magazine, wrote that "*Syria has become the unlikely site for what could have been the deadliest skirmish between the U.S. and Russia since the Cold War*."[252] Bremmer, US foreign policy specialist and global political risk analyst, basically argues how the biggest part of the internal risk of the Syrian conflict seven years in, comes from foreign clashes raging in Syria and that the country is at being overrun by proxy conflict between

[252] Bremmer, Ian; *These 5 Proxy Battles Are Making Syria's Civil War Increasingly Complicated*; in *Time*; 16/2/2012; http://time.com/5162409/syria-civil-war-proxy-battles/

US and Russia. *The Economist* pays much attention to the involvement of these two countries in the conflict from its very beginning and the aim of the study in this section is to analyze how US and Russian involvement in the conflict is covered, with increased focus on the Russian military intervention in Syria as the foreign policy involvement of the biggest symbolic significance to Western media. The content analysis of how their involvement is reported on by *The Economist* will center on background contextualization provided in the articles as to how US and Russia perceive Syria in their foreign policy strategies and why they support specific actors in the conflict. The attempt is to look into the coverage of the involvement of the two countries relative and in parallel to each other. The involvement of other global powers such as the United Kingdom or France falls beyond the scope of this study as it is largely regarded as concurrent and in line with the US involvement.

The time period which is under focus of this study coincides with Obama's presidency – Trump's presidency will not be analyzed. *The Economist* writes how when Obama became president and started his term in 2009, "*he had two main aims in the Middle East: to make America more popular around the region; and to get out of it, starting with Iraq and ending with Afghanistan*."[253] *The Economist* reinforces the notion of the American fatigue of foreign interventions as a reason behind the initial US unwillingness to enter the conflict more decisively. It briefly contextualizes the connection between the US exit strategy from the Middle East region with the need to ensure its energetic security ("*make America less dependent on Middle Eastern oil and, in turn, bound less tightly to its oil-rich allies in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere in the Gulf*"[254]) and prevent nuclear proliferation of Iran ("*persuade Iran to forgo a nuclear weapon, preventing further war in the region*"[255]). However, *The Economist* states how American interests at the beginning of this decade lie elsewhere:

"*With all this done, America could edge towards an exit from this troublesome place and pivot towards the Pacific.*"[256]

Reoccurring notion is that the US has not been willingly dragged into the Syrian conflict, but had to get involved for humanitarian purposes and, to lesser extent, to respond to other regional and global actors' ambitions in the region.

"*That elegant pivot became an ungainly lurch back to America's position of old, as reluctant and unloved mediator.*"[257]

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[253] *America and the Middle East – The masochism tango*; in *The Economist*; 15/12/2012; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2012/12/15/the-masochism-tango?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[254] *Ibid*
[255] *Ibid*
[256] *Ibid*

From the outset of the conflict, there is certain amount of victimization of the US administration under Obama due to their responsibility to get entangled in the Syrian conflict to protect global democracy and protect the victims of the Assad's brutal regime aided by Iran and Russia. Moreover, *The Economist*'s coverage of the US role in the conflict is strongly driven by attachment to certain actors of the Syrian civil war, principally the Syrian opposition, but also Kurds, under the notion of a moral imperative to protect them as victims. Obama is generally written about as indecisive, almost weak. Criticism of his insistence on diplomacy and pursuing peaceful means in trying to find an international solution for the conflict is matched by different possibilities of military intervention – ranging from arming rebels and imposing no-fly zone over Syria, over the need for airstrikes, to full-scale boots-on-the-ground military intervention.

General conclusion which could be drawn from *The Economist*'s articles is that its editorial is more interventionist than the Obama administration, especially after the 2012 US presidential elections. Under the common understanding the second term allows the US president to have bolder agenda – *The Economist*'s articles are calls for stronger involvement. In an article entitled *Time to engage*, the editorial brings a statement on how although "*Barack Obama's first-term caution was understandable, he must now show greater resolve*."[258] *The Economist* analyzes and critically reflects on what is its understanding of the foreign-policy rationale during Obama's first term:

"*His response is to ask for evidence that interventions would make things better, rather than satisfy the urge to 'do something' at the risk of escalating the conflict. His second response is to ask for the price-tag: no small matter to a nation tired of war. […]The response to the bloodshed unleashed by Syria's rulers against its people shows the difficulties of this approach. […] The reluctance to act, says a witness to the debate, is understandable. It is also, he adds, a 'shame on all of us'.*"[259]

The Economist is reluctant to criticize Obama *ad hominem* for his policy choices, thus his personal victimization as a human being who makes tough decisions on things which are beyond his control.

"*There is much to like about the foreign policies pursued by President Barack Obama. Rational and reasonable, they have blended strategic optimism with tactical caution, and tempered grand visions with a careful weighing of costs.*"[260]

However, US is understood and written about as the state which has moral responsibility to get involved in order to protect its interests, but more importantly from the editorial standpoint, values and

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[257] *Ibid*
[258] *Time to engage*; in *The Economist*; 19/1/2013; https://www.economist.com/briefing/2013/01/19/time-to-engage?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[259] *Ibid*
[260] *Ibid*

human lives. *The Economist*, similar to most of the Western media, repeatedly enforces the notion of red-line for interventions – which is used as a symbolic tool to allow the preservation of the US moral high ground without militarily fulfilling its responsibility to protect the victims of the Assad's regime, as long as the regime abstains from using chemical weapons as mean of waging war.

The use of chemical weapons as "crossing the Rubicon" has been the main rhetorical device of the Western media, *The Economist* included, for rallying around the need for US military involvement – with preserving the image of Obama as genuine.

"*The Syrian regime has hesitated to deploy any of its large stock of chemical weapons because of Barack Obama's warning that doing so would cross a red line—and would not be tolerated. But Mr Assad, sensing that intervention in Syria's civil war is the last thing the administration wants, may have decided to test Mr Obama with the low-level use of such weapons.*"[261]

With repeated allegation of use of chemical weapons by the Syrian regime in Damascus, the building of the awareness about the need to do more in Syria and to militarily intervene seems to be the central aspect of *The Economist*'s narrative around the US involvement in the conflict. Obama's minimalist approach towards using the military in Syria and support for the diplomatic negotiations among different internal actors and external mediators is depicted as "*wishful thinking*".[262]

"*It is true that the president faces only bad choices in Syria. But he is partly to blame. While America and its allies have dithered over calls to arm more moderate wings of the opposition or to impose no-fly zones, the most alarming militants have grown in clout, including fighters who have sworn fealty to al-Qaeda. […] Mr Obama must now choose between tolerating conscience-staining massacres and intervening at the risk of empowering violent extremists.*"[263]

The Economist's editorial grows increasingly tolerant toward the possibility of arming radical jihadi anti-Assad groups of rebels over the course of war – ironically, under a strongly humanitarian narrative. The context of American involvement in the Syrian conflict is exclusively around the need to protect the innocent, without taking into account any geopolitical or neorealist considerations of foreign policy interests.

The other major aspect of the coverage of the US involvement in the conflict is its fight against global terrorism. US have led the Western effort to contain and combat the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq. Since 2014 and the rise of ISIS, the US have led the military effort consisting principally of airstrike, but also supporting the Syrian opposition groups and Kurds in military equipment, training

[261] *Crossing a red line*; in *The Economist*; 27/4/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/04/27/crossing-a-red-line?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[262] *Dithering over Syria*; in *The Economist*; 4/5/2013; https://www.economist.com/united-states/2013/05/04/dithering-over-syria?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[263] *Ibid*

and intelligence, which has been collectively undertaken by multiple Western countries. Altogether, *The Economist* is generally critical of the Obama's administration effort against ISIS, labeling nuance as indetermination and weakness. The editorial answer to all questions arising from criticism of Obama's policies is a need for stronger military involvement.

"*The mission to 'degrade and ultimately destroy' ISIS [reference from Obama's speech] carries significant risks and will keep American military pilots busy. While warning that 'it will take time to eradicate a cancer like ISIL,' Mr Obama wisely provided no whiff of a timetable. Nonetheless, he did not explain how air power alone could realistically achieve the mission, even after years of strikes.*"[264]

Saying that "*president's speech was long on promises and short on detail*" generally sums up *The Economist*'s narrative of US fight against the Islamic State – praise for the effort, criticism of policy and insufficient military involvement.

Importantly for analyzing the coverage of the American fight against ISIS, the US support from Kurds and their effort to fight the Islamic State had met resistance from Turkey, especially during the battle for Kobani. Turkey had disenabled supply of weapons, ammunition, food and medicines over its borders. Overall, it was a contentious issue in US-Turkish relations at the time. *The Economist* is critical of this relation perceiving it as one of the main obstacles in doing more to fight the Islamic State.

"*The coalition may already be losing the fight against Islamic State. […] The coalition's strategy is beset by contradictions and self-imposed constraints, with two of the worst offenders being the two countries that could do the most to degrade IS: America and Turkey.*"[265]

Turkey is again covered as an excuse for the American inability to provide clear-cut and decisive support to Syrian grass-root effort against ISIS:

"*Mr Erdogan seems wary of offering anything more than rhetorical Turkish support for the coalition. He refuses to help the Kurds, whom he sees as his enemies.*"[266]

The Economist's strongly engages in promoting the idea of a US-led military intervention as a solution for fighting ISIS.

"*The fight against IS cannot succeed without competent troops on the ground to guide coalition aircraft to their targets, pursue enemy leaders and take and hold territory.*"[267]

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[264] *Barack Obama v ISIS - Tall order*; in *The Economist*; 11/9/2014; https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2014/09/11/tall-order
[265] *The will and the way*; in *The Economist*; 11/10/2014; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2014/10/11/the-will-and-the-way
[266] *Ibid*
[267] *Ibid*

On other occasion, the editorial mainstreams the questioning of who is a bigger danger – Assad or ISIS – "*some complain that, instead of bombing Mr Assad, America is attacking his enemies*,"[268] also proposing the notion of supporting al-Nusra as a legitimate mean of involvement in the conflict :

"*Jabhat al-Nusra, is affiliated to al-Qaeda but is nevertheless accepted by more moderate groups for its fighting prowess.*"[269]

The most astonishing notion is whether fighting the Islamic State is counterproductive for the West's prime goal to overthrow Assad:

"*Are American-led air strikes creating a Sunni backlash? […] unless America can convince the majority of Syrians that it is on their side, the biggest winners may be IS and Mr Assad.*"[270]

On the other end of *The Economist*'s general coverage of global powers' involvement in the Syrian conflict is Russia – where coverage of Russian involvement has been mirrored to the American. Saying this, *The Economist* narrative of the Russian involvement is one of strong criticism and one where decisive involvement is not praised and belauded, but described as a strategy to leave America perceived "*impotent and incompetent*"[271]. Here the study comes to the content analysis of the Russian involvement in the Syrian conflict and its military intervention in particular, as it is an integral and important part of the conflict. Since the beginning of the Syrian civil war in 2011, Russia has been an ally of the Syrian government, firstly through providing military aid and political support, and since 2015 also through direct military involvement – and *The Economist* portrays Russia as a "*partner in crime*" to Assad and his government.

The Economist provides wider contextualization of Russian foreign policy toward Syria and its involvement in the conflict; albeit the general conclusion is that it *The Economist* is highly selective when it comes to providing general background and overall aligned with Western foreign policy agenda when criticizing the Russian moves in Syria. *The Economist*'s reports do not educate and inform the reader either about the history of alliance between USSR/Russia or the strategic importance of Syria for the Russia foreign policy. Most of the contextualization is provided with a clear aim to create negative symbolic link between Assad and Putin as two autocrats and, basically, demonize Russia among the average readers. For reference, in terms of discussing Russian foreign policy interests and potential rationale behind the involvement, and later military intervention – the following considerations are completely absent from *The Economist*'s narrative of Russia's role in the conflict

[268] *Unintended consequences*; in *The Economist*; 3/10/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/10/03/unintended-consequences
[269] *Ibid*
[270] *Ibid*
[271] *The least-bad choice*; 18/5/2013; *Op. cit*

(while they are arguably legitimate – and even if not considered truthful by the editorial, would certainly add value to the coverage and inform the reader in a more broader sense): (1) prevention of state-failure in Syria as a mean to prevent radicalization and regional instability; (2) ensuring its reputation as a trustworthy ally and affirmation of the credibility of its security-alliances among allies; (3) stopping further unilateral regime changes supported by the West (also connected to Russian internal politics); (4) combating global terrorism.

The Economist's reports are mostly centered on three aspects of the rationale behind the Russian government's involvement in Syria which bear higher symbolic significance. The first one is Russian military presence in the region through its naval base in Tartus.

"*The Syrian port of Tartus is Russia's only military base outside the old Soviet Union.*"[272]

This is of course a valid notion made on geopolitical assumptions – but is made on a pre-notion that Russian presence anywhere globally is a threat per se for the West.

The second aspect of Russian interest in the Syrian civil war, which is repeatedly brought up in *The Economist*'s articles, is that Russia is in it for arms trade. Still, though it might be legitimate to make the assumption how commercial interests in arms sales are one of the largest factors of Russia's support for Assad, no such statements are made concerning the Western involvement in the conflict, or the history of interventionism and presence in the Middle East region at large.

"*Syria alone accounts for about 10% of Russia's arms sales.*"[273]

"*Syria allows Russia to keep a naval base on its shore and buys Russian weapons in return. Though Syria accounted for just 10% of Russia's arms sales to the Middle East from 2004 to 2008, this was sufficient to make it 'largely dependent' on Russia for weapons. […] Russians have some special interests in the country – more than 75% of Syria's weapons are bought from Russia.*"[274]

According to *The Economist*, the third aspect of why Russia might be in Syria is its strong sense of grievance about what had happened in Libya.

