The Mobilization Process of Syria's Activists: The Symbiotic Relationship Between the Use of ICTs and the Political Culture

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Using extensive interviews of Syrian activists and tracing the course of initially peaceful protests, this article explores the mobilization tactics protesters adopted over four distinct phases of Syrian protests up to August 2011. Analysis reveals that in establishing trustful relations and a sense of effectiveness and belonging among the protesters, interpersonal communication was more effective and faster than the hybrid media activities of Facebook administrators. Nevertheless, the uprising's later stages show that the more protesters became accustomed to protest culture, the more they benefited from ICTs. Many scholars studying ICTs' role in the protests have advanced the idea that people's use of the technology—not the technology itself—affected social processes. This study takes this argument a step further to claim that people's use of technology constitutes a dependent variable linked to the country's political culture.

Keywords: ICTs, social media, protests, political culture, Syria, collective action

In March 2011, after showing remarkable endurance under the Assad regime for many years, Syria witnessed the biggest uprising in its history. Inspired by Egyptian and Tunisian protesters, 15 schoolchildren in the provincial town of Deraa drew antigovernment graffiti on the walls of a school. They were arrested by the Moukhabarat (intelligence service) and their fingernails were pulled out. The local representative's humiliating words toward the children's parents galvanized the town's clans, and within three days, the people of Deraa took to the street. While protesting, a few were shot dead (Leenders, 2012). The violent death of peaceful protesters was a particularly catalyzing factor that instigated local protests around Syria. Like Tunisians and Egyptians, many Syrians mobilized to gain their freedom by pushing their long-standing dictator and the Moukhabarat out of office. From the start, however, the regime's very effective use of repression and a hybrid media system led to divisions among the protesters. Some eventually took to arms to thwart violent reprisals against opposition groups. Over four years, the uprising turned into more than a battle between the opposition and forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad, drawing in neighboring countries, world powers, and extremist groups, including the Islamic State ("Syria: The Story of the Conflict," 2015). By August 2014, the UN attributed more than 191,000 civilian deaths to the conflict, demanding urgent international and national action ("More Than 191,000 People Killed in Syria," 2011).

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The Syrian uprising also differed from protests in Egypt and Tunisia in its mobilization process, as the Internet did not become the Syrian protesters' main organizational hub. Commentators have emphasized that analysis of the role of ICT in protests needs to take into consideration the nuanced social, political, and communication structures that were unique to each Arab country (Anderson, 2011; Castells, 2012; Howard & Hussain, 2011; Khamis, Paul, & Vaughn, 2012). Khamis et al. (2012), for instance, compared cyber activism's roles in the Egyptian and Syrian uprisings and found that political and social factors unique to each country affected the process of the protests, such as the degree of state pressure on the protesters, interference by the international community and the military's response to the protesters. Meanwhile, the two countries' differing media structures affected their communications. Syria, unlike Egypt, limited coverage of the events by banning foreign journalists, with few exceptions (Khamis et al., 2012). The aim of this study is not to identify all the structural factors differentiating Syria from other Arab countries, but to understand which factors affected the use of ICTs during the protests and what their role in the Syrian collective action was. Angelis (2011) explored the network society of Syria in 2011, arguing that in contrast to Egypt's well-developed Internet community, the Syrian Internet space was formed only after the protests erupted in Syria, by newly active and disconnected actors mainly operating from abroad. Consequently, Internet activism seemed incapable of either guiding the protests or offering a platform on which opposition members could negotiate a unified political position. This article develops Angelis' argument using in-depth interviews with an administrator of the Syrian Revolution 2011 Facebook page (SRFP) and Syrian protesters on the ground. These interviews reveal the communication techniques the protesters used to organize and mobilize the protests. Their responses also illuminate how and why particular ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts.

This research's first critical finding is that Syria's political culture significantly impacted the use of ICTs in the protests. Acquaintance with the country's political culture before the uprising is vital to understanding this relationship. Given Syria's turbulent political development after independence, Syrians generally preferred to distance themselves from political activities that could cause instability and chaos (Lesch, 2012). The regime's attempts to create cultural mechanisms of control, such as a "cult of personality" around the president, further shaped Syrian political culture (Weeden, 1999). Although people did not necessarily believe the "mystifications" advanced by the regime, they were required to obey (Crisis Group, 2011). In the 1990s and 2000s, the Internet and satellite TV channels took on an informative role in Syria, creating a much more interactive and engaging political space (Lynch, 2006; Shaery-Eisenlohr, 2011). Anderson (2013), who did ethnographic fieldwork in Aleppo from 2008 to 2009, found that the cultural mechanisms of state control were no longer effective. People weary of the corrupt, patriarchal, nepotistic system adopted a narrative of scorn and lament that not only mocked or castigated political figures but also drew attention to their failings (Anderson, 2013).

