

perspectives

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Editorial

Hardly anything is more challenging than writing about something that is essentially nothing more than 'hot air'. Yet anyone who has been affected by rumours is familiar with their unhallowed dynamics, and the serious consequences they can entail. Rumours fulfil social functions. They serve as a medium through which unfulfilled hopes or unspecific fears can be voiced. They bond and drive a wedge between people and population groups at the same time. They can destroy reputations, credibility and even lives.

Some rumours develop out of misunderstandings and quickly take on a life of their own. Others are spread deliberately in order to enhance the legitimacy of a person's position – or at least to undermine the credibility of the respective other party. Many rumours contain true information that, taken out of context or distorted, suddenly assumes an entirely different meaning. Many a half-truth is inflated and develops into one of those contemporary legends, which a 'friend of a friend' has certainly experienced for themselves. Others, with the addition of more and more details, morph into elaborate conspiracy theories, often becoming more popular than simpler and more obvious explanations.

The possibility of identifying the truth is not always given. However, even when possible, the deceptive depiction persists. The internet is flooded with pseudo-truths that have been clearly refuted and nonetheless, in a zombie-like fashion, are periodically revived. A great deal of what occurs in Syria could easily be mistaken for footage from a horror film. The image of a Syrian Christian woman who was allegedly murdered with a cross found much attention on Twitter – an image that was in fact taken from an actual horror movie. In times of upheaval and uncertainty, and especially under circumstances that make it difficult to access reliable information, rumours develop to their most disastrous effect.

In this issue, Hiba Haidar shares her memories of a day in 1975, a day on which a rumour changed her life. Journalist and documentary filmmaker Christina Foerch Saab reports on interviews conducted with

combatants from different factions in the Lebanese Civil War, which focus on the role rumours play in psychological warfare. Haid Haid explains how rumours about the Syrian presidential elections persuaded Syrians in Lebanon to vote – even those who viewed the elections as illegitimate. Syrian authors Mohammad Dibo, and Dima Wannous describe how the past and present political climates in Syria have shaped the development of, and belief in rumours. The Syrian intellectual Yassin Al Haj Saleh shares his experiences of how rumours of their imminent release haunted political prisoners and their family members. Moroccan journalist Salaheddine Lezaimi analyses how rumours about the Moroccan monarchs and their ongoing role in the fraught relationship between the press and the palace were exploited by various political factions, and his fellow countryman Omar Brouksy addresses the anthropology of rumour. Rumours do not only assume a role in high politics, but also have an effect on local affairs. In this context, Suzanne Baaklini reveals how disinformation impedes the campaigns of civil society organisations in the struggle over public space in Beirut.

Regardless of how adverse the circumstances, nobody is helplessly exposed to the dissemination of rumours. While most people view the internet as the main cause for the more and more rapid dissemination of rumours, it simultaneously is the internet that allows for their swift exposure as myths. In an interview with Noor Baalbaki, Jad Melki, Professor at the American University of Beirut, describes how annual summer schools on 'Media Literacy' instruct students and journalists in critical thinking. Lastly, the organisation Dawlaty, in cooperation with hbs, held an initial workshop on 'Rumour Control' – a learning process for everyone involved, and continued in further workshops on the same topic. This Perspectives issue is illustrated by Mazen Kerbaj.

*Translated from the German by Christine Kollmar

Get the Hell out of Here - They are Coming to Kill Us

Hiba Haidar

1975, a year engraved in my soul and memory for ever.

1975, the beginning of the civil war in Lebanon, I still remember what happened that day in September.

We used to live in East Beirut, in Ain El-Remanneh, where the civil war started on April 13 of that year with the Ain el-Remmaneh bus incident. For four or five months, the war remained limited to that area before it spread over all of Lebanon.

It was September, I was a child of 8 years and the war had been going on in the streets for almost five months.

Snipers surrounded the area waiting to harvest the lives of those who dared to venture out to run errands.

On that day in September it was still early in the morning, we were having breakfast, all the females in the family were sitting around the table eating. My father had taken my brother with him to our village in the Bekaa Valley to take care of our lands there. As the fighting in the streets in our neighbourhood had become more ferocious, it was now unsafe for them to return to Beirut. Most families had already left because they were afraid of the fighting. On all the high buildings, there were snipers from the different factions, and I recall that whenever my mother sent me to get bread, she told me to run, not to walk, because of the snipers.

We were among the last to stay in that area. This was mainly due to two reasons: first we didn't believe that the fighting would continue, and were convinced life would soon be back to normal. This in itself was not uncommon, for not in their wildest dreams did the Lebanese people imagine that this would be the beginning of such a long and costly war for them, and that a whole generation of children would grow up and become adults before it ended in 1990. The

second reason was that we were living in the building adjacent to al-Hayat hospital where doctors were striving to help the injured, and due to my father's medical background he assisted in healing the sick and the injured. It was only that week that he had had to go to the Bekaa valley to take care of our lands there.

That morning we heard the doorbell followed by a strong knocking on the door. The person was in a hurry, my mother ran and asked who it was. A familiar voice answered, 'It is me, Georges.' My mother, relieved that it was our neighbour, opened the door. He was tense and she sensed that something serious was going on.

He stayed there standing at the door and said, 'Auntie, you should get out of here, leave the house, it is very dangerous to stay, the Palestinian Liberation organization (PLO) and Lebanese National Movement are coming tonight and they are going to kill us all.' He turned his back and left my mother there mesmerized. She looked at us and said, 'How can we leave? We don't have a car.'

At that time I did not understand what he was saying or who these people were, all I sensed was the fear on my mother's face. She sat for a while, thinking what to do. Then I saw her picking up the phone and calling someone. She was just opening her mouth to tell him what had happened, then suddenly I saw her face relax a little. The man on the other side of the line was an old family friend and a neighbour living two blocks away from our house. He told her he was going to pick us up, 'I am not leaving you behind to be killed. Don't pack things, there's no time and I can't stay long in the car waiting, you know it is very dangerous', he said. My mother hung up and quickly turned towards us and told us that we had to leave right away. She ran to our bedrooms and packed a

few things, turned to her own bedroom and put some clothes in a small bag, then turned to the kitchen and washed the dishes. It was obvious that the Kataeb party through its fighters were informing everyone to leave the area. The Kataeb were the dominant party in our neighbourhood and wanted to let us know the enemy was coming.

We could not take anything with us apart from the barest necessities. I can still vividly picture how I cried, 'Why can't I take my favourite toys and more clothes with me?' While my mother was pushing us out of the house, hurrying, yelling at us to, 'just go!' When we reached the stairs of the building, she told me to, 'Run quickly, hide inside the car and keep your head bent, don't show your head, do you understand me?' I looked at her and said, 'yes.' This was repeated with my two other sisters, and finally she did the same.

We left, speeding down the street, gun shots just missing us, the snipers were trying to hit the car but God was looking after us that day and we managed to flee the area safely. We left for the mountains of Aley where we stayed at my uncle's house. My parents' friend went to his village in the Shouf area in Nabeh Al-Safa. The second day, my father came to Aley and took us to our village in the Bekaa valley.

My Mother had the radio near her all that time, following the news, but nothing in particular happened that day. The fighting continued. There was actually an assault on the neighbourhood later on, however, it was a fight between the different parties concerned at that time, and as in all such fights casualties did occur among both fighters and civilians, but it was not about private houses or slaughtering civilians as we had been made to fear.

When in November 1975 a ceasefire was brokered between the factions, we decided to

return home, but with fighting flaring up every now and then, we spent the time going back and forth between the Bekaa valley and Beirut until May 1976, when it was clear that the Syrian army would intervene militarily against the Lebanese National Movement. Then my parents decided to empty the house in Beirut and move all our belongings to our village. The fighting finally ceased in October 1976 after the Syrian Army succeeded in quelling the resistance. Unfortunately for us, we could never return to our home as it had been occupied by the Syrian Army. It had been a rented house, so when we came back to Beirut, due to the divisions in the town, we decided to move to another area.

The threat was never explicitly issued – it was only spread as a rumour. But it was impossible to know whether it was true or false, and when your life and the life of your family are under threat, you'd rather not take the risk. Luckily for us nothing happened that day. Nonetheless, this rumour has marked my life and I will never forget the fear on my mother's face, and how terrified I was about those monsters that I thought were coming to kill us.



Hiba Haidar is the PR and Website Manager at Heinrich Böll Stiftung - Middle East office in Beirut. Prior to that, she worked at UN agencies, the Arab Resource Collective and the Amel Association.

Psychological Warfare: Rumours in the Times of the Lebanese Civil War

Christina Foerch Saab

It's a nice evening during the summer of 2014, a small group of old friends gather in a mountain village for a chat, a drink and some tasty Lebanese food. These friends, all of them now in their fifties, were combatants during the civil war that ravaged Lebanon from 1975 until 1990. Although they all found their way back to civilian life long ago, almost inevitably during such encounters they talk about their experiences and memories of the civil war. Those experiences, and the memories of them have become special bonds between them, and their gathering goes on until way after midnight. The next day, some of them continue their chat from the previous night on Facebook, and one of them jokingly suggests that they'd better take care of this mountain area, which is located near the Syrian border, in order to watch out for invasions by the militia of the Islamic State (IS). The joking on Facebook goes back and forth, and one of them suggests setting up a new armed force to protect their region, just as they'd done as teenagers during the times of the Lebanese civil war. Someone outside this group picks up on the Facebook conversation, taking the jokes for real, and the next day there's an article in, what I was led to believe was a well-known Lebanese newspaper, claiming that a group from such and such region is planning to take up arms to fight IS. The article also claims that another group, from a different religious confession than this group of friends, is apparently planning to do the same. It's become a rumour, a rumour taken for real information, an in-joke that was taken literally by someone on the outside, someone who didn't do their research properly, but nonetheless it found its way into the media – and the media publish such articles, following their own political agendas.



Christina Foerch Saab holds a Master Degree in Political Sciences and Spanish from the Free University of Berlin. In the year 2000 she moved from Berlin to Beirut where she has been working as filmmaker, journalist, and consultant for NGOs. She has specialised in issues such as the memory of the Lebanese civil war, ex-combatants, peace education, media, and arms control and disarmament processes.

Lebanon is a small and complex country, with many TV channels and radio stations, and citizens who love to communicate via social media such as Facebook and Twitter. In such a context rumours can easily spread, and there is a danger that in a society that is deeply fragmented and prone to conflict rumours get out of hand. This is a serious matter, as a war starts in the hearts and minds of the people, long before anyone picks up a weapon – and rumours play an important role in influencing, even manipulating peoples' hearts and minds.

In the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, rumours were connected to preconceptions related to religious sects:

'All Muslims are savages who want to take over power in Lebanon.'

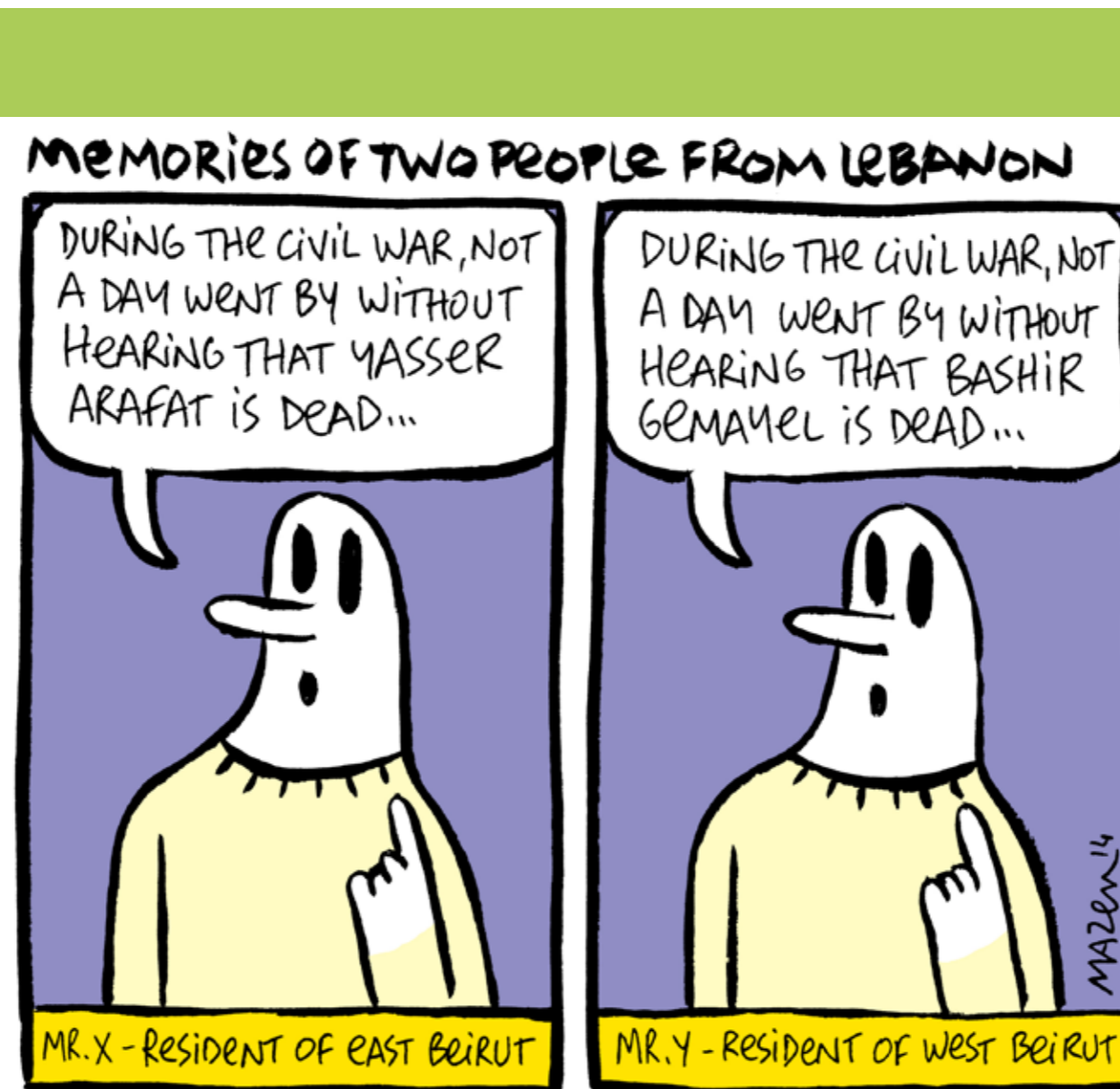
'The Christians are bourgeois capitalists who exploit the others.'

Rumours based on such preconceptions prepared the grounds for the Lebanese civil war, they prepared the minds of the people, before they joined militias, received military training, and then actually went to fight. However, the Lebanese civil war can't be defined along sectarian lines only, it was far more complex. The Palestinian presence with their armed forces was a major catalyst, and a factor central to the conflict, as in their way were economic interests, and commonplace power struggles. Last, but not least, the cold war spread its shadow over Lebanon, Lebanon being used as a battlefield for a proxy war between the West and the East.

'Rumours were intoxicating the people, and this intoxication carried bad intentions', remembers Assaad Chaftari, former leader of the intelligence office of the Christian party the Lebanese Forces. He asserts that, 'If I believe that Muslims are savages, I will believe all the rumours that confirm my belief, and I'd deny the rumours that are against my belief. I would even work on stopping such rumours.'

At the beginning of the Lebanese civil war, rumours weren't limited to general negative preconceptions about the 'Other', but became more specific. Haidar Amashi, a former combatant fighting with the al-Murabitoun (the Independent Nasserite Movement), recalls that since 1972, there was 'news' out there that Christians were getting militarily trained, and that they were forming armed groups. He recalls that, 'We believed that their aim was to fight the Muslims, to take over all the country, and to drive the Shiites out of Lebanon, back to Iraq.' In this case the main substance of the rumour – or information – turned out to be true; the Lebanese Christians did form armed groups – as did the Lebanese Muslims, the Druze, and the Palestinians. Now, 40 years later, Amashi believes that, 'Such rumours were the most dangerous weapon that prepared the ground for the civil war.'

One can distinguish between at least two different kinds of rumour. Firstly, rumours that are accidentally created, such as the rumour mentioned in the introduction. Then there are intentionally created rumours, or purposeful misinformation, that the media, as well as politicians and militia leaders use to pursue certain aims such as to scare off the enemy's militia, to weaken the morale of the opposing civilian population, or to increase the morals of their own fighters and civilian supporters. All participating parties in the Lebanese civil war – Lebanese, Palestinians, and also the Israelis –



used rumours and misinformation, or at least the downplaying or the exaggeration of events, for their strategic purposes.

The crumbling Lebanese state regularly used the media under its control to downplay events. Hana Saleh, former director of the Communist radio station *Voice of the People* remembers that, 'During the civil war, the public radio was famous for this one sentence, the road is open and secure. For example, the radio presenter would say, "Today the road of Mathaf (the National Museum, a famous crossing between East and West Beirut) is open and secure."– But in fact, the presenter wasn't sure, he hadn't done any research. People were crossing and something happened to them.'

Lebanese historian and political scientist Nemer Frayha confirms that the state media would deceive people by downplaying dangerous events. He remembers that, 'Because of such misinformation, people would unknowingly get into danger. Many kidnappings and killings of civilians happened because the public radio or TV stations had downplayed the danger of the situation.'

Saleh recounts that, 'There was some news about kidnappings or killings somewhere, [but] there was no way of knowing if this news was right, and the news was immediately broadcast everywhere, and there were direct reactions. So many victims died because a rumour was spread by the radio.' It's a general problem of war reporting that in many cases reporters can't confirm if the news is correct or not and are forced to rely solely on testimonies. For example, certain areas might be sealed off by militias or the army who won't allow reporters to enter, or the events may have already passed, and are thus impossible to confirm.

'There were few experienced professionals in the radio stations at that time,' admits Saleh, and the journalists often weren't aware of how certain news would affect the situation on the ground. 'When the media spread news about kidnappings and killings, there would be acts of revenge,' recounts Frayha– just to find out later that such kidnappings and killings hadn't happened in the first place.

The former director of *Voice of the People* recalls that his radio station broadcast 24 hour news, and that there was tough competition between the media outlets to be the first ones to broadcast a scoop, 'This competition was at the cost of the truth' he admits, and goes on to assert that at the end of the day, 'the divisions (in the country) were so strong that you didn't care anymore about what you spoke about the other.'

During the time of the civil war, the media

landscape was completely different to how it is now. In 1975, only one public TV channel existed, and a few radio stations, alongside a wide range of newspapers. According to Saleh, the advantage of this limited media landscape was that, 'information about events would reach the target audience directly'. Militia leaders and politicians from all sides used the media effectively to spread information, to downplay or inflate events, and therefore to channel information the way they wanted, and to their advantage. Further, both political and militia leaders used reporters to spread (mis) information to the other side.

Voice of the People, based in West Beirut, had some reporters on the Eastern side. These reporters were thus the main source of information from this area. 'We trusted them that they would give us the right news,' recalls Saleh. 'After a while, we realized that one of our reporters worked for (the Christian party) Kataeb. He gave us the news that Kataeb wanted to distribute.' Apparently, he did it in quite an intelligent way, at times giving the right news, and at other times giving false information. Saleh concludes that, 'About the important issues, he gave us the information that Kataeb wanted to give us. So we reached a point that we stopped working with him.'

According to Frayha, Western journalists reporting on the civil war were helping to spread false information. In his opinion, most of them were biased in favour of the Palestinian side. He claims that, 'Western media spread the rumour that the Christian militias were getting weapons from the U.S. and from France, which wasn't true. In fact, Western countries refused to sell the Christians weapons. Most weapons were bought in Eastern Europe, and later on Israel would supply weapons to Christian militias'. According to him this had significant consequences as he judges that 'the effect of the media on people was stronger than any education, and peoples, 'emotions were often abused.'

Lebanese militias used rumours in order to keep on fighting. Ex-combatant Amashi recounted that during the first years of the war, the Higher Shiite Council, represented by Sheikh Mohamad Yakoub launched an initiative with Dany Chamoun, the son of a former Lebanese president, to engage in reconciliation efforts to end the fighting. According to him the Nasserites were annoyed by this development, because they wanted to continue fighting. They spread rumours saying that if such a reconciliation initiative were put in place, Christian militias would secretly invade the Shiite area of Chiyah in Beirut and conduct

operations from inside. Such rumours were used to mobilize people's fears and therefore were very effective in undermining any effort to solve the Lebanese civil war on a political level.

Channeling information in a certain direction, or spreading misinformation with the intent to reach a strategic aim is part of the art of psychological warfare. In the Middle East, it is said of the Israelis that they have widely used military intelligence for such tactics and strategies. For example, a certain Lebanese militia was informed that the Israelis would invade Lebanon in the summer of 1982, several months before the actual invasion happened. Bits and pieces of this information found their way to the media – it was an effective way to spread the rumour that such an invasion might actually happen, and a strategy to scare off the Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. 'Until now I am not sure why the Israelis spread this news,' says Chaftari. He conjectures that, 'They probably did it so that the world would not be shocked when it actually happened – it was a strategy to let people get used to the idea.'

Ziad Saab, a former commander of the Lebanese Communist Party, has a different memory of these events, 'I remember that the first one to speak about a possible invasion in public was Communist party leader George Hawi,' he said. 'I think that our Politbureau had this information from the Soviet secret services.' Consequently, the communists prepared themselves in South Lebanon with weapons so as to be ready to resist the Israeli invaders.