"*The toppling of dictators in Iraq and Libya hurt Russia's oil interests and arms sales. It wants to avoid that in Syria.*"[275]

"*Two of the veto-wielding members of the Security Council, China and particularly Russia, feel that the 'responsibility to protect' has already gone far enough, thank you very much. Last year, they signed on to a resolution that authorized 'all necessary means' to protect Libyan civilians from Muammar Qaddafi. That*

[272] *Syria and Russia – Wait and sea*; in *The Economist*; 14/1/2012; https://www.economist.com/node/21542793?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d
[273] *Putin's targeted strike*; in *The Economist*; 18/4/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/04/18/putins-targeted-strike
[274] *Moscow rules*; in *The Economist*; 6/2/2012; https://www.economist.com/newsbook/2012/02/06/moscow-rules
[275] *Ibid*

intervention became a NATO-led air war against Libya's regime, and ended with Qaddafi's bloody death at the hands of the rebels. The Russians felt duped."[276]

Russia had given support to the Assad regime through arms, equipment, supplies and intelligence, but has also supported Assad in diplomatic fora. Russia has constantly used its position as a permanent member of the UN Security Council to block resolutions aimed at demanding the resignation of Assad and his government or introducing sanctions. It has however condemned violence and has taken a role in the peace talks about the future of Syria, recognizing the need for constitutional and election reforms, but emphasizing on the legitimacy of the current regime in Damascus. That has met straight criticism from *The Economist*'s editorial.

"*Its refusal to back the UN resolution reflects its fears that Saudi Arabia and Qatar, backed by Europe and America, are pushing for regime change in Damascus which would erode Russia's influence in the region. Still angry about the military intervention in Libya last year which was framed as protecting civilians but ended with the death of Muammar Qaddafi at the hands of rebel forces, Russia is unwilling to endorse similar action in Syria.*"[277]

Russian diplomatic efforts in the UN Security Council and elsewhere are dismissed as ineffective and counterproductive - those trying to find diplomatic solution are depicted as complicit in atrocities, describing "*the UN's failure as a 'license to kill'*"[278].

"*For those dying in Syria, the maneuvering must seem absurdly abstract, and Russia's desire for 'a peaceful settlement without foreign intervention and with respect to the sovereignty of Syria' somewhere between cynical and downright ridiculous.*"[279]

The Economist's repeated criticism of Russia for continuously blocking the sanctions against Syria in the UN Security Council overall constitute a series of highly-opinioned articles. On one hand, the editorial cites the official statement such as the following:

"*America described the veto as 'shameful' and said any further bloodshed would be on Russia's hands. Britain said the failure to get a resolution was 'letting the Syrian people down'.*"[280]

On the other hand, it also condemns the diplomatic efforts as such and the West for working with "*[Putin] a serious abuser of human rights*"[281] in peace negotiations on chemical-weapons control. Surpassing the rhetorical devices previously identified, *The Economist* engages in the usage of tools

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[276] *Libya bitten, Syria shy*; in *The Economist*; 31/1/2012; https://www.economist.com/newsbook/2012/01/31/libya-bitten-syria-shy?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

[277] *The UN stands divided*; in *The Economist*; 5/2/2012; https://www.economist.com/newsbook/2012/02/05/the-un-stands-divided

[278] *Ibid*

[279] *Ibid*

[280] *Ibid*

[281] *The weakened West*; in *The Economist*; 21/9/2013; http://www.economist.com/news/leaders/21586565-deal-over-syrias-chemical-weapons-marks-low-those-who-cherish-freedom-weakened-west?zid=308&ah=e21d923f9b263c5548d5615da3d30f4d

such as stereotypes and historical analogies to discourage public support for diplomatic engagement with Putin and Russia in order to craft solutions by peaceful means. Connecting peace talks with Munich-1938 or Putin with Stalin are just examples of forging the historical context and reinforcing existing stereotypes.

Following gradual upscaling of the military support to the Syrian regime in Damascus, Russia entered a new phase of its involvement in the Syrian conflict during the second half of 2015. The most recent military upscale at that point included sending Russian planes, tanks and other heavy military equipment to the Russian military facility in Latakia, as well as the repositioning of the Russian Mediterranean fleet. Following a period of more intensive international diplomatic engagement, such as the meeting of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (ODKB) in Dushanbe and the beginning of the new regular session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015, Russian president Vladimir Putin was given a permission to deploy and use the Russian Air Forces in Syria by the Federation Council, the upper chamber of the Russian parliament – which basically constituted a procedural permission to the Russian president to use military force abroad. On 30 September 2015, Russian air forces started conducting airstrikes against positions held by ISIS and the Syrian opposition groups around cities of Homs and Hama, which marked the beginning of the new phase of Russia's involvement in the conflict – the military intervention.

Before focusing on the coverage of the Russian military intervention in Syria by *The Economist*, one of the topics that is surprisingly not given due consideration by *The Economist*'s editorial is the legality of the Russian intervention. The narrative on the intervention is centered on its illegitimacy – however coverage of the legal side of the intervention is largely absent, which is a sharp contrast to the way Russian involvement in Ukraine is covered. This is undoubtedly an editorial choice.

The legal case for the Russian military intervention in Syria according to the understanding of the author of this thesis is as follows – there is a strong line of legal argument to back the position which finds the Russian military intervention to be in accordance with international public law and the UN Charter. Legal case of the Russian intervention falls under what is colloquially called "intervention by invitation", which in fact falls legally under collective self-defense. Although Article 2(4) of the UN Charter states that:

"*All Members shall refrain in their international relations from the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations*"[282],

legally banning violations of other states' sovereignty, the Article 51, under the Chapter VII (*Action with Respect to Threats to the Peace, Breaches of the Peace, and Acts of Aggression*), states how:

"*Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security*"[283].

According to the UN Charter, as well as customary international law, states have an inherent right to individual and collective self-defense – which means that governments of states, whose sovereignty has been violated, have the right to call upon other states to help them preserve sovereignty and security. Arguably, Assad's government has the capacity to call Russia to intervene in the Syrian conflict – Iraqi government in fact used the same legal principle in 2014 when it called upon the US for help in combating ISIS. Apart from this principle, the UN Security Council can grant authorization for military intervention under the Chapter VII, which is the only other legal exception to the use of force under the current system of international law, which has not been the case here due to Russian and Chinese vetoes in the Security Council which had been mentioned earlier.

The case is obviously not completely straightforward.

"*Two legal conditions must be met in order to invoke this principle [intervention upon invitation]: the validity of the invitation (valid consent) and the legitimacy of the inviting authority.*"[284]

Arguably, the legal condition of a valid invitation to intervene was met when Assad, who is head of state, made a formal request for airstrike from the Russian side. The case can be made against the legitimacy of the Assad government to call upon the intervention, because of the fact that its rule is contested in an internal conflict. On the other side, Assad's government has continued to be recognized as the official Syrian government by the UN and Russia. Despite the call to be recognized as the official Syrian government, the Syrian National Council has only been recognized as the legitimate government by Libya, while multiple Western states' official stance is that they recognize the Syrian opposition represented by the Syrian National Council as an entity which takes part in peace talks.

[282] UN Charter, Article 2(4); Source: https://treaties.un.org/doc/publication/ctc/uncharter.pdf
[283] *Ibid*, Article 51
[284] Ildefonso Ocampos, Tania; *The legal basis for foreign military intervention in Syria*; in *Middle East Eye*; 29/7/2016; http://www.middleeasteye.net/columns/legal-basis-foreign-military-intervention-syrian-territory-805524848
also Mercier, Samuel; *The Legality of Russian Airstrikes in Syria and 'Intervention by Invitation'*; 29/4/2016; http://www.e-ir.info/2016/04/29/the-legality-of-russian-airstrikes-in-syria-and-intervention-by-invitation/

Besides, there is a legal tradition dating back to the ruling in *Nicaragua v. United States*[285] before the International Court of Justice, according to which "*the invitation to intervene in the sovereign affairs of a foreign state only possesses legal basis if the invitation in question is extended by the legitimate government of the state, and not by the opposition*."[286] Moreover, Assad was reelected as the Syrian president in 2014, which de jure reaffirmed his capacity to call for the Russian intervention under the realm of his presidential authority. This line of thought creates a strong rationale behind the argument that the Russian military intervention in Syrian is legal, although further and deeper analysis is beyond the purpose of this thesis. Arguments could, however, be formulated against the legitimacy of the Assad government in its capacity as the inviting authority in a context of a civil war, thus challenging the legality of the entire Russian military intervention – which is a path *The Economist* does not follow. On the contrary, these considerations are completely absent from *The Economist*'s coverage of the intervention. And while similar considerations of the legality of foreign involvement and military interventions have been historically invoked in some cases such as the Russian annexation of Crimea, they have been absent from the narrative on the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999 or the Iraq war in 2003.

The military entry of Russia into the Syrian conflict was followed by a series of articles providing analysis of the potential role that it might have and the consequences it might bring.

"*Russian power could simply heighten and further complicate the fighting. Or it could provide a decisive tilt, militarily and perhaps diplomatically. It depends on how Mr Putin plays his game*."[287]

In providing reasons behind the intervention during September and early October 2015, *The Economist* is quick in framing the intervention as one dictator helping a fellow dictator.

"*Russia's support for Mr Assad has less to do with Syria per se, than with the West. The Kremlin watched the Arab Spring in horror, seeing uprisings against authoritarian leaders as American conspiracies. While Mr Putin harbors no particular personal affection for Mr Assad, the Syrian leader has become a symbol of resisting 'colour revolutions' and attempts at 'regime change'. Having backed Mr Assad thus far, allowing him to fall now would mean that Mr Putin is 'retreating under American pressure, which is the one thing he cannot do'.*"[288]

It is said how if Russia's goal is not to bring decisive advantage to Assad's forces and help end the conflict, it might as well be to use the situation on the ground and the continuing bloodbath as

[285] Referring to the *Case Concerning the Military and Paramilitary Activities in and Against Nicaragua* ruling from 1986 (1986 I.C.J. 14)
[286] Ildefonso Ocampos; 2016; *Op. cit*
[287] *A game-changer in Latakia?*; in *The Economist*; 26/9/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/09/26/a-game-changer-in-latakia
[288] *Why Russia is an ally of Assad*; in *The Economist*; 30/9/2015; https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2015/09/30/why-russia-is-an-ally-of-assad

leverage in enhancing its international position, or simply show muscles. Anyhow, its military involvement is not seen as a positive thing whatsoever.

"*Russia's presence will likely deepen the conflict. While America has softened its stance on the need for Mr Assad's immediate exit, his presence presents an intractable obstacle to any cooperation between Russia's ad-hoc coalition (which so far includes Iran, Iraq and Syria) and America's.*"[289]

"*For Russian domestic opinion, Mr Putin has framed the deployment as a contribution to the war on Islamist terrorism, as a bolstering of Syria's legitimate government, support for Syria's Orthodox Christians and as a corrective to 'childish' American policies that Russian media depict as having both fostered terrorism and failed to fight it.*"[290]

Provided Russian rationale for the intervention as to fight terrorism and contain the extent of violence in Syria is instantly dismissed – three predominant explanations of the intervention are:

(1) helping Assad and the government forces in the conflict environment where they started losing ground during 2015 (Assad lost Palmira and Idlib, also losing ground in Aleppo.);

"*For Mr Putin clearly, an important goal is the propping up of his long-time ally, Bashar Assad, who controls some 20% of his country after four years of bloody war.*"[291]

(2) an attack on the West and their mission to bring democracy;

(3) deflect the attention of the international community from Ukraine and show muscles.

"*The latest gambit in Syria has also helped Mr Putin deflect attention from the unwon war in Ukraine and bring Russia back into the company of world powers […] both to the domestic audience and to the non-Western world, is that Russia remains indispensable to solving global problems, whether the West likes it or not.*"[292]

Another important aspect of the narrative around the Russian military intervention in Syria is a high level of victimization of the US, Obama and the West at large in the light of Russian involvement.

"*The Russian move has certainly left America and its allies looking flat-footed. Mr Putin's boldness contrasts sharply with the timidity of Western efforts in Syria, which have wavered between lukewarm support for anti-Assad fighters and tacit collaboration with his regime in fighting IS.*"[293]

The angle is that the US could and should have done more, but now that the Russians are in Syria, they cannot do anything. In an article from 3 October, entitled *A new spectacle for the masses*, *The Economist* writes how "*strategically it is about America*."[294] A bombastic subheading "*Vladimir*

[289] *Ibid*
[290] *A game-changer in Latakia?*; 26/9/2015; *Op.cit*
[291] *Why Russia is an ally of Assad*; 30/9/2015; *Op. cit*
[292] *Ibid*
[293] *A game-changer in Latakia?; 26/9/2015; Op.cit*
[294] *A new spectacle for the masses*; in *The Economist*; 3/10/2015; https://www.economist.com/europe/2015/10/03/a-new-spectacle-for-the-masses

Putin embarks on a risky campaign to prop up the Syrian regime and embarrass America"[295] is followed by an imagery revealingly filled with symbolism. In a graphic enclosed in the article, Putin, dressed as a muscular hooligan, is portrayed to be stepping over a destroyed city, with Russian planes bombing around and an ISIS group celebrating it as a triumph, while lethargic Obama cannot do anything about it. Coverage charged with symbolism reaches its pinnacle in one of the more astounding examples of reinforcing stereotypes and simplifying reality, explaining how Russia is a threat to world peace and stability – "*Russia's behavior in Syria resembles the fable of the scorpion who promises not to sting the frog that carries him across the river, but does so anyway—because it is his nature.*"[296] Meaning: Russia is inherently evil.