Despite Syria's increasing political awareness, the culture of obedience remained influential there until the 2011 uprising began. The interviews for this research reveal that Syrians followed these norms initially because they lacked protest experience, and subsequently because the Syrian security state's structures of enforcement and coercion deterred them. Caroline Ayoub, for instance, a Christian Syrian from Damascus detained by the Assad regime in 2012 for her civic engagement, stated:

> Before the revolution in Egypt, people were allowed to gather, had political parties. . . .
> People were exposed to political life. In Syria, we were away from politics. Our parents
> used to tell us that we shouldn't talk with anyone about our religion or about politics.

Syria's limited political space and political culture, which ran through families, restricted the protest capacities of the youth. Apart from the few Syrians who had been politically active before the protests, such as members of the civil society movement, Syria lacked an experienced community capable of organizing a solidly structured protest movement. Other than regime-sanctioned protests on foreign issues, since the 1980s Syrians had witnessed only a few protests in Kurdish regions in 2004 (Kurdwatch, 2009). The regime had also fettered and repressed the civil society movement that emerged in the 2000s and played a controversial role in the manipulation of Syrian culture (Cooke, 2007).

To activate a public used to living in a culture of obedience, it was paramount to first create trust relations among potential participants and establish a sense of causality and belonging. This analysis shows that the administrators of a Facebook page were unable to implant these notions with only two weeks of preparation. Old communication methods and the expertise of experienced activists with preexisting ties to different segments of the public more effectively and rapidly built togetherness and trust relations among participants.

This study's second finding is that the eruption of protests in an authoritarian state can initiate a transition from a coercive culture of obedience to a protest culture prioritizing tolerance over conformity, autonomy over authority, and participation over security (Welzel & Inglehart, 2008). Such a transition had taken place in Egypt when the Egyptian uprising began (Colla, 2012; Tufekci, 2014). In Syria, however, despite the efforts of intellectuals in the 2000s, the cultural transition mostly occurred in 2011. Clearly, the more people got used to protest culture, the more they benefited from hybrid media and built transnational public networks.

To gain a more nuanced perspective on the role of ICTs in collective action, this study first explores collective action theories long emphasized by social movement theorists. The literature review clarifies what collective action requires and whether ICTs can meet these needs. It also analyzes research on the role of ICTs in the Arab Spring protests. Second, it provides a brief background for the methodology used in this research. Finally, by presenting interviews with Syrian activists and tracing the course of the peaceful protests, the analysis details the use of ICTs in four different stages of the uprising.

The Role of ICTs in Collective Action

Social movement theorists have long sought to understand how individuals become involved in collective action. Resource mobilization theorists, such as Olson (2002), have argued that protesters rationally estimate the costs and benefits of taking action. To hinder free riders among protesters, Olson advocates that leaders either coerce by punishing those who fail to participate, or offer incentives to those who act in the group interest (Olson, 2002). Conversely, political process theorists like Tilly (2006) and Tarrow (2011) emphasize the role of political opportunities and constraints in the emergence of "contention." According to Tarrow (2011), contention arises when dissidents, forbearing to comply with

restrictions, obtain external resources and discover opportunities to use them. Although these theorists clarify the factors that trigger collective action, they do not generally explain how a movement can sustain itself over time (McCaughey and Ayers, 2003). New social movement theorists, such as Melucci (1996) and Taylor and Whittier (1999), examine this issue and stress the importance of agency, collective identity, and loose network structures for the sustainability of protests. Collective identity has been defined as both an action and a notion (Melucci, 1996, pp. 72–73). First, it enables social actors to act as unified and delimited subjects. Second, it helps them build a notion of causality and belonging. Hence, participants feel that they are all working towards common goals. They also have defined opponents and an integrated sense of being that is incorporated into movement ideologies (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Melucci, 1996).

Recent use of ICTs controverts the collective action theory of social movement theorists (Bimber, Flanagin, & Stohl, 2005). Emerging technologies make communication less costly, difficult, and time-consuming; and it is no longer limited by individuals' cognitive constraints (ibid.). The rapid flow of messages from one messenger to potentially millions on the Internet reflects the way new communicative forms can reduce the role of social movement organizations and leaders in the mobilization process. According to Castells (2010), transborder network communication is key, since it helps expand societal bonds by assisting the formation of weak ties with strangers. Weak ties have been crucial for mobilization processes, as they are conduits whereby collective action reaches larger numbers of people and travels a greater social distance (Granovetter, 1973). They have also been important in creating sentiments such as togetherness and led to the construction of a "network society" (Castells, 2010, p. 348). Gerbaudo (2012), developing this theory, proposed that the emotion of togetherness did not arise via spontaneous communication on the Internet, but rather was harnessed by the new "soft leaders" or "choreographers" of digitally enabled protests. Still, whether ICTs help to foster collective action and create the sentiment of togetherness among Internet users, and whether these technologies always extend people's political capacities are questions that need to be analyzed in different contexts. So far, researchers' responses to these questions have been diverse. Cyber optimists like Garrett (2006), Rheingold (2002) and Shirky (2009) praise ICTs for enhancing protesters' ability to undertake collective action by removing barriers to group action. Cyber pessimists such as Morozov (2011) have warned of the risks of using these technologies in collective action, arguing that social media sites have in fact been used to reinforce dictators and threaten dissidents.