In 1985, the Israelis were still occupying the Southern Lebanese town of Saida, along with the entire Southern part of Lebanon. They used their Lebanese allies, the Lebanese Forces, to spread a rumour, saying that if the Israelis withdrew from Saida, the Muslims would massacre the Christians. 'The Lebanese

'I think it's rather amusing what some media publish. It was rumoured that I had accepted an invitation to a yacht trip with 1200 dollars' worth of wine, my father was a CIA agent, my mother was a Jew and buried on the Golan Heights – a formerly Syrian region that has been occupied by Israel since 1967. All of that is, of course nonsense. My mother is a church tax paying Protestant, lives in Berlin and is thankfully in good health.'

Detlev Mehlis, Public Prosecutor and former Special Investigator in Lebanon, 20/01/2006, Der Stern

Forces used this rumour because they wanted the Christians to leave Saida, in order to make them come to East Beirut,' assumes Fouad Dirani, an ex-combatant from the Leftist party Organization of the *Communist Action in Lebanon*. As such, the Lebanese Forces' strategic purpose with this rumour was to unite the Christians, to encourage more of them to train militarily, and to spread armed men to other areas where they were needed.

'This rumour also served to divide the people between Muslims and Christians,' confirms Amashi, 'to encourage the Christians to arm themselves, and to guarantee the Israelis a safe withdrawal.' Last, but not least, the rumour also served economic interests through the sale of weapons to the conflicting parties.

All militias channelled information or spread misinformation for spying purposes, and they used the media for this purpose as well. 'The Lebanese Forces launched many campaigns through the media and even through politicians to give false information, and to let such information leak on purpose in order to achieve a certain aim,' admits Chaftari. For example, they would say that such and such militia was corrupt, or that they were getting a lot of money from abroad. He continues, 'So we'd tell their followers, 'Why do you support them with money?' By spreading such rumours, we'd try to disconnect the militia from their support group.'

The parties from both the right and from the left would use intelligence officers to spy on the other side. Agents would infiltrate the enemy's party or militia, saying that they wanted to cooperate with them against their own force. In this way, the intelligence officers would both find out which leaders could be won over, and who were the people inside their own forces who were cooperating with the

other sides.

In a deeply religious society like Lebanon, rumours with a spiritual connotation could be particularly powerful. 'The statue at Harissa turned twice during the civil war,' says Chaftari, laughing. Christian leaders would spread the rumour that this statue made out of pure concrete had turned towards a certain direction 'to protect Jounieh, or to protect the Christians in general' remembers Chaftari.

"Miracles" of this kind were often spread among the population when we were passing through a difficult military situation,' the ex-combatant explains, in order to raise the morals of the population and to tell them, 'that God will help us'. The social scientist Frayha has a similar opinion, 'You need miracles in situations of weakness, you need hope, and this comes from superstitious beliefs.' Those beliefs weren't limited to the Christian sect only, and were equally used by Muslims. The Shiites, for example, used Zeinab (a grandchild of the prophet Mohamad). 'Important Shiite figures would say that "Sitt" Zeinab had appeared in their dreams, saying that "the road ahead is long and difficult, but at the end, you will be rewarded"', recalls Amashi. This would strengthen the moral of combatants and civilians alike to endure difficult times, and keep on fighting.

The preconceptions that had existed in people's minds, and the traumas experienced during fifteen years of civil war couldn't be immediately lifted when the civil war officially came to an end in 1990.

A Christian couple got married after the end of the civil war and decided to celebrate their honeymoon in Amir Amine palace, a beautiful hotel located in a mountain area which is inhabited by Druze and Christians. A relative to the couple told them, 'The Druze will come at night and cut your throats!' The couple left the hotel in panic; their war traumas were so strong that their honeymoon was ruined.

Also, in the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Displaced People organized a summer camp in the Lebanese mountains, with the aim of contributing to reconciliation efforts among Lebanese youth from all the different religious sects. The trainers used specific activities to deconstruct the preconceptions that had existed between the different religious groups during the war. At the end of the camp, a girl came up, crying, and told one of the camp's organizers, that she couldn't go home now and face her parents. When the trainers asked for the reason, she said, 'My parents taught me that the people from the other side were bad, that they even looked differently from us. I found

out that this was a lie. How can I believe my parents ever again?'

What to believe and whom to believe, that's the central question. By the way, the article on the new armed group to fight IS wasn't published in the well-known Lebanese newspaper at all. This was just another rumour. Apparently it appeared in an online magazine. I guess I should have sat down and do some proper research in order to confirm my information, too!

Note

As I am finishing this article, someone translated a paragraph that appeared in the online magazine, Lebanon Files, for me. The article was talking about an article that in turn appeared in the Al Akhbar newspaper entitled 'A training of the Socialist Party under the cover of a scout camp': 'On 20/09/2014, Al Akhbar mentioned that under the cover of a scout camp, the Socialist Party, together with the fundamentalist Druze group "Sheikh Ammar", organized a training camp for more than 60 people in the hills of Shwaifat city. There were some sheikhs from Deir Qoubel village as well. It wasn't the first time that such training camps including military performances, as well as the firing of weapons had been seen in these hills. This time, however, the training for the participants of the camp were theoretical lessons only; about using heavy automatic weapons, especially those that you can carry on 4x4 vehicles, and they were told how to use these heavy guns.'

Often, rumours carry a little grain of truth. It is true that in the past, parties from different affiliations abused scout camps for military training. It is true that currently, Lebanese civilians are pulling out their hidden guns again, and some are even forming civilian protection forces in their communities.

I happen to work for an NGO called 'Permanent Peace Movement'. The director of this NGO, Fadi Abi Allam, gave training sessions during this particular scout camp – about conflict resolution and peace building, and definitely not about heavy guns. A war starts in the minds of the people, and such articles poison the civil peace in Lebanon. Peace also starts in the minds of people. Let us not be deceived by political or military leaders and their media outlets, let us not let them manipulate our minds for war. Let us take up responsibility and create a space in our minds, free of rumours and misinformation, for peace.

The Syrian President is being Made in Lebanon? Rumours and the Syrian Presidential Election in Lebanon

Haid Haid

The Syrian presidential elections were an event of special significance for Syrians and Lebanese alike, since holding these elections entailed prolonging the humanitarian and political crisis suffered by Syrians and the societies and states that play host to them. It was the first time that Syrian elections had allowed for out-of-country voting, and the Syrian embassy in Lebanon prided itself on having had more than 80,000 voters on the first day alone.¹ Given the time and space available for voting, it is more realistic to suggest that between 20 and 30,000 cast their vote. However, the images of crowded streets and the whole event being perceived as more of a happening than an election, led to controversial discussions, 'How could citizens who had to flee their country participate in this dog-and-pony show?' And even more so, 'How could they vote for the President who in the worst case had them persecuted, in the best case did not protect them?' In fact, some of those participating in the elections were motivated by genuine desire. Others, however, feared the consequences if they did not take part, with a number of rumours circulating, urging people to get involved, and threatening them with dire consequences if they did not. This was the result of a number of factors that this article will attempt to address by shedding light on the circumstances in which such rumours gain currency and how people respond to them.

The fear of having one's nationality revoked

As the armed conflict in Syria grew fiercer (itself the product of the regime's excessive use of force against citizens who peacefully demonstrated for political change), reports began to circulate that Bashar al-Assad and

his supporters were involved in a plan to partition Syria into a number of different states. Though these claims were never verified, they caused a large number of Syrian refugees to feel that the regime was secretly plotting to revoke their Syrian nationality – for their lack of loyalty – by creating the state it desired, having accepted that it was unable to take control of all Syrian territory. Such concerns on the part of many refugees created a fertile soil for the unquestioning acceptance and circulation of any rumour which confirmed their fears that they would be unable to return to their homes. Against this backdrop, claims concerning various draft laws gave added impetus to rumours urging participation in the presidential election. The most important of these draft law rumours were:

i) 'I'm not Syrian'

In late 2013 there were widely disseminated rumours of a draft law that would revoke the nationality of all Syrians who had participated in activities against the Assad regime within Syria or abroad, by bearing arms, funding, incitement, organisation or facilitation.² This particular claim spread because some refugees believed that the law governing the entry of non-Syrians into Syria and their residence there also covered Syrian citizens abroad. In other words, they would be treated like foreigners in their own country. Despite being untrue, some Syrians abroad still believe in and circulate this rumour, convinced that the regime will use this draft law as a way of disposing of its political enemies and applying pressure to those states hosting them (since stripping Syrian refugees of their nationality would mean they would have to stay in their host nations). The fear of losing one's nationality is also not entirely abstract as an increasing number of Syrians are stranded



Haid Haid is program manager at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's Middle East office in Beirut. Prior to this, he worked as a senior community services-protection assistant at UNHCR- Damascus office. He has an MA in social policy and development, a postgraduate diploma in counselling and a BA in sociology.

abroad because the Syrian regime will no longer issue extensions for their passports.

ii) New IDs, for whom?

During a parliamentary session in March 2014 the Syrian Interior Minister announced that his ministry was in the process of creating new identity cards and that the project would begin to roll out in the second half of that year, as soon as the necessary funds had been collected.³ Even though officials pointed out that the idea of the project was first mooted before the start of the crisis, and that it had nothing to do with current events, many still harboured suspicions over the true purpose of making this announcement, particularly given the project's high cost (estimated at 28 million Euros) in a country that is going through a debilitating economic crisis. A lack of clarity around the mechanism for implementing the project and its timeframe had led some to link it to the then upcoming presidential elections, since the only people eligible for new ID cards would be regime loyalists in regime controlled areas. Others point out that the project will hinder the return of Syrian refugees and émigrés to their home towns, while enabling those who have abstained from military service to be tracked down and arrested. In this context, many believe that the process will effectively revoke nationality from half the Syrian population, the majority of whom will be those who oppose the regime.

iii) Seizing property and renting it out... Why?

In May 2014, the Ministry of Justice discussed a proposal to rent out houses and real estate abandoned when their owners left the country. The justification for this proposal was a stated desire to provide secure shelter and thus to reduce the sufferings of the many Syrians who had recently been made homeless. Although the regime had previously been willing to offer support to displaced persons in the area, including providing shelter and humanitarian assistance to Lebanese refugees in 2006, this was the first such gesture during this conflict. So far its officials had not even made the effort to visit internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, let alone refugees abroad, and yet now pondered how to use refugee's property to host IDPs. The likely effect of this would be to help one group of displaced persons at the expense of another.

Rents were to be set by the committee and the monies collected placed in a special funding account and returned to the properties' owners on their return via a payment system also run by the committee.⁴ However, the lack of detail in

the proposal and the fact it coincided with the presidential elections helped raise suspicions that there was some plot afoot against the opponents of the Assad regime. For instance, the proposal made no mention of whether the consent of the property owners would be obtained, whether their relatives or agents within Syria or abroad would be contacted, the percentage of rent monies that the state agencies would keep, how the leases would be organised, nor anything of the fate of the contents of these homes and buildings used in this way. This provoked fears that the seizure of private property belonging to the tens of thousands of Syrians who have fled the country as a result of unrest was being enshrined in law, particularly given the favouritism the authorities have typically shown to supporters of the regime.

Events that have contributed to the spread of rumours

i) 'Even here in Lebanon, they come after us...'

Citing accounts from Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Reuters reported that men were wandering around refugee camps in the Bekaa Valley asking who intended to vote in the presidential elections and taking down names. According to Reuters the men identified themselves as members of a Lebanese party allied to Bashar al-Assad, and their presence in the camp was a reminder to more than one million Syrian refugees that they were still within the reach of the regime.

Some refugees whispered that heavily built men driving cars with blacked out windows had suddenly appeared, demanded to see their identity documents and taken down their details. They claimed that vehicles would come on election-day to take them to the Syrian embassy and that anyone who failed to vote would be prevented from re-entering Syria. Reuters added that though during the course of more than twelve interviews it did not encounter any proof that refugees were being intimidated, the mere presence of men carrying papers with the Syrian embassy seal on it would be enough to frighten many people, particularly given the regime's long history of brutality in Lebanon and the existence of powerful regime allies within the country.⁵ All Syrians also carry memories of the omnipresent *Mukhabarat* (intelligence service) in Syria — of the plain-clothed men trying to look like normal citizens but who could be 'smelt for miles against the wind.'

The *Mustaqbal* newspaper, close to the



Activists from the Syrian village of Kafranbel commenting on the elections

Lebanese March-14 coalition, reported that Syrian refugees and residents were going to the Syrian embassy as a result of intimidation being carried out in their homes and places of work by Hezbollah and other allies of the Syrian regime. A Syrian who works as a security guard in Beirut told the paper that members of the March-8 movement had come to his building and ordered him to come with his family the following day, to one of the assembly points from where Syrians would be bussed to the embassy. He indicated that most of the Syrians he knew had submitted to the same intimidatory tactics, fearful of revenge or being expelled from their homes and jobs. Sources on the ground spoke to *Mustaqbal* about the confiscation of identity documents belonging to a number of Syrian refugees to ensure their attendance and participation in the elections, while others were blackmailed in various ways, such as being told that those who did not vote for Al Assad would not have their travel permits renewed and would not be allowed back into Syria.⁶

Other refugees told the *NOW News* website that Lebanese men had come to their homes and forced them to take part in pro-Assad marches. They reported that, 'We took to the streets and carried portraits of Bashar al-Assad for fear of public humiliation. They also forced us to vote for him. We had no choice but to do what they wanted because there is no government to protect us.'⁷ In an interview with *al-Nahar*, a representative of UNHCR in Lebanon, Ninette Kelly, revealed that her organization had received reports, 'that there were refugees who were feeling vulnerable as the date for elections in Syria approached; that they had been pressured to vote and that they felt unsafe.'⁸

ii) 'Don't shove!'

The arrival of large numbers of Syrians at the gates of the Syrian embassy in Yarzeh — transported in buses and trucks hired for the occasion — created gridlock, preventing many from reaching their destinations. The standstill affected a number of important centres in the city, prompting some voters to complete the journey on foot while waving Syrian flags, portraits of Assad and Hezbollah banners, and chanting slogans in support of the president and Hezbollah. This angered many of those who were caught up in the traffic jam, particularly opponents of Assad, leading to fights between the gridlocked drivers and the marchers.

The extensive media coverage of this 'electoral gridlock' only increased the pressure felt by those Syrians who were in two minds about going to vote. Some media outlets exaggerated the numbers of those who went to vote, thus increasing the speed with which this rumour spread and its impact. While some blamed the Lebanese government, which should have anticipated and prevented what happened, others believed that the gridlock was deliberate, that the vehicles transporting Syrians to Yarzeh had all been dispatched simultaneously with the intention of creating a traffic jam that would focus media attention on the scale of voter participation, thereby intimidating those who had been unwilling to vote and putting pressure on them to attend.

Reactions against Syrian refugees

i) 'Go home'

'These people don't have any dignity. I swear I don't feel sorry for any of them, because they all should be wiped out.'

'Go back to your country, you morons.'

The above are just two examples of the comments made by Lebanese citizens on social media sites, protesting at the impact of the Syrian presidential elections in Lebanon. But the anger felt towards Syrians in general, and especially those who had chanted for Bashar al-Assad, and paraded around with his portrait, was not just confined to the man on the street but also found echoes in official statements by Lebanese political parties, particularly those opposed to the Assad regime. The position of the March-14 movement came through clearly in a statement made by senior alliance member and former MP Mustafa Allouch to Al Nahar, 'March-14 believes that these people support and love Bashar al-Assad so they should not be designated refugees and the Lebanese state must take the decision to send them back to their homes.'⁹ Minister of Labour, Sejaan Kazzi, told the same paper that, 'the crowds that Lebanon witnessed outside the Syrian embassy show that these refugees are not refugees at all but rather an army, just like the Syrian Deterrent Force used to be.' He added, 'If you have thousands of people loyal to the Syrian regime trying to vote it in, that means they can go straight back to areas controlled by the regime, which has extended its reach within Syria. I shall ask the cabinet to adopt a firm position with regards to sending them back to Syria as soon as possible.'¹⁰ Many media figures and artists close to the March-14 Movement have also called for Syrians to be deported. On *DNA*, a satirical news analysis show, presenter Nadim Koteich called for Syrian refugees to be 'resisted,' and even 'expelled from the country.'¹¹ It is interesting to note that the reactions of opponents of Assad mostly failed to take into account the above rumours about intimidations and threats issued – and the resulting fear of many Syrians that they would be denied permission to enter or leave Syria, and of not being granted visas by the Syrian authorities.

'Feelings of fear or insecurity do not always submit to rational considerations, but can be excessive and paranoiac.'

The anger many Lebanese felt may be partially explained by the heavy traffic caused by the flood of Syrians coming to participate in the elections, but is also a sign of disgust many Lebanese feel at Syrians seeking to re-elect Assad, after all the crimes he has committed — and continues to commit — in Syria and Lebanon. However, the Lebanese response

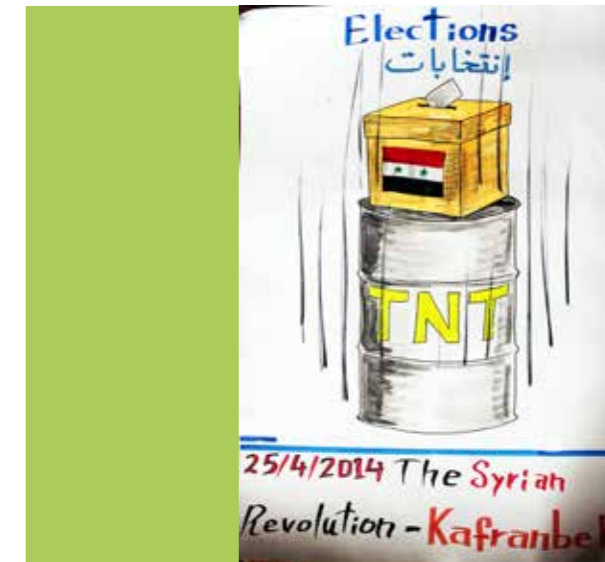
is not confined to disgust and resentment, with the regime's allies celebrating this 'moral victory', others have attempted to come up with rational explanations, so as not to end up blaming the victims and shifting ultimate responsibility away from the true criminal. Yet, even so, a substantial proportion of Lebanese citizens, and also those Syrians opposed to the regime, continue to feel active hatred towards pro-Assad voters. Their responses have not been limited to incendiary statements, with Lebanon seeing security incidents and revenge attacks, most notably the burning of a camp in the Jdita municipality in the Bekaa Valley, two days after the elections, which was home to around two hundred Syrian refugees.¹²

ii) Revoking refugee status

In early June 2014, Lebanese Minister of the Interior, Nihad Machnouk, declared that he would be revoking the refugee status of Syrians in Lebanon who had re-entered Syrian territory. This was announced shortly after the uproar provoked by the participation of Syrians in the Syrian presidential elections. A statement from the ministry read, 'As part of the ongoing process of regulating the entry and exit of Syrian subjects into and out of Lebanon, all Syrian refugees and those registered with UNHCR are requested not to enter Syrian territory after June 1, 2014, on pain of having their status as refugees in Lebanon revoked. This measure has been taken to safeguard Lebanon's security and relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens in host areas, and to prevent any friction or mutual antagonism.'¹³

This decision prompted widespread concern among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, some of whom were in the habit of regularly travelling to Syria for a variety of reasons. The most common of these were; renewing residency, checking their property (i.e. homes, shops, land etc.), obtaining official documents, visiting family members, buying medicine for chronic illnesses at cheaper Syrian prices, and finally checking to see if conditions in their home areas would allow them to return or not. The minister's plan did not differentiate between those refugees who had to go to Syria on urgent business and those who were in fact living in Syria, while remaining registered in Lebanon.

It is worth noting here that the requirements for entering Lebanon as a refugee are the same as those for non-refugee Syrians, which are governed by Syrian-Lebanese treaties. What worries Syrian refugees is that revoking their status would cut off their access to aid and assistance, most of which is provided by UNHCR.



Another take on the elections by the activists of Kafranbel

The online rumour war

Some tried to fight the rumours that were being circulated by regime supporters to encourage participation in the presidential election by creating 'counter-rumours', to the effect that UNHCR would revoke the refugee status of anyone voting. This claim when sent via social media, such as 'WhatsApp' was accompanied by the UNHCR logo. The following announcement was also passed around via facebook, 'To all those Syrians who went to participate in the presidential elections out of fear that they would not be allowed to return to their homeland Syria: Syrian embassies abroad intend to send the names of all voters to the United Nations in order to demonstrate the extent of support for Bashar al-Assad's regime among the Syrian people. The names of voters will be compared to those names on UNHCR's aid lists and all those who participated in the elections will be struck off, since aid is intended for those who are unable to return to their homes, and who have left their country in flight from the regime's injustice, in accordance with the 'No home' humanitarian principle.'

Both these rumours, however, were not widely circulated among Syrian refugees and so had a limited impact. There were a number of reasons for this, including that the majority of refugees not having access to social media and chat apps, which were the principle mediums used to circulate these rumours; Syrian refugees fearing the regime more than the prospect of losing the support of UNHCR, and UNHCR denying that it had written the text attributed to it in a letter sent to all registered Syrian refugees.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that it is impossible to be certain of the impact that the rumours discussed above had on encouraging Syrian refugees in Lebanon to participate in the Syrian presidential elections, direct observation of Syrians during the elections show that at least a number of them were affected. This has been reinforced by reports and articles written about the elections. However, the most important impact of these rumours was not on the results of the presidential elections itself, but rather on the relations between Syrian refugees and their host communities. This in turn led to the spread of other rumours which incited public feeling against Syrians in Lebanon. This was reflected in the calls of many Lebanese politicians, public figures and celebrities for Syrians in Lebanon to be sent home.

1. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/207400>
2. Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/syriaheissyira/posts/249373365216192>
3. New identities in Syria, March 12, 2014, at <http://www.damaspost.com/>
4. <http://ncro.sy/baathonline/?p=6300>
5. For more information, see the following article by the author: <http://lb.boell.org/ar/2013/05/03/nhw-trmym-llqt-llbny-lswry>
6. Hezbollah secures quorum for Al Assad, May 29, 2014, at <http://www.almustaqbal.com.lb/v4/article.aspx?type=np&articleid=618937>
7. Nadine Elali, A free election?, May 24, 2014, at <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en>
8. Syrian regime show of strength lays siege to Beirut, May 29, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
9. Mohammed Nimr, Why don't Al Assad's supporters return to Syria? May 28, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
10. Syrian regime show of strength lays siege to Beirut, May 29, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUxQcaMenxc&feature=youtu.be>
12. <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/721151>
13. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=175089>

* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

Regime Strategy and Opposition Tactics: Rumour in Syria

Mohammed Dibo



Mohammed Dibo is an author, researcher and poet. He is currently the editor in chief of the website *Syria Untold*, which is an independent digital media project highlighting the diverse forms of resistance currently taking place. He writes opinion articles and undertakes specialist research for various Arabic and foreign newspapers and magazines. Among his Arabic literary works are: *Electoral Mistake* (2008), *If a Friend Betrays You* (2008), and *Witnessing His Own Death* (2014).

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

With time, this discourse of fear and intimidation enters popular culture in proverbial form. For instance, 'Even the flies won't know how to find his corpse' is juxtaposed with other proverbs such as, 'A hundred mothers mourn but not one tear in my mother's eye' and 'Stick close to the wall and pray to God to keep you safe'. The first of these sayings is designed to intimidate, whereas the second two point the way to safety and security. Counter to what is commonly believed, the authorities work to orchestrate this balance on a daily basis by means of what political science professor Lisa Wedeen terms 'ambiguities of domination'¹ — this doesn't mean that the violence within prisons and detention centres is just rumour or that it does not take place, for it does take place,

but rather that this violence is deployed within authoritarian discourse and re-transmitted into society in the form of rumour (occasionally exaggerated) on a popular level, filtered through the media, yet subject to outright denial by official sources. Thus, every 'channel' has its own mechanism for disseminating rumours, and although the subject matter might be 'true', that is, based on real events that have happened on the ground, and then magnified to make them utilisable, they might also be entirely fabricated, depending on the mechanism used to disseminate them within society, their date, and the purpose for which they are intended.

Rumour in the shadow of the uprising

The Syrian regime benefitted from the fact that the Arab Spring flared up in five countries (Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Bahrain) before its flames reached their doorstep. It spared the regime the element of surprise, which otherwise plays such an important role in such affairs and allowed it to devise an emergency containment strategy. It was fully prepared, something that could be clearly sensed on March 30, 2011 in the dictator's first public speech following the start of the uprising.

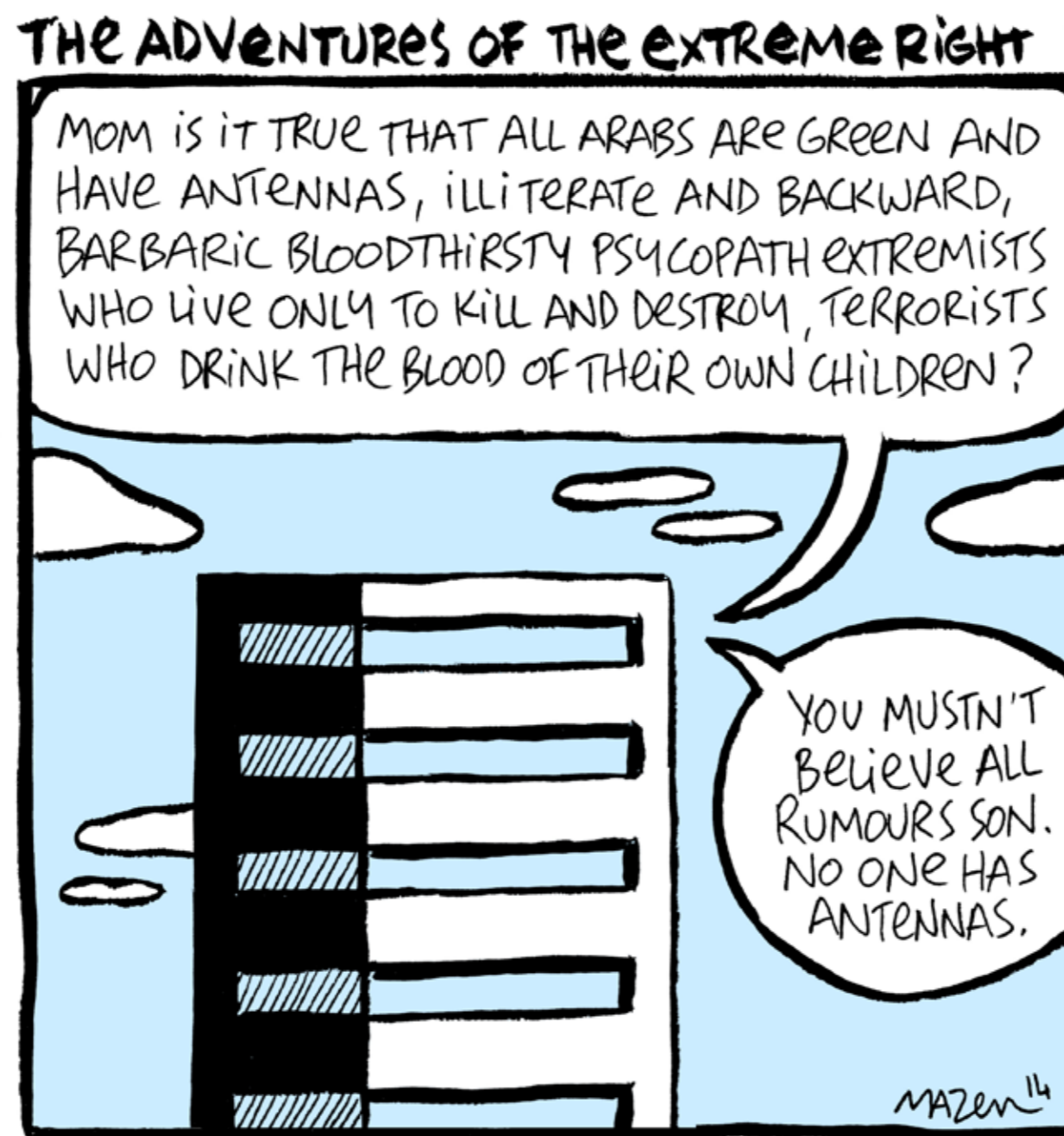
Rumour is one of the components of the authorities' strategy to forestall and distort the popular opposition movement. The authorities are experts in deploying rumour in a society whose secrets are in their control, unlike the opposition, which even now remains ignorant of the machinations of power in the society in which it operates, so ignorant in fact that on numerous occasions it has helped the regime further its agenda instead of confronting it

Regime rumours

i) *The Alawite sect's partisanship*

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

In the first months of the uprising, the rumours focused on gaining the Alawite community's total support for the regime by encouraging it to think of the revolution as a Sunni phenomenon, which would target the very existence of the Alawites. To achieve this it first had to cut off the Alawite opposition to the



regime from its immediate environment. To this end it launched major rumour campaigns that mentioned individuals by name, describing them as agents of Bandar Bin Sultan (Director General of the Saudi Intelligence Agency from 2012 to 2014) and Hamad Bin Jassem (Prime Minister of Qatar from 2007 to 2013), claiming they took money from foreign embassies. These campaigns were accompanied by announcements on state television that their families and villages had disowned them, thus placing them in immediate danger. For example, an Alawite teacher who participated in the demonstrations in Baniyas was beaten up in his car by his own students; a number of rumours were put into circulation targeting opposition figure Mahmoud Eissa in his village of Al Dardara, and the surrounding area, stating that he worked as an 'observer' from his residence in Homs, and owned a satellite telephone provided to him by international intelligence agencies; at the same time, it was whispered that the activist Marwan Adwan had been detained for transporting weapons into Douma. The majority of opposition figures faced similar allegations.

Through these rumours the authorities were

'Feelings of fear or insecurity do not always submit to rational considerations, but can be excessive and paranoiac.'

seeking to isolate activists and opponents from traditionally Alawite areas and thus prevent them from having any influence over their surrounding communities, which functioned as the regime's reserves of support and manpower. The initial rumours were followed by others which claimed that the authorities had found weapons concealed in cemeteries and the ancient crusader fortress of Qalaat al-Marqab outside Baniyas. These new rumours were designed to give the impression that the Sunnis were arming and therefore the Alawites must protect themselves. The authorities were also looking to create justifications for carrying and using weapons, and it was around this time that the seeds of the pro-regime militias that came to be known as the National Defence Force were first sown. In April/May 2011, the authorities began arming Baathists and setting up checkpoints at entrances and exits to villages, and every day saw new rumours about a 'militant' being arrested or a 'sniper' detained. The situation was exacerbated by the death of

Nidal Junoud, an Alawite who died when the army came under fire at the Baniyas Bridge. This incident inflamed historical fears held by the Alawite community, which began to feel that its existence was under threat. As such, the regime used a combination of rumour and direct action to coax out one element of Alawite identity — a sense of vulnerability — and this process had no connection to appeals to patriotism, 'as [the authorities] knew that people will always cleave most strongly to those aspects of their identity that are most at risk.'² These are the words of the renowned writer Amin Maalouf, who offers a powerful explanation of this situation. He explains that, 'In any persecuted group it is only natural to find individuals distinguished by their savagery and opportunism, who promulgate a demagogic discourse to salve the community's wounds. They see no purpose in respecting others, as respect is a right that must be won; rather, they think, respect must be imposed on others. They vow victory or revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill the secret desires of their persecuted brethren. The circle is thus completed and war can now break out. Whatever happens, the "others" deserve their punishment and "we" shall not forget "everything they have made us suffer" since the dawn of history.'³ He continues, 'What is referred to as "the killing madness" is the hidden propensity of our species to transform into criminals when we feel that "our tribe" is under threat. This is because feelings of fear or insecurity do not always submit to rational considerations, but can be excessive and paranoiac. However, at the moment in which a given people start to become fearful, the reality of their fear should be taken more seriously than the reality of the looming danger.'⁴

ii) Striking at sectarian fault lines, paving the way for civil war, and the introduction of foreign militias

The opposition remained blissfully unaware of all this, taking shelter behind the slogan 'The Syrian people are one', even as the regime set out a clear strategy to push the popular movement towards sectarianism and militarization, and force the Alawite community to turn to it for protection. In this it was assisted by elements within the opposition, and foreign actors who were under the illusion that the regime would collapse overnight, and so used the very same techniques as the regime to gather Sunni support for the revolution. There were numerous rumours to the effect that, 'The shabiha are all Alawites and murderers', and that Sunni villagers would attack Alawite villagers

and vice versa. The writer Fares Saad's report of what one activist said to him is perhaps the clearest example of this phenomenon, 'During Ramadan, July 2012, we got word that the Alawites had gathered with staves and knives to attack Baba Amr and were at the bridge. People started assembling, also carrying staves and knives and headed out for the bridge. Half an hour later they returned. Someone asked them what had happened. 'We sent them all home', they said. 'The whole thing was a lie. If they'd said they were attacking with guns we would have believed them, because there are guns in Baba Amr; the militants there killed a security officer a fortnight ago. But to attack with knives? That would mean they were coming to commit suicide, not to fight.' The next day I saw my friend from Al Zahira. An Alawite. 'What's all this?' I jokingly asked him, 'You lot gathering to attack us? You looking to kill us?' He said, 'No, I swear it! We heard that it was you lot gathering at the bridge and looking to kill us!'⁵ Here we see rumour and counter-rumour cleverly orchestrated by the regime to strike at sectarian, ethnic and tribal fault lines and thus to prevent these communities from coming together as a single nation capable of mounting a unified revolution. The sub-national (i.e. the sectarian, confessional, tribal, ethnic, etc.) is promoted at the expense of a national identity that expresses itself through slogans of freedom and democracy. As the Syrian author and analyst Salama Keila says, 'The authorities' obsession centered around preventing this by frightening the Alawites with Sunni fundamentalism. Look at their discourse in the first few months and note the symbols they focus on: Salafist emirates; Brotherhood gangs, Al Qaeda, dismemberment, etc. A year into the revolution (from January to April 2012), when they started to sense that they had failed, they unleashed the 'jihadists' to set up the Nusra Front (then ISIS), Ahrar Al Sham, and the Army of Islam.'⁶ This would come to play a significant role in the subsequent slide towards hatred and civil war, and pave the way for the incursion of extremism and terrorism into Syrian territory, especially with the evolution and change in the nature of rumours from one period to the next. The rumour that the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab, the daughter of the Shia martyr Ali and granddaughter of the prophet Mohammed, in Damascus was being threatened by Sunnis was a pretext to the incursion of Shiite militias (Hezbollah, Abou al Fadl Al Abbas, etc.) into Syria, while rumours to the effect that, 'Alawites are killing Sunnis', facilitated the introduction of Arab and foreign fighters, turning Syria into the backdrop to a

vicious Sunni-Shia war, waged alongside the conflict between the Syrian Free Army and the regime. Revolution, civil war, extremism and terrorism were jumbled together to form a confusing and complex compound that persists to this day. This shows how, at the end of the day, rumour was a highly effective tool for guiding society into the regime's trap. Rumours paved the way and all possible efforts were made to promulgate them, from dispatching informants and agents to villages and towns, to leaking information on Facebook, where the Syrian intelligence services control a number of pages that, alongside their rumour-mongering, give minute-by-minute updates of events from around the country.

iii) Overwhelming people with day-to-day difficulties as a means of fomenting civil strife

Events during June 2014 in the city of Salamiye provide clear evidence of this approach. The city was without water and electricity for approximately one week, prompting residents to protest against their situation. Rumours claimed that the power would come on the next day, and it would – for an hour. When people began to question what was happening, rumours were circulated that the electricity grids and water supply were being destroyed by refugees from the city of Hama. On June 29, 2014, the Facebook page *salamiehlive* (which many activists believe is run by the security services), posted the following, 'According to the Electricity Board, the reason for the black-outs in #Salamiye is the governorate of #Hama!! Now you can see who wants you to go out and demonstrate!! The folk from Hama have realized that the people of Salamiye have provided 4,000 martyrs and heroes to Syrian Arab Army and have taken in some 250,000 refugees from every governorate in Syria, and many in Hama don't like it... !! Since Salamiye is part of the governorate of Hama, Hama can mess with the daily lives of Salamiyens as they please... How much longer will the people of Hama go on stealing our daily crust and basic services!!!' This was followed by a second post on June 30, 'Young men and boys... Could someone please explain to me why the electricity in Hama is out 3 times in 3 days but 7 times in 1 day in Salamiye!!!'⁷ Note the incendiary language and the attempts to exacerbate regional tensions between the residents of Salamiye and Hama, using rumour to incite Salamiyens to expel those from Hama and refuse to rent them accommodation, the implicit message being, 'If you want electricity then you have to chuck the residents of Hama out or at least make their lives difficult.' Hama,

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

iv) Isolating minorities

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

This approach has been accompanied by a parallel effort to incite members of minority sects against the Sunni majority, particularly within the security services and armed forces. Shortly after the uprising began, a security officer in one military unit assembled minority servicemen and openly incited them against Sunnis in an attempt to entrench the idea that minorities must stick together.⁸ At first this went hand-in-hand with preferential treatment for members of minorities within the various

branches of the security services, and at checkpoints, though this situation is not stable and changes as the uprising evolves. When the armed opposition attempted to draw the Druze-majority city of Suweida into the war with the regime, observers noted that city residents were being tortured to death while alarmist rumours circulated that the Nusra Front was threatening to shell the city and enslave women—this had certainly not happened at an earlier stage.

v) Rumours after the militarization of the revolution

As the revolution transitioned into an armed movement the rumours changed. The authorities became more certain of their ability to persuade large swathes of the population of their point of view, particularly since they had, at an earlier stage, circulated many rumours about the presence of weapons. The movement's militarization served to convince minorities and regime supporters that these rumours had been true, and paved the way for the spread of even more, while the opposition remained incapable of countering them—or at the very least of proving to those who had joined the movement that they were untrue. During the period of peaceful opposition the situation was exactly the opposite; despite the intensive rumour campaigns mounted by the regime, its tactics backfired and the finger of blame pointed squarely back at it. This was even the case among the 'silent blocs' which then gradually lost faith in the opposition and began to stand behind the regime. The regime knew just how to manage this situation, by keeping these blocs trapped in a web of rumours, which it would add to every few days, tailored for specific regions. In the city of Jaramana in East Ghouta there were daily rumours that 'jihadists' were infiltrating the city to take revenge and enslave women. This situation was exacerbated by the quotidian inconvenience of water and power supplies being disconnected for hours at a time, ensuring that most of the district was turned into a series of enclaves ruled by fear and rumours, which obscured a truth that was at first obvious to the residents but which later became nebulous. We see the same thing with the mortar fire which falls continuously on certain cities and claims the lives of innocent civilians, without any sure way of knowing who is responsible, particularly since the situation can vary from region to region. The issue remains a wedge between Syrians themselves, some of whom blame the regime for manipulating people into clinging to it for protection within the huge prison, that is Syria,

and whose gates it controls, and those who accuse the armed opposition.

The impact of these rumours, which manipulate and shape public opinion according to the designs of the authorities, continue to sever the social ties that bind Syrians together, prevent them from uniting, and has left them on the verge of civil war. Rumours have even impacted on the course of actual battles, with daily claims that such-and-such an area had surrendered its weapons or had agreed to a truce, or was about to. This was done with the aim of sowing mutual distrust between the armed groups, and between them and the communities in which they operated. These communities then began to worry that if the militants were making deals without consulting them they would be left at the regime's mercy. Other rumours spoke of the 'supernatural' or 'highly organized' power of Hezbollah units and the pro-regime Aboul Fadl Al Abbas Brigades, and the crimes they committed in areas that they had entered. These rumours aimed at intimidating the other side before the fighting had begun, and convincing them they would lose. The media and state controlled stations such as Al Mayadeen and Al Akhbar also played their part. Ibrahim Amin, editor-in-chief of Al Akhbar admitted in an interview with a Lebanese newspaper (also called Al Akhbar) that, 'There's great progress been made, right up to the recent battle in Yabroud where psychological warfare played a decisive role in achieving a rapid victory and enabled the Syrian army and fighters from the Lebanese resistance to reach their objectives with minimum losses and without exposing their target areas to excessive destruction. The media-psychological battle is a massive security and intelligence operation and makes every fighter on the opposition frontline believe that he is sure to be defeated. The choice they then have is whether to flee, to withdraw, to enter negotiations, or to die!'⁹

For a precise understanding of the mechanism and tools used by the regime and its allies in the creation of rumour, and how they circulate rumours until they become self-fulfilling, we should reexamine the claim that terrorists were going to destroy the Sayyida Zeinab shrine in Damascus. In a jointly-written article, Ibrahim Amin and Hassan Oleik state, 'Along with attempts to pin accusations of murder on Hezbollah and demonize them they [the regime] started looking for some strategic trap into which they could lure them. With this in mind they moved to meddle with Shia holy places, particularly the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in South Damascus. Hezbollah rushed

to ask permission from the Syrian leadership to dispatch groups of its fighters in order to prevent the shrine from falling into the hands of militants. This was the first public indication of Hezbollah's involvement. For a long time the group's fighters mounted no aggressive operations; indeed, they lost many members who were concentrated in positions designed to defend the shrine.¹⁰ This makes it quite clear that the rumour was nothing but a pretext to facilitate Hezbollah's entry into Syria, a point reinforced by the fact that the group is currently active on all of Syria's front lines, and is not confining itself to protecting sites sacred to the Shia.

'Over the course of the Syrian revolution many rumours have circulated with the aim of impacting the regime, its infrastructure and supporters.'

The opposition and revolutionary forces

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

i) Opposition rumours

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

Rumours were also circulated about the imminent collapse of the Syrian economy, the regime's inability to pay the wages of employees in state agencies, the decline in the central bank's currency reserves, inflated figures of the number of security and army defectors. These were in addition to numerous rumours surrounding atrocities and massacres (not so much the massacres themselves, but the figures, precise events and their circulation in

the media). These rumours would start with the number of victims and include the identities of those responsible and descriptions of how the massacre was carried out. They would then accuse the shabiha and security services of responsibility, accompanied by endless hints and suggestions that these operatives were exclusively Alawite, which was by no means correct, but added fuel to the fire and helped to lift the invisible buffers that shielded sectarian communities from one another. Most of these rumours were circulated during the non-violent stage of the uprising.