Once the military intervention started, besides airstrikes against the Islamic State Russia also started targeting the Syrian opposition groups. This was publicly confirmed by the Russian officials:

"*Officials now admit that Moscow's aim is far broader than the publicly announced fight against terrorist groups*."[297]

According to the article, Russian officials are cited as saying that, apart from fighting terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State, Russia′s aim included helping the Assad government reclaim territory from different anti-government groups that are labelled by the West as "moderate opposition" – and that the broader geopolitical rationale is to contain American influence.[298] Russian military effort in this phase of the conflict was clearly to stabilize the front amid recent opposition's advances. This aspect of the Russian intervention is overwhelmingly emphasized in *The Economist*'s coverage:

"*The missiles and the strikes are said by Russia to be part of a campaign against 'terrorism', but have almost exclusively been directed not against IS but against opposition groups, including some supported by America, much closer to Mr Assad's remaining heartland.*"[299]

According to *The Economist*, "*supporting ground attacks by the Assad regime, Russian planes have repeatedly bashed groups in the north-western rebel-held province of Idlib and pockets around the city of Homs, in some cases making indiscriminate use of cluster bombs.*"[300] After and largely because of the Russian intervention began, once close to collapse, the government forces have

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[295] *Ibid*
[296] *An odd way to make friends*; in *The Economist*; 8/10/2015; https://www.economist.com/europe/2015/10/08/an-odd-way-to-make-friends?zid=308
[297] Arkhipov, Ilya; Kravchenko, Stepan; Meyer, Henry; *Putin Officials Said to Admit Real Syria Goal Is Far Broader*; in *Bloomberg*; 19/10/2015; https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-10-19/putin-officials-said-to-admit-real-syrian-goals-are-far-broader
[298] *Ibid*
[299] *Syria's opposition – Down but not yet out*; in *The Economist*; 10/10/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/10/10/down-but-not-yet-out?zid=308
[300] *Ibid*

consolidated, regained control of a few cities, including the recapturing of Palmyra during March 2016, and have encircled the rebel-held parts of the strategic city of Aleppo. The area around the city of Homs was especially important to Assad's control of the West of Syria and preventing the opposition of cutting the corridor and separating the north-western part around Latakia with the south-western area around Damascus. The Russian military intervention has reversed the trend and altered the dynamics of the Syrian conflict, strengthening the Syrian government's military effort both against the Islamic State and against the rebels.

An important aspect of the coverage of the Russian military intervention by *The Economist* was claims of widespread violations of the international humanitarian law by the Russians during airstrikes, including targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure, especially in urban areas such as Aleppo. Russian bombing raised questions about the violations of the international humanitarian law and the protection and human treatment of civilians. The principles of international humanitarian law that the Russian intervention might have violated during this phase of the Syrian conflict include principles of distinction, military necessity and proportionality. Although legal in its nature, the topic is covered with a strong emotional charge without educating the reader about the legal aspects of the alleged humanitarian law violations. Moreover, as in many other cases with *The Economist*'s coverage of the conflict, sources behind these claims are omitted, which constitutes a clear breach of journalistic practices. This is overall one of the most troublesome aspects of *The Economist*'s coverage identifiable throughout the course of the Syrian conflict. The angle on humanitarian law violations is one of Russian guilt, not of human lives lost – which scrapes the potential of the coverage of the atrocities being framed as a humanitarian crisis. Coverage of civilian casualties of joint military efforts of Russia and Assad forces is predominantly focused on naming and blaming the alleged perpetrators, not on the universal value of human life. Ambiguity of *The Economist*'s coverage also lies in its inability to critically analyze the actions taken by all actors in the conflict.

Russian air forces continued bombing the positions ISIS and the rebel groups until the end of 2015 and for the biggest part of 2016. As emphasized before, the Russian military intervention has been, both strategically and symbolically, the single most important example of foreign involvement in the Syrian conflict – which has profoundly altered the course of the war.

2.5. Battle of Aleppo

Aleppo was the most populous Syrian city prior to the conflict, the industrial hub and a strategically important to all four internal groups of actors (identified earlier) due to its location.

During the course of the conflict it became a major battleground, first and foremost, of the various fractions of the Syrian opposition (to whom the eastern parts of the city had become a strategic base) and the government forces, but the Islamic State and the Kurds were also involved as conflict stakeholders. Aleppo turned into a de facto divided city, with all sides managing to hold control of some districts and residential neighborhoods in the city. Since 2012, the city experienced massive levels of destruction and violence which followed the clashes between the groups in the guerilla-type warfare within the urban neighborhoods, as well as the surrounding countryside – resulting in a deadlock, without any of the sides being able to take complete control of the city.

The eastern, opposition-held parts of the city turned into a military priority of the Assad forces with the coming of the Russian military intervention and larger supplies of weaponry. Since mid-2016, eastern Aleppo turned into a principle target of Assad and Russian airstrikes due to Aleppo's importance to Assad regime's ambition to eventually claim back control over the whole country. Once and if Aleppo had fallen, Assad would have controlled four major urban centers in Syria.

"*Pro-regime forces will then be able to turn their guns on the pockets of resistance around Damascus, the main highway from Homs to Aleppo and the rebel-held province of Idlib.*"[301]

Following principally Russian airstrikes, Assad forces, backed by Shia fighters from Hezbollah and Iran, succeeded in encircling the city, cutting the connection to eastern rebel-held parts of Aleppo and effectively establishing a siege. *The Economist* emphasizes the Russian role in succeeding to do this:

"*How the tables have turned. In February [2015] Bashar al-Assad's forces launched an offensive to take back Aleppo, once Syria's most populous city but divided between the regime and rebel fighters since 2012. Not only were Bashar's battalions pushed back from the city; the rebels then turned west and routed them from Idlib too. A year on, Mr Assad is attacking Aleppo again. This time he is succeeding. […] Aleppo is now almost encircled by the Syrian army. They have taken back two Shia towns north-west of Aleppo and have cut off the rebels' last supply route into Aleppo from the Turkish border. Russian airstrikes cleared the way. […] 300,000 people in the eastern part of Aleppo under rebel control are in danger of being cut off and starved.*"[302]

Beginning of 2016, *The Economist* predicts a long and violent military effort by the Assad forces to break into the eastern Aleppo and destroy the resistance.

"*None of this means that Aleppo will fall quickly to regime forces. There are about 40,000 battle-hardened rebel fighters from more than 50 opposition groups still in the city.*"[303]

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[301] *Assad's forces advance into eastern Aleppo*; in *The Economist*; 1/12/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/12/01/assads-forces-advance-into-eastern-aleppo

[302] *Assad on the offensive*; in *The Economist*; 13/2/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/02/13/assad-on-the-offensive

[303] *Why would he stop now?*; in *The Economist*; 20/2/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/02/20/why-would-he-stop-now

Russian involvement is emphasized as instrumental in Assad's effort to win in Aleppo – rhetorical mechanisms of splitting the blame between Assad and Russia for the violence in Aleppo are identifiable.

"*Russian bombers have brought the regime of Bashar al-Assad within sight of victory, but the bloodshed and dangers are growing. Without Russian air support the pro-regime forces ranged against them would look a lot less formidable.*"[304]

The siege of Aleppo lasted throughout most of 2016, cutting somewhere between 250 and 330 thousand people from vital supplies within Eastern Aleppo. The military rationale of the Assad government was to break the guerilla resistance of the opposition groups in the parts of the city under siege by cutting them supplies of food, medicines and weaponry – which would ultimately brake their ability and will to fight, also affecting the willingness to support the oppositional effort among civilians. Entry of the army in Eastern Aleppo could have potentially been too costly, given the military ability of the rebel groups – while airstrikes, although not as effective, would gradually decrease their military capabilities. Following the military strategy of a prolonged siege, which basically meant pairing suspension of supplies delivery with using heavy airstrikes to traumatize the population into a mass exodus, what ensued was indeed a humanitarian crisis.

The bombing and shelling of Eastern Aleppo escalated during the autumn of 2016, especially after the failure of a peace negotiations round and withdrawal of the United States from the talks. Russia intensified its airstrikes, which nullified the relative advances made by the opposition groups during the summer of 2016 (when "*mainstream and jihadist groups used suicide bombers, artillery guns and tanks to break through regime positions; rebels seized a military complex, captured weapons and ammunition, and opened a narrow corridor into areas that have been under government blockade for weeks; rebels again gaining ground*"[305]). *The Economist* was becoming increasingly critical and vocal about the intensity of the military effort and of the Russian involvement – compering Aleppo with Grozny and Dresden due to the extent of indiscriminate airstrikes that are comparable to carpet bombing strategies and labeling it as "*savagery*"[306].

"*Vladimir Putin, the Russian president, is exporting the scorched-earth methods that he once used to terrify the Chechen capital, Grozny, into submission."*[307] *"Assad is pursuing a scorched earth policy to destroy the city*

[304] *Ibid*
[305] *Rebels break the siege of Aleppo, but at a cost*; in *The Economist*; 9/8/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/08/09/rebels-break-the-siege-of-aleppo-but-at-a-cost
[306] *Grozny rules in Aleppo*; in *The Economist*; 1/10/2016; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/10/01/grozny-rules-in-aleppo
[307] *Ibid*

and uproot its people […] His Russian allies are helping, using the same tactics and some of the weapons that turned the Chechen capital, Grozny, into a smoldering ruin in 1999."[308]

This comparison represents another sharp example of employing historical analogies to construct the narrative. Another is referencing past examples of sieges of urban centers in recent conflicts, such as the siege of Sarajevo and using it as a ground to create the public discourse calling for the responsibility to protect and Western interventionism.

In November 2016, the Assad forces and the broader coalition around them launched a decisive military effort to break into the Eastern Aleppo urban enclave – inhabited both by fighters and civilians. The final offensive received the most intensive media coverage both by *The Economist* and by Western media at large since the beginning of the conflict.

"*For months the regime has sought to strangle the city's rebel-held east into submission. A siege has slowly sapped the strength and morale of its defenders. As the blockade tightened, Russian and Syrian warplanes relentlessly bombed civilian infrastructure, destroying hospitals, schools and bakeries in a bid to drain support for opposition fighters by making life unbearable for the east's 250,000 or so remaining civilians. These tactics, which have forced rebels to surrender in other parts of the country, have crippled eastern Aleppo. Food rations have almost run out and medical supplies are low. With the city's hospitals destroyed, doctors now treat patients in the basements of homes.*"[309]

The narrative of the November-December 2016 offensive was, however, notably constructed as a bloodbath exclusively against civilians. Three objections can be made around this point. First one is around selective invocation of international humanitarian law - selective reliance on international law employed by *The Economist* fails to acknowledge that large portions of the people within the occupied parts of Eastern Aleppo bear arms and are considered to be combatants under the international law regime.

"*In public, rebel fighters and opposition politicians remain belligerent, vowing to fight to the last man rather than surrender to a government they despise.*"[310]

Second objection can be made around loose usage of figures:

"*The fate of up to 100,000 civilians is terrifyingly unclear.*"[311]

While at times reporting on even singular cases of killing and relying on trusting and accurate information, posing question about the fate of 100,000 people could be an example of manipulating

[308] *The agony of Aleppo*; in *The Economist*; 1/10/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/10/01/the-agony-of-aleppo
[309] *Assad's forces advance into eastern Aleppo*; 1/12/2016; *Op. cit*
[310] *The fall of Aleppo to Bashar al-Assad's soldiers seems imminent*; in *The Economist*; 8/12/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/12/08/the-fall-of-aleppo-to-bashar-al-assads-soldiers-seems-imminent
[311] *Bashar al-Assad's forces crush the resistance*; in *The Economist*; 17/12/2016; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2016/12/17/bashar-al-assads-forces-crush-the-resistance

facts and figures by *The Economist*. Thirdly, while being unapologetic about the Assad forces' military effort and atrocities, *The Economist* displays zero level of criticism towards guerilla strategy employed by the opposition groups in the first place - fighting in the city and effectively using civilians as human shields is actively framed as an act of heroism.

What ensued was a military of the pro-Assad coalition. After several failed attempts of ceasefire in order to evacuate remaining civilians and rebels from Eastern Aleppo, the evacuation was finalized on 22 December, with Damascus declaring complete control and "liberation" of Aleppo, stating "*the return of safety and security to the city*"[312] *The Economist*'s overall narrative of the battle of Aleppo is one of a "final/decisive battle" between "good" and "evil" – in a manner delivered in blockbuster thrillers, which impedes practices of objective and balanced journalism.

Among the Western public, and largely due to the manner it had been covered, Aleppo has, if anything, become a symbol of violence and destruction of the Syrian conflict and the impotence of the West amid a humanitarian crisis. It has been the symbolically most important and most intensively covered event over the course of the conflict. Two focal points of *The Economist*'s coverage of Aleppo were the blame of Assad and Russia (in a blockbuster narrative Assad and Russia are the villains) and the tragedy. *The Economist* puts focus on the tragic fate of the city, scope of killings and violence – and lack of any real response of the West. In the aftermath of the battle, there is new amount of historical analogies with the Spanish civil war (Guernica) and the Rwandan genocide.[313]

"*Grozny, Dresden, Guernica: some cities have made history by being destroyed. Aleppo, once Syria's largest metropolis, will soon join their ranks. […] Likewise, the defeat is not just a blow to Mr Assad's opponents, but also to the Western conviction that, in foreign policy, values matter as well as interests. After the genocide in Rwanda in 1994, when Tutsis were slaughtered as the world turned its back, countries recognized that they have a duty to constrain brute force.* "[314]

The aim of this kind of comparisons is to say how the West should have done more, that West had a moral responsibility to prevent the killings – but at the same time enable a certain level of self-victimization.

