

WE ARE HERE, WE ARE THE SYRIANS

There is no single day in Syria where bombs, torture and death aren't present. It's been like this since the spread of the Arab Spring. It's important to emphasize that a bigger part of the war happening today in Syria is a repercussion of the Arab Spring that began in Tunisia in January 2011. There's a rumor that everything started when a poor 26-year-old street-vendor named Mohamed Bouazizi allegedly was selling fruits without permission and police officers humiliated him in public. In a desperate act against his country's oppression, this young vendor decided then to set himself on fire in front of a government building. What was different between the act of this young Tunisian and past similar Middle-Easterners activist actions, it was the fact that we live today in a globalized world where communication and information travels faster than ever. During the terrible episode in front of the government building, several people recorded and shared the story of Mohamed; and because of this, the young Tunisian became a martyr ("The Arab Spring..."). This originated protests around Tunisia, Yemen, Egypt, Libya, Syria, among other Middle-Eastern countries. When the protests started peacefully in the streets of Syria, the Syrian Army led by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, open fire in the Syrian population who were protesting, killing hundreds, which resulted in an uprising against the regime. This boosted the beginning of groups like the Free Syrian Army, created by former Syrian generals who were anti-Bashar al-Assad, and beginning of the Syrian Civil War like we know

today. As a result, the situation in Syria is complex and difficult to explain in just a few pages. Syria is one of the oldest countries on earth and since the time of the Persian Empire, more than three centuries before Christ, always lived a reality of wars, invasions and suffered from fights opposing ideologies, tribes, empires and multiple nations. The Civil War in Syria is today considered a war of propaganda promoted by many sides, but with the President Bashar al-Assad in the center of this cobweb.

For John McHugo, an international lawyer and historian who specializes in Arab issues, the civil war happening today in Syria is a consequence of an Islamic concern and an extreme struggle to return to "the moral roots of Islam" and fight "against the westernisation of [the Syrian] society" (McHugo 116). Although, it is true that things were apparently more calm after the President Bashar al-Assad took leadership in 2000. Maybe because of his western education and lifestyle, a few things have changed positively in the decade after the death of his father and former president, Hafez al-Assad. There was more freedom. There were more independent newspapers and political prisoners released. There was more discussion and debate, which promoted unusual political criticism. The country lived a better structured democracy compared to the oppression of the old times. There were more civil organizations working to improve human rights and making Syria a progressive country (McHugo 206). Moreover, in an interview given to the Washington Post, a few months before his fa-

ther Hafez died, Bashar expressed the importance of having a larger internet system with the purpose of connect people with more information. He said "The more you see, the more you improve (...) new generations want new ideas. New hope." (Zisser 34). However, by looking at the facts given in several reports by international organizations, like the Amnesty International, the Syrian Network for Human Rights, or just civil testimonies living the Syrian terror, it's possible to understand that the idea of a new Syria was too romantic, not transparent and what was in reality happening was not what was propagandized since Bashar became the President of Syria.

When Bashar al-Assad took the office in June 2000, Syria was living a facing challenges politically, economically and socially (Zisser 7). During the long period of governance by his father Hafez al-Assad (1970/2000), Syria became a stable and safe place to live. Hafez was admired and got status from a large majority of the Syrian population. He was considered an extraordinary strategist, although his methods were highly supported by fear, suppression and a dictatorship regime that had the clear intention to keep all Syrians controlled (Zisser 8). After Hafez died, Bashar was called to be the president. However, a great number of influential generals didn't accept his nomination because they considered him inexperienced and westernized (Zisser 44). The truth is that a referendum answered by the Syrian population elected him with 97.29% in a total of almost 9 Million votes (Zisser 41). Regardless the suspicion around this and others referendums, Bashar was officially considered the 19th President of Syria since the country became independent from France in 1946.

In his inaugural speech, Bashar al-Assad assumed the failure of past governmental policies and

asked the Syrian people, especially the Syrian institutions, for more "democratic thinking" expressing the importance of putting the country goals above the tribes (McHugo 204). In the Middle-East, tribes play an important role all over the territory, but most of the times it is in rural areas that tribes have a bigger impact in people's identity and lifestyle. In contrast, bigger Syrian cities like Aleppo, Damascus or Homs, are considered urban areas and people are not too connected to the tribe commitment as in rural areas (Dukhan). As a result, by asking all the people to put the country before of the tribes, Bashar perhaps spoke not to all the Syrian people but just a fraction. Moreover, Syria was never an easy country to command. There's a history of Muslims, Alawites, Druze, Christians, Kurds, among others, competing to control that territory (Rubin VI) and in the actual presidency, Bashar al-Assad is descendent of a minority Alawite community, believer of the Shia Islam and old opositor to the ideology of the Sunni Islam. His credibility then may have been in doubt because he didn't seem to be a leader with care, cause, and a sense of identity for all the tribes and these are crucial conditions that a great leader needs to respected (Heinrichs 240). Bashar's appeal to emotion and not to the rational side of his people, represents the basis of his power since the beginning of the mandate (Rubin 2).