In the wake of Arab uprisings, debates over the role of ICTs in mobilizations for political and social change intensified (Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). At first glance, these technologies appeared to have played a central role in facilitating political change. They gained attention for providing new sources of information that a regime could not easily control (Niekerk, Pillay, & Maharaj, 2011). Based on surveys of Egyptian protesters, Tufekci and Wilson (2012) also found that ICTs positively shaped how citizens made individual decisions about participating in protests. However, these early studies drew criticism for not considering the different roles of different media technologies and for overemphasizing technologies' role in the protests. Multiple researchers who had conducted interviews with protesters started arguing that the online sphere was simply a tool for off-line protests (Aouragh & Alexander, 2011). Moreover, what brought success was not the technology but the political actors (Khamis et al., 2012). Adapting the resource mobilization theory to the Egyptian case, Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) found that the impact of

ICTs relies on the influence of outside conditions and the actors' efficacy in utilizing available resources to meet their goals. The Egyptian actors used ICTs effectively, so the Internet helped them receive and disseminate information, build strong ties among protesters, and increase interaction among activists.

Studies on Arab uprisings have explored more than the role of ICTs during protests. Hofheinz (2011) criticized the literature's narrow focus on media revolutions and examined long-term cultural and social effects of ICTs to assess their part in the formation of a movement. Howard and Hussain (2013) also assessed cultural and social effects of ICTs in the Tunisian and Egyptian protests, finding that activists who built solidarity networks used ICTs to identify collective identities and goals in the preparation phase. Similarly, Herrera (2014) conducted interviews and analyzed the Internet activities of youth in Egypt, finding that as Egyptian youth interacted with each other online, they developed a virtual intelligence by sweeping away taboos, desacralizing icons, and freeing their minds. Hence, Internet use in Egypt opened cultural frontiers, broke down boundaries, and shattered taboos (ibid.). However, as Rinke and Roder (2011) pointed out, everyday use and appropriation of ICTs vary among cultural contexts. Cultural forces both enable and restrict the impact of ICTs. Focusing on the mobilization process in Syria, this study will build upon these theorists' work by illustrating the symbiotic relationship between ICTs and the political culture. This research demonstrates that even as Internet use affects the culture of a country, political culture affects the way the Internet is used in collective action. Political culture may also complicate the creation of loose ties via the Internet and hinder the activities of soft leaders.

Methodology

Given the need to understand protesters' experiences in both the online and off-line spheres, their personal tactics for organizing or mobilizing protests, and the way they used ICTs, this research relied on semi-structured interviews to shed light on the collective action process in Syria. The study adopted a method similar to that of Papadopoulos and Pantti (2013), who conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with Syrian diaspora activists to explore their media practices. Interviews for this research were conducted with 21 protesters who helped organize protests in either the prerevolutionary period or the mobilization period of the protests and with three journalists who worked in Syria during the uprising. Conducted in Istanbul, London, and Cairo in 2013 and 2014, the interviews lasted 60 to 90 minutes. The interviewed activists reflect the ethnic diversity of the Syrian opposition, mirrored also by their backgrounds in different cities that hosted peaceful protests in 2011: Daraya, Deraa, Damascus, Tartus, Latakia, Homs, Hama, Idlip, Saraqeeb, Deir-Ezzor. Most participants' surnames are not given for safety reasons, and two participants are identified with pseudonyms at their request. The interviews were structured around six questions: *Did the activists have past protest experience? How did the activists hear about the protests and get involved in the collective action? What was their aim in joining the protests? How did they organize or mobilize the protests? How did they get their news during the uprising? How did they use the Internet or other communication methods, such as face-to-face communication and mobile phones?*

To enrich data from the interviewees and reflect on the case studies in a broader perspective, this article also refers to secondary data gathered from mainstream news about Syria, monitored online

reports, academic articles on the Syrian uprising, human rights reports, citizens' reporting (e.g., Syria Untold[1]), and the websites of the opposition (e.g., the local coordination committees' website).