"*There were turning-points when the West might have stepped in—by establishing a no-fly zone, say; or a haven where civilians could shelter; or even a full-scale program of arming the rebels. But, paralyzed by the legacy of*

[312] Francis, Ellen; *Syrian army announces victory in Aleppo in boost for Assad*; on *Reuters World News*; 22/12/2016; https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria/syrian-army-announces-victory-in-aleppo-in-boost-for-assad-idUSKBN14B1NQ
[313] *The lessons from Aleppo's tragic fate*; in *The Economist*; 17/12/2016; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2016/12/17/the-lessons-from-aleppos-tragic-fate
[314] *Ibid*

Iraq and Afghanistan, the West held back. As the fighting became entrenched, the need to intervene grew, month by bloody month. But the risk and complexity of intervening grew faster."[315]

The language of this article in particular clearly indicates the amount of emotional charge pursued by *The Economist*'s editorial.

More than anything, the Western narrative around Aleppo fits the model of journalism of attachment of war coverage depicted by Martin Bell, former BBC war correspondent, who argues that journalistic objectivity in times of conflict is inappropriate. This philosophy of conflict coverage encourages journalists to embrace emotional attachment to victims and take sides, something that is arguably highly visible in *The Economist*'s coverage of the battle of Aleppo. The silver line of *The Economist*'s coverage of Aleppo is the acute need to emphasize the moral high ground of supporting the opposition in a broader humanitarian discourse employed by the Western governments – something which arguably goes beyond the classical role of a journalist. What can, to some point, be identified as poor reporting in terms of the amount and quality of information provided is hidden behind the mantle of being moral – strong emotional attachment and rallying humanitarian cry arguably led to reductionism and distortion of imagery around the battle of Aleppo, as well as public reinforcement of antagonism between two sides in the conflict. Opinionated articles on the topic lacked concrete information from relevant sources, while "the theatre of war" also silenced the potentially constructive debates which could have come out of the coverage. The way in which the battle of Aleppo was covered by *The Economist* triggers the question about the moral mandate of journalists and media in conflict coverage – the narrative constructed around Aleppo has not been a literal depiction of the event, but a representation of its symbolic significance.

2.6. Peace Efforts

In this section, the aim will be to briefly reflect on the way *The Economist* has been covering the peace initiatives that took place since the beginning of conflict in 2011. There is a history of diplomatic efforts aimed at resolving the conflict and finding a peaceful solution to the conflict through negotiations and diplomacy in different forums and formats. Negotiations have involved representatives of the Assad government and different oppositions groups' representatives – representatives of the Islamic State have never been recognized as a legitimate stakeholder in any negotiations due to their widely-accepted depiction as a terrorist organization, while Kurdish representatives have largely stayed out of the peace talks. Different formats have also included

[315] *Ibid*

different states and international organizations as stakeholders who took part in the negotiations, while states involved in the diplomatic efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict were predominantly states that had previously been identified as regional and global actors in the conflict. Although a wide range of actors have been involved in the negotiations, first point to be made here is that all of the frameworks have looked at the conflict in isolation to other regional conflicts and have not tried to engage in a more comprehensive conflict resolution and peace making effort tackling the Middle East as a whole.

First major peace proposal came from Kofi Annan in 2012. Annan, former Secretary General of the UN was appointed as the joint United Nations and Arab League envoy to Syria, presenting a 6-point peace proposal before the UN Security Council on 16 March 2016. The proposal expected both sides to "*commit to work with the Envoy in an inclusive Syrian-led political process to address the legitimate aspirations and concerns of the Syrian people*"[316] and "*commit to stop the fighting and achieve urgently an effective United Nations supervised cessation of armed violence in all its forms by all parties to protect civilians and stabilize the country*."[317] By May 2012, Annan's peace effort failed due to the inability of both sides to comply with the ceasefire as part of the peace plan. *The Economist* had quickly dismissed the possibility of success with regards to Annan's 6-point peace proposal. In an article from 30 March, *The Economist* states how "*plan could have short-term benefits but is unlikely to end Syria's crisis*"[318], labeling it as "*a welcome bandage rather than a long-term solution*."[319] *The Economist* is critical and dismissive of the proposal, despite not going into too much substance. In another article, it frames the plan as the best worst option and only because a military intervention would be just too strategically difficult – however the language of the article is one where Western military intervention would be a natural response.

"*The plan deserves a chance—if only because the alternatives of military action and inaction are so unpromising.*"[320]

From the very first peace initiatives, *The Economist*'s narrative is one of intervention-mongering.

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[316] *Text of Annan's six-point peace plan for Syria*; on *Reuters World News*; 4/4/2012; https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-ceasefire/text-of-annans-six-point-peace-plan-for-syria-idUSBRE8330HJ20120404
[317] *Ibid*
[318] *Annan with a plan*; in *The Economist*; 31/3/2012; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2012/03/31/annan-with-a-plan
[319] *Ibid*
[320] *Time to get tougher*; in *The Economist*; 28/4/2012; https://www.economist.com/leaders/2012/04/28/time-to-get-tougher

Next peace initiative took place in Geneva in June 2012, also facilitated by Annan as UN Envoy for Syria, and was dubbed as Geneva I, (due to several other subsequent peace-talks round taking place in Geneva). Being that a buy-in from all five permanent members of the UN Security Council was secured; a joint communiqué was issued at the end of the conference, outlying a road map for conflict resolution. It was to the largest extent a reference to Annan's previous plan and was based on ceasefire and moving towards political resolution through "*establishment of a transitional governing body with full executive powers that would oversee elections and put the country on the path to democracy*."[321] It was a comprehensive agreement on principles of conflict resolution and political transition, though different understandings of whether it included Assad staying in power were expressed by different stakeholders afterwards. *The Economist* covers Geneva I with the same kind of discouragement as the previous Annan plan.

"*The Syrian opposition lamented the removal of a specific reference in the Geneva text to Mr Assad's departure that had been in an earlier draft. But Western diplomats insisted that even the Russians, despite their subsequent blustering denials, implicitly accepted the principle of Mr Assad's early exit. […]He needs some dignity. But he can't kill that many people and remain legitimate.*"[322]

The Economist follows up Geneva I with one long, opinioned and critical article on the prospect of peaceful resolution of the Syrian civil war, again not providing much substance on the actual peace proposal and possible way forward. It also repeatedly raises the question about the trustworthiness and good faith of Assad and the Syrian government as a side in negotiations,[323] while only seldom recognizes the wide scope of domestic and international interests involved in negotiations. Another aspect of *The Economist*'s coverage of peace efforts that becomes identifiable is a certain amount of reductionism of the overall complexity of negotiations to Assad's personal malice; or Putin's strategic maneuvering.

During 2013 and the international community's effort to respond to the alleged usage of chemical weapons by the Assad forces, *The Economist* publishes an opinioned article about the possibility of the US intervention in Syria and its possible repercussions. Amid negotiations between Lavrov and Kerry about Syrian chemical weapons and ways to prevent its utilization, principally by the regime, it cites the example of Kosovo as a legitimate precedent of an intervention to protect international norms. In comparing the importance of the rule regulated by the UN Charter which

[321] *Syria diplomatic talks: A timeline*; on *Al Jazeera*; 15/9/2017; https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/09/syria-diplomatic-talks-timeline-170915083153934.html; also *Action Group for Syria Final Communiqué*; 30/6/2012; http://www.un.org/News/dh/infocus/Syria/FinalCommuniqueActionGroupforSyria.pdf

[322] *The tide begins to turn*; in *The Economist*; 7/7/2012; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2012/07/07/the-tide-begins-to-turn

[323] *Trap or way out?*; in *The Economist*; 10/9/2013; https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2013/09/10/trap-or-way-out

prohibits use of military force without the consent of the UN Security Council and the international norms against chemical warfare – *The Economist* is dismissive of the whole rationale behind the Security Council's decision making mechanism explained by Yale professor Jack Balkin ("*The whole point of the charter is to prevent member states from attacking each other based on their individual interpretations of international law.*"[324]). According to the article:

"*American military mission against Syria would carry a moral justification. If he were to flout the UN and attack Syria over Russian and Chinese vetoes, Mr Obama would be acting to punish Mr Assad for violating a global rule against deploying chemical weapons. He would be violating a rather weakly respected international norm in order to sustain a more pressing norm. The UN, meanwhile, would remain about as powerful as it has been in recent years. Which is to say, not very powerful at all.*"[325]

Again, this is another example of media mainstreaming of the responsibility to protect legal doctrine. Moreover, it contributes to the public perception of the UN as an increasingly weakening forum for resolution of conflicts by peaceful means and public understanding of the possibility of resolving violent conflicts using diplomatic, not military tool. It was partially proven wrong later during September 2013 when the UN Security Council adopted a resolution on Syrian chemical weapons, calling for the organization of new round of Geneva negotiations based on the communiqué signed after Geneva I.

Chemical attacks in Ghouta and subsequent adoption of the UN Security Council resolution on chemical weapons in Syria restored the consciousness about the need for diplomatic engagement, which led to the organization of Geneva II in January 2014, led by Lakhdar Brahimi, who replaced Annan. From the set-out, *The Economist* was largely wary about the prospect of Geneva II actually taking place and potential outcomes.

"*A plan for a second big peace conference in Geneva, floated six months ago, was boosted in September after Syria's government, caught out killing more than a thousand civilians with chemical weapons, agreed to give them up. But since then hopes for serious talks have kept sinking into quicksand.*"[326]

On one hand, it downplayed the possibility of talks actually taking place – due to two sides' inability to agree on the basic principles of negotiations, as well as their continued attempts to prevail on the battlefield before starting the negotiations. On the other hand, it emphasized Geneva II as the last opportunity to find a political solution for the conflict.[327] Despite the relatively balanced and

[324] *Syria and international norms – The greater harm*; in *The Economist*; 16/9/2013; https://www.economist.com/democracy-in-america/2013/09/16/the-greater-harm
[325] *Ibid*
[326] *Still no hint of a compromise*; in *The Economist*; 7/11/2013; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2013/11/07/still-no-hint-of-a-compromise
[327] *On Syrian peace talks*; in *The Economist*; 20/1/2014; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2014/01/20/on-syrian-peace-talks

analytical reporting in the preface of Geneva II, once the negotiations have failed due to the deadlock between Assad government's and the opposition's representatives around the issue of Assad's role in the transitional government which would be formed, and amid a period during which Assad's legitimacy as a partner in negotiations had actually relatively grown after the deal to destroy his arsenal of chemical weapons – *The Economist* places the blame exclusively on the Syrian government (quoting the saying that "*history is said to repeat itself first as tragedy then as farce*"[328]). And again, the end of Geneva II had seemingly triggered the pattern of turning to the military option as an alternative straight after lack of diplomatic success.

"*Past promises have come to nothing much. But following the diplomatic train crash in Geneva, Mr Obama is said to want Mr Kerry and his military advisers to come up with something bolder.*"[329]

Last bit of the peace effort that falls under the scope of this thesis and which will be the subject of content analysis is the way *The Economist* covered the Vienna peace-talks framework that took place between October and December 2015. After the beginning of the Russian military intervention in Syria in 2015, the diplomatic efforts to craft an agreement on Syria intensified. Twenty states under the framework of the International Syria Support Group assembled in Vienna agreeing on the need to bring the Assad government and the Syrian opposition together for negotiations under the UN auspices. The ISSG framework involved the most comprehensive array of stakeholders, including Iran, Turkey and Saudi Arabia as the most important regional actors, as well as all five permanent members of the UN Security Council. Vienna peace talks received relatively bigger media spotlight in comparison to previous peace initiatives and resulted in a more comprehensive conflict resolution agenda, leading to the adoption of the Resolution 2254 by the UN Security Council in December 2015 which reaffirmed the compromise brokered in Vienna. All of this was followed by relatively more positive and optimistic coverage by *The Economist*:

"*Those following diplomatic 'road maps' in the Middle East often fail to reach their destination. So when the parties involved in Syria's nearly-five-year-old civil war produced a guide for ending that conflict last month, there was much skepticism. Pessimism is still warranted, but on December 18th more progress was made on the path to peace, as the United Nations Security Council unanimously passed a resolution calling for a ceasefire and talks between the Syrian government and opposition.*"[330]

[328] *Can he manipulate the West?*; in *The Economist*; 23/1/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/01/23/can-he-manipulate-the-west

[329] *The lessons of Geneva*; in *The Economist*; 22/2/2014; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2014/02/22/the-lessons-of-geneva

[330] *The UN makes a bit of progress in ending the Middle East's most intractable war*; in *The Economist*; 19/12/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/12/19/the-un-makes-a-bit-of-progress-in-ending-the-middle-easts-most-intractable-war

A relative difference to previous peace efforts was that Vienna peace proposal was analyzed for the substance of its propositions, not only for the politics surrounding it. Main aspects of the deal, which were also captured by *The Economist*'s coverage, include:

(1) Relative vagueness around "*the fate of Bashar al-Assad, Syria's authoritarian president, who is opposed by a patchwork of moderate and radical rebel groups.*"[331]

"*Elections are to be held within 18 months of the start of talks, according to the resolution, and it has for the moment been left unclear whether Mr Assad would be allowed to run; his position in the interim is also unclear.*"[332]

(2) "*UN will broker and monitor a ceasefire while the Syrian regime and the fractured opposition form a transitional government. The contentious question of distinguishing between terrorists, who will be excluded from the transitional government, and legitimate opposition, who may take part, will be led by Jordan, a comparatively neutral party.*"[333]

(3) The Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra will not be included in the transitional government due to their depiction as terrorist organizations by the UN Security Council, while the inclusion of other oppositions groups with Salafist affiliation is yet to be decided.