After weapons became widespread exaggerated claims about the strength of the oppositional armed brigades gained currency as they prepared to attack Damascus, Aleppo and Al Deir, with the aim of intimidating the regime and shaking the confidence of its armed forces. There were further exaggerated claims about the strength of the opposition's defences in Quseir and Qalamoun, the errancy of which became clear when the regime managed to gain control over these areas.

ii) The opposition's circulation of regime rumours

Perhaps the biggest trap into which the opposition and revolutionary forces fell was to turn themselves, on occasion, into unwitting tools of the regime by circulating its rumours. The regime would frequently generate rumours that the opposition would seize on and put back into circulation without checking their accuracy or whether they served the regime's objectives. Back on July 27, 2011, a rumour spread that, 'The governor of Deirzozor, Samir Othman, has been killed and the head of military security Jami Jami Ali wounded by a defected army unit.'¹¹ The news was confirmed by numerous opposition figures, including Louay Hussein, on their personal Facebook pages, only for it to later become clear that it was just a rumour, with no basis in reality. This happened with many rumours, all of which were subsequently shown to have originated with the regime and been circulated by the opposition. The Zeinab al-Hosni case, which was hugely controversial within revolutionary circles, might be the clearest indication of the extent to which the opposition fell into the regime's trap. Arab and Western media published a huge volume of reports on Zeinab being brutally tortured to death, a story that the opposition adopted wholeheartedly, only for Zeinab to subsequently show up on Syrian television. The true circumstances surrounding this case remain a mystery to this day.¹²

Looking at the above, it seems apparent that the regime was working to smear the

opposition's reputation in the eyes of the general public, and strip away its credibility by generating rumours which the opposition would pick up only to have them shown to be lies. This advanced the regime's agenda even further, as to have a rumour of its own adopted by the enemy is a significantly greater coup.

The most obvious demonstration of how the opposition came to inadvertently act as tool of the regime is found in the way the opposition parroted the regime's rumours in the run up to the presidential elections. They repeated claims such as those that the security services would detain any citizen that did not go to vote, that checkpoints around the country would let no one through whose fingers were not marked by voting ink, and that the regime would visit people's homes and force them to go to the voting booths. The regime lent these rumours credibility by mounting a number of genuine operations, such as placing personnel at checkpoints who threatened citizens by saying, 'Anyone who comes through here tomorrow without an ink mark on them either won't get through or will be locked up.' Then a few days before the elections, men in plain-clothes were sent round to people's houses telling them that everyone must vote. No one was able to check their identities and no openly stated threat was made, but the message was clear enough.¹³

In their eagerness to take a stand against these elections, the opposition spread word of the regime's actions and exaggerated them, thus assisting the regime in promulgating an atmosphere of fear. The regime's primary objectives were to use fear to force citizens to go to the voting booths and secondly, and more importantly, to reconstruct the barrier of fear that had once held people in check.

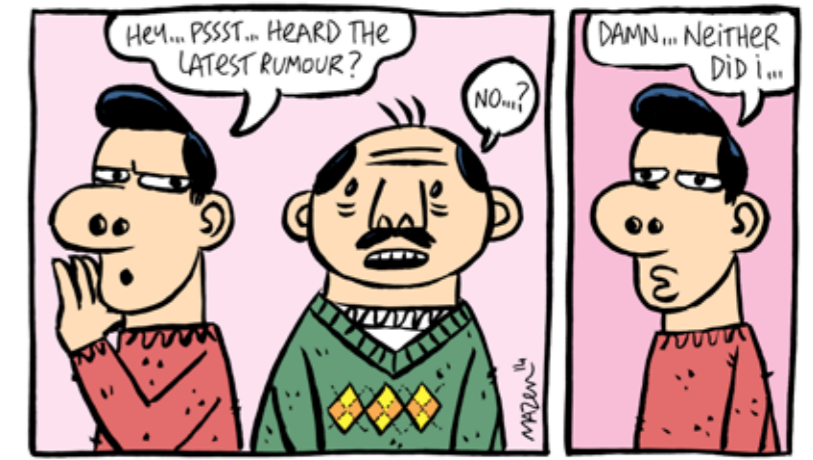
We can be sure of this last point when we realise that on election-day the regime enacted none of the rumoured measures, with the exception of stationing security officers at state buildings to remind people of their presence and encourage them to vote. The fear that the regime had sown with its rumours, and that the opposition had helped to entrench, did the rest.

Conclusion

A close look at the way in which the regime uses rumour shows us that it is a central component in the authorities' strategy to counter any revolutionary activity that it might face — it serves as re-affirmation that the regime holds the keys to political power and social control. For decades it has worked to 'booby-trap' society from within by preventing the various sects and groups that make up

Syria from coming together. It has smothered civil society in the cradle, while protecting and nurturing sectarian sentiments which it can then orchestrate according to its whims. Syria is left with a network of sub-national/state relationships that function as a state within a state, made up of village and urban grandees (landowners, mayors, merchants, sectarian chiefs, tribal elders, religious leaders, etc), the self-same networks that were prevalent during the Ottoman occupation and French mandate. In this way, the regime is able to set down invisible boundaries, or buffers, between sects and Syrian citizens, which it can lift whenever it chooses through the use of rumour, detentions and orchestrated chaos, confident that the collective conscious of Syrians will not reach the level of a national consciousness capable of overcoming sectarian loyalties.

If the authorities are doing this in order to preserve themselves and their privileges, it is equally notable that the opposition, in the way they have acted in taking on the regime, have shown a clear inability to deal with the situation. This raises a serious question-mark over the opposition, which has studied neither the regime nor the power structures it has put in place well enough to critically deconstruct them. The opposition needs to ask questions such as: Why has the regime survived for all these years? What strategy is it using at the moment? What is the role of rumour in its successes? Only in this way can it achieve an understanding of the regime's essential nature and the methods by which society and the opposition can effectively confront it. In this regard, we are confronted by a clear shortcoming on the part of the opposition for which it is paying the price today. If the opposition had any real knowledge of the regime's methods, of the nature of its activities and the tools it uses, it would be able



to create an approach to resistance that would neutralise the regime's arsenal, foremost among these being the rumours that have poisoned society and infected the revolution itself. The opposition treats rumour as a short-term tactic and looks no further than the moment in which a rumour is set in motion. It has no conception of a clear strategy in which the use of rumour is part of a set of decisions that aim to achieve one short-term objective after another until the final goal is achieved. Today, it seems obvious that rumour was one component of an integrated system put in place by the regime to achieve its goals, and which, as the opposition stumbles blindly along, continues to do so.

1. See: Lisa Wedeen. 1999. *Ambiguities of Domination: Politics, Rhetoric, and Symbols in Contemporary Syria*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press
2. Amin Maalouf, *Les Identités meurtrières* (Arabic: *Al Huwiyat Al Qaatila*), Translated by Nahla Beidoun, Dar Al Farabi, 2011 (2nd Ed.), p.41
3. *Ibid*, p.42
4. *Ibid*, p.43
5. <http://digital.ahram.org.eg/Community.aspx?Serial=1134474>
6. <http://janoubia.com/184791>
7. In the Arabic the author preserved the spelling mistakes and orthography of the original posts, and this has been followed (minus spelling mistakes) by the translator. The author spoke to a number of intellectuals and activists in Salamiye to establish the true facts. The Facebook page can be found at this link: <https://www.facebook.com/salamiehlive>
8. Conversation between the author and one of the individuals involved.
9. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/204391>
10. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/204390>
11. <https://www.zamanalwsl.net/news/20651.html>
12. For more information, see the following Wikipedia article on Zeinab Al Hosni: http://ar.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D8%B2%D9%8A%D9%B6%D8%A8_%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B5%D9%86%D9%8A
13. Personally witnessed by the author.

* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

The Iconoclasts: How Syrian Citizens Brought a God back down to Earth

Dima Wannous

'Was Maher al-Assad' present in the great hall? Did he listen to the swearing-in speech? We didn't see him! We didn't notice him! And Farouk al-Sharaa? He wasn't there either! They must have been purged...'

This is what a number of Facebook activists were preoccupied with in the weeks following Bashar al-Assad's swearing-in speech delivered on July 15 last year (2013). Many of these people had previously been preoccupied with Maher al-Assad, appearing in the company of Lebanese-Syrian singer George Wassouf. One activist went so far as to doubt the authenticity of the images claiming that it could not have been a recent photograph, because George Wassouf was now confined to a wheelchair and could only have been standing if two people had picked him up, then sat him down again after the photograph was taken.

Two years ago, many activists and even some Western officials were caught up with rumours circulating around the 'Crisis Room bombing' in Damascus that killed Assef Shawkat, the head of Military Intelligence, former deputy Defence Minister and husband of Bashar al-Assad's sister Bushra. At the time it was claimed that Maher al-Assad had been at the meeting of security and military personnel and had been killed with the others. Then another report emerged that a private jet had taken off from the Mezzeh Military Airport outside Damascus, with Maher on board, in the company of his confidantes, heading for Moscow to receive treatment. We should also not forget the rumour, which in September 2013 gained currency among Arab and Western officials that former Defence Minister Ali Habib had fled to Paris to prepare for a 'transitional period' in which he would replace Bashar

al-Assad as an 'acceptable' Alawite leader. He was seen as a moderate who had refused to stain his hands with the blood of Syrians (especially Sunnis) and who had opposed the decision to send the army into Hama in 2011, when the uprising was still centred around peaceful demonstrations.

These and other stories passed around by activists, opposition figures and revolutionaries, all point to the same thing; the Syrian regime is still just as present in people's thoughts as it was prior to the revolution. The regime still functions as it has for decades; a shadow, a spectre, an abstraction, an intangible myth fenced round with rumour and folklore. Not only has the security regime not been penetrated, it has also retained its capacity to toy with the day-to-day course of the revolution. While tales of Maher preoccupy many of its opponents, the regime is free to pursue its methodical slaughter, torture, kidnapping and sieges.

The effect of the regime's decades-old strategy has been to transform the ruling family and its dependents into icons or almost mythic figures. Ordinary citizens are struck dumb with amazement when they spot one of these figures in a restaurant or drive past them in a car, and here 'amazement' means something like actual disbelief.

The Syrian collective consciousness has a deep-rooted belief in the 'sacredness' of those in charge, whether they be military or religious, from the president himself to the director of a local branch of the intelligence services. The absence of any rule of law is one aggravating cause of this abiding illusion, and is confounded by a generalised inability to properly analyse the situation and these people's role in it. As such, the revolution on the ground has been bedevilled by a lack of logic and a propensity to make hasty judgements (and believe in them)

and unsupported by any developed critical rationality.

Exalted Totalitarianism

For decades the Syrian regime has fashioned an entirely separate world for itself. The world in which Bashar al-Assad and his wife Asma al-Akhras live is conceivably even more detached than was the world of his father Hafez al-Assad and his mother Anisa Makhlof. This is despite cosmetic attempts to give the opposite impression. No one knows where the family and those around them live. The security that surrounds their existence is absolute and even overdone, given that they lived in a peaceful nation without any political life to speak of: no independent parties, no autonomous institutions, no genuine opposition, and no openly declared opponents with the legal, constitutional and legislative tools to remove the al-Assad clan from power.

However, there was the constant impression that the family was being stalked and targeted, forcing them to sneak around; moving according to pre-laid plans with streets blocked, traffic stopped and curfews imposed in the areas through which they were passing. False rumours were a common tactic here, a patrol would be told that the president's entourage planned to travel along a particular road, then they would select a different road altogether. Likewise, security branches would be ringed round with cement walls topped by barbed wire or electric fences, as if they were the targets of some imminent assault. All these measures served to heighten the regime's mythic status and thus aided the spread of rumour: How did they live and eat? How did they spend their free time? Did they sleep? The regime's human face became utterly occluded, and how could it not? For it was walled in with cement, hidden behind the darkened glass of its car windows and the gates of its many palaces.

From 2000, Bashar and his wife tried, in a somewhat stilted fashion, to humanize the image of the president and his family. Their 'spontaneous' appearances, and those of their children became events in themselves, carefully planned and devoid of any revealing details. Take, for example, the choice of the location where they spent their Eid vacation. The people who were chosen to visit the resort where Bashar and Asma had 'by chance' turned up, the preparations and events at the resort, all of which coincided with their short stay, clearly everything was thought through and planned in advance. Pictures of their visit were distributed to the official Syrian news agency,

SANA, and uploaded onto 'blocked' Facebook pages that could only be accessed via proxies. It was this type of thing that made people gasp when they caught sight of Bashar or Asma in the street, as though they were movie stars and not the president and his wife. Compare this to the famous phrase uttered by the late Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish after one of his performances in Damascus. As usual he had received rapturous applause, but after the show he grumpily confided to a friend: 'I don't like all that. What am I, Ragheb Alama (a famous Lebanese singer), or something?'

By contrast, Bashar and his wife became obsessed with being seen as the most beautiful, the cleverest, the chicest. Their media machine even managed to convince Vogue to publish

'The bubble in which the family lived made it the prisoner of the portraits stuck up in car windows, on the walls of state agencies, in the streets, on lampposts, tree trunks and wherever there was space to stick a picture of the president and his wife and kids.'

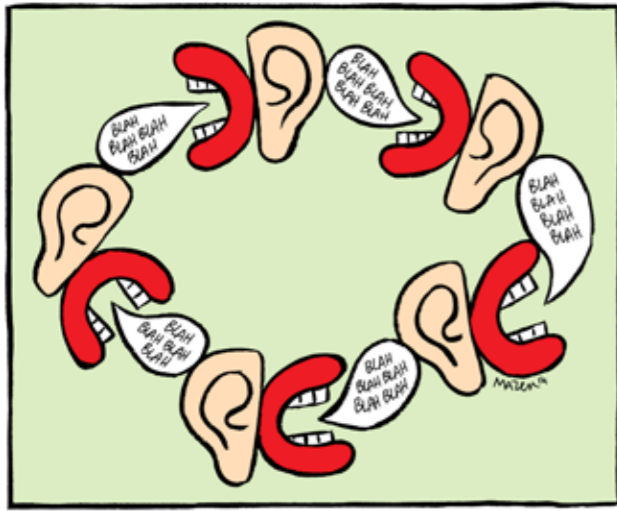
an article in early 2011 (just days before the outbreak of the revolution) that described Asma as 'a rose in the desert.'

The bubble in which the family lived made it the prisoner of the portraits stuck up in car windows, on the walls of state agencies, in the streets, on lampposts, tree trunks and wherever there was space to stick a picture of the president and his wife and kids. These portraits were just a paper-thin caricature, an abstraction freighted with a fantasy that could not support the reality of the president as a person. In Syria the president is not an individual and nor are the people individuals. There are no individuals or citizens, just ruler and ruled, president and subject, executioner and victim, and the distance between these polarities is the distance between life and death, a distance whose substance is the fertile soil of the imagination that nourishes fear and panic. In Syria, the sensation of fear has been transformed over decades of oppression, denial and marginalization into a *fait accompli*. People do not feel fear when something takes place, they fear that it will take place. Maybe it does and maybe it doesn't happen, but the fear is permanent, it has become something like a hereditary disease, imprinted on the national DNA.

Bashar al-Assad and his wife, Asma, have



Dima Wannous studied French literature and translation at the University of Damascus in Syria and the Sorbonne in Paris. She worked as an editor and a presenter for the cultural program 'City Lights' that was screened on the 'Orient' satellite channel, and writes cultural and political articles for a number of Lebanese and foreign newspapers. Among her literary publications are: *Details* (2007) and *Chair* (2009). She currently oversees the cultural page of the electronic newspaper 'Al-Modon.'



three children, and it is no exaggeration to say that most Syrians have lived through three endless and exhausting waves of rumour and speculation, each one triggered by the birth of one of their offspring. Is it a boy or girl? Pale or dark? Healthy or unhealthy? Have they given him or her a traditional name or one of those new-fangled ones? It is my belief that this pandemonium over the three children was ultimately about succession, as it is very hard to conceive of the Assad family ever voluntarily giving up power. It sees itself as immortal, in its portraits, in its 'spirit', in the memory of every 'citizen', and so a new born son signifies the arrival of a 'legitimate' successor. It was this that made Hafez al-Assad junior hated even before he was grown, a criminal in a baby's body, implicated before he even knew the meaning of the word. It was said that behind their high walls the men of Damascus's wealthy families were praying that Bashar's son Hafez would 'turn out a good man, because he'll be our president in the future,'—and this in a country that is supposedly a republic, not a kingdom!

Tyranny and the vaults

At the same time as we Syrians pointed our forefingers heavenwards, in reference to those mysterious, anonymous figures who ran our lives, caused us hardship, prevented our books and films from being published, and imprisoned our friends, every one of us was aware that there was another world that played itself out underground, down in the vaults and dungeons of the regime. There were rumours about the true extent of these underground chambers, and how they linked security branch-offices together. The 'Metro Tunnels' project, the plan for an underground transport system in Damascus, for instance, which should have

been completed years before the revolution broke out, just served as proof for the rumour-obsessed. The regime owns the underground, we would say, just as it owns the land and the sky up above.

Life in this underground world was lived in isolation from those above ground. Secrecy surrounded its inhabitants, who, it was claimed, went for days, months, even years, without seeing the light of day. Their identities and affiliations were almost a complete mystery; their scents and tastes and preferences — everything linked to their humanity — was unknown. Jelly-like creatures, trapped beneath the earth, beneath the office of the director of such-and-such a security branch. Beneath the offices where the director would receive his guests, drink tea and coffee with them, eat, wash, and maybe even invite his girlfriend for the night.

The tyranny, the savagery, with which this unknown 'Above' to whom we pointed with our fingers would treat the similarly anonymous 'Beneath' — someone who might have been our neighbour, our friend, or our relative — all this veiled the machinery of the regime with a cloak of fantasy; incomprehensible, intangible, impossible to see with the naked eye. In this way, the security regime became a nursery not just for the spreading of rumour, but for believing it, too.

'The other' as stranger

The regime has never stopped, not for an instant, promoting an official discourse of fraternity, peace, and embracing 'the other'. Indeed, fraternity — or coexistence — has been a duty, forced on every Syrian, and practiced for fear of retribution. Discourse on issues related to sectarian affiliation is outlawed and suppressed

to the point of creating ignorance, and mutual misunderstanding. Religions and sects are surrounded by a fog of legend and rumour. Minorities preserve their distinctiveness with secret, undeclared rites. Among the stereotypes that were circulated were: 'The Druze have become creatures who hide tails beneath their clothes and worship bulls'; 'The Shia bow down before vaginas'; 'Alawites are pagans who do not pray or fast and who drink alcohol'; 'Alawite women are whores who sell their bodies.'

The very regime that called for brotherhood was in truth participating in the oppression of all minorities. It outlawed their traditions and customs, while restricting their movement outwards from their traditional bases. This ignorance of 'the other' has also turned sects into taboos, sacred icons sunk in their past. The different sects that make up Syrian society are consequently beset by rumours, most of them untrue. Over the past few years of revolution we have seen much of this rumour-perpetuated stereotyping, so beloved of the regime: 'every Alawite is loyalist'; 'every Sunni is in the opposition' and the other minorities are treated with suspicion and face accusations until they are forced to prove their innocence. Far from fraternal conviviality, or the balanced critical thinking that would benefit the popular movement, Syrians are using abuse, insubordination and hatred, instead of the balanced 'conscious' thinking that should properly accompany the popular movement. This generalized tone of accusation has extended to all those who were employed in various government centres, institutions and agencies prior to the revolution - as though we had all been living in France where independent jobs were plentiful and easily available!

Despair

Muammar Gaddafi was taken from his bolthole and led to a car a dying man. He was feeling his head, looking at his fingers and marvelling at his blood. He couldn't believe that he was bleeding. Him... Muammar Gaddafi! And us... we couldn't believe it either. The tyrant could die! Just as happened with Saddam Hussein in Iraq. To this very day, we still encounter people who are not convinced that Saddam Hussein was executed. It's claimed that his body-double was killed and that he lives on in a tunnel in Baghdad. For many it is difficult to believe the news. Many fear that if they believe it, and are brave enough to give expression to their feelings, he will suddenly emerge from beneath the earth and hold them to account. Here, too,

we encounter the problem of the individual beset by an a priori fear.

Following the killing of Muammar Gaddafi, some Syrians were convinced that getting rid of Bashar Al-Assad and his family was no longer just a dream, no longer just a wild fantasy. Rumours about his death started up, filling social media. Bashar orders the bombing of some district and they start passing round reports of his death: 'His convoy came under attack and he was killed'; 'They detained him on the road to the international airport as he was trying to make a run for Russia.'; 'They stormed the palace and assassinated him'; 'They shelled the People's Palace'. People began criticizing the assassins, saying it would have been better to keep the president alive so he could face trial! The identity of the assassins was also obscure. Sometimes it was the Free Army, sometimes the Nusra Front. 'Elements' (an abstraction) 'assassinate a president' (another abstraction).

Three years on, with frustrations and failures building, many areas of Syria have become mass graves. In this context rumours have started to function as a kind of temporary shot of morphine passed back and forth between activists on social media sites to revive some degree of hope. Reports of 'the regime's fall' or 'the death of the president' or even 'the death of the president's mother' have become an increasingly tired joke against the backdrop of the regime's ongoing policy of murder, destruction and detentions. It is now incumbent on Syrians—meaning intellectuals, activists, members of the opposition, and the fighters on the ground—to locate hope in something more substantial, and useful than rumour. They have to mine despair and frustration to fashion alternatives and strategies for the next stage, which will be exceptionally difficult and complex now that their single enemy: the regime, has morphed into a horde.