Tracing the course of the protests and conducting interviews helped to identify four phases of the peaceful protests analyzed here: (1) experimentation, during which the administrators of the SRFP struggled to spark widespread protest using ICTs and TV channels; (2) local protest, in which contextual factors such as the presence of experienced activists, social networks, protest culture, and shared grievances helped foster a sense of togetherness; (3) diffusion, as mobilization began in new protest sites, in this case mosques, with the help of experienced activists' networks; and (4) organized collective action, in which the nascent protest culture helped drive the formation of transnational public networks.

The Experimental Phase: Led by Facebook Administrators

As in the Egyptian revolution, the seeds of the Syrian protests were first sown on the Internet. Inspired by Tunisian and Egyptian protesters, three Syrians outside of the country decided to take action for Syria and launched the SFRP, a Facebook page titled "The Syrian Revolution 2011." Operating online, they did not need to reveal their off-line identities. Even today, four years since the beginning of the uprising, one administrator, Mahmoud, still prefers to stay anonymous and uses an alias in interviews. When asked why he preferred to use an alias outside Syria, he stated:

> For security reasons. . . . It is not only about Syrian intelligence, but also about all intelligence agencies around the world. If the intelligence agencies know your identity, they will not allow you to stay in their country. Many Syrians got deported because of that, so we have to protect our identities.

Except for one spokesperson, Fida'ad-Din Tariif as-Sayyid, the other administrators also adopted the same precautions Mahmoud took. In Syria's unsafe environment, the Internet arose as the only platform permitted to operate anonymously against the state. It also provided a new platform from which the public—in this case as members of the Facebook group—challenged public authority. As the activist Suhair Atassi pointed out, Syria has long been a "kingdom of silence" (Wikstrom, 2011). In the absence of political or social alternatives to the Ba'ath Party, online activists used the platform of the Internet to counter this culture of fear.

The SRFP also played an informative role, releasing information on the time and location of protests planned for February 4, 2011, in Syria. The interviewees described this call to action as a very courageous and shocking act. As the Syrian dissident Bilal, for instance, who while living in Damascus was detained by the Assad regime in 2011 for his online posts, mentioned:

> Before the revolution started, there had been a trial in February. There was a call for a protest from the SRFP. When I saw the first online post, it was a shock. The first thing I

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[1] See www.syriauntold.com

did was show it to my family. I said, "Look what is going on" and then, there was this silent moment.

Bilal's words point to the country's long-reigning obedience culture. Seeing a call to action that directly challenged the authorities initially surprised Syrians and caught their attention. However, fear of a potentially oppressive response from the regime kept them from immediately responding to this call. Like Bilal, many other interviewees reported emotions of shock and surprise. Some, like Nada (alias), an activist from Tartus and employee of the online opposition radio station Radio Souriali, expressed suspicion: "When I heard the first call for protests, I thought this could be a ruse by the Syrian security services and that it might not be real."

Thus, although staying anonymous helped the administrators to operate safely, it prevented them from earning the public's trust. Syrians skeptical about the credibility of the page hesitated to respond promptly to the call to action. The SRFP administrator Mahmoud indicated that TV and print media coverage was crucial to the page's prominence and increased membership. He said:

In the first two weeks, we were writing things like "please help us to reach 5,000 people." We kept writing this post, some brave-hearted people invited their friends and we got support from other Arabs. When we got 5,000 likes, a lot of media outlets noticed our page and started to write about it. Within three weeks, we became like a star and everybody heard about the page.

Mahmoud's words illustrate the enduring significance of traditional media in convincing people of the credibility of social media. Television channels that look into mediating stories from inside Syria became the mediator between the public and the SRFP administrators.

Despite recent developments in ICT capabilities, in 2011 Syria's telecommunication infrastructure was the least developed in the region. Internet penetration was just 23%. Although phone penetration was notably higher at 63% of the population, the number of 3G users had reached only 80,000 by the end of 2010 (Freedom House, 2012). Organizers relied on TV channels to reach non-users of Facebook. As in the Burma Campaign UK, whose growth is due to the power of a Facebook group and the BBC, the interconnection between the Internet and broadcast media shaped the evolution of the SRFP (Chadwick, 2013). These data show that with regard to information dissemination methods, developments in Syria resemble those evident in western countries.

Despite administrators' intensive efforts, nobody turned up to answer the call for collective action. This failure had many causes. According to Ribal Al Assad, the date chosen for the protest and the pictures used on the page created doubt in minds of the public. The administrators chose the date to invoke the Muslim Brotherhood uprising in Hama in 1982. The SRFP also featured a picture of a clenched fist with a red color suggestive of blood, which was like calling for a civil war (Ribal Al Assad, in Lesch, 2012). Moreover, certain segments saw the religious language in the administrators' posts as an attempt to incite sectarian hysteria (Nabki, 2011). As the administrator Mahmoud explained,

we used religious language without any sectarian intent; we just wanted to communicate in the everyday language of the Syrian people. We later referred to a consultation board about the content of our messages, but it was a challenging process, as the consultants did not always respond quickly.