(4) "*The ceasefire will not apply to the whole country. Attacks by outside powers on Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra, the local al-Qaeda affiliate, will continue.*"[334]

This encapsulates the main points of agreement in Vienna and the way they were captured by *The Economist*. Looking back, this peace agreement has obviously not lived up to the expectations of everyone involved in the negotiations – it even remains doubtful whether all sides negotiated in good faith. However, it remains a positive example of how peace efforts have been covered by *The Economist*, which managed to better inform the readership about contentious issues in negotiations and even raise the level of public optimism about the prospect peaceful conflict resolution.

Overall, however, conclusion can be made about the general pattern of how peace initiatives are written about and presented by *The Economist* to its readers. One of the main takeaways is the disproportionate focus of *The Economist*'s coverage on Assad's future as the president of Syria. Atop of being a manifestation of superficial understanding of the conflict, this also shows *The Economist*'s zero-sum understanding of negotiations as opposed to a possibly more considerate win-win framework of thinking. *The Economist* seemingly perceives negotiations as war by other means.

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[331] *Ibid*
[332] *Ibid*
[333] *After Paris, Syria's peace process limps on*; in *The Economist*; 17/11/2015; https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/11/17/after-paris-syrias-peace-process-limps-on
[334] *The UN makes a bit of progress in ending the Middle East's most intractable war*; 19/12/2015; *Op. cit*

To the largest extent, *The Economist*'s understanding of the Syrian conflict, which has been subject of multiple peace negotiations frameworks, is brought down to direct violence. This approach to understanding conflicts when covering peace talks is not overwhelmingly different than how most of the mass media would usually cover them – however, it is a standpoint which is strongly disputed by the field of academics who work in the field of peace studies, as well as conflict and security studies. Narrowing the understanding of conflict, this kind of approach to covering peace negotiations narrows the space for positive conflict transformation and a mutually satisfactory solution for all parties involved, limiting maneuvering space for collaboration and finding creative solutions for the issue.

The Economist's coverage even offers more focus on government representatives of big global and regional powers than local actors and their representatives in negotiations, which is even more ironic considering its lack of recognition of the Syrian conflict as a proxy war more than an internal conflict. Consequently, it also means that the coverage exclusively focuses on the international forums for dialogue. There is no insight into any of the local peace initiatives or organizations that might exist in Syria.

Furthermore, there are no considerations, whatsoever, of any possible solutions as part of a potentially more constructive approach to reporting on peace efforts. *The Economist* does little to inform its readership's understanding of the possible solutions and ways to transcend the conflict. There is little analysis on the areas where the goals of the conflicted parties might actually meet and space for compatibility (on issues such as security, autonomy, representation, etc.). For example, some of the talking points could potentially involve new constitutional design which would possibly involve federalization of Syria on principles of peaceful and functional coexistence of different ethnic and religious groups. This would possibly tackle some of each side's biggest concerns such as security, recognition and acceptance of distinctive identities, freedom to exercise identity-related practices and policies and effective participation in political processes. Still just as an exemplification, prospective federalization would mean partial fulfillment of each side's request and enable coexistence of principles of consensual democracy, providing a possibility for diverse groups and combatant parties to partially integrate, mitigating their fears of being controlled by a dictatorial and overly powerful political center – while in the same time satisfying some of the interests of the foreign parties involved in the conflict. This kind of solution would incentivize the creation of power-sharing mechanisms with as much decentralization as possible to enable the highest possible level of self-governance for different ethnic, religious, cultural, etc. groups. This was again just an example provided by the author of this study, which if reported, would, if nothing, inform the reader's understanding of needs and

attitudes of the sides involved in the conflict and negotiations, and not just the visible manifestations streaming from their violent behavior.

Last consideration related to how peace efforts are covered is *The Economist*'s strong identification with needs and interests of one side in the conflict and negotiations, propelling the "us versus them" narrative. *The Economist* has a relatively strong stance on the desired outcome of the conflict, through negotiations or potentially a Western military intervention – and reports accordingly. What this means is effectively depriving voice and media representation to actors whose cause *The Economist*'s editorial does not support, while always and necessarily representing the other side as the obstacle to the peaceful resolution of the conflict.

3. Peace Journalism or War Journalism?

In this chapter the aim will be to use the sample collected through the empirical part of the study conducted in the previous chapter and run it through the theoretical framework of what is called peace journalism. According to one of the key authors working on the concept, Jake Lynch, "*peace journalism is a set of distinctions in the reporting of conflict and a fund of evaluative criteria for media monitoring and content analysis*."[335] As such, it is considered a valuable theoretical framework for testing the hypotheses of this study and making general conclusions by this author. Several sets of indicators and assumptions will be taken up in this chapter as analytical tools. Material gathered through the empirical part of the study will be reevaluated using these instruments.

The original concept of peace journalism comes from the peace studies' founding father Johan Galtung. Galtung developed a theoretical framework of two opposite concepts – peace journalism and war journalism. According to Lynch, pivotal work was initiated by "*the first significant conventionalist account of journalism about conflict*"[336] between 1965 and 1980. Together with Mari Holmboe Ruge, Galtung developed his first set of assumptions on the topic around the key factors of newsworthiness in the mainstream media news coverage of international conflicts. In *The Structure of Foreign News*, Galtung and Ruge show the previously mentioned gatekeeping to be a systematic process.

"*Gatekeeping decisions create discernible patterns of omission and inclusion – not random, but structured, according to five key criteria:*

- *Threshold: A big story is one that has an extreme effect on a large number of people.*
- *Frequency: Events that fit well with the news organization's schedule.*
- *Negativity: Bad news is more exciting than good news.*
- *Unexpectedness: If an event is out of the ordinary it will have a greater effect.*
- *Unambiguity: Events whose implications are clear make for better copy.*"[337]

And while the first two factors are extremely important, they are relatively more connected to the commercial incentives put in front of media editorials while making news. Especially on television, events and issues covered by media have to fit into the news cycles and be commercially sustainable. The threshold criteria, however, is not without significance for this study. According to Lynch, "*peace journalism finds a foothold by inquiring into how particular parts of 'the truth' come to be 'discerned', whilst others are habitually ignored*."[338] He goes on to make a point that "*journalists typically judge*

[335] Lynch, Jake; *Peace Journalism*; in Allan, Stuart; *The Routledge Companion to News and Journalism*; Routledge; New York, 2010; page 542
[336] *Ibid*
[337] *Ibid*
[338] *Ibid*; page 544

'threshold', according to readily identifiable conventions, notably in nationalistic terms."[339] This study argues that *The Economist* makes a good example of the Western media at large, referring to the notion of countries, labeled as the West, which have close and conjugated foreign and security policy interests which are reflected in what can be defined as a strategic narrative. This conjugation of world views and understanding of foreign policy interests is uniformly reflected in the way the Syrian conflict has been captured by *The Economist* in particular and by Western media in general. The coverage reflects NATO's foreign policy interests in the Middle East and the situation on the ground. It is also aimed at the Western readership and could be depicted as Western in origin and orientation. There is a uniform and consolidated base of assumptions and talking point throughout all six years of *The Economist*'s coverage of the war in Syria which was the subject of the first chapter of this study. Arguably, *The Economist*'s coverage can be understood as "*a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the environment in which they operate*."[340] An extra argument in favor of this assertion is *The Economist*'s bias to officialdom as a source for information, but also definitions and talking points which are by default upheld as neutral. This is one of the additional points raised by Lynch.[341]

The last three criteria also factor in the narrative construction conducted within *The Economist*'s coverage of the Syrian conflict. *Negativity* – there is an overwhelming bias to tragedy and violence as visible aspects of the conflict. Although it might seem as uncontroversial and ultimately natural approach toward reporting about a conflict, there is an overwhelming focus on violence, shadowing the underlying complexity of the conflict which as a consequence is reduced exclusively to its violent manifestations. It is Galtung's starting premise that conflicts are about so much more than just violence. *Unexpectedness* – there is a level of oscillation in the orderliness and regularity of news articles coming from Syria. Articles are generally much more frequent and the intensity of the coverage distinguishable around the violent series of events taking place in Syria – which, to a certain extent, justifies the general understanding of *The Economist*'s coverage as an outcry under the journalism of attachment credo. *Unambiguity* – the reality of the Syrian conflict is overwhelmingly reduced to binaries – "us" and "them", "good" and "evil", "victims" and "perpetrators", "freedom-fighters" and "the autocratic regime"; reduction of the number of parties involved in the conflict – Assad and the opposition; the West and the Russia-Iran-Syria axis, etc. The way in which the conflict is narrated creates an impression of factual and moral unambiguity with the reader – which at times

[339] *Ibid*
[340] Miskimmon, Alister; O'Loughlin, Ben; Roselle, Laura; *Strategic Narratives – Communication Power and the New World Order*; Routledge; New York, 2014; page 2
[341] Lynch; 2010; *Op. cit*; page 544

comes at cost of simplification and superficiality. Overall, reflecting back to the content analysis conducted in the previous chapter, all of the factors of newsworthiness are identifiable and can be said to be significant in the attempt to go backwards in deconstructing *The Economist*'s overall narrative of the war in Syria. It is important to take that into account in deliberating "*the extent media can tell us what to think*", but also their "*great influence on what we think about*" as readers.[342]

Lynch proposes peace journalism as a remedy for this kind of biases, promoting peace as an instrumental bias, potentially enhancing journalists' understanding of conflicts and their capability to cover them fairly and accurately, while giving the peace agenda space in the public discourse.

"*Editors and reporters [should] make choices – of what stories to report, and how to report them – that create opportunities for society at large to consider and value non-violent, developmental responses to conflict.*"[343]

Peace journalism is undoubtedly a normative point of departure for critical narrative analysis, but a very insightful one nevertheless. The rationale behind it is to encourage journalists and media outlets to explore and embrace the complexity of conflicts when reporting.

"*The idea behind it is to give stories more context and to educate the reader. The goal is to bring more background into a story and also to report what is going well, so that people are better able to create a realistic view of the world than that which traditional crisis-oriented journalism has to offer.*"[344]

Johan Galtung saw peace journalism as potentially transformative for journalistic ethical code, but in this study, the importance of his findings here are primarily in providing analytical tool for looking into the ways contemporary conflicts are covered by mass media. Galtung conceptualizes peace and war journalisms as two competing narrative prototypes in covering conflicts.

"*Peace journalism addresses issues more comprehensively and addresses the root causes of conflicts. It focuses on contradicting goals rather than on violence. Conflict analysis broadens the scope of actors and stake holders, takes into account root causes and basic needs and assumes that solutions must be based on legitimate goals.*

On the other hand, the war journalism places its emphasis on violence which it confuses with conflict. Violence can be understood as the use of force to achieve a goal. As Jake Lynch and Annabel McGoldrick write in Peace Journalism, 'Violence is only one possible response to conflict—a collective expression, or political tool to achieve ends'."[345]

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[342] Hällgren; 2012; *Op. cit*; page 3

[343] Lynch, Jake; McGoldrick, Annabel; *Peace Journalism*; Hawthorn Press; Stroud, 2005; page 5

[344] McIntyre; Karen Elizabeth; *Constructive journalism: The effects of positive emotions and solution information in news stories*; University of North Carolina; Chapel Hill, 2015

[345] Perez, Marianne de Fransius; *Peace Journalism Case Study: US Media Coverage of the War in Iraq*; in *Journalism: Theory & Practice*, Vol 15 Issue 1; pages 72-88; source: Transcend Research Institute; https://www.transcend.org/tri/downloads/Peace%20Journalism%20Case%20Study-%20US%20Media%20Coverage%20of%20the%20War%20in%20Iraq.pdf

Galtung provides basic guidelines and ultimately quite operationalized indicators to be used in analyzing media content – conceptualizing his vision of peace journalism opposed to war journalism he says:

"*We need peace journalist reporting the invisible effects of war, the underlying conflict formation, the roots of conflicts, the many people of good will in and outside the arena struggling for an end to violence and transformation of the conflict, searching for alternatives to violence, outcomes and processes, reporting ideas that emerge. We need much less war journalism that reports only highly visible violence – often in a pornographic manner – with a simplistic soccer game image of the conflict, with little or no understanding of the roots of conflicts, with neglect, or even contempt of common people and their struggle for peace and dignity, mainly concerned with who is winning and how 'our peace' can be imposed, with a very limited view of possible peace outcomes and processes.*"[346]

The expanded version of his original framework can be found in Lynch's and McGoldrick's *Peace Journalism*:[347]

PEACE JOURNALISM	**WAR JORNALISM**
PEACE/CONFLICT ORIENTATED	**WAR/VIOLENCE ORIENTATED**
Explore conflict formation, x parties, y goals, z issues	Focus on conflict arena, 2 parties, 1 goal (win) war
General "win, win" orientation	General zero-sum orientation
Open space, open time; causes and outcomes anywhere, also in history/culture	Closed space, closed time; causes and exits in arena, who threw the first stone
Making conflicts transparent	Making wars opaque/secret
Giving voice to all parties; empathy, understanding	"Us-them" journalism, propaganda, voice for "us"
See conflict/war as problem, focus on conflict creativity	See "them" as the problem, focus on who prevails in war
Humanization of all sides; more so the worse the weapon	Dehumanization of "them"; more so the worse the weapon
Proactive: prevention before any violence/war occurs	Reactive: waiting for violence before reporting
Focus on invisible effects of violence (trauma and glory, damage to structure/ culture)	Focus only on visible effect of violence (killed, wounded and material damage)
TRUTH-ORIENTATED	**PROPAGANDA-ORIENTATED**
Expose untruths on all sides / uncover all cover-ups	Expose "their" untruths / help "our" cover-ups/lies
PEOPLE-ORIENTATED	**ELITE-ORIENTATED**
Focus on suffering all over; on women, aged, children, giving voice to voiceless	Focus on "our" suffering; on able-bodied elite males, being their mouth-piece
Give name to all evil-doers	Give name to their evil-doers
Focus on people peace-makers	Focus on elite peace-makers
SOLUTION ORIENTATED	**VICTORY ORIENTATED**
Peace = non-violence + creativity	Peace = victory + ceasefire

[346] Galtung, Johan; *Conflict Transformation by Peaceful Means – the TRANSCEND Method*; Manual – UN publication; 2000; https://www.transcend.org/pctrcluj2004/TRANSCEND_manual.pdf
[347] Lynch; McGoldrick; 2005; *Op. cit*

Highlight peace initiatives, also to prevent more war	Conceal peace initiative, before victory is at hand
Focus on structure, culture, the peaceful society	Focus on treaty, institution, the controlled society
Aftermath: resolution, reconstruction, reconciliation	Leaving for another war, return if the old flares up again

In the next few pages, the study will look back at the conflict as it has been covered by *The Economist* in the first six years since its outbreak in 2011 and go through a systematic item-by-item analysis using the framework above. Peace journalism is used as a lens for critical narrative analysis. Looking at the table above, the concept of peace journalism reveals the extent to which conflicts can be covered in different ways. Critical narrative analysis using the analytical instruments provided above will expose the extent of *The Economist*'s agency as a matter of choice and conscious editorial policy.