The regime has spread the idea that Bashar al-Assad's acceptance of the presence of an alternative candidate in his staged presidential 'election' is a major concession. In this vein some opposition figures claim that 'the most important achievement' of the revolution, after more than 170,000 have lost their lives, millions have been displaced and tens of thousands wounded or locked up, is that Bashar al-Assad has been transformed from a god into an mere mortal.

1. Commander of the Syrian Republican Guard and brother of President Bashar al-Assad
2. Vice President of Syria

*Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

One Aspect of the History of Political Rumour in Syria

Yassin Al Haj Saleh

This article deals exclusively with political rumour in 'Assad's Syria'. It is an attempt to examine the subject based on the author's personal experiences

Rumours to soothe

Only a few weeks into our detention we began hearing rumours about our imminent release. It was the 1980s and we were political detainees. Our visitors — or the visitors of some of us — told us, 'they say there will be a pardon for detainees to mark Eid', the anniversary of the 'Corrective Movement' (Hafez al-Assad's coup on November 16, 1970), or 'The Renewing of the Pledge' (the term given to the seven yearly referendum on Hafez al-Assad's presidency). They attributed the information to an officer in some branch of the security services, to a prominent member of one religious group or another, to a major financier — the 'news' is even traced back all the way to some anonymous source 'in the palace'.

We were in Aleppo's Central Prison situated in the district of Muslimiya, about a hundred of us most of the time, representing a range of the political movements opposed to the regime. We had no officially recognized rights, everything was on the basis of long-established custom. Visits were allowed, but were suddenly, and quite unexpectedly stopped in February 1982 (around the time of the Hama massacre), and were also banned for twenty straight months during 1987 and 1988. For all those years we didn't receive any human-rights assistance or access to lawyers. We weren't even officially accused of anything or tried until the spring of 1992, which in my case was some eleven years and four months after I'd been locked up. The most important thing in all this was that we

had no idea how long we would be in prison; Months? Years? More, perhaps? A life sentence? Maybe we'll die here! We didn't know, and nor did our families.

This, then, was the first genesis of the rumour of our imminent release; the complete absence of information, and further, the absence of any trustworthy source of information about our cases. Rumours with no clear origin are the only available alternative to information with a known and named source. Faith in information equals faith in its source.

This dearth of information was a source of great distress to our families. My mother passed the whole of one long summer's day on the doorstep of the military intelligence building in Aleppo trying to find out anything she could about the detention of her third son in the summer of 1986, and she learnt nothing. In the winter of 1995 my siblings spent days outside the headquarters of Political Security in Damascus trying to learn anything they could about my fate, and got nowhere. I had just finished fifteen years behind bars at that point, and instead of being released all word of me had ceased.

Information came at a steep price; the wives, mothers and sisters of Islamists sold their gold jewellery to the mother of the Tadmor Prison's director in the 1980s (Major Faisal Ghanim) so that she would act as an intermediary, to find out from her son whether their husband, father or brother who was missing was still alive, and if so, to let them visit him in jail. The trade in alive-or-dead information was the origin of huge fortunes in the 1980s.

The issue of political detention in Syria was an open secret, but one which everyone was supposed to pretend they knew nothing about. Taking an open interest in the subject was exceptionally dangerous and Syrian

officials would never mention it, and deny any knowledge if asked. Western journalists internalized the Syrian regime's taboos, rarely questioning Hafez al-Assad or his men about the matter.

It is possible that officials on the lower rungs of the regime ladder were attempting to soothe families by distracting them with stories about the imminent release of their relatives and loved ones, and the wretched families would believe what they heard or choose to believe it, to strengthen their resolve and the resolve of the family member in detention. Alternatively, maybe the regime deliberately spread stories about the release of detainees through its unofficial channels. It is possible that the objective here was to siphon off some of the pressure exerted by society during a period in which detainees in prisons and branches of the security services numbered in the tens of thousands, as well as to test how various parts of society reacted to the leaked information. Here is another genesis of rumour, aside from lack of information; deliberate misdirection; the regime's agencies deliberately spreading false information.

Only in this second instance is it appropriate to talk about rumour mongering. The phrase rumour mongering indicates the presence of a party actively spreading or propagating false information. If this party is anonymous, making the rumour appear self-generating, then the false information is likely to spread all that much more effectively. In reality, of course, there is very rarely such a thing as a self-generating rumour, and there are very few rumours that someone somewhere is not working to spread for some purpose. As such, most rumours are ultimately the product of rumour mongering. At the same time no rumour can play out its natural life-cycle — i.e. spread in a given social

circle or its target environment — without first severing links with its creators and making identification with its original source impossible.

This gives rise to a question about what drives rumour; is it the anonymous figure who creates the rumour or is it the environment in which the rumour is passed around and in whose circles it spreads? I tend to think that after the rumour has taken wing and has begun to lead its own independent existence, this 'driver' shifts from being the person who starts the rumour to the environment that first hosts it, then alters and edits it until the content and function of the rumour is almost entirely changed from its first iteration.

'Information came at a steep price; the wives, mothers and sisters of Islamists sold their gold jewellery to the mother of the Tadmor Prison's director in the 1980s (Major Faisal Ghanim) so that she would act as an intermediary, to find out from her son whether their husband, father or brother who was missing was still alive, and if so, to let them visit him in jail. The trade in alive-or-dead information was the origin of huge fortunes in the 1980s.'

In our case, the political detainees of a former era, it is possible that there was a third genesis of the rumours of our imminent release, aside from the lack of information and deliberate misdirection, and this was the hopelessness of our relatives and of us prisoners ourselves. People convert their desires into facts, or rather, they talk about them as though discussing facts. They are the drivers of the rumour, not in the sense that they start it, but because they use it



Yassin al-Haj Saleh is a Syrian writer and dissenter based in Damascus. He was a political prisoner between 1980 and 1996. He writes for several Arab newspapers and journals outside of Syria and regularly contributes to Al-Hayat newspaper. Among his Arabic publications are: *Syria in the Shadow: Looks inside the Black Box* (2009), *The Myth of the Others: A Critique of Contemporary Islam and a Critique of the Critique* (2012), and *Deliverance or Destruction: Syria at a Crossroads* (2014). He has been granted the Prince Claus Award in 2012 as 'a tribute to the Syrian people and the Syrian revolution.'

to carry their emotions and dreams. It enables them to bear the burden of living in harsh times. It becomes their property. During one prison visit, after I'd spent years behind bars, my father said, 'The years in prison are numbered!' It's a proverb and means that however long these years last, they will end. I told my companions what he had said and it started to seem like a piece of information, so I began wondering what the source had been! The need for hope generates convenient information and a less frustrating world.

The truth behind the rumours about our release was something about which we political detainees desperately lacked information. When would we be freed? What was to become of us? From the perspective of the detainees and their relatives, rumour was the alternative to unavailable information. From the regime's perspective, rumour was the final element of a strategy of denying and fabricating information, or a means of deflecting pressure from the detainees' relatives.

'It makes sense to talk of a triangle of rumour, its three points representing: the party spreading the rumour, which also possesses political power and information, the consumer within society who is to be 'soothed' or misled, and finally, the subject of the rumour, which was us, the group of political detainees at the time.'

It makes sense to talk of a triangle of rumour, its three points representing: the party spreading the rumour, which also possesses political power and information (i.e. the security-political establishment), the consumer within society who is to be 'soothed' or misled (i.e. the families of detainees), and finally, the subject of the rumour, which was us, the group of political detainees at the time. Specific rumours in specific circles deal with specific content. For instance, rumours of the release of detainees had currency among the families of detainees and not, say, for university students or those in artistic circles. And by the same token, no rumours about artists were passed around by the mothers of detainees, they were not fertile ground.

It is significant that when we were transferred to the State Security Court in the spring of 1992, the rumours slackened off. Two of the three anchors of the triangle of rumour had been cut loose; the party that set the rumours in motion no longer needed to

deliberately — or randomly — pump them out, and the consumer was now receiving information about the course of the trial, and the changes in the condition and fate of the detainees directly from the detainees themselves. We were charged with a range of crimes, including 'disseminating false reports' with the aim of weakening the nation's resolve. The regime, which had kept its subjects in the dark concerning the fate of tens of thousands of their fellow citizens, was now trying some of them for spreading false rumours!

Rumours to distort

At an early stage in the Syrian revolution it was rumoured that myself and other opposition figures like Razan Zaitouneh and Riad Al Turk, were staying at the American Embassy in Damascus. The site that published this 'report' first appeared after the start of the revolution, and was linked to one of the regime's covert and notoriously secretive, and mysterious, intelligence agencies. Here you have what, on the surface, is a known source, but which in practice is anonymous, and completely impervious to any checking procedure. Most of the reports on the site fall into the category of 'dark propaganda,' dealing with the personal relationships of opposition figures, their incomes and their purported connections to entirely fabricated stories. While it is generally the case that rumours aim to be believed, to be treated as truths, there is a certain species of rumour, whose objective is to distort, to erode the standards by which credibility is assessed and to destroy the public's ability to distinguish truths from lies. This is another instance of deliberate misdirection, something the Syrian security services are well versed in. Knowing that they have no chance of winning the battle over truth, they prefer instead to erode the entire concept of truth itself.

Around the time that the rumour about the American embassy was circulating, I was being told that armed gangs were assassinating senior figures and killing soldiers. At this point I was, in fact, hiding out in Damascus, and every week an article or two of mine on Syrian affairs was being published.

It was in the nature of Syrian Baathist ideology that its 'objective analyses' would be converted into facts on the ground. If you were 'hostile to the homeland' and complicit in 'foreign conspiracies' against the homeland, it was all the same whether you ran 'armed gangs' or didn't, or whether or not you actually lived in the American Embassy, or didn't. What mattered was your 'objective partnership' -

serving the same goal. If we were really 'partners' why shouldn't those 'armed gangs' really be mine? Why wouldn't I be living in the American Embassy? Why do the actual details matter if the overall strategy is understood, the 'deep objective' that manifests itself in events? Insisting on actual facts distorts the clarity of the strategy (the conspiracy), which is the 'true reality'. Here, rumour becomes more 'real' than checkable facts.

The point is that there is an epistemological grounding for rumour; verifiable reality evanesces before the desire for a comprehensive knowledge of reality and the power of judgment. The word for judgment in Arabic is *hukm*, which means both 'passing judgment' (i.e. ruling between right and wrong) and also refers to 'governance': governing people and managing their affairs. Hafez Al Assad's state agencies described the ruler as an historic, 'wise' leader. The word for wise, *hakim*, is from the same root.

Two years later, I was in East Ghouta. During an online press interview I was asked about my residence at the American Embassy by a regime-affiliated journalist. I replied that it had been comfortable and safe and that I'd enjoyed the company of other opposition figures. My intention was to destroy the rumour by adopting it, and that is what happened, but not before another farcical episode had taken place. Regime loyalists, and those hostile to the Syrian regime took my mock-serious response as absolute proof of what they had been saying all along, that the revolution was an American creation. They included a Lebanese University professor who taught in the American University in Beirut and a fairly well-known Syrian poet, who said they'd known about my stay in the American Embassy for a good while before my 'confession', because they'd been told about it by a 'patriotic opposition figure' while they drank coffee in a Damascus cafe.

This is an exercise in how something massive gets made out of nothing when the desire for passing judgment grips people. If it weren't for this impulse, there is no way a poet in his sixties and a fifty-something-year-old professor would believe that the Americans would hand over the keys to their locked and bolted embassies to a group of Leftist Syrian opposition figures who also happened to be the bitterest enemies of the Syrian regime. Further, how is it that Syrian intelligence, as 'aware' of this information as they were, failed to make good use of it? Aside from self-interest and personal malice, it goes back to the process of discarding solid facts in favour of an abstract 'strategy' or map that purports to be a facsimile

of reality. The poet and professor made fools of themselves because they sought to make fools of others and monopolize judgment for themselves.

In any case, rumour here is a tool of political conflict whose purpose is to discredit and destroy the opponent's cause.

Rumours to deceive

Ever since my wife, Samira Khalil was abducted along with Razan Zaitouneh, Wael Hammada and Nazem Hamadi in the city of Douma in East Ghouta on December 9, 2013, there has been a never-ending stream of rumours about their fate. Razan, a lawyer, writer, and founder of the 'Violations Documentation Centre', had been threatened by Jaish al-Islam (the Salafist paramilitary group that controlled Douma) just a few weeks before the abduction. I have no conclusive evidence, but from my knowledge of the situation on the ground, and from some other pieces of information, I am convinced that the aforementioned group is responsible.

The rumours said everything; that secret regime cells abducted them, that they are with Jabhat al-Nusra (another viable candidate after Jaish al-Islam), that someone saw Razan in some prison, that one or other of the four is in some other prison. Giving the impression that he was actually conducting a serious investigation into the matter, the leader of Jaish al-Islam himself spread the rumour a while ago that a special committee was looking into it and that they had found 'a lead'. He hinted that 'foreign elements' were involved in the crime, before complaining that there was too much focus on Razan and her friends while other detainees of the regime — he mentioned female Muslim detainees — were being ignored.

Here, too, the genesis of the rumour is a dearth of information and the absence of trustworthy sources, independent of political actors. Nor is it unlikely that some rumours gain currency as misleading information as part of a deliberate strategy. I am aware of at least one instance of this, when it was alleged that a group that no one had heard of was responsible for the abduction.

In the case of the four abductees from Douma, the source of the rumour is not the regime and its agencies but other, new authorities, and new 'rulers' who control people and their ability to assess correctly. This is a new reality in Syria, where rumour always rode on the train of state power or followed it like a shadow. But just as the monopoly over weapons was broken by the revolution, so were the monopolies over truth and deception.

When the official monopoly over information ended, so did the monopoly over rumour. It could be said that rumour was one of the authorities' weapons that they did not have to answer for and with which they distorted society and weakened its ability to call them to account, terrifying it with dangers and disasters that were never any threat at all.

Rumours of fear have been exploited by ISIS in particular. In order to clear areas of their inhabitants or reduce their numbers, the group would send them warnings or inquire about them in surrounding areas. This would be enough to make many people flee before them. The well-publicized fact that ISIS has committed numerous criminal acts only lends veracity to these feelings of fear.

This example shows that a rumour's power is proportionate to the power of the party that disseminates it (or that forms its subject) on the one hand, and on the other, to the enigmatic nature of that party.

As I mentioned at the outset, the three cases outlined above come from my personal experience. I was a prisoner in the first case, when my companions and I received rumours about our fate, then in hiding for the second case in which I was the subject of the rumours. Then for the third case, I was one of the family members of the abductees, the husband of an abducted wife, and received a number of rumours about her fate. The three cases fall into the sphere of politics, the politics of a closed regime which acts like a secret organization or an interested party, and not as a publicly accountable authority. This also applies to Salafist military formations, which act, in turn, like security agencies. In all these cases the distance between politics and the crime is not great, and for all the parties involved, much of what concerns them is to remain undetected. Rumour is the other face of secret power.

Do people fight rumour?

If truth is always the first victim of war, then Syria has been living through warlike conditions for half a century. These conditions have further weakened the public's already weak desire for actual facts. It is well-known that a state of emergency was declared on the first day of Baath rule on the pretext of its war with Israel, a move that imported the logic of war into the domestic arena and obliterated the conditions for the birth of truth, i.e. independent scrutiny, the examination of facts and comparing competing narratives.

In the current circumstances people doubt certain narratives, but not from a position of

verifiable facts or based on a logic of what-can-be-expected—what is possible and what cannot be. Such approaches are rarely viable amidst the circumstances of 'double war' (the 'hot conflict' in Syria playing out against the backdrop of a longer, 'cold conflict' – the ongoing state of war with Israel). We lack independent vantage points from which to scrutinize and inspect what is taking place, especially those weathervanes that indicate the fluctuations in the cross-currents and disturbances that characterize revolution and war.

This is only enhanced by another element, one that is far from rare in the Syrian socio-psychological make-up, and which manifests itself in phrases like, 'No smoke without fire' and 'If so-and-so hadn't done such-and-such he would never have been arrested'. The truth is there is much smoke in the world today, and that it is possible to spread smoke in one place to conceal the fire in another, and that the arrest or abduction of a man or woman says something about the perpetrators of the crime, not the victim. Nor is it unusual, given current circumstances in Syria, that someone will come in for special mistreatment for being who they are and not for what they've done. We are all guilty if the mistake one of us makes is being who he is (not what he does), thus violating some general principle. This is sectarianism. You are wrong because you are one of them. They are the wrong group. I am right because I am one of us, and we are in the right. I am talking here about individuals being valued according to their identities and origins and not their actions. Killing on the basis of identity is based on affiliation not deed.

We are talking about sectarianism because the sects are perfect target environments for rumour. Rumours spread there which are rarely encountered elsewhere. Sects are special social frameworks for special rumours, whose source is inter-sect conflict, and which constitute one aspect of their narratives about themselves and others. The spread of sectarian rumours through wider society is inversely proportionate to how 'forbidden' or taboo the topic is in public discourse. Once again, we encounter the issue of lack of information and deliberate misdirection.

Contrary to many hopes, the communications revolution did nothing to check the onslaught of rumour. The same tool that aids research and provides trustworthy information also acts as a conduit for the spread of lies and fabrications. As far as I can make out, in the case of Syria those who work in agencies that spread false narratives are more committed to their cause

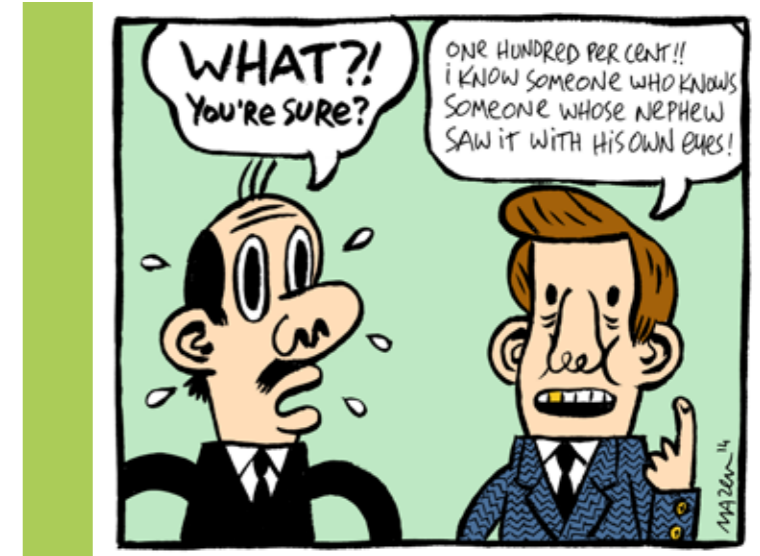
than those who conduct independent research and investigation in pursuit of the truth.

The heroes of countering rumour: scepticism and observation of the authority

For all that we are not totally powerless in the face of rumour. We can compare stories and identify their points of weakness or 'holes'. When chemical weapons were used to perpetrate a massacre in Ghouta in August reports soon spread in Syrian and international circles, and everyone (starting with the regime) seemed to accept a rumour which said that opposition forces were the ones who had used the chemical weapons. The American journalist Seymour Hersh spent nine months working hard to come to exactly this conclusion. What all sides had in common was that none of them had tried calling the residents of Ghouta (there are approximately four million people currently living there), and asking them if there had been any whispers about chemical weapons in the neighbourhood or about the possibility that opposition fighters had used them. And then there was a precedent; the Assad regime had used such weapons before, perhaps as many as thirty times prior to the assault in August 2011.

These things help distinguish between rumour and fact, between a report you can trust and a rumour that seeks to deceive. The report says something about an incident, while the rumour says something about the person who started it.

But while individuals are able to trust some information in circulation, the ability to catch rumour in the political arena requires the existence of independent — and agenda-less — scrutiny and investigation. On the social level, effective resistance to political rumour requires



the authorities to be placed under observation, and greater transparency in the creation of policy.

There is a somewhat hypocritical proverb in Arabic which says, 'The speech of kings is the king of speech.' In other words, that our rulers are also the wisest among us. Right now we need to develop a counter-proverb that says that kings (i.e. those with political power) are liars, that their speech is false until proved otherwise, and that the more power the speaker possesses the more his words and deeds must be subjected to wider social scrutiny. Rulers are careless and irresponsible, this proverb must say, and more often than not, criminals.

In societies everywhere information is one of the basic tools of governance and a basic tool of resistance. In our country, the rulers have monopolized information to control people and control the concepts of right and wrong. They have stripped people of their ability to assess and judge reality and placed them in the position of the accused, the guilty. The separation of political power and information, of governance and judgment, is essential if we wish to develop a liberated and democratic politics.

In the examples above, rumour rides on power, it does not subject it to scrutiny. The object of scrutinizing political power — the kings and rulers — is to negate its ability to spread rumour that misleads its subjects, who are denied both information and power, and to prevent the powerful monopolizing governance and 'wisdom'.

* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

Morocco: the Monarch and Rumours

Salaheddine Lemaizi

In comparison with the majority of Middle East and North African countries, Moroccan political life is a bed of roses. Media coverage of governmental and parliamentary activities appeals little to the general public. The media therefore prefers to focus its attention on the activities of King Mohammed VI and the royal family. Due to its central position in the Moroccan political system, the monarchy generates excitement in the Moroccan media and the general public at large. This very interest has led to it being at the heart of rumours, which in some instances have been reported in the written press. These false stories find fertile ground in a locked political system marked by the absence of political communication on the part of the monarchy,¹ and a lack of professionalism in the media.