One main reason for the public mistrust was that the SRFP was not founded until January 18, only a few weeks before the protests erupted, which was not enough time to build trust in a platform that was new to the public and had only one conduit between the administrators and the public—the spokesperson, Fida. Hence, the wrong narrative choice, a restricted time period, and the administrators' security anxieties contributed to low attendance at the protests.

Citizens' reluctance to attend these protests supports theories of diffusion and mass communication studies that claim that people rarely act on mass media information unless it is transmitted through personal ties (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955). The administrators had not established personal ties with the society, so the Internet by itself was not sufficient to convince people. As Castells (2012) has maintained, overcoming fear, which is fundamental to individuals' participation in collective action, requires creation of an emotional mechanism of togetherness. The administrators could not build such societal ties in the limited time between the start of preparations for the protests and their ignition date. Additionally, most Syrians in Damascus lacked protest experience. Here it is crucial to remember that the logic of collective action entails relational structures, the presence of decision-making mechanisms, the setting of goals, circulation of information, calculation of outcomes, accumulation of experience, and learning from the past (Melucci, 1996). The Syrian protests lacked such factors as accumulation of experience and learning from the past. Without past protest experience, Syrians preferred to wait for others to take the first step. For instance, Mazen Gharibah, an activist and journalist from Homs, told me: "My friends and I attempted to go to the protests, but then a couple of us said that no one was going and that it was very dangerous, so we did not go." Mazen's words underline Syrians' inexperience when it comes to protest. Off-line activism brought many challenges, and without a well-organized group unified around a notion of causality and belonging, dissidents were afraid to take the risk of protesting against the oppressive Syrian state.

A final factor stifling the spark of protest was the absence of experienced activists. Mahmoud said that what the administrators actually needed to organize protest in central Damascus was the support of experienced protesters. His arguments illustrate the limited capacities of "soft leaders," in this case the administrators, in the organization process. Fear of the security services and the absence of effective opposition meant the organizers could not rely on hybrid media tools to mobilize people but also had to draw on the dynamics of collective action by finding leaders on the ground.

The failure of the first Internet-organized protest compelled the SRFP administrators to include additional methods in their repertoire of contention, defined by Tilly (2006) as the subset of tactics people employ to make claims against powerful others. Thus they benefited from traditional methods like face-to-face communication with experienced activists. Mahmoud claimed that

we once more called for protests on the 15th of March. We said that we were not going to wait for someone but that we would find this person. Thus, we began to communicate with activists and told them "you should go!" I had never been in jail, not even for an hour. I could not imagine myself in jail. Experienced activists did not know such fear because they had spent 15 years in prison.

Mahmoud's words support the validity of Olson's collective action theory in the digital age. While taking action, protesters consider the rational estimate of the costs and benefits of action. Experienced activists ready to cope with the possible results of protests initiated the spark in the off-line sphere. They also encouraged others. Thus, the March 15 protests, organized via cooperation between the administrators and experienced activists, became the first planned protest against the regime in Syria, calling for democratic reforms and the release of prisoners ("Syria Protests," 2011). Until then, Syrians had witnessed only spontaneous protests (Foreign Policy, 2011). Various media channels, including the BBC and Al Jazeera, covered the March 15 protests. Protest videos circulated on YouTube. Yet analysis showed that attendees numbered only about 50 ("Protesters Stage Rare Demo," 2011).

If the SRFP played any part in the emergence of the Syrian uprising, it did so particularly as the first public platform to encourage the public to take action. The administrators' initiative was immediately taken as an example. On March 16, approximately 150 experienced activists and relatives of political prisoners gathered in front of the Interior Ministry to request the release of political prisoners ("Middle East unrest," 2011). The seeds of the uprising had been sown.

The Phase of Local Protest via Social Networks in Deraa

Unlike the March 15 protests, the Deraa protests, which succeeded in bringing millions to the streets, were not planned. Leenders (2012), who explored the dynamics and underlying conditions of the Deraa uprising by analyzing digital sources and contacting activists on the ground, drew attention to the dense social networks in Deraa. Clans, labor, migration, cross-border movements, cross-border trade between Deraa and Jordan, and crime, Leenders argued, had led to well-established social networks in Deraa that proved vital to the successful mobilization of the uprising. Hence the appearance of the protests in Deraa was not a coincidence. Collective identity, which social movement scholars like Melucci have long emphasized as a driving factor in protests, was already present in Deraa.