Firstly, this chapter will consider *The Economist*'s coverage of the Syrian conflict using the first of four Galtung's peace journalism binaries: *peace/conflict vs war/violence oriented journalism*. Although *The Economist* recognizes the existence of multiple parties which are grouped in four larger groups, it fails to capture the overall number of independent groups and actors that take part in the war. Grouping them in what has been identified as four major internal actors (the Assad government, the Syrian opposition, ISIS and Kurds), *The Economist* simplifies the complex landscape. This type of generalization and simplification is not uncommon, however, it becomes problematic when followed by essentialization – a process through which groups are increasingly homogenized and ascribed with certain sets of identities, values and behaviors in creating movie-like characters and attempting to make them predictable and relatable to the reader.

Also, there is a strong tendency of covering the conflict as basically several separate conflicts taking place, each involving only two sides – Assad against the opposition, West against ISIS, Turkey against Kurds, etc. – to name just the most prevalent ones. In this manner, the complexity of the conflict is mitigated by breaking the Syrian conflict into few smaller ones which involve two parties fighting over a singular issue. The predominant two-party conflict is Syrian opposition's fight for freedom and democracy against a brutal regime, which is a prevailing narrative in *The Economist*'s coverage, with the global war against terrorism as a main subjacent narrative. The underlying presumption is that the opposition and Assad have an incompatible goal – the defeat the other side and keeping/taking control over Syria. This places *The Economist*'s coverage much closer to the *war/violence orientated journalism* paradigm. The alternative approach would have to "*assume a wider perspective on the conflict […] but also the various persons and groups within their governments and states, political and military allies, the military-industrial complex*"[348] – if anything,

[348] Perez; *Op. cit*; page 12

The Economist does not examine the issues and goals of each of the parties involved in the conflict (both internally and externally) in relation to everyone else's. It is important to recognize that even the two actors that *The Economist* principally puts in front in its coverage, do not determine their interests, positions and behavior exclusively towards each other, but pivot in a more complex coordination system. Also, there is a need to problematize the term Syrian opposition as an umbrella notion that has no strong foothold – the groups that fall under the term position themselves on such a wide spectrum of interests and identities that is arguably unjustifiable to tie them together as one singular actor. Using terms as moderate and extreme opposition does not do enough to mitigate this issue.

The fault for the conflict is pre-determinately placed on Assad and strongly personalized. *The Economist*'s understanding of the conflict is based on its visible manifestations and digested into a script which is rarely abandoned. It uses patterns of terms and categories such as "dictator" and "insurgents" to inform its readerships understanding of the conflict, without being precise on what these terms and categories actually entail. Words take sides.

The Economist's understanding of the conflict maneuvers within a closed conflict arena – Lynch phrases this as *closed space and time*. Beginning of the conflict is well defined and can be traced to a specific date and event (detaining of the group of children for painting anti-government slogans in Dara on 6 March 2011). Although there is an existing sense of a proxy war and of regional spill-over influences from and to Syria, the conflict is Syrian in its location within national borders. There is little or no examination of deep roots of the conflict that are analyzed at the beginning of the empirical part of the study and no understanding whatsoever of structural and cultural violence as drivers of the conflict.

The conducted content analysis has discovered a strong sense of "us versus them" narration, where the West is strongly identified through the Syrian opposition's cause. There is a prevailing sentiment of who the "good guys" are, while "they" are seen as a problem. *The Economist*'s conceptualization of "us" and "them", as victims and oppressors, effectively narrows the space for negotiations and compromise. The philosophy of journalism of attachment is manifested in the emotional attachment to certain actors in the conflict as sole victims. As a consequence, this dehumanizes the "other" and reinforces the antagonism between the conflicted sides.

Moreover, there is a clear-cut focus on violence and its visible effects. There is a discrepancy between the volume of coverage of direct violence, atrocities and killings and the coverage of peace efforts, as well as *the invisible effects of violence*. Similar to conclusions made by Perez about the Iraq

war,[349] there is no coverage of structural and cultural violence; there is no reporting on post-traumatic stress disorder and returning foreign fighters; there are no stories about damage done to families and the disruption of the ordinary way of life, disrupted education, consequences of destroyed infrastructure, access to food and medical supplies, access to culture or disrupted exercise of religion.

Secondly, the study considers *The Economist*'s coverage against the *truth vs propaganda orientated* binary. *The Economist* brings up repeated assertions of propaganda and untruthfulness principally coming from Assad's and Russian regimes' media. The level of uniformity within their narrative of the Syrian conflict is presented not only as media capture and strong officialdom bias on their side of coverage, but as vicious lies and propaganda. Western media's sense of newsworthiness mentioned above and highly uniform way of reporting about the Syrian conflict are, however, not given same kind of scrutiny. This also strongly relates to an evident absence of any challenges to *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict and strong inclination toward officialdom. By default, this determines the extent to which the display and deliberation of the Syrian conflict have been based on selective, opinioned and, ultimately, one-sided sourcing. Differing standpoints and attempts to convey different imagery and understanding of the conflict have been ignored by *The Economist*. There is no mentioning of some of the Western journalists who have been providing different inputs from Syria (especially on the role of organizations such as White Helmets) such as Eva Bartlett or Vanessa Beeley, respectively. The rhetorical mechanism through which these attempts to penetrate the dominant narratives and provide alternative inputs have been muted relates to what Edward Said labeled as *rhetoric of blame* (attempts to provide critical reflection, with an aim to add more complexity to the narrative are framed as justifying the crimes and immoral). Moral delegitimization is ultimately used as a tool to preserve the established narrative, as one of the components of the journalism of attachment approach. Radmila Nakarada discusses the presence of a similar dynamic among public intellectuals in her study of the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the Yugoslav wars describing it as "*an anesthetization of critical reflection*."[350] Peace journalism holds media to a higher standard of questioning and challenging the mainstream narratives and dismantles officialdom bias in a sense that it decreases reliance to official definitions and information as a single source of media content. All sides in the conflict should be held accountable for the way how they communicate their interests and understanding of the conflict to the public – continuous criticism of Russia or Assad for disseminating propaganda, while claiming monopoly over truthful reporting, to a certain extent

[349] *Ibid*, page 16
[350] Nakarada, Radmila; *Raspad Jugoslavije – Problemi tumačenja, suočavanja i tranzicije*; Službeni glasnik; Belgrade, 2008; page 30

exposes *The Economist* and Western media at large as an instrument of official governments in reproducing previously mentioned strategic narratives. More fundamentally, Said's criticism of rhetoric of blame is in his own words an intellectual plea for anti-systemic and anti-essentialist starting points which ask "*how all representations are constructed, for what purpose, by whom, and with what components*."[351]

Third among the Galtung's binaries problematizes the difference between *people-orientated* and *elite-orientated* journalism. To this point, the overall conclusion is that *The Economist*'s coverage of the Syrian conflict is strongly elite-orientated. All actors are represented through their group leaders – this being most strongly reflected in the coverage of pro-government actor as a whole. In *The Economist*'s coverage, Assad is not just a political leader and decision maker before one of the embattled parties, but a strong symbol of anti-Western values, brutality and dictatorship. From the onset of the conflict, Assad is the embodiment of evil and "them". ISIS was, as mentioned, been given a face in the character of Jihadi John who has been embedded with symbolic significance. On the contrary, there are no similarly strong characters who represent the Syrian opposition or Kurds who are narrated as victims at large. Naming all leaders would contribute to the sense of accountability for wrong doings and humanitarian law violations among all parties. Crimes and atrocities conducted by the opposition-related armed groups are covered as isolated cases or not covered at all. This consequently creates a sense of relativism.

Additionally, reporting of peace efforts is completely focused on elite peace makers. This is one of the focal points between the two paradigms conceptualized by Galtung. According to the peace journalism and people-orientated approach, it is essential to cover and give voice to bottom-up grassroots peace incentives, or interreligious dialogue and women associations for example. This is connected to the forth of the binaries: *solution vs victory-orientated journalism*. In describing war journalism, Perez mentions how "*this understanding of peace stems from a classic international relations view and from the lack of journalistic training in conflict analysis. It disregards the efforts necessary before and after a ceasefire agreement is signed. Indeed, it attempts to make peace an event and give it a date*."[352] This conclusion is relevant for the way *The Economist* covers peace efforts, according to the content analysis conducted at the end of the previous chapter. The importance of this conclusion is twofold: first, there is a need to create public space or discussing proposals for conflict transformation and peace-making; second, there is also a need to go beyond the understanding of peace through ceasefire, victory or peace treaty. Although reports of international peace efforts are not

[351] Said, Edward W; *Culture and Imperialism*; Vintage; New York, 1994; page 314
[352] Perez; *Op. cit*; page 18

muted, they are focused on intergovernmental diplomatic negotiations, not on possible solutions and space for conflict transformation. Peace summits and negotiations reports are focused on who said what, and not the substance of peace proposal and ways for contributing to the dialogue and public understanding of preconditions for peace.

Overall conclusion is that *The Economist*'s coverage relies on what Galtung identifies as war journalism. Based on all of the mentioned above, there is a strong inclination of *The Economist*'s editorial of encouraging a public understanding of the Syrian conflict which is fundamentally war-fueling, which in essence uncovers the magazine as an extended political tool for implementation of official governments' foreign and security agendas. This idea is proposed by Lynch and McGoldric in their extension of Galtung's theory of peace journalism.

"*Like Galtung, they argue that most reporting inadvertently function as an agent of war, not least by serving as an outlet for one of the key elements of war journalism; propaganda.*"[353]

According to Hällgren, Lynch and McGoldrick identify six far-fueling claims that are an essential part of post-9/11 media coverage of the Middle East, which are relevant for analyzing how Western media shape public perception over foreign policy topics related to Middle East.[354] These are understood by Hällgren as complicity of Western media in ensuring public support for military interventions overseas. This study will adopt these claims and analyze them in the context of *The Economist*'s coverage of the Syrian conflict.

"*We are under threat.*" (1) – The overall undertone of *The Economist*'s coverage conveys a sense of threat coming from Syria. The empirical research conducted in the first chapter has shown multiple instances of reports from Syria reinforcing this sense of direct danger coming from the events from Syria. Two of the most apparent dimensions of this sense of vulnerability are manifested in the coverage of the migration inflows and multiple terrorist attacks which took place in the first six years of the Syrian conflict around the world. Migration from Syria and the Middle East at large is covered as the migration crisis, not solely due to the extent of popular migration and internal displacement which really amounts to a humanitarian crisis, but also because migrants are perceived as threat to European stability and way of life. The so called migration crisis has been a focal point of European politics since the beginning of the conflict and as such has been largely mediatized. Terrorist attacks conducted principally by ISIS and taking place on European and American soil have also been a vital component of the overall narrative of the Syrian conflict. Threat from ISIS terrorism has been

[353] Hällgren; 2012; *Op. cit*; page 12
[354] Lynch ; McGoldrick ; 2005; *Op. cit* ; pages 95-98

symbolically connected to the Syrian conflict and spilled over to how other actors taking part in the conflict are understood. Moreover, coverage of the conflict has to some extent been in function of communicating the understanding of how the conflict in Syria affects not only Western strategic foreign and security interest in the Middle East, but internal politics in the Western countries, in spite of the physical remoteness from Syria and relatively low level of direct influence to general public. General conclusion is one of disproportionate coverage of the conflict compared to the genuine threat to Western societies.

"*We have the support of…*" (2) – Coverage of official positions of part of regional and global actors and their government official is in function is in function of creating an understanding of an international coalition that has a common position on the conflict. Despite some of actors having very distinct and differentiated interest in the conflict, emphasis of *The Economist*'s coverage is on how Western positions differ from the rest of the international community. Mutual differences among or example US, Turkey and Saudi Arabia are minimized and potential ambiguities are minified, while the cleavage between the Western interests and Russian and Iranian positions are accentuated. Global and regional actors' common ground on issues such as fight against terrorism, preserving territorial integrity of Syria, protecting cultural heritage is underrated.