The initial rumour

It is 1993, and King Hassan II is preparing for the transition of power to his son, Mohammed VI. Negotiations with the opposition have been held over the previous several years to ensure their participation in what is labelled an 'alternative government.' During this period, a rumour circulates in the salons of Rabat and Casablanca, 'The king is ill,' is whispered in the private meetings of the political and economic class. Khalid Naciri, one of the leaders of the Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS) offers this take: 'It was an open secret that the king was ill. Indeed in 1993, when receiving the heads of the Koutla,² Hassan said to them, 'I have but a few years left to live, and I wish to spend them with you.'" This information was not made public at the time, nevertheless the news spread in a fairly structured way. However the press were not allowed to publish this news, so the veracity of the rumour was not officially confirmed. Has

this obscurantism been lifted since the arrival of Mohammed VI?

Rumours and celebrity culture in politics

On his accession to the throne in 1999, the young king named Hassan Aourid as spokesman for the Royal Palace. This was a first in the country's history, and a decision that was in keeping with the new reign's policy of openness. This interlude would last only five years, and the spokesman would in fact exercise his functions for only the first two of these years.

The Moroccan and foreign media therefore no longer has an interlocutor at the heart of the palace. The monarchy chooses new ways to communicate. Cleverly orchestrated by communication consultancies,³ Mohammed VI is baptised 'King of the Poor'. Contrary to his father, the monarch opts for proximity to his subjects. In each town he visits, the king informally mingles with the crowds and takes tours in private cars. This method of communication leaves the door open to 'urban legends' about Mohammed VI's character.

The press takes a keen interest in the King's 'celebrity side'. His taste in clothes, food and music are described based on statements by citizens who have supposedly run across him, or from secondary sources, but rarely based on first hand contact. With supporting photographs, the Moroccan press makes its best sales thanks to its 'investigations' on 'M6'.⁴ As Beau and Graciet assert, in the 2000s 'the Arabic newspapers, regurgitating more-or-less verified juicy anecdotes [about the court of Mohammed VI], sold like hot cakes.'⁵ On only one occasion did the palace react to such an article, this was in 2005, when the weekly newspaper Jarida Al Oukhra published a portrait

of the wife of Mohammed VI. This was one of the first to be written about Princess Salma, the king's wife. Here the Royal Family reacted swiftly, and a missive, in a menacing tone, landed on the editorial desk of the newspaper. Freelance journalist Ali Amar reflects on the incident: 'This unprecedented state of fever pitch illustrates the distance the monarchy wishes to maintain with the kingdom's media on the subject of the princess, even if the throne does not hesitate in ostentatiously exposing itself in foreign magazines. Its marketing-savvy approach beyond its borders contrasts with the sacredness of the King for Moroccan subjects who remain infantilised by the law.'⁶ He adds: "The Palace seeks a one-way means of communication."⁷

In the Moroccan political system, the King is by far the predominant actor. No other element in the system carries any weight next to him. This domination has a price, and his private and public lives trigger fantasising. The absence of institutionalised royal public relations obliges the press to throw itself into a game of endless interpretation of the monarch's acts and gestures. Thus the public has become accustomed to reading in the privately-owned press of the alleged 'royal rages' against his close circle; advisors, bodyguards, governors, etc. This 'news' has, however, never been refuted by the Royal Palace. 'Moroccan journalists are very prudent when it comes to the monarchy. If there is a rumour about the institution, it is dealt with cautiously as the monarchy has also been the victim of malicious gossip,' warns Maria Moukrim, a Moroccan investigative journalist. How much credence should be accorded to such 'news'? Is rumour taking precedence over the search for truth?

The King's health and the press trial

On one occasion, a dispatch from *Maghreb Arab Press (MAP)* came as a bombshell to the Moroccan editorial sections. On the August 29, 2009, the official agency announced that 'the sovereign had been placed in convalescence for five days due to an infection posing no threat to his health.' The text, signed by the King's personal doctor, specified the nature of the sickness.

The king 'is infected with rotavirus, causing him digestive troubles and acute dehydration,' stated the press release. This statement from the king's doctor, relayed by the official press agency, proved the impetus for a series of rumours spread by the press. Some of the rumours were already in circulation, but only

in the salons. Prior to this dispatch, there had never been – to my knowledge – articles in the Moroccan press on the King's health.

Maria Moukrim, a journalist at the time for the weekly *al-Ayam*, was following the story, 'The communiqué was an event. The news story was at first a rumour that had been doing the rounds for some time,' she remembers. In order to establish the truth, journalists published false information on the subject. Quoting an unnamed medical source, the daily *al-jarida al-Oula* published an article proposing a noticeably different explanation, stating that 'the origin of the rotavirus contracted by the King is due to his use of corticosteroids against asthma that cause swelling in the body and decreased immunity.' The weekly *al-Michael* then published an article whose headline ran, '*al-Michael* reveals the reasons for the Palace statement on the King's health that caused concern among the general public.' The article quoted a Spanish reporter who had been peddling rumours about the King's health,⁸ and was accompanied by an interview with a doctor entitled: 'Rotavirus is caused by immunodeficiency or allergies.' The weaving of initial reports (blending rumours, hypotheses and secondary sources), coupled with a lack of official sources providing more information to journalists about the king's illness, would have a fatal effect on the written press of the time.

'In the Moroccan political system, the King is by far the predominant actor. No other element in the system carries any weight next to him. This domination has a price, and his private and public lives trigger fantasising.'

A few days later, the Attorney General announced the opening of an inquiry into the weekly newspapers *al-Michael* and *al-Ayam*, due to the publication of 'misleading facts and false information,' which followed on from an investigation into the editor and a journalist from the daily newspaper, *al-Jarida al-Oula*.

This judicial marathon would end in the conviction of Driss Chahtane, editor of *Al Michael*, with a one year fixed sentence for 'publishing questionable articles about the health of the king.' Convictions of three month fixed sentences were handed to two other journalists from the weekly newspaper, and a one year suspended sentence to Ali Anouzla, editor of *al-Jarida al-Oula*. Meanwhile, the journalist who had written the incriminating



Salaheddine Lemaizi is a journalist who specialises in the media coverage of political news. He is based in Casablanca. He maintains a blog on Moroccan media: <http://journalinbled.wordpress.com/>

article was given a three month suspended sentence. This soap opera would check the spirits of the two sides. The Palace, thinking itself playing fair with a sensitive statement on the health of the monarch thought itself let down by the attitude of certain media outlets that in its opinion were desperate to deal in sensationalism, at any price. The independent media were being sharply told that they could not cross certain 'red lines'. This mishap would be a defining milestone.

Five years later, the episode's effect is still felt. Hence in 2013, when the King's public outing with a crutch did not lead the King's doctor to present a report on the health of the king, the door was opened to the wildest of rumours on the health of Mohammed VI. Today, the confusion persists; rumours circulate on the supposed sickness of the King, supposedly 'evident' from his weight gain, and breathing difficulties during the last years, and can be read about in the foreign press.

'The problem with rumours concerning the palace is that we have no interlocutor with whom we can communicate. Even if the role of spokesperson exists, we are still not able to get answers to our questions.'

Moukrim, director of the news site Febrayer.com, makes the following observation: 'The problem with rumours concerning the palace is that we have no interlocutor with whom we can communicate. Even if the role of spokesperson exists, we are still not able to get answers to our questions. The Palace has always been a closed institution. This has been a constant since the reign of Hassan II.' For her part, Naciri, a former government spokesperson, defends the policy of the monarchy with regards to public relations: 'The communication strategy of the Royal Palace obeys very precise rules of protocol. Traditionally, the Palace is not an institution open to the four winds. Modernity and democracy can coexist with a system that is not opaque, but still protects the internal life of the monarchic institution.' The aura of mystery surrounding the Moroccan monarchy and the King helps to shape, and perpetuate, the myths about his character and the institution.

Books about the King: revelations and rumours

Unable to interview him,⁹ Moroccan and foreign journalists throw themselves into investigations

to solve the mystery that is 'M6'. Portraits made based on serious investigations may also repeat many rumours. This literature meets with success among the Moroccan public hungry for news about Mohammed VI and his court.

A compendium of conditional sentences and approximations abound, 'Rumour has it that Hassan II has given Basri the task of watching over the heir to the throne,' 'Mohammed VI, seemingly wishing to take a bit more time to take this brutal decision,' 'A persistent rumour insists that an oil slick was discovered and that Mohamed VI ordered the wells be closed, due to their proximity to the Algerian border.'

Whilst Graciet and Baud penned a generally good quality investigation in their 2007 book, even these two experienced journalists do at times yield to rumour, as is evidenced by the following excerpts: 'Mohammed VI and his councillors seem to have preferred to watch their backs.' While referring to the brother of the king, Moulay Rachid: 'A compulsive party animal, whose escapades all Rabat is fantasising about, was supposedly managing with his brother relations between Morocco and Saudi Arabia.'¹⁰

A weapon for the 'foreign enemy'

King Mohammed VI has been the subject of many rumours. On several occasions, the origin of such false stories has been the Algerian press. In the climate of tension that prevails between the regimes of the two countries, the press of Morocco's eastern neighbour rarely misses an opportunity to start rumours about the Moroccan Head of State and vice versa.

This was the case in April 2014. On a private trip to the United Arab Emirates, rumours were circulating about the health of the Monarch in the Algerian press. Then two months later, in June, during an official visit to Tunisia, the Algerian press claimed that a misunderstanding had arisen between the Tunisian president and the King. This rumour would force the Tunisian presidency and the Moroccan Royal Cabinet to publish communiqués denying these allegations. Moukrim feels that the Palace's reaction was not fast enough, he states that, 'Rumours travel fast. They must be killed very quickly; otherwise they will grow and spread. In this case, our enemy won his bet.'

Facebook counters rumours

To respond to these rumours, Royal communication has opted over the last months to use social media networks. As such, several unofficial Facebook pages provide Moroccan

internet users with images of the King on his private visits, as was the case in Dubai and Tunisia this year. These banalities of a private nature perform a function of political communication, as they respond to the rumours of the moment. Naciri, a former minister of communication, remains cautious over the meaning to be given to these photos: 'Future events will confirm or otherwise the existence of links between the rumours and these photos. It is certain today that the circulation of these banalities was carried out so as to bring to an end to the moronic campaign against Morocco.' Abdelhamid Jmahri, Editor-in-chief of the daily partisan newspaper *al-Itihad al-Ichtiiraki*, states that, 'We must distinguish the public 'body' of the King from the private. One belongs to public life and the other to private life. In the case of the photographs of the King in Tunisia, the Royal Cabinet considered them to be part of his private life.' Moukrim appears critical of this method: 'Communicating by the intermediary of Facebook has advantages and disadvantages. It is a tool that certainly contributes to democratising access to information. However it remains that from a strategic point of view, making Facebook one's backbone indicates a communication problem.'

Rumours and political life

Despite its lack of liveliness, Moroccan political life beyond the Monarchy does not escape the rumour mill either. Here rumour is an instrument in political battles between enemies, both from opposing camps and those of the same sides. Rumours emerge and evolve along with political circumstances. 'One of the first political rumours in Morocco's history was the resignation of the Bekkay government,'¹¹ says Adil Benhamza, leader of the Istiqlal Party.

'Germany won the Football World Cup in Italy in 1990. In the days following the win, the German Embassy, hiding out in the Adaimi Hospital in Jounieh at the time, could not be reached. Rumour had it that the embassy was so proud of the triumph, it would issue 40,000 visas for Lebanese citizens. Later, in August of 1990 embassy employees showed me the video that had been filmed behind a wall of sandbags back then that was showing huge crowds and people waving out of car windows with German flags encircling the embassy, waiting to file their application.'

Achim Vogt, Director Friedrich Ebert Foundation Lebanon

The formation of governments is always the 'high season' for political rumours in Morocco. The press announces some ten times the 'definitive list' of the next government. 'At this juncture in political life, we are into rumour in all its splendour,' comments Khalid Naciri.

For Moukrim, the mechanisms of political rumour in Morocco obey the same rules as elsewhere in the world. 'Rumours can emanate from intelligence services or political actors. They are used like trial balloons or as a means of detracting the attention of the general public,' she says. These reasons force the journalist to analyse rumours from a political standpoint. 'One must understand its context, its means of diffusion, seize its foundations and speculate about its purpose. For me, it is a barometer of political life.'

Across political parties, director of the daily party newspaper and member of the political desk of the USFP, Jmahri, asserts that 'rumours have destroyed lives in the Moroccan political sphere. They are equivalent to political assassination.' He offers as an example the cases of Abderrahim Bouabid¹² and Fathallah Oualalou,¹³ two party leaders who were the victims of rumours. 'The rumours had a precise aim and their timing was no coincidence,' he insists.

Naciri reflects bitterly on his experience of rumours during his time in government: 'A certain number of journalists made a national sport out of it. The rumours had passed beyond the conceivable. We were in a cloud of political and media pollution. In the beginning, I used to react but at the end of my term, disinformation had become so widespread that I no longer paid any attention to the rumours, out of discouragement and by political choice.'

Faced with this flood of rumours, journalists and politicians in Morocco shift the blame

onto one another. The former consider the political actors 'still oblivious to the vital role of communication.' Jmahri, director of Al Itihad states: 'Rumours intensify when institutional communication is absent.' Naciri does not share his opinion: 'The political class have an obligation to communicate. However, an absence of communication can never justify disinformation.' The politicians, for their part, accuse media professionals of 'slipping all too easily into disinformation.' While Moukrim insists that, 'Faced with rumours, journalists have to be careful. They must cross-check information, and take the time to speak to all those concerned. In other words, return to the ABC of journalism.'

Conclusion

An analysis of rumours in the Moroccan political sphere sheds an important light on several aspects of public life. Politically, the monarchy remains disengaged from any meaningful public communication. This is a process that should ideally consist in an ongoing exchange rather than merely one-directional 'communication'. The status of the monarchy and its prior and current experiences reinforce this status quo. The only noticeable change in recent years has been the King's use of new communication channels in order to dispel rumours.

The absence of a structured communication strategy contributes to the propagation of rumours in political circles. Political life in Morocco, as such, offers an open playing field for the use of rumours as a weapon in the service of political competitors.

Finally with the media, journalistic practice is still characterised by breaches of ethics, which allows for rumours to be easily relayed. Despite the Moroccan context where access to information is an uphill battle, journalism must overcome this obstacle in order to carry out its principal mission, to search for verified, corroborated and ordered information - it is the most effective antidote to rumour.

1. For more on this topic, see Mouhtadi Najib, *Pouvoir et communication au Maroc: Monarchie, médias et acteurs politiques (1956-1999)*, L'harmattan (2008).
2. Meaning the 'bloc'. A coalition of four opposition parties: Istiqlal, USFP, PPS and OADP. The first three of these parties would later agree to form a government in 1998.
3. For more information on this subject, read Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, La Découverte (2007).
4. Nickname given to King Mohammed by the foreign press in reference to his laid-back approach during the first years of his reign.
5. From *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, p.232

6. Ali Amar, Mohammed VI, le grand malentendu. Calmann-Lévy (2009), p. 78
7. Sylvain Moullaird, Maroc: parler de la santé du roi reste tabou, *Libération* (8 September 2009) http://www.liberation.fr/monde/2009/09/08/maroc-parler-de-la-sante-du-roi-reste-tabou_580255
8. For more information on the reporter's version of events, see Ali Amar, Chut ! Le roi Mohamed VI est-il malade? <http://www.demainonline.com/2013/04/05/chut-le-roi-mohamed-vi-est-il-malade/>
9. The last interview given by the King dates back to 2002. Contrary to his father, Mohammed VI does not favour this mode of communication.
10. Nicolas Beau and Catherine Graciet, *Quand le Maroc sera islamiste*, La Découverte (2007), p.206. Translated by Sarah Morris for Perspectives.
11. The government of Bekkay Ben M'barek is the first Moroccan government since independence in 1956.
12. The Socialist leader paid the price for a rumour suggesting that his imprisonment in 1981 had been a deal agreed with Hassan II.
13. A rumour on the homosexual habits of this Socialist leader was published by the Moroccan newspaper *Akhbar al-Ousbouaa* in 2004. Its editor was sentenced to a six months fixed prison term. The author of the article was given a six month suspended sentence.

* Translated from the French by Sarah Morris

The Anthropology of Rumour

Omar Brouksy

'Gossip', 'chit-chat', 'tittle-tattle', 'it is said', 'hearsay'... the terms and expressions that refer to the phenomenon of rumour are in no short supply. Nowadays their multiplicity, the many forms they take and their impact on the daily lives of groups and individuals is widely recognised. However, the scale of rumour's impact remains difficult to grasp, so much so that this phenomenon, ever a hot topic, is at once complex and constantly changing.

How do rumours begin? What forms do they take? What are the methods of amplification that transform a simple rumour into a societal phenomenon with sometimes disastrous, and more often unchecked consequences? What role do truth, cross-checking and verification play in the transmission and exchange of information and data?

All these questions lead us, firstly, to reflect on how rumours begin and on the main characteristics of a phenomenon that continues to intrigue sociologists and anthropologists. We will then examine the methods of amplification of rumour, and the new challenges brought about by the digital revolution, evident most notably in social networks and so-called 'news' sites.

The origins and bases of rumours

Some define rumours as a process of exchanging information whose veracity is not (yet) established. Rumours lie on the fringes of 'facts', but at the heart of social, daily relations between individuals and groups, and can be found in most political, economic and financial structures.

Others describe rumours through their principal characteristics; ephemeral phenomenon, at once fragile and fickle. If their

ephemeral side is often highlighted, rumours nonetheless install themselves by the fact that they are exchanged, relayed and transmitted from one individual to another, and from one group to another. They can also leave their mark by the consequences of their dissemination.

In more concrete terms, the spreading of a rumour entails the seizing of a news story and its appropriation by 'taking it one step further', or by 'adding a layer', before communicating it to an individual, group, or even a media institution.

This process of transmission, through the exaggeration or partial distortion of a piece of unconfirmed news, is not a recent development. As a societal phenomenon par excellence, rumours have always been at the heart of everyday human behaviour, always inspired by preconceived cultural, political and historical notions.

Rumours can piggyback onto short news items, spreading and taking on epic proportions. They can also be born in the wake of a moment of strong emotion in the history of a country, as was the case in 1955 during the return from exile of Sultan Mohammed V, grandfather of the current king of Morocco, Mohammed VI. According to a collective rumour that over time became a national 'legend', Moroccans could spot the face of their Sultan in the moon. This vision would quickly anchor itself into the collective imagination of millions of Moroccans, and offer itself as a tool of cohesion in response to the European coloniser in particular, and all that is in opposition to the aspirations of a nation in general. Rumours are therefore a complex collective construct sandwiched between archaism and modernity, past and present, anxieties and euphoria, moments of doubt and feelings of superiority. As soon as they are born, rumours becomes 'bulimic',



Omar Brouksy is an independent journalist and a University Professor. He is the author of *Mohammed VI. Le Fils de Notre Ami* ('Mohammed VI. Our friend's Son'), published by Nouveau Monde, Paris in 2014.

feeding on all that composes the context in which they are deployed, including worries, fears, cultural myths, social representations and frustrations of all kinds. The example of what is known as 'Jihad al-Nikah' (sexual jihad) is in this regard highly indicative of the frustrations that interact with rumours. In December 2012, a Saudi sheikh, Mohamad al-Arefe, announced in a tweet that women were authorised to 'get married to a jihadist for a few hours, and then to other jihadists so as to strengthen the morale of combatants and open the doors to paradise.' This statement, immediately denied by the Saudi sheikh, spread like wildfire throughout the Arab world. Syrian state media seized this false tweet and made a song and dance over it. In September 2013, in a new development the Tunisian Minister of the Interior Lotfi Benjeddou 'added a layer' to this rumour by announcing that Tunisian women had left for Syria to carry out 'sexual jihad' in support of Islamist fighters. In April 2014 the photograph of a young Saudi girl called Aisha, who had supposedly also travelled to Syria in order to practice 'sexual jihad', was published by an Iranian website (Bultan News). However, several days later, Iranian bloggers revealed the true identity of the young Aisha, who was in fact a porn actress.

'Details disfigure or exaggerate the rumours that like a bulimic monster, gorging itself on whatever lies in its wake, and then throwing it back up again in a regurgitated form, takes advantage of not only a favourable context, but of human nature itself.'

The example of this rumour, born of a fake tweet which went viral, shows to what extent a news story that is neither cross-checked nor verified can feed on the frustrations of an, at once broad and heterogeneous population, and take on almost global dimensions. In short, the process of birth and dissemination of rumours often takes the form of 'stories doing the rounds', 'splashes', 'gossip', news stories that 'spread', chatter and tittle-tattle. Details disfigure or exaggerate the rumours that like a bulimic monster, gorging itself on whatever lies in its wake, and then throwing it back up again in a regurgitated form, takes advantage of not only a favourable context, but of human nature itself.

In his will to be and to exist, the individual that spreads rumours seeks to assert and feed his ego by assuming the role of both source of information and reference for the 'other', even for an entire group. It is the relation of the individual to the collective that is

highlighted in the emergence and spreading of rumours. It is a relationship based on mutual interactions, which contributes to the shaping and amplification of information. In this social dynamic, the emergence and proliferation of what is known as 'New means of communication and information' (NCMI) has turned upside-down all concerns linked to the phenomenon of rumour, and notably participated in its amplification.