Apart from the city's close social networks, two other distinct factors differentiated the Deraa protests from the March 15 protests. First, the Deraa protests ignited spontaneously against the brutal repression of the regime, mediated by overlapping social networks built over years. The public witnessed the arrest of children and the deaths of peaceful protesters. This serious violence and threat triggered outrage that gave way to widespread protests. In contrast, the March 15 protest was not responding to a political constraint or provoked by an immediate act of repression or threat coming from the regime. As the media researcher Enrico de Angelis asserted:

> The Facebook page of the Syrian Revolution 2011 was made on nothing. It was not dedicated to a specific person either, like the "Kullena Khaled Said" Facebook page of Egyptian revolution.

The administrators had difficulty activating people's emotions in the absence of an iconic figure or specific event that carried profound emotional power, as had the death of Khaled Said and the torture of children in Deraa (Herrera, 2014).

The other distinction between the Deraa protests and those in Damascus was the Deraa protesters' past experience with protests. The experienced activist Osama, for instance, drew attention to the significance of past civil movements to mobilize citizens. Osama was among experienced activists who demanded the release of political prisoners in the March 16 protest in Damascus. When the Deraa protests began, he organized protests in his hometown of Daraya with the future martyr Giath Matar, well known for handing soldiers flowers, who became a symbol of the peaceful protests. When asked how they had succeeded in breaking down people's fear and activating them in Daraya, Osama answered:

> The situation in Daraya was suitable for these things because, in 2003, there was a civil movement there against corruption and the invasion of Iraq. So, the atmosphere was ready, and the people were prepared for the demonstrations. At first, there were almost 50 young men who went to the protests. Then, the protests became bigger and bigger. I had some friends who were arrested in 2003 in those protests and then released after two and a half years. They had big roles in mobilizing people in 2011.

Osama confirmed that past collective actions had an important role in the 2011 uprising. The physical presence of experienced activists and their dense social networks helped form and sustain a collective sense of "we-ness" more rapidly (Earl & Kimport, 2011). This connectedness also encouraged a particular trust among the people that was closely related to the participants' motivation. As their motivation intensified, the mobilization process accelerated (Granovetter, 1973). For example, when asked what motivated people to participate in the Deraa protests, Dr. Nasser Hariri, a Deraa cardiologist and representative of the Revolutionary Movement in the town of Horan, emphasized the close bonds of Deraa's citizens, claiming that:

> Deraa was the last city that French occupation had reached and it was the first city that French occupation left. The people of Deraa have a specific culture. They have strong ties. Our humanity, our feelings, our honor are important.

Consequently, the factors facilitating people's collective action, such as a repertoire of contention, social networks, cultural frames, and collective identity (Tarrow, 2011), already existed in Deraa. These factors produced confidence in the participants. When the government's attempted repression reached intolerable levels, well-developed social networks helped citizens forge solidarity with the parents of the tortured children.

The Diffusion Phase: Friday Rallies Led by Experienced Activists

In parallel with the Deraa protests, demonstrations took place in three other Syrian cities—Damascus, Homs, and Banias—on March 18 (*The New York Times*, 2011). Yet the diffusion of the protests occurred mostly on March 25, dubbed the Friday of Glory by the SRFP administrators. These protests brought thousands of Syrians into the streets in at least a dozen cities, including Homs, Hama, al Tah, Jableh, and Latakia, as well as in the towns surrounding Deraa and Damascus (Free Syrian Translators, 2012).

The leading activists in these cities took the initiative to organize and mobilize the protests. As an experienced activist from Daraya, Osama and his friends were among the leaders mobilizing the crowds. When asked what they did to mobilize people in Daraya, he answered:

> We were concerned about the security forces, so we only used our mobile phones to plan meetings. We did not say anything on the phone. We discussed things face-to-face when we met. We formed circles of five people, and then each circle tried to mobilize people. After creating big numbers, we gathered in the mosques. Later on, we went to the street and started chanting our slogans. People who saw us followed us, but the core groups were formed by circles of five people. This was because of security concerns.

Osama's words show that the mosques eliminated the organizational and logistical issues that a social movement organization would have encountered. The protesters did not have to put themselves at risk by showing up alone in the protest area. Starting the protests at mosques helped people discover they were not alone and spurred them to run the risk. The mosques became new protest sites where people gathered and felt deep-rooted feelings of solidarity.

Meanwhile, the high number of security agents throughout each segment of society meant that Syrians had to adopt unique methods for the mobilization process, such as separating into small groups and communicating with people they already knew. Meziane, a leading activist from Hama and software engineer for Syrian National Council media, explained that "most people were afraid to go to demonstrations with people they did not know. They might be from the security forces. So, we did this with the people we knew."