"*'We are taking on 'evil-doers'.*" (3) – This point has already been discussed. *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict is based on a clear-cut distinction of who the "good" and who the "bad guys" are in the conflict. The blame for the conflict is placed exclusively on Assad and is strongly personalized. *The Economist* puts most effort into providing evidence of horrible crimes that were committed by the Syrian leader. He is symbolically constructed as "evil" and the single most important perpetrator of violence and atrocities taking place in Syria using various symbolic and rhetorical instruments, some of which had already been identified and discussed, and some to be discussed in the next chapter.

"*We are left with no alternative.*" (4) – There is a great deal of inclination from *The Economist* to present the peace efforts as ineffective and not worthwhile. In the journalism of attachment approach to reporting, often it is the case that media cover peace efforts in order to communicate the ineffectiveness of diplomatic means in conflict management and peace making and construct public perception that different approach ought to be adopted. Based on the body of content analysis gathered, there is enough evidence to claim that some deal of reporting on peace efforts is in the function of proposing the need for stronger military involvement and ultimately a military intervention in Syria, similar to the past cases of Kosovo, Afghanistan, Iraq and Libya. This is manifested in repeated claims

that not doing enough is ultimately compliancy. *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict gradually increases its advocacy for the responsibility to protect through reporting. This is clearly noticeable around the events and phases of the conflict which have been identified as events carrying the strongest symbolic significance, such as alleged usage of chemical weapons, destruction of cultural heritage protected under UNESCO and the battle for Aleppo.

"*We must save them.*" (5) – "*Sense of taking a stand against evil, saving the population from its cruel leader or bringing peace to a region are commonly propagated incentives.*"[355] This relates to the idea of responsibility to protect mentioned around the previous point. While the normative component of the responsibility to protect might as well be earnest, this kind of narrative has a prominent and important dimension of reinforcement of occidental paternalism.

"*We must act now.*" (6) – The last of six claims defined by Lynch and Mc Goldrick, is understood by Hällgren as reinforcement of notion of "*lack of time to act with peaceful means due to some imminent threat or ongoing atrocities.*"[356] The dynamics of the conflict are covered as a straight and consistent progression into more and more violence. Focused coverage of the respect of red lines drawn by the US administration and absence of stronger military involvement in response to events taking place in Syria are in function of proposing a US-led military intervention. Times and again, Obama was criticized as weak, hesitant and inert. To this point, *The Economist*'s coverage has been in line with more hawkish parts of Western political establishments – if nothing remote from incentives coming from the peace journalism proponents and more pacifist parts of political spectrums arguing for peace by peaceful means.

Arguably, there is evidence of relative fulfillment of six "war-fueling" claims made by Lynch and McGoldrick. As a consequence, it is reasonable to raise the notion of *The Economist*'s editorial having some agency in pushing for an interventionist agenda on top of pursuing an approach defined as war-journalism by Galtung. This in return reduces *The Economist*'s ability to deliver different angles to the conflict and capability to pursue a more conflict sensitive approach. *The Economist*'s ability to reflect on some of what Ross Howard labels as journalism's unconscious roles[357] is impeded by the strong focus on violence and politics. Following Howard's list, some of the subsidiary roles on which *The Economist*'s editorial has underperformed reporting on the Syrian conflict include: (1) *Channeling communication – The Economist* fails to embrace its potential role as a mediator for communication

[355] Hällgren; 2012; *Op. cit*; page 7
[356] *Ibid*
[357] Howard, Ross; *Conflict Sensitive Journalism: A Handbook*; IMS & IMPACS; Copenhagen, 2004; page 8-9

between parties involved in the conflict both internally and externally. Media have the potential of reducing transaction costs of negotiating, especially given the mediatization of the Syrian conflict. (2) *Educating* – according to Howard:

"*Each side needs to know about the other side's difficulty in moving towards reconciliation. Journalism which explores each side's particular difficulties, such as its politics or powerful interests can help educate the other side to avoid demands for simplistic and immediate solutions.*"[358]

If anything, *The Economist* could have been more engaged in informing public knowledge about the historical background of the Syrian conflict, interests of the sides involved – and more balanced, rather than embracive of one specific narrative and version of truth. (3) This is also related to *confidence-building*, where journalism can actually be understood to have potential of reducing suspicion among embattled sides and contributing to mutual understanding and confidence as preconditions for negotiating. Moreover, peace-journalism approach has the potential for (4) *correcting misperceptions*:

"*By examining and reporting on the two sides' misperceptions of each other, the media encourages disputing sides to revise their views and move closer to reducing conflict.*"[359]

By attaching to one side in the conflict and adopting its narrative, *The Economist* has rather contributed to reinforcement of public misperceptions and stereotypes about Syria. It has contributed to the dehumanization of one side, while simultaneously victimizing the other side – impeding the process where solutions are sought based on mutual trust and good faith. Dehumanization and focus on direct violence also impedes what Howard labels as (5) *emotional outlet*:

"*In conflict resolution, there must be outlets for each side to express their grievances or anger or they will explode in frustration and make things worse. The media can provide important outlets by allowing both sides to speak. Many disputes can be fought out in the media, instead of in the streets, and the conflict can be addressed before it turns violent.*"[360]

Instead of insisting on one party's grievances and other party as perpetrator, it is essential to communicate an understanding of both parties' grievances, interests and needs. Instead of just reinforcing the rhetoric of grievances and conflict of interests, conflict-sensitive journalism avoids inflammatory coverage and *thinks about solutions* (6). Complete dehumanization and demonization of any actor effectively prevents negotiations in good faith with that actor. All of the already mentioned roles and others Howard enlists in her handbook, if adopted and conducted professionally are in function of reducing conflict. Based on the content analysis part of the study, there is little evidence of

[358] *Ibid*; page 8
[359] *Ibid*
[360] *Ibid*; page 9

The Economist's commitment to conflict-sensitivity and adopting peace journalism principles, which in fact places its coverage much closer to the war journalism paradigm.

"*A conflict sensitive journalist applies conflict analysis and searches for new voices and new ideas about the conflict. He or she reports on who is trying to resolve the conflict, looks closely at all sides, and reports on how other conflicts were resolved. A conflict sensitive journalist takes no sides, but is engaged in the search for solutions. Conflict sensitive journalists choose their words carefully.*"[361]

[361] *Ibid*; page 15

4. *The Economist*'s Narrative of the Syrian Conflict – Deconstructed

The final chapter will reflect on the initial assumptions which were defined as specific hypotheses of this study based on the empirical part of the research and critical narrative analysis previously conducted. Each of the sections of this chapter will examine if there is sufficient evidence to support each of the specific hypotheses set in the introduction. Conclusions on these specific hypotheses will ultimately feed into the concluding remarks about the general hypothesis. Notions raised in each of the specific hypotheses are perceived as building blocks of the overall narrative of the Syrian conflict and tools that are used to inform public understanding of the first six years of the war by *The Economist*.

4.1. Fight for Freedom and Democracy against a Brutal Regime

First special hypothesis of this study has been formulated as follows:

The Economist, more than anything else, portrays the war in Syria as a fight for freedom and democracy of the opposition groups against the brutal regime. Alternative narratives are absent from The Economist's coverage of the Syrian conflict.

This notion has been mentioned several times during the study and has been supported by extensive evidence offered by the content analysis conducted in the first chapter. *The Economist*'s narrative is that the conflict is Syria is a fight for freedom and democracy against Assad, a brutal autocrat who is guilty for the conflict. With the emergence and strengthening of the Islamic State, the narrative is complemented with a strong subjacent narrative of the war against terrorism – but remains strongly focused on the internal conflict between the Assad forces and the Syrian opposition at large as its single most important dimension. It was shown through the comprehensive content analysis endeavor that this narrative does not manage to encapsulate all dimensions of the conflict and that the reality of the conflict is considerably more complex. There are alternative narratives which, if employed and integrated in *The Economist*'s coverage could contribute towards mitigating this complexity, but are largely absent from the coverage. Besides the already mentioned narrative on fighting for freedom and democracy against a brutal regime, it is important to acknowledge the possibility to use alternative following settings: fight of Islamists against a secular regime (1), regional sectarian war between different Muslim fractions, fueled by the proxy conflict among neighboring states (2), regime's anti-imperialist fight against Western-sponsored regime change (3), etc. This variety of narratives tells a lot about the possibility of media to use certain dimensions of the conflict to

frame it one way or another. It also sheds light on the kind of focus and consistency *The Economist* has had on preserving this narrative in the first six years of the conflict.

4.2. Absence of Critical Refection

Second special hypothesis of this study has been:

The Syrian conflict is presented in The Economist's articles in a highly consistent and uniform manner, with no space for alternative inputs and sources which would potentially challenge the overall narrative. Sources for the information provided in the articles are rarely cited and information is presented as facts, while deeper critical reflection is delegitimized as immoral.

First part of this thesis revolves around discursive consistency, which leans onto the previous thesis. *The Economist*'s interpretation of the Syrian conflict during the first six years was relatively consistent, without any major shifts or reconsiderations. There is a consistent pattern on how each of the key actors is narrated and this is in this author's opinion the key basis on which the overall narrative is constructed.

The key part of this consistency is clear absence of any alternative inputs or, more importantly, contributors or sources with different standpoints or understandings of the conflict. There is an appearance of consensus over the understanding of the Syrian conflict, which is safeguarded by obstruction, or at least negligence, of any alternatives. In the critical narrative analysis part of this study, it was identified that the single most important mechanism through which this is done is the *rhetoric of blame*, conceptualized by Said. There was enough evidence found to support the notion of marginalization of challenges to the established narrative through moral delegitimization. *The Economist* does not voice different opinions because it deems them as apologetic and morally unfit. Any attempt to provide serious and critical reflection, with an aim to provide more complex analysis and challenge the simplicity of the narrative, is framed as justifying the crimes. Understanding of political correctness impedes balanced journalism and becomes more important than examining the overwhelming complexity and multi-causality of the Syrian conflict – it impedes with reporting on the scope of killings, torture, rape, starvation and deprivation on *all* sides and by *all* actors involved in the conflict. The overall tone is not investigative, but accusatory.

Contributing factor to this kind of understanding of *The Economist*'s reporting of the Syrian conflict is the relative absence of precise sourcing for the information provided in the articles. Not actually questioning the quality of information and respect for journalistic practices in how information

are obtained and checked, given the relative absence of citation of the sources of information, there is not enough evidence of diverse and broadminded consideration of sources of information.

4.3. Stereotypes, Historical Analogies and Manipulations of Facts and Figures

Special hypothesis number 3 of this study has been:

Narration tools such as stereotypes, historical analogies and manipulation of facts and figures are identifiable in The Economist's coverage of the Syrian conflict.

The content analysis conducted in the first chapter has identified place where stereotypes, historical analogies and unprecise usage of facts and figures are employed.

Stereotypes are understood in this study as reinforcement of over-generalized representations and using well-known symbolic representations in order to evoke a sense of familiarity with the reader. It means constructing symbolic relations between events and actors which are not necessarily naturally connected to legitimize that kind of connection. Throughout the first chapter of the study which dealt with empirical research of *The Economist*'s articles about the Syrian conflict, there were many instances where usage of stereotypes was identified and flagged as important tool for narrative construction. Stereotypes are understood as indicators of moral charge and symbolic and cultural resonance. Here is a list of some of the instances where stereotypes were employed by *The Economist*:

- Comparing Assad and his father Hafez to *the Italian mafia family Corleone* (trying to depict Assads' way of governing Syria to a shady family business, running the country on basis of personal connections and family alliances and backdoor payoffs and killings);
- Evoking *Ramadan* 2011 as an *opportunity for change and cleansing* (not just in sense of spiritual and moral rejuvenation, but also political change);
- Using the example of *children playing with gun toys* as a symbol of deepening social profanity (creating the sense of how every level of society, even children, as a symbol of moral impunity, are befouled by the Assad regime; additionally suggesting that gun toys are imported from China, who alongside Russia blocks the Western peace efforts in the UN Security Council means creating the symbolic relation between the social decadence into violence and the role of Russia and China);
- The notion of *a red line* for political and military actions that cannot be internationally tolerated (contemporary adaptation of the phrase *red line in the sand* which has a long history of usage in the political and military discourse) – *crossing the Rubicon* as a similar notion;

- *Kurds* as unreasonably *stubborn* (in explaining their reluctance to join the Syrian opposition's effort to overthrow Assad);

- Comparing Putin to *a scorpion* in the fable of scorpion and a frog (presenting Putin as inherently evil and not trustworthy as a negotiation partner);

Historical analogies serve a similar purpose. They involve comparing an event from the present with what may appear to be its counterpart in the past. They are identified as being evoked by *The Economist* to imply a sense of lessons learned from the past and manage perceptions by attributing them with a sense of familiarity. They serve a similar function as stereotypical images and representation, but are based on real historical foundation. Historical analogies imply preconceived conclusions and overemphasize similarities. Here are some of the historical analogies identified in *The Economist*'s coverage:

- Comparison of the sectarian divide and instability of Syria to *Iraq* – creating a parallel of why military intervention might ensue, prior to the beginning of the actual conflict – but also emphasizing the fact that intervening in Syrian might carry the risk of long and unpredictable military involvement without a clear exit strategy;

- Comparison of Damascus, the Syrian capital with the Romanian capital *Bucharest under Ceausescu* – as a symbol of pre-modernity and rejection of the Western way of life and neoliberal capitalism;

- Comparisons of Assad to *Qaddafi* in evocating the overturning of a leader by violent means – with a strong positive connotation;

- Focus on Assad's *Alawite* background to create symbolic closeness of Assad to Iran as one of the rogue states and a symbol of anti-modernity. There is no necessarily historical basis for such a symbolic connection. Historically, Alawites have not had much religious affinity towards Iranian Shiites. They have a history of being an autochthonous religious and ethnic group living in Syria alongside Sunnis – moreover, they are ethnic Arabs, while Iranians are not. They are one of the most moderate Muslim groups, opposite to orthodox Sunni and Shia groups. This analogy between Iran and Alawites is in the function of stigmatization.