Methods of amplification and new challenges posed by rumours

Rumour, it is said, is the oldest media in the world. It has always been present in human relations, in all societies, and across time. The history of humanity attests that rumours have accompanied the evolution of societies, from the Chinese Empire to Sub-Saharan Africa and passing through Western Europe. For a long time the Great Wall of China was, for instance, considered by the country's population to be the single construction on Earth visible from the moon. Another example, in Sub-Saharan Africa, several men were lynched because a rumour had suggested that they were able to reduce the penis size of every person who shook their hands.

In the 19th century, a great breakthrough took place; rumours became urbanised under the combined effect of a relentlessly industrialising society, and the proliferation of methods of communication and the transmission of news. Related to this, at the beginning of the 20th century, propaganda emerged as a tool for mobilising the masses, a phenomenon that would reach its peak in Nazi Germany.

The correlation between a strong image and a hard-hitting, simple and precise text, can boost the use of rumours to undermine the image of a political actor, or destroy his or her career. During Barack Obama's first presidential campaign (2008-12), his adversaries regularly cast doubt upon his birth in the United States, with the aim of weakening him politically. This was carried out through persistent rumours spread by the great American media machine. Owing to rumours, information often slips into approximations and conjectures that are propagated today by means of the internet, Facebook and Twitter, at an uncontrolled speed.

The veracity or falsity of a news story is no longer the exclusive domain of a media sector with a responsibility to verify and cross-check.

A new actor has arrived on the scene as a result of the new means of communication: the web user. He/she might be a blogger, the webmaster of a site or simply an individual possessing an account on one or several social networking sites. Yet his/her power to deliver news stories, to construct and amplify them, is considerable. Profiting from strong emotions, a sensitive context or a favourable collective state, the web user can manipulate a news story by amplifying it, and consequently, distorting it. Extending beyond the local and national levels, rumours can now acquire a global dimension in a matter of minutes.

In July 2014, several web users published a rumour that an armed Libyan group had taken control of the airport of Tripoli and laid its hands on two fighter planes. They added that the group threatened not only Tunisia, the country bordering Libya, but all the states in the Maghreb region.

More recently, a tweet dated August 25, 2014 announced the death of the American actor Sylvester Stallone. Picked up by the site microblogging, the rumour immediately generated a media storm across the planet, before the relatives of the actor dispelled it. This all unfolded in one single day.

Rumours do not only grow through social networks or what is known as the mass media (television, radio, the written press). They can also thrive during informal meetings, salons or receptions. These are favourable places for the exchange and transmission of rumours and news stories, for which a degree of truth is often left to be desired. In this narrow and limited world, to which can be added, offices, refreshment areas and cafeterias, millions of small stories are relayed, scenarios sweetened and stories amplified. 'Multiple mini-rumours that remain confined to the restricted circles



of family, the workplace, the local area, the village, run shamelessly. We all bathe in a permanent "ear to mouth" syndrome, which certain people are particularly partial to. No social circle or profession escapes it, not political and intellectual circles, and not even news professionals. Where uncertainty and competition reign, the mechanism of "it is said" is ready to function.¹

A story, a script, some catchphrases, actors and a coherent narrative construction, such are the elements that actively contribute to the amplification of rumours. 'Amplification falls under the psychological tendency to "top up," in other words "add" into the rumour mill a small dose of overstatement, that acceptable part of a lie that lifts oneself a little above the rest.'²

One of the major challenges that confront us today is the value of information. To ensure that rumour does not take the upper hand in a world where access to data has come within the reach of the many, the contribution of news professionals, whose mission is to cross-check and verify information, is a necessity. The mainstream media outlets – press agencies, newspapers, twenty-four hour news channels, radio stations etc, are called upon to fully play their part because all balanced, verified and cross-checked information has a price. As such, mainstream news providers must firstly – and as a matter of urgency – be independent, and above all possess adequate material and human resources.

1. Bernard Paillard : L'écho de la rumeur, in Communication, n°52, 1990
2. B. Paillard, op.cit.

*Translated from the French by Sarah Morris

How Vagueness of Information Became a Tool for Controlling Public Spaces in Lebanon

Suzanne Baaklini

Influential politicians and businessmen have long tried, and often succeeded, in controlling public spaces in Lebanon, both along the coast and in the hinterland. The Lebanese people are, for the most part, notoriously deprived of access to all kinds of public spaces. There is practically no free access to the sea along the length of the coast, and very few public gardens in the cities, the capital included. With time, what would be considered as scandalous in other countries has become normal practice in Lebanon. For example, the proliferation of private resorts on the public coastal domain does not concern or stir the masses. Only a handful of activists have managed, over the years, to raise questions about this matter. In this activists often have to face an invisible but pernicious enemy: rumours aimed at deflecting people's attention from their right to access public spaces. Lack of communication on the part of the authorities, secrets surrounding controversial projects, insufficient information, clashes between civil activists and authorities, are all factors that have frequently led to the spreading of rumours. Often these rumours have affected campaigning for the right to access public spaces, and, sometimes, the projects themselves.

The scandals related to public spaces are many and varied. One of the latest scandals concerns the coast of Dalieh, well known to Ras Beirut residents, which was recently claimed as private property by companies owned by the late Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's heirs. They apparently planned to build a big resort on this little beach overlooking the Pigeon Rocks (Raoucheh). In other places, the problem has been the result of the authorities' mismanagement of highly controversial cases such as those of the Jesuit Garden's planned parking (which was to be built under the public



Suzanne Baaklini has been a journalist for 'L'Orient-Le Jour' newspaper since 1997, where she specialises in environmental reporting. She has covered issues related to the privatization of public spaces in Lebanon: mainly projects on the sea front, and public gardens, since the late 90s.

garden, causing its temporary destruction before its final reconstruction); the Beirut pine forest (Horsh Beirut), still closed to the public many years after its renovation; or the planned commencement of a fifty year-old road project, the Fouad Bustros highway through the Hikmeh quarter in Achrafieh, to the dismay of many of this neighbourhood's residents. These issues are often referred to by activists and officials whenever they are asked about their experiences in dealing with rumours.

How do rumours affect campaigning to access public space?

The undefined nature of rumours often makes them a disruptive factor in issues relating to public space. 'Rumours are unconfirmed information spreading through word of mouth,

nowadays amplified by social media, acquiring, with time, force of truth', explains Michel Abs, sociologist and economist, researcher in economic sociology and Director of division at St. Joseph's University, Lebanon. 'Rumours might be spread in good faith by people who misread reality or perceive it in a special way. They can also be initiated purposefully in which case they are straight lies, or otherwise by people having an interest in revealing secret but genuine information. In the case of rumours concerning the public domain, it is always difficult to differentiate between reality and fantasy. Take the Dalieh example: the silence of the party accused of wanting to build on this beach is fuelling the debate. This same debate will take a different turn once someone reveals the outlines of the project.'¹

Mohamed Zbeeb, journalist and co-founder of Mashaa, a group campaigning for the restoration of public space in Lebanon, believes rumours do play a role in such cases, but they are not the main factor that motivates the activists. 'In the Dalieh case, for example, we are only motivated by the concept of the right to free access to the coast', he says. 'The system we live under is not a transparent one, it is true. There is practically no mechanism to search for truth, and activists are often confronted with a great quantity of data and/or rumours. But our opposition to this or that project is based on matters of principle.'

According to Zbeeb, rumours have, nonetheless, greatly affected campaigns for restoring public spaces through the targeting of public opinion. 'For decades rumours have regularly been used to deter the public', he explains. 'In order to be able to control Dalieh, the political party behind the companies that own the place has helped spread the idea that it is awash with drug dealers, prostitutes, rapists and street children. Dalieh was once a beloved venue for Beirut citizens, many of whom swam there until the late sixties. Then, during the war and the years that followed, this place gradually became isolated from the population, partly by the spreading of those rumours of lack of security there. This happened around the time the land was massively being bought up by these companies. Our response was to conduct a study which showed that the number of official complaints about events concerning this location was very low. The same method was used in relation to Horsh Beirut. The municipality still refuses to reopen this public garden under the pretext that it will attract illicit activities. The fact is that this garden is surrounded by popular neighbourhoods comprising communities from different communitarian backgrounds,



The Angry Dolosse Army, intervention by Christian Zahr for Dalieh of Raouche Campaign



Civil campaign to preserve the Dalieh of Raouche

and we think the authorities are interested in preventing different social classes and religious communities from coming together.'

Abir Saksouk, a young engineer and member of the civil campaign to preserve the Dalieh of Raoucheh, believes that rumours exist at all levels in issues relating to public space, especially in the case of Dalieh, 'Rumours can be the result of the ambiguous stance of the authorities who all refuse to take responsibility', she says. 'When we first started discussing the case of Dalieh with the authorities, the minister of Environment as well as officials in the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) said that they were against building in this area and urged us to increase pressure on the Ministry of Interior. The latter, as well as the Directorate General of Urbanism and the municipal council of Beirut, denied any responsibility, thus making it difficult for us to face this "ghost issue"'

She adds, 'I also notice that rumours spread sometimes without being propelled by anybody. Our campaign is named after 'Dalieh el Raoucheh'. That title was confused, in the minds of many people, with the 'Pigeon's Rocks' themselves. These people understandably came to think that a project was going to be carried out on the rocks themselves, which compelled them to react to the issue. It is disturbing to think, however, that most people would be more concerned about the protection of a national symbol, than about preserving their right to free access to a public beach.'

How rumours are used as a political tool

Rumours, in this sense, seem to be used as a political tool par excellence for influencing people's views on public spaces, and for avoiding disturbing questions and debates.

Raja Noujaim, an activist who is involved in many of the issues mentioned above, accuses the authorities of concealing the truth and using rumours to manipulate the masses and to hinder the activists' campaigns. 'Many powerful individuals in the administration secretly work to ensure their interests, in spite of the fact that the law orders them to make their decisions public', he says. 'Rumours take over in the absence of precise information. It's up to us to deal with such rumours and look for the truth from whistleblowers inside the administration who are dissatisfied with the officials' behaviour. Or we can thwart their attempts through getting information provided by expert consultants, as is the case with the Fouad Boutros highway a project that is going to lead to the destruction of many traditional neighbourhoods, and that is mainly promoted by the CDR and the Beirut municipal council.'

The Beirut municipal council is one of the official institutions involved in issues relating to public spaces in the capital. Hagop Terzian, member of the municipal council, categorically denies any implication in spreading rumours about any issue of public interest. 'This type of behaviour might be an option for the secret services but certainly not for a municipal council with the duty to make all of its decisions public', he asserts. According to him, it was rather the council that was a frequent victim of rumours targeting its projects deemed controversial.

Referring to a case he followed closely, that of the Jesuits' Garden, he says, 'Our aim was to build a much needed car park under the present garden, while recreating the garden in a more open and modern fashion. Rumours started to spread, I think originating from political adversaries to the municipal council. It was said we would never rebuild the garden. Then, somebody claimed there were archaeological

relics under the garden. There are in fact some relics in the Jesuit Gardens, which were brought in from another site, but there is no proof of the presence of any archaeological relics under the site. As a result, the parking project was delayed and people are still fighting over parking spaces every night in this area.'

However, he admits that rumours may at times be beneficial. 'I recall I once heard a rumour about a decision from the Mohafez to destroy one of the town's old staircases. We investigated the matter and it turned out that the rumour was true. Thus we had a chance to intervene and stop this controversial project.'

The difficulty of facing rumours

The vague nature of rumours and the uncertainty surrounding their origins make it difficult to respond to them. 'Rumours spread haphazardly; we don't need to know who initiates them in order to respond to them properly', says Michel Abs. 'On the other hand, rumours in public affairs issues are closely linked with the people's deepest preoccupations. Therefore, it is not easy to know how people perceive them and how they develop. According to him, transparency is the only way to combat rumours. He suggests that a more transparent political system would reduce the impact of rumours on the public. 'But one can't bet on that', he adds. 'The only thing working in this political system, except for efforts spent on security issues, is profit generation. Matters of public concern are not at the top of the authorities' priorities. How can they be more transparent when they have things to hide?'

Abir Saksouk and Mohamed Zbeeb both agree that transparency and revealing the truth are the only ways to pre-empt the effect of rumours. They have both worked on changing the stigmatizing portrayal of places like Dalieh. 'A rumour is a story', Abir Saksouk says. 'Instead of desperately trying to deny what is told to people, I find it much more fruitful to highlight the other side of the story, to show what public spaces are really about.' Mohamed Zbeeb, stresses the importance of the concept of civil rights, which for him is, 'above any other matter, and certainly above the illusory benefits of any private project.'

Only Raja Noujaim is of the opinion that rumours may at times be counteracted with other rumours. 'Our adversaries, authorities or investors, use rumours to hinder our campaigns against their controversial projects', he says. 'These adversaries are much more powerful

than us. They also have much better access to the media. I believe that in certain instances, it is justified to fight them with their own weapon, provided the cause served is a noble one. For example, we might give the impression we are working on some issue while we are effectively putting all our efforts on another. In my view, in specific cases, we have no choice, they leave us no choice.'

Abir Saksouk is convinced, for her part, that the use of rumours by civil society organisations is never the best strategy. 'I believe transparency and truth are much more efficient means', she says. 'We have many other tools at hand, starting with the judiciary and the laws. But I know that the civil campaign to preserve Dalieh is made up of very different people, and I respect everybody's views.'

Mohamed Zbeeb states that, 'I refrain from using rumours as a tool, not for moral reasons, but because I think it doesn't serve the purpose.' He explains that 'Provocation is more Machaa's style of work. For instance, we have recently listed in the press the names of all the politicians implicated in violating public property on the coastline. This list shows that all Lebanese political parties are equally implicated in this matter.'

With regard to the reaction of the authorities to rumours, Hagop Terzian says he has often advised the council to adopt, 'a better communication strategy in order to counteract rumours around its projects'. He says that, 'I think that our successes and our transparency are the factors that will help us beat the rumours hindering our projects.' He goes on to explain his approach; 'Personally, regarding projects that I follow closely, such as the recent renovation of a historic staircase in Beirut, I communicate with the public through posting pictures and data on my social media accounts, and through all other available means. When people see what is being done, there is no more room for rumours.'

Well engraved in the mind

One might wonder why rumours seem to have such a strong grip on the Lebanese people. What are the special characteristics of the Lebanese in this matter? Michel Abs stresses the fact that 'the phenomenon of rumour is universal'. However, he also explains that, 'In Lebanon, especially in matters relating to public spaces and public affairs, the lack of confidence between the public and the authorities makes the people wary of the latter's decisions. In a country like Lebanon, where people don't trust their government or even their elected

representatives, rumours of mismanagement spread very easily, fuelled by many dire experiences.'

According to Abs, the problem might even be a matter of local culture, derived from habits dating from the Mutasarrifiya era, when a system based on corruption was put in place, which has never been corrected. Surprisingly, Hagop Terzian agrees. 'Authorities take little trouble to inspire confidence', he says. 'They fail as much in big tasks, such as holding elections on time, as in managing everyday life issues. I hope we will become a society where individuals in power will be held accountable for their actions continuously and at every level. Rumours take undue importance in our society because we only try to look for the truth when it's too late, then we blame everything on fate. We have to become a more rational society, we

'Such issues are never a priority in a country continuously facing existential questions and serious security problems. It is no coincidence that the companies chose those troubled times to drag up this issue.'

have no more excuses.'

Mohamed Zbeeb goes further into this line of thinking. As he puts it, our conception of public spaces, including public beaches, is marked by years of propaganda. 'Lebanese people have no problems believing rumours about the bad reputation of public places because the idea of safe public spaces was destroyed in their minds by a huge propaganda machine', he says. 'Foreigners would be astonished to know that the Lebanese people don't have free access to the sea at any spot along a 240 kilometre long coastline, but the Lebanese find it very normal to pay for access to private beaches, because they are convinced that security and order can simply not be provided in public spaces. This idea has its roots in another long lasting piece of propaganda: that the State is corrupt beyond repair. Moreover, any person who manages to build on State property goes unpunished. This, of course, is the result of a political system based on communitarian rather than national affiliation. The Lebanese have been, and still are, fed the idea that the State is an adversary, instead of the idea that they are the State's partners or, indeed, the State itself. Corruption is the individual's doing, and everybody in the State should be involved in combating it.'

Mohamed Zbeeb is convinced that the

solution is in the people's hands. 'If we all decide to go to public beaches, we would be able to reverse the conviction of their bad reputation', he says. 'We would restore their initial meaning in our lives. And if the majority of people demand the restoration of their right to access public spaces, then the corrupt individuals in power will not be able to contain such a movement.'

Why, then, do so few people show up when sit-ins are organized for the preservation of the public domain such as in Dalieh? 'We are aware that we are fighting a huge propaganda machine that has been functioning for years', Zbeeb says. 'There are many reasons for the public's disinterest, specifically in the case of Dalieh. First, such issues are never a priority in a country continuously facing existential questions and serious security problems. It is no coincidence that the companies chose those troubled times to drag up this issue. Second, the rumours circulating around the beach don't help people feel they belong to this place. Third, the neighbourhood has greatly changed since the war. Ras Beirut is now full of huge expensive buildings, inhabited by immigrants and foreigners. They are isolated from this little beach that used to be so vital for the original population. Notice that sit-ins for other places like the Jesuit Garden have gathered more people because the residents felt more concerned with them.'

Raja Noujaim has his own opinion on this, 'I think people are not at present more conscious of their civil rights than they were before, but there are more professional activists on the ground', he says. 'I think authorities and investors hide information and spread rumours hoping that those small groups of people will get tired and leave. Continuity, here, is the key for success.'

Is success in restoring public spaces possible in such a context? The activists are more or less optimistic. They point to public consciousness as a major factor in this matter; only progress at the popular level can compel the authorities to enforce the law for public good instead of privileging private interests through bypassing legislations. Only public consciousness can lessen rumour's grip on people's minds. Nevertheless, all this takes time. And in time will there be anything left to fight for?

1. All quoted speech is taken from original interviews conducted by the author.



The Phoenix

That information should be verified before publishing, and if that is not possible, at least flagged as 'hearsay' is not a modern concept only. See this lovely example of Herodotus, who in his writings about the Middle East's flora and fauna also covered the Phoenix. While parts of the story are told as if talking about a real and not a mythic creature, he expresses his skepticism repeatedly, stressing that he could not confirm the bird's existence and genesis with his own eyes but reports only on what people tell him.

'They have also another sacred bird called the phoenix which I myself have never seen, except in pictures. Indeed it is a great rarity, even in Egypt, only coming there (according to the accounts of the people of Heliopolis) once in five hundred years, when the old phoenix dies. Its size and appearance, if it is like the pictures, are as follow: The plumage is partly red, partly golden, while the general make and size are almost exactly that of the eagle. They tell a story of what this bird does, which does not seem to me to be credible: that he comes all the way from Arabia, and brings the parent bird, all plastered over with myrrh, to the temple of the Sun, and there buries the body. In order to bring him, they say, he first forms a ball of myrrh as big as he finds that he can carry; then he hollows out the ball, and puts his parent inside, after which he covers over the opening with fresh myrrh, and the ball is then of exactly the same weight as at first; so he brings it to Egypt, plastered over as I have said, and deposits it in the temple of the Sun. Such is the story they tell of the doings of this bird.'

Herodotus: The History of Herodotus, Translation: George Rawlinson, taken from The Internet Classics Archive.

Critical Thinking, Down to a T

Noor Baalbaki

In summer 2013, the American University of Beirut held its inaugural Media and Digital Literacy Academy of Beirut (MDLAB). It was the climax of multiple research projects, brainstorming sessions, conferences and workshops over the previous five years. The academy was based on a study-abroad model used by the Salzburg Academy on Media and Global Change and rooted in the curricular tradition of critical media literacy, which was first used in Europe in the 1950s, and subsequently adopted in the US and more recently across the globe. In the first class, 50 students and academics from Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Iraq and Jordan took part, and this year, it has expanded to include participants from even more Arab countries.

In this interview, Dr. Jad Melki, Director of the Media Studies Program and Assistant Professor of Journalism and Media Studies at the American University of Beirut speaks about the importance of digital and media literacy for the Arab region.



Noor Baalbaki is a Program Manager at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's office in Beirut. Prior to this she worked as a project coordinator at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at AUB, and as a Researcher for USAID on a program designed to strengthen the Lebanese Parliament legislatively. She holds a Masters degree in Middle Eastern Studies from SOAS, and a Bachelor's degree in Political Sciences with a minor in Arabic from AUB.

Noor Baalbaki (NB): Could you describe the work of your centre? What are the key issues you address during the two-week summer workshop?

Jad Melki (JM): When this field of study emerged, it was prompted by the introduction of television and electronic mass media in general, and the fear that media might affect us in many, and especially negative ways, shaping our world views and influencing our actions and beliefs. Media literacy was basically a response to this concern, fuelled by a sense of duty for academics who have to build critical thinking skills for people who consume this media. In other words, building critical media consumers who can understand how media messages are constructed, how entertainment is constructed; to understand what the political, economic, technological and social influences on these constructions are, and how they influence us as individuals, communities and societies. The Academy started teaching various topics, including propaganda, the negative effects of advertisements, the relationship between media and business, and other locally relevant topics that evolved over time. Especially with the role of the internet today and digital technology and mobile telephony, the focus became both critical media and digital literacy. We are not only teaching the critical reading of media texts but also how to use digital tools that are freely and widely available to express opinions, advocate beliefs, exchange information, and engage in global discussion and participatory culture—in other words, to empower individuals and communities. We encourage MDLAB participants to take these curricula to their hometown universities

and teach them to their own students. So this is the main goal and mission of the academy. We are now introducing more advanced lectures, and some previously enrolled students will return to give lectures next summer so that we build local capacity and not rely on too many foreign lecturers and speakers. However, we will continue to invite world renowned media educators who will participate and give lectures at the Academy.