In line with Granovetter's theory (1973), the protesters developed weak ties that later transformed into strong ties as they met friends of friends. Granovetter argued that individuals who lack weak ties are unlikely to effectively mobilize in collective action within their community, as weak ties create more bridges between people (Granovetter, 1973). To form the necessary ties, the core group split into smaller groups, and each member of a small group brought a friend to the protests. The consequent snowballing effect enlarged the protesters' numbers. Social networks that had developed over years of local dissidence played an important part in this process. Turkish reporter Hediye Levent, who has worked in Damascus for many years, gave an interesting example of how such communication networks developed: "The best news source was people themselves; you could hear what happened in Aleppo on that day from a taxi driver in Damascus, the communication network was that developed."

Hence, word of mouth and snowballing mobilization tactics were the Syrian protesters' main repertoire of contention. In a culture of fear, citizens preferred these conventional, secure methods.

The Role of ICTs in the Diffusion Phase

ICTs did not have a major role in the process of organizing the protests but were essential to informing the outside world about them. Slow Internet speed impeded Syrian protesters' direct connection to the outside world. Internet connection was mostly via dial-up connection or a fixed-line telephone subscription. Most users were restricted to speeds of only 256 Kbps; hindering multimedia content downloads (Freedom House, 2012). The diaspora took an active role in the information stage and secured news accessibility (Papadopoulos & Pantti, 2013). Protesters on the ground did mention using the Internet to discuss protest logistics and strategies. Mazen Gharibah, a journalist from Homs, said:

> We started to create secret groups on Facebook and these groups were called "information groups for demonstrations." They were closed groups. On these pages, we said that there would be demonstrations in front of this bank, on this date, so try to be there. We took this news and circulated it in trusted circles on the same day. And we got ourselves there, that's how it started.

Mazen's statements point to the unique methods protesters employed for social media. Instead of launching open Facebook pages to interact with millions, they created closed Facebook and Skype groups, interacting with friends or friends of friends in these groups. These unique activities were partly due to the dissidents' inexperience with the participative, collaborative nature of digital media, but their creative use of ICTs was probably driven more by the cruelty and oppression of the Syrian regime. Compared to the well-established Egyptian blogosphere and Twitter users who openly discussed their ideas in Egypt, bloggers in Syria could not even openly declare their support for the people's demands in the country (Ghrer, 2013). Using social media was risky, and dissidents were afraid of being caught by the Shabiha (armed militia supporting the Ba'ath Party government) while operating the new technologies.

The situation was no different for mobile phone communication. Interviewees in this research mentioned that from the start of the uprising, they used secret words when speaking to friends on the phone. Dina, for instance, an activist from suburban Damascus, stated:

> I had to flee Syria due to an incautious phone conversation with a friend. I was in a protest and called a friend from the protest site. My friend was arrested due to our phone conversation, and I had to immediately leave the country. When we called people from protest sites, we actually put these people in danger.

Dina's words show how the Moukhabarat, by listening in on certain citizens' phone calls, easily arrested them within hours.

Apart from communication methods such as word of mouth, mobile phones, and the Internet, protesters also used traditional communication platforms like coffee shops to organize their protests.

Meziane, the leading activist from Hama, mentioned that between March 18 and 25 they met mostly in coffee shops during the day to plan the protests. Rather than reaching out via the Internet without meeting in person, as would be expected from a 21st-century protest organization, off-line platforms were still popular in Syria.

Rinke and Roder (2011) argued that the use of off-line areas and oral communication is consistent with Arab communication cultures. Oral communication has a striking advantage in creating the resource of trust, necessary for collective action. However, interviews for this study showed that the activists used face-to-face communication not just because of their communication culture but also for security reasons.

The Organized Collective Action Phase

Deadly clashes between protesters and police in the first month of the protests showed that if the protests were to succeed as a sustainable movement, they needed to move beyond local action to a more organized campaign (Najm, 2011). In pursuit of this aim, groups that originally formed to organize and document local revolutionary activities on the ground were unified at the local coordination committee (LCC) level. The first committee emerged in Daraya, a restless suburb of Damascus (Shadid, 2011). Osama, a leading dissident in the Daraya protests, described how the local Daraya committee merged with the LCC:

> The Daraya Local Committee was effective in organizing protests and other peaceful activities. Actually, it was founded by a number of leading activists in the city before the foundation of the LCC in Syria. When the LCC was established, the Daraya committee chose to join it and remained active within it.

In towns and neighborhoods, leading figures like Osama also pioneered oppositional unity. Although the committee in Daraya took its power from the street, online platforms loomed large in the mobilization and internationalization attempts of LCCs' members, who organized across disparate regions via these tools (Shadid, 2011). Mazen Gharibah, who had helped the Homs Local Committee Council, talked about the Internet activities of the LCCs:

> Where we were meeting was in the Internet café of a friend. Aside from organizing the protests, we were creating logos and banners, drawing some flags, preparing the sprays. We also wanted to know what was going on in other cities and how they organized. We started to create co-ordination groups on Skype. For example, we contacted local groups in Deraa. They told us to use onions when the gas came or not to organize the protests from the same mosque.