- Evoking *the Munich agreement from 1938* to imply negotiations as a sign of weakness and moral capitulation that comes with working with the evil. More resolute actions are implied as a necessary solution.

- Comparing Aleppo to *Grozny*, *Guernica*, *Dresden*, *Sarajevo* and also *the genocide in Rwanda* to create a sense of familiarity and moral unambiguity.

Concerning the manipulations of facts and figures, the author of this study has indicated instances of loose usage of figures in the content analysis part of the study. However, there are no strong evidences to support the notion of widespread manipulation of facts and figures. Overall, the content analysis and the critical narrative analysis have only partially verified the accuracy of this specific hypothesis.

4.4. Lack of Legal and Historical Background

Special hypothesis number 4 of this study has been:

Simplifications and distortions are identifiable in The Economist's coverage of legal and historical aspects of the Syrian conflict.

One of the dimensions of the topic in which this study has delved in was *The Economist*'s coverage of legal and historical aspects of the conflict. These topics are inherently more complex and more difficult to write about in the format of news articles. By nature, the coverage of these issues leaves more space for manipulation, since the general public is not necessarily well informed and educated on topics such as the history of the Middle East or the UN Charter and norms of international humanitarian law. For an average reader these kinds of topics are, more often than not, just overly complex. This by default leaves more space for editorial agency which involves selective inclusion or omission of historical and legal background facts and interpretations.

Based on the body of content analysis, the conclusion on this specific hypothesis is that there is strong evidence of editorial agency around how historical background and legal interpretations of the Syrian conflict fit in the overall narrative. Historical aspects of the conflict are in this sense understood more broadly, as providing all necessary information to widely contextualize the conflict taking place in Syria. This refers to the understanding of deep and immediate causes of the conflict, as well the history of religion-driven sectarianism, history of politics in the Middle East, consequences of 20th century imperialism, as well as the specifics of the Syrian political context. The conclusion based on the content analysis is that historical contextualization is used highly selectively and only in function of strengthening the existing narrative of the conflict. Moreover, legal topics such as the evolution of the conflict through various phases from internal tensions, riots and other isolated and sporadic acts of violence, to an armed insurgency and ultimately a civil war (1); the legality of the Russian intervention

in Syria (2); and violations of principles and norms of international humanitarian law (3). Legal considerations are generally covered superficially by *The Economist*. In general, while still not considered manipulation in a proper sense, the way historical background and legal topics are covered make them important instrument in the overall narrative construction.

4.5. Orientalism

Special hypothesis number 5 of this study has been:

The political, social and cultural overtone of The Economist's narrative of the Syrian war is orientalist. The Economist's coverage of the conflict in Syria is reliant on the reproduction of orientalist historical, cultural and religious images and ideas.

Out of five special hypotheses of the study, this one is arguably most difficult to prove using strong and solid evidence because it deals with the narrative overtone and relatively less tangible aspects of the coverage. However, based on the empirical research and conclusions made throughout critical narrative analysis conducted in the two previous chapters, the author of this study claims there is sufficient trace and evidence of orientalist features in *The Economist*'s coverage. Moreover, and even more importantly, this author argues that the conceptual framework developed by Edward Said is a useful tool for decoding the media content concerning the Middle East. This notion has been part of some considerations and conclusions made in the previous chapters.

Conceptualized by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism* from 1978,[362] orientalism is a conceptual framework for seeing emphases, exaggerations and distortions of perceptions of the Middle East in the eyes of the West.

"*In Said's analysis, the West essentializes these societies as static and undeveloped—thereby fabricating a view of Oriental culture that can be studied, depicted, and reproduced. Implicit in this fabrication, writes Said, is the idea that Western society is developed, rational, flexible, and superior.*"[363]

This study implies that there is an identifiable nuance of orientalism as an omnipresent aspect of cultural representations of actors and politics around the Syrian conflict in *The Economist*'s coverage. Where this may be visible are, on one hand, representations of actors taking part in the conflict and, on the other hand, vocabulary and wording used to depict them. Ultimately, it may be the case that *The Economist* is contributing to the reproduction and sustenance of orientalist cultural

[362] Said, Edvard; *Orijentalizam*; Biblioteka XX vek – Knjižara Krug; Belgrade, 2008;
[363] Mamdani, Mahmood; *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terrorism*; Pantheon; New York, 2004; page 32.

representations of the Middle East by adopting a certain type of language and understanding of politics and society in Syria.

Possibly the strongest and clear-cut expression of the orientalist rhetoric was found in an article analyzed in the first chapter in the section about the beginning of the conflict.[364] The articles paired stereotypical imagery of the Middle East as jihadist on top of a sand dune with a crescent-and-star symbol on the sky with notions of incompatibility of democracy and Islam. The tone of the article was patronizing in a sense that it reinforced the notion that Middle Eastern countries inherently have an underdeveloped understanding of what democracy is and that the West has to educate their knowledge about what their interests should be and a mission to civilize them and embed them with democratic values. This to a point follows what Said depicts as orientalism, which according to him has been present in the Western intellectualist tradition for centuries now.

"*The representations of Orientalism in European culture amount to what we can call a discursive consistency, one that has not only history but material (and institutional) presence to show for itself. […] such a consistency was a form of cultural praxis, a system of opportunities for making statements about the Orient. My whole point about this system is not that it is a misrepresentation of some Oriental essence, but that it operates as representations usually do, for a purpose, according to a tendency, in a specific historical, intellectual, and even economic setting. […] Representations are formations, or as Roland Barthes has said of all the operations of language, they are deformations.*"[365]

The Economist's narrative of the Syrian conflict arguably fits into this long history of discursive consistency and belief in Western exceptionalism and the need to civilize the "other" dating back to enlightenment. Some of the previously mentioned aspects of *The Economist*'s coverage feed into this kind of thinking and single understanding of truth. One of them is the patronizing dimension of the responsibility to protect discourse, not in terms of the legal doctrine, but in terms of replicating the understanding of various countries worldwide and their political actors as immature and in need of help. The second points relates to how this discursive consistency is defended and preserved by using *rhetoric of blame* to present Western understanding of the Syrian conflict not just as factual, but in accordance to universal understanding of morality compared to none.

Interestingly, there have been little or no articles from *The Economist* featuring either people with public profile (organized-groups leaders, academics, politicians, etc.) or common people who are from Syria and live there during the conflict. In analyzing the conflict in Iraq, Judith Brown mentions how Said "*described 'Orientalists' not as people who portrayed Arabs and Muslims negatively, but*

[364] *Islam and the Arab revolutions*; 31/3/2011; *Op. cit*
[365] Said; 2008; *Op. cit*; page 362

those who used their European ability to 'comment on, acquire knowledge of, and possess'."[366] If anything, it seems as though people from the region would have deeper understanding of the conflict and could as an interviewee or through op-eds add value to *The Economist*'s coverage. Alternatively, there are not many articles featuring human-interest stories. One of the more peculiar examples is *The Economist*'s interview with two Jabhat al-Nusra fighters in Raqqa from 2013.[367] It, however, represents more of an exception which proves the previous point – rare example of a story giving some from Syria a voice is an example of representing Orient as something exotic and treating the al-Nusra fighters not as a correspondent, but an object of observation. Generally, without giving any voice to Syrians but objectivizing them instead, makes it relatively straightforward to locate the ownership of *The Economist*'s narrative with its editorial. Not giving voice to the Orient on issues about concerning it is one of the key aspects of cultural hegemony of the West in its relationship to the Orient, according to Said.

Furthermore, Islam as a threat is one of the indirect and latent notions of *The Economist*'s narrative of the Syrian conflict. To this point, Assad is, for example, symbolically constructed as an enemy of the West, its values and the way of life, and not considered as reaction to what in fact are centuries of Western foreign policy involvement in the Middle East. *The Economist* deals with politics and conflicts in the Middle East in detachment of any kind of critical consideration of deep roots of the Syrian conflict, but pins to religion as a point of reference. It does not for example tackle the historical ramifications of the Sykes-Picot agreement and the experience of colonialism throughout the 20th century to the volatility and instability of Middle Eastern countries. Historical context of colonialism and state-building which had disregarded geographical, linguistic, religious and ethnic peculiarities of the region are beyond any kind of consideration by *The Economist* in the context of reporting about the present Syrian conflict. The orientalist colonial crave-up shapes the environment in which the Middle Eastern countries and various actors in the region exist and behave – *The Economist*'s narrative of the conflictual Middle Eastern ecosystem, however, does not even consider them. ISIS's intention of creating a caliphate is for example a direct reference to Sykes-Picot and the expressed desire to undo a century of Middle Eastern interstate borders and create a unified political space for Arabs. Kurds also have historical grievances about their statelessness which are connected to Sykes-Picot. Internal and regional actors' understanding of the environment in which they operate and their fundamental goal –

[366] Brown, Judith; *Orientalism Revisited: The British Media and the Iraq War*; in Nikolaev, Alexander G; Hakanen, Ernest A; *Leading to the 2003 Iraq War – The Global Media Debate*; Palgrave Macmillan; New York, 2006; page 100
[367] *An interview with Jabhat al-Nusra*; in *The Economist*; 23/5/2013; https://www.economist.com/pomegranate/2013/05/23/an-interview-with-jabhat-al-nusra

are absent from *The Economist*'s narrative when covering the war in Syria. Significant part of their goals and behavior is narrated as rejection of Western modernity and irrationality.

"*Earlier tradition of Orientalism than the nineteenth-century one provided them with a vocabulary, imagery, rhetoric, and figures with which to say it.*"[368]

The use of orientalism as source of representation and language in covering the Syrian conflict has admittedly not been overwhelmingly acute. However, there is enough evidence to support the thesis about *The Economist* using the kind of political, social and cultural overtone described as orientalism by Said. This also adds value to critical narrative analysis conducted as part of this study in general – using orientalism as a tool to decode *The Economist*'s articles has shed new light upon its agency in informing public understanding of Syria and shaping the public debate.

[368] Said; 2008; *Op. cit*; page 58

5. Conclusion – General Hypothesis and Basis for Generalization

All of the research conducted so far really feeds into the conclusion on the general hypothesis of this study. In the introduction, the general hypothesis was set as follows:

The narrative on the Syrian conflict in the British magazine The Economist in particular, as a selected representative among the Western mass media, and in the Western mass media more generally – has been one where cultural violence is promoted and reproduced. The Economist has a complex, active and performative role in reproducing a narrative of the conflict as a fight for freedom and democracy against the brutal regime – which makes it a representative Western mass media outlet.

The narrative of the Syrian conflict represents the way how the story about the conflict has been told to the public. The research conducted and conclusions made have provided substantial evidence of *The Economist*'s complex, active and performative role in telling this story. The study has demonstrated how *The Economist*'s editorial digresses from the standard of objective and balanced reporting. One of the aspects of its coverage is the inability to grasp the complexity of the Syrian conflict, which results in simplification amounting to distortion. This is also understood as one of the reasons for employing established paradigms of representation like orientalism and ultimately essentialization of actors in the conflict. One the other hand, one of the more important conclusions of the study has been around its inclination towards what Galtung defined as war journalism. The overall narrative is strongly focused on direct violence and it manifestations. Moreover, the philosophy of journalism of attachment has been strongly manifested in *The Economist*'s narrative. *The Economist*'s propels strong emotional attachment to certain actors in the conflict as sole victims. As a consequence, it dehumanizes other actors and reinforces the antagonism between the conflicted sides. Consequentially, it reduces space for conflict resolution by peaceful means. Lastly, strong officialdom bias decreases potential for more balanced reporting and a more constructive and conflict-sensitive approach. In general, *The Economist*'s narrative can be described as contributive to the reinforcement of cultural violence in the context of the war in Syria, which has, importantly been neglected as one of the main factors fueling the conflict. Overall, the research has found enough evidence to support the general thesis of this study on the violence-focused coverage.

One part of the general hypothesis revolves around the notion that *The Economist*'s coverage of the Syrian conflicts fits into a wider pattern of how Western media in general cover the conflict. The case of why *The Economist* might be considered a good representative of Western media has been set in the introduction. The author of this study would argue that *The Economist*'s large readership, high outreach and global influence fulfill necessary requisites for generalization. If anything, its tone, the focus on relatively deeper analysis in comparison to other mainstream Western print media outlets and

targeting of more educated readership actually inhibit some of the problematic aspects of how international conflicts are covered more generally. Some of the conclusions made would arguably be manifested more strongly in the analysis of narratives of other mass media, especially in the context of the revolving debate on widespread practices of selective dissemination and one-sided arbitrary interpretations of facts and images known as fake news. In a wider endeavor to recognize and theorize the role of media in contemporary conflicts, it is this author's conclusion that general coverage of conflicts moves on a spectrum ranging from complete concealing from the public sight to extreme mediatization. The Syrian conflict has most definitely been on the mediatization part of the spectrum, which only reinvigorated all of the aspects off coverage analyzed in this study. Following Galtung's remark on war journalism, the Syrian conflict has really been covered in a pornographic manner, or one similar to a Hollywood blockbuster aimed at selling tickets and filling cinemas. The single most important aspect of this inclination toward spectacle has been the promotion of violence in the public discourse by mass media. The role of mass media in contemporary conflicts and the amount of influence they have on public opinion and understanding of conflicts, as well as the influence they have on policy and decision-makers is yet to be given academic attention it deserves. In a more practical sense, it also demonstrates the need for mainstreaming the principles of peace journalism and better training for journalist in order to equip them with knowledge and tools for containing violence in the public discourse.

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