NB: So what are the core topics you are covering?

JM: As introductory topics, we cover: What is media literacy? And the different approaches to it; Where does the education stand globally?; The state of media in the Arab world; Culture and the influence of media and its impact on society. Then we move on to more advanced subjects, such as: The portrayal of Muslims and Arabs in the media; The objectification of Women in the media; Propaganda, how to analyze it, and how to protect yourself from it, whether its news, entertainment or even comics; Factors that influence the construction of news; The dark side of the internet: Surveillance and privacy threats that people should be aware of; Video games, children and violence; Media, sectarianism and racism. On the digital skills level, we teach students how to edit photos — from a critical thinking perspective — so they learn not only theoretically about the power of images and how these images are manipulated, but also experience hands-on how images are constructed. Similarly, students learn to produce audio, edit and put it online, how to analyze twitter and social media data, and finally some video editing skills.

NB: What role does 'critical thinking' play in your work? With students coming from different countries and different educational and socio-political backgrounds: How strongly do you perceive the differences in their approach?

JM: Having students come from different countries and different educational and socio-political backgrounds with different approaches is always a challenge. However, we anticipated that and it was not that much of a hindrance this year. It did not disrupt the Academy at all, although we had a few incidents. Frankly, in our societies, we have rampant sexism, racism and sectarianism and every other 'ism' in the world, and if people are not faced with these issues and their taken for granted beliefs are not challenged, they will still live their lives without realizing what is right and what is wrong. Although we are not here to change people's minds or views, or force them to subscribe to one ideology or another, we do tell them what is out there and how this harms people. We give them some tools to think critically through certain matters that are largely invisible to them. For example, I was discussing with one of my students an article written by this very progressive journalist at Al Akhbar newspaper. In his article the journalist was defending a female news director, but he was defending her by also praising the way she looked and dressed and flattering her physical attributes. However, when it came to the male news editor he was also defending, he only focused on his intellectual abilities, experience and patriotism. In many ways people don't see that as sexism, but it is, because the negative message we are thereby sending out to adult women, and children who will become adult women in the future is: 'A women's most important attribute — no matter how professional, intelligent, accomplished, and successful she is — is her physical appearance, and, if you are a woman, you need to take care of that first and not to worry about anything else.' When we raise our kids like that, and when the media reflect that, and portray women in that fashion all the time, then this is how women's minds and concerns are focused in our society. When it comes to men, it is different: The media focuses on



Jad Melki, Ph.D. is a journalism and media studies professor, trainer, researcher, consultant, and a freelance multimedia and broadcast journalist. He currently holds the position of director of the Media Studies Program and assistant professor of journalism and media studies at the American University of Beirut. He is also the research director of the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda (ICMPA) at the University of Maryland; a visiting faculty member at Johns Hopkins University, USA, and at the Salzburg Academy for Media and Global Change, Austria.

their accomplishments, intelligence, smartness, etc. — who cares about their looks? So the student was telling me that this guy, one of the more progressive journalists in the country, sadly does not realise what he is doing with this kind of sexist description. That's from a critical thinking point of view.

Going back to the topic of different backgrounds, cultures and religions, our biggest problem was that of the different levels people were academically. Some participants had a quite high level of critical thinking and digital skills, others barely had any. We put them in the same room and for the advanced ones, it was a bit frustrating because we started with the basics. While for those who had no prior education, they felt bad and had to struggle to catch up. In one of the exercises, for example, which was about students critiquing advertisements — focusing on body image and how women are portrayed — a guy who had never been exposed to this topic before, came up with almost zero critical thinking skills! He looked at a picture of a woman dressed provocatively and positioned submissively, surrounded by dominant men looking down at her and with this huge lion and its mouth open and its teeth right by her neck. The student did not see that the woman was in a vulnerable position. I think he even described it as being a normal or natural portrayal of a woman. It was then that many participants critiqued him, so he was kind of embarrassed, especially since he was one of the older graduate students who should know these basic matters, but this is indicative of how badly media literacy and critical thinking are needed in this part of the world.

The other issue is blunt racism and sectarianism; some people thought they were better than others because of their religion, the community they belong to, their culture or institution so we immediately dealt with such disturbing behaviour. This year, we instituted multiple activities and exercise that immediately nipped this problem in the bud and the outcome was fabulous.

We also introduced this year a more rigorous application process. Last year they only had to submit a CV. This year, they had to submit an essay, then we interviewed them, and based on the interview we prioritized them. We asked them a question: If you were in a room where people had radically different opinions and beliefs about something how would you deal with it? And based on their answers we would assess how open minded they were. We had a ranking scale, the optimal people were those who had their own opinions but were willing and eager to listen to other people's opinions. We got a lot of people scoring in the middle range, saying they won't fight with others who differ, but they might argue, but certainly not change their minds. Especially with many male Arab applicants, it seemed like something that had to do with pride, and the belief that someone who changes his mind or belief is a fool.

NB: It seems especially in the Arab world, a number of traditional media outlets — newspapers and TV stations — are not there for investigative, informative journalism but rather to convey ready-made messages. Is there any movement in this sector? To what extent do you see interesting new publications coming? And how do they deal with the issue of dependence/independence of funding?

JM: Arab media historically have been controlled by governments or political groups. In Lebanon it's political groups, in the Arab countries it's mainly the autocratic governments or their lackeys, and to a large extent they still are but under a different guise, even after the so called 'Arab Spring'. Al Jazeera, for example, owned by Qatar, was a model of objective journalism for a long time, and it had great production and news quality. This was up until the 'Arab Spring' when it shifted to a typical propaganda machine.

The online media have not been much different from the traditional media. The current situation is that the majority of online media are

reflections of the traditional media and tend to be owned by the same political groups. Of course, there are some emerging online media run by independent journalists and bloggers who are adding more independent voices, different dialogues and opinions, but it is only a very small group, they only have a niche following, and have not reached a critical mass and effective level. Another trend in traditional mass media and specifically in Lebanon is the commercialisation of the news, which has introduced sensationalised news to attract more audiences, and more advertising, and hence more revenues. This is equally problematic as government controlled media.

This brings us to the subject of rumours. Rumours are a big problem in this part of the world given this uncritical media literacy environment, and I am not only talking about journalists generating rumours, but also rumours generated by the general public. Rumours take a life of their own and sometimes become facts for many. While many believe them, unfortunately, very few dispute them. For example, hate speech or racism, the racist rhetoric targeting Syrians in Lebanon and the sectarian hate speech between extremist Sunni and Shiite groups. Now social media makes it much easier to disseminate rumours — when the general public is doing it, that is one thing, but it's problematic when journalists do it, because the journalists have an obligation towards their audiences and often have an aura of credibility. Usually it's not propaganda with vicious intent, or misleading information as in psychological warfare — it is sometimes just inaccuracy, incompetence, or running for the scoop without double checking. When someone gives you information, the rule of thumb is to have three independent sources confirm it, if you can't get a third source then you can't post it or you can shed some doubt on it by saying you can't verify it independently, and then you would attribute it to somebody.

There are mistakes that happen in the news but people don't read the corrections which sometimes come the next day in newspapers. Finally, the 'breaking news' fad in Lebanon has become a big problem. Here, sometimes even dictation mistakes make a big difference in the meaning, especially in Arabic. An example of that would be the Aرسال and Bir Hassan breaking news story a few months back on one of the Lebanese television channels where a single dot made all the difference: basically, the Lebanese know that Aرسال is a predominantly Sunni town while Bir Hassan is predominantly Shiite. The alert read 'Aرسال residents invade (yaghzoun) Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan', whereas it should have been 'Aرسال residents offered their condolences (yo'azoun) to Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan'. In an environment fanning the flames of a purported Sunnite-Shiite conflict, this dictation mistake could have triggered civil strife in Lebanon. Now, there is a big difference between saying that a predominantly Sunni town is invading a predominantly Shiite community — particularly using the word 'yaghzoun' which evokes images of historic Arab tribal invasions — and saying that the former is offering condolences to the latter, although dictation-wise the difference is one tiny dot on top of a letter: ء instead of ء.

A Sisyphean Task: Rumour Control

Dawlaty

Before 2011, the most common charge levelled against the political opposition and activists in Syria was, 'spreading false information to weaken the resolve of the nation.' However, after this 'nation' rose up in March 2011 the fabrication of news items and information, and the dissemination of rumour became official state policy. In his speech at Damascus University in June 2011, Bashar al-Assad praised the Syrian media for its contribution to what he termed 'an information war', and praised the supportive role of the Syrian Electronic Army. This was the first official mention of this group of hackers who specialise in attacking media perceived as hostile to the Syrian regime by hacking into their social media accounts and spreading fabricated news. Alongside this, the mainstream Syrian media, in the form of official, semi-official and government-allied channels, continues to broadcast dozens of weekly programmes, which claim to counter 'media misinformation'. These have gone as far as the absurd claim that opposition demonstrations have been 'fabricated' in studios in Qatar. Official television channels have also broadcast the forced confessions of dozens of activists who have 'admitted' to falsifying reports and disseminating misinformation and spreading rumours.¹

The state's policy of misleading public opinion has infected certain activists and opposition groups in the form of what some termed 'positive rumours'. These are rumours designed to strengthen the resolve of the 'nation,' which the regime is trying to break. As such rumour has become one of the most important weapons in the Syrian conflict – and this is why Dawlaty decided to take on the difficult task of 'rumour control'.



Dawlaty is a Syrian organisation committed to democracy, human rights, non-violent activism, and gender equality. The organisation's mission is to enable non-violent activists, groups and civil society organisations to become active participants in achieving democratic transition in Syria, with a particular focus on young people. Since July 2012, the organisation has trained 200 Syrian activists, and has developed and published educational kits and booklets. More information is available on their website (www.dawlaty.org/en).

Eyewitness

Fear and curiosity are fundamental components of all conflict situations and often lead people to invent and repeat information of dubious veracity. In many regards, Syria has been an ideal environment for the fabrication of such information and the spreading of rumours, which in turn have come to play a prominent role in intensifying the conflict and propagating a discourse of hatred and extremism. The war, which has severed lines of communication between residents of different regions as well as between those within each region, has made it even more difficult to check the veracity of such (mis)information. Verifying any given

rumour is thus almost impossible in most cases, especially when coupled with the inability of people to move freely (due to sieges and the general security situation), the absence of electricity, the internet, and wireless and non-wireless communications in the majority of Syria's regions. All this serves to inflate the impact of rumour on the sectarian, regional, and economic levels, not to mention its impact on the daily lives of Syrians, exacerbating an already unsafe, fearful and mistrustful atmosphere, which in turn facilitates the further spread and credulous reception of rumour.

As events picked up pace, some activists fell into the trap of broadcasting rumours or lending them credibility by passing them on before checking them. Other Syrian activists and organizations perceived the dangers inherent in such an approach, leading to a number of initiatives to create ways of checking the veracity of these rumours. Most of these initiatives used social media platforms, such as the Akhbar Shebab Sourya (Syrian Youth News) group — out of which grew Tahrir Soury (Syrian Edit) — and Shahid Ayan (Eyewitness). Among others, these groups attempt to verify or disprove reports using eyewitness accounts, pictures and video footage. A quick review of the work of any one of these groups shows the extent to which reports have been faked and how images, footage and events from other countries (both regional and international) are recycled, as well as the number of parties attributing different contexts and dates to identical reports.

Fact checking and fighting rumour

Based on the above, we at Dawlaty decided that it was imperative to counter the spread



of rumour in Syria by training activists to check reports, verify information and so strengthen their role in fighting the creation and dissemination of false reports. To this end we developed an online application form to select participants for our workshops. In this form we asked applicants to describe some of the rumours they have had to deal with, their descriptions gave us further insight into the rumours circulating in Syria. This information allowed us to identify fundamental differences between those regions under the control of the Syrian regime, areas controlled by the opposition, and those dominated by extremist groups linked to or affiliated with al-Qaeda. These differences manifest themselves in the form and type of rumours, and the manner in which they were disseminated. There was, for example, a clear difference between the type and source of rumours that influenced activists in the southern and central regions and those that influenced activists in the north.

'ISIS systematically used rumours to discredit its opponents and to justify its actions towards them. When aiming for total control of Raqqa, it spread rumours to discredit those who refused to join it, eventually managing to defeat them and push them out of Raqqa.'

The majority of the rumours that southern and central activists spoke of dated from between 2011 and 2013, and came from different sides of the conflict. Rumours originating from the regime tended to promote sectarianism and regionalism, for example, the rumours of sectarian clashes between the al-Sabaa and al-Nozha neighbourhoods in

Homs in 2011, which claimed that individuals from both areas were killing each other along sectarian lines — not on their own initiative, but as part of a coordinated strategy to wipe out the other neighbourhood. Since the early days of the peaceful revolution, the regime has spread rumours about 'terrorists' targeting electricity stations, cutting supply lines and exploding oil pipelines to justify the bad economic situation in the areas under its control.

Rumours from the opposition, such as the regime poisoning drinking water, gained currency in various regions throughout Syria, particularly in Deraa, the Damascus countryside and Deir ez-Zor. Other rumours which were still current at the time of the workshop were mentioned. These rumours dealt with Syria as a whole, such as the Syrian regime's 'intention' to issue new identity cards only to residents in regime-controlled areas, and that all those who did not obtain these documents would be barred from holding Syrian nationality.

Most of the rumours discussed by activists from northern Syria were of comparatively recent date, either — current or from only three or four months before the start of the workshop — and almost all of them were about ISIS (The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria). Some of these rumours originated with ISIS itself, while others focused on where ISIS would be, for example ISIS returning to areas from which it had previously withdrawn, such as the countryside west of Aleppo. Activists mentioned the direct impact such rumours had on residents in these areas. ISIS systematically used rumours to discredit its opponents and to justify its actions towards them. For example, when ISIS was aiming for total control of Raqqa, it bought the loyalty of some armed groups and tribes, spread rumours to discredit those who refused to join it, eventually managing to defeat them

and push them out of Raqqa.

On the basis of this survey we decided to hold two workshops, the first during December 2013 in Lebanon for activists in regime-controlled areas as well as some Syrian activists in Lebanon, and the second in Turkey in April 2014 for activists from opposition or extremist held areas. Holding two separate workshops allowed issues to emerge that might not have arisen had we gathered all the activists from the different areas in a single workshop.

'Positive' rumours

There is confusion over the concept and definition of rumour, and a failure to appreciate its destructive consequences. At the beginning of both workshops there were definite uncertainties about what qualified as a rumour and what might be categorized as a strategy that was permissible to use in times of war or conflict. At both events, some activists made early references to what they termed 'positive rumour', by which they meant a rumour with the aim of achieving a 'legitimate' objective, such as mobilizing people to protest against the regime, mobilizing public opinion around events in Syria, or protecting a given area from military assault. Initially the workshop participants insisted on the value of deploying such rumours in Syria, especially during the period of non-violent revolution, when their use, they claimed, played a vital part in winning support to stand up to the armed and violent regime, then later in ISIS-controlled, or formerly ISIS-controlled areas, as part of what they regarded as 'legitimate wartime strategies'. Much of the discussion in the workshops was dedicated to participants describing the direct and indirect (often imperceptible and unacknowledged in the short-term) impact of these rumours. In



The key for state building is there is a key for everyone

'Some activists made early references to what they termed "positive rumour", by which they meant a rumour with the aim of achieving a "legitimate" objective, such as mobilizing people to protest against the regime, mobilizing public opinion around events in Syria, or protecting a given area from military assault.'

light of these discussions, the majority of those who had formerly insisted on the need to use rumour in times of conflict eventually changed their minds. In addition, it emerged that the principles on which the revolution was based, or rather the ethical values that activists of the protest movement espoused, were not as fixed as they had initially appeared, and at times even came to resemble the 'morality' of the Syrian regime. All this has weakened the uprising's credibility in Syria. Alongside this there has been the impact of the activists in the non-violent movement and the political opposition's use of rumour on world opinion through those international organizations tasked with documenting human rights violations, which were initially reliant on local sources to forward reports of violations in targeted areas. This was particularly so after the start of the revolution, as it was then even more difficult for journalists to enter Syria or for the UN to move about freely. This increased the dependence on local activists as sources of information for international organizations, most of whom were untrained, or had little or no prior media experience. When these activists reported on incidents that had not actually taken place or exaggerated those that did, they lost credibility. On numerous occasions this led to the international

'During Hafez al-Assad's rule, he was portrayed as an immortal being; a superhero or a vampire. For almost 30 years, Syrians were forced to chant 'Our leader forever is Hafez al-Assad.' During the summer of 2000, something strange happened, when state TV announced the death of Hafez al-Assad. Many people didn't believe that this could happen. They felt that their president is spreading this rumor to find out who his enemies are from within. For many years, some people thought that Hafez was still ruling Syria from a dark corner in his office. This could be why one of the revolution's main slogans was 'We curse your soul, Hafez', just in case he is still alive.'

Haid Haid, program manager at Heinrich Boell Stiftung Beirut

organizations, who had relied on the activists, finding themselves embarrassed following the publication of a given report, which was later completely disproved or turned out to be based on inflated figures. One example of this is the 'massacre' in the neighbourhood of Khalediya in Homs where reports were published of the regime killing more than four hundred civilians, only for it to become clear that the corpses shown belonged to regime and Free Army fighters who had died during direct combat in the district. Yet at the same time the regime was indeed perpetrating mass murder against the civilian population, and there had been no need to indulge in exaggeration or present anything other than the truth. Even more tragic was that in the wake of the rumoured al-Khalediya massacre, 'revolutionary' regions throughout Syria showed their solidarity by taking to the streets to demonstrate against the regime's actions, leading to many activists being detained by the regime's forces - not as a result of real events but of a fabrication, which further weakened the position of revolutionaries.

At the beginning of the second workshop, some of the groups produced shocking instances of participants' direct involvement in rumours which had resulted in the deaths of many civilians and soldiers. This highlighted the many-layered risks of using rumour, and had a direct impact on changing participant's perceptions of the value of 'positive rumour.' After conducting the two workshops on rumour control we are continuing to work with the participants who are now applying what they have learned and reflecting back on it. Given the somewhat vague nature of the concept, a core point was that participants develop a working definition of what 'rumour' actually is. This is what they came up with:

'A specialized intelligence tool, usually

carefully researched, and containing a great many details, thus rendering it difficult to detect. Rumour differs from propaganda, in that it involves false information, exaggeration or the addition of false details, with the aim of creating a certain approach to, or coverage of, a given incident, or entrenching a given state of affairs, and it is then deployed as a part of propaganda. Propaganda is a comprehensive methodology used to shape a future set of affairs or to deny or entrench current circumstance. Rumour is used to emphasize certain details.'

The workshops included opportunities for participants to discuss different kinds of rumour and their impact. A major issue that emerged was the use of digital media: How can you prevent your social media accounts from being used by others to spread rumours? How can the internet be used as a tool for verifying or falsifying information rather than a space where rumours can flourish without being contested? Participants also explored the different components out of which rumours are made, how they go viral, and also discussed the different motivations and interests behind the spreading of rumours.

Several experts relayed information on how investigative journalism deals with the difficulties of fact checking. Activists and researchers from different organizations shared case studies on the detrimental effect of certain rumours on their work and on the perception of what is actually going on, and two former fighters from different factions in the Lebanese civil war explained how they used to spread rumours as a weapon of war.

However difficult the circumstances — even though it might not always be possible to find out the truth behind a rumour — we should not allow ourselves to be complacent. On the contrary, it is our conviction that everybody's first step on the path to verifying information and countering rumour should be to look critically at the news. When confronted with sensationalist information and images, we need to check the soundness of the sources before blindly 'sharing' or 'liking'.

1. Haid Haid: Forced Confessions: A Syrian Drama Yet to Reach its Peak. 03.04.2014, <http://lb.boell.org/en/2014/04/03/forced-confessions-syrian-drama-yet-reach-its-peak>

* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger



Still from the video: Ask Smithsonian: How Did King Tut Die? by smithsonianmag.com

'A fantastical death, worthy of a pharaoh'

History is full of unsolved mysteries and questions. The death of legendary Pharaoh Tutankhamun (or: King Tut) is one example. Since the discovery of his mummy in 1922, a number of hypotheses about the cause of his death have circulated. In 1960, the assumption was that he was murdered, a version contested later on. Was he run over by a chariot? Did he die of Malaria? Or can his death in the end be explained by the bite of a hippopotamus? The Washington, D.C. based Smithsonian museum deals with these question 'How did King Tut Die?' in its series of online videos 'Ask Smithsonian.' Check out their page to see the entertaining animation. As they put it: "It was no doubt a fantastical death, worthy of a pharaoh"

<http://www.smithsonianmag.com/videos/category/ask-smithsonian/ask-smithsonian-how-did-king-tut-die/#8w6uv3M5HgCerEPx.99>

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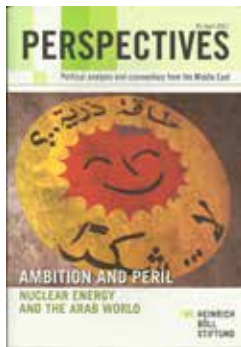
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