Mazen's account describes the improved coordination among different local groups on the ground. Approximately 120 local committees emerged across the country. Representatives of these groups started to meet fortnightly via Skype to coordinate activities. LCCs became responsible for reporting news and developments on the ground to international media. The LCC media office played a significant role at this

stage, gathering, verifying, and supplying real-time information about the uprising. It also constantly updated the LCC website and Facebook page (Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2012).

As the protesters became more organized, ICT use and media reporting became increasingly well structured. To some extent, this coordination between protesters and new Syrian media agencies emerging abroad, such as the Activists News Association and Syrian National Council Media, broke the regime's media blackout. Employees of the Syrian National Council media center said they were in contact with activists inside Syria via satellite Internet provided to those activists by the center. As Syrian society got used to the developing protest culture, it saw a large increase in citizen journalists, who provided information to international media and Syrian-initiated news websites, e-magazines, online radio stations, and media centers. Apart from SRFP, various Facebook pages sprang up after the uprising, the most prominent being the Syrian Days of Rage, the Shaam News Network, With You Syria and We Are All Martyr Hamza Alkhateeb (Almqvist, 2013). All these e-magazines, opposition Web pages, and social media groups became both the revolutionaries' voice and their tools for shaping the protests' narrative (Harkin, 2013). Sama, one of the administrators of the We Are All Martyr Hamza Alkhateeb page, said that in the absence of social networks, they would all have been killed without anyone noticing. She added:

> When I saw how they tortured this innocent child who was trying to deliver milk and bread for the children of the besieged city of Deraa, I thought it was our duty to expose this crime to the world.

The administrators tried to get the support of the international community by showing the torture and other atrocities happening in Syria. As Volkmer (2014) stated, the spread of citizen journalism gives way to a process of de-bracketing the society–state nexus. Volkmer (2014) defined the de-bracketing process as a characteristic of the transformation of publics that fractures public communication, from national mass media spheres to the complex structures of interactive transnational networks. Thus, although ICTs were not the main source of Syrian mobilization and organization, they were significant players in the creation of interactive transnational networks that informed the world about the protests.

Conclusion

Tracing the development of peaceful protests in Syria shows that specific actors and media came to prominence at each stage of the uprising. In the experimental phase, administrators of the SRFP were the first actors to try to mitigate the culture of fear amongst Syrians. Along with the Internet, traditional media channels played a crucial role during this stage, heightening the prominence of the Facebook page and the administrators' credibility. This finding is corroborated by recent research arguing that the initial nuclei of new collective action emerge in the form of online discussion (Gerbaudo, 2012). But despite the administrators' initiation of online discussion in a constructed emotional space, an ill-conceived choice of narrative, a restricted time period, and security fears, they failed to reconstruct a sense of togetherness and trust in the society. Consequently, their hybrid media activities were insufficient to convince large numbers of people to join in the collective action. This finding goes against recent generalizations on Arab uprisings that have argued that social media reconstruct a sense of togetherness (Castells, 2012) and facilitate gatherings in off-line space (Tufekci & Wilson, 2012). Apparently, people in coercive systems still

rarely act on mass media information that is not transmitted through personal ties. The spontaneous protest phase in Deraa showed that the presence of social networks, activists' past protest experience, and shared grievances and aspirations in a place were still major elements in forming and sustaining the collective identity necessary for the emergence of sustainable collective action.

The organization of protests might be better understood by examining the Friday rallies. This study's findings indicate that leading activists in different cities had an active role in mobilizing the public. Snowballing tactics, whereby small mobilization groups galvanized their friends or relatives, were the protesters' main repertoire of contention. Mosques were key to facilitating gatherings and creating a sense of "we-ness" in the public sphere. Analysis of protestors' communication methods reveals that word of mouth and face-to-face communication were significant. Interpersonal communication via secret Facebook and Skype groups also contributed to the exchange of information and informed the world about the situation on the ground. However, the Internet could not be the protesters' main organizational hub.

The final phase of the peaceful protests supports this research's hypothesis of a symbiotic relation between political culture and the use of ICTs. As protesters developed their protest culture, their spontaneous activities increasingly became more organized. Local committees in towns and neighborhoods began cooperating with each other and unified under the LCCs. Although the politically inexperienced grassroots opposition failed to launch an initiative that harmonized the efforts of political forces (Al-Monitor, 2013), it efficaciously developed a protest culture in towns and cities. As protesters overcame their fears and adapted to the nascent protest culture, they operated more comfortably on the Internet, and the number of citizen journalists increased. Eventually they broke free of the regime's media blackout and bypassed the structural limitations via the use of satellite phones and the Internet. Thus, the protesters' hybrid media activities improved in parallel with the activities of developing the political culture, de-bracketing the society–state nexus in Syria.

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