The "democratic thinking" claimed by Bashar was actually directed to the Syrian Public Institutions as he called "institutional thinking". In Syria, the regime and the state have separate functions. While the state institutions provide services like water, gas, education, health or social security to the Syrian population; the regime oversees all of this without administering, although there's a link between both

systems and there's even research saying Bashar's regime monopolize state institutions, not allowing all the Syrian population to have access to these important services (Khaddour). During the inaugural speech he expressed the importance of implementing a democracy with Syrian identity and not the democracy from western countries (Zisser 48). He explained about "institutional thinking" that it's "the logic of cooperation and openness to others". Then he asked and answered "[Democracy] is in elections or in the free press or in the free speech or in other freedoms and rights? Democracy is not any of these because all these rights and others are not democracy, rather they are democratic practices". He concluded, "this thinking is based on the principle of accepting the opinion of other and this is certainly a two-way street. It means that what is right for me is a right for others" (McHugo 205).

Bashar's inaugural statements are the representation of a common form of rhetoric called Doublespeak, seen in politicians, especially in dictators and especially in the Middle-East. Doublespeak makes it appear that everything is good even if it's clear that everything is not good. It's used to make an unpleasant idea seem attractive, it's used to avoid responsibility or to attribute responsibility to other parties (Lutz 4). Bashar was showing to his people and the world that, even having an European background, his Arab principles were well presented and nothing would put him out of the cause of past regimes. In fact, when many Middle-Eastern leaders are pressured by international organizations for actions against humanity, they become even more demanding (Rubin 3). This is a common characteristic seen and studied in dictators, as it's possible to see also in Bashar al-Assad. The American foreign policy ex-

pert and professor Barry Rubin, explains in the book *The Truth About Syria*, that two important principles seen in Middle-Eastern dictators and used by Bashar to persuade Syrian people to follow his leadership are: the negative perspective of all types of western values, because western societies are based in open economy, moderation and freedom, and as well as the capacity to make their people believe that the fight against western opponents, like the United States, is more important than freedom or prosperity (2). In other words, it's frequent to see Bashar al-Assad to justify the civil war with the propaganda promoted by Western countries. The United States, for example, are frequently used as a scapegoat for his own failures and these and other Western countries represent the reason why terrorism still exists (Rubin 11).

Bashar's credibility and the capacity to look trustworthy are apparently less important than the attack against the West. In this relation between ethos and pathos, a leader who understands his people's values, showing a care for demonstrative rhetoric, and a sensibility about causes and identity, is certainly a leader with more ethos and in addition, a leader with a more capacity to create unity and support around him (Heinrichs 240). Although, the rhetoric based in a present demonstrative idea needs to be highly supported by a more deliberative rhetoric pointed to the future, because a leader who supports his decisions only in values and eternal truths, is a leader who is not able to look with more deliberation to the future and make decisions based in circumstances. In Bashar's speeches and public statements, he reveals himself to be a demagogue. This is especially true in his exclusive interview with *Yahoo! News*.

At the Presidential Palace located in Damascus, the President Bashar al-Assad sat down with the

Yahoo! News chief investigative correspondent Michael Isikoff and during more than half-hour, topics related to propaganda, evidence and humanitarian disaster were discussed. As an illustration, the clock was marking the very first seconds, when without hesitation President Bashar said “we have one stand, one position toward what’s happening in Syria. And it’s about fighting terrorism” giving here a thesis about what would be his point-of-view along all the interview. The fight against terrorism guided all his answers, but the President of Syria doesn’t bear any responsibility. As it’s known: he blames Western countries for supporting terrorism and creating a humanitarian disaster with almost 5 million refugees since the begin of the civil war.

The relations between Syria and United States were supposed to be in discussion, especially for the recent nomination of Donald Trump to the White House Presidency. Bashar expressed that Trump in the leadership of the United States is promising and that a cooperation between the US and Syria can be real if the Americans are willing to understand terrorists in a comprehensive way. However, even showing some signs for cooperation with United States, it’s clear that old negative relations still present in his mind and influence his thoughts as he claims that “United States supported terrorism during the Obama administration”. At some point, Isikoff questioned him about a turning point in the Syrian Civil War, toward the end of this events and the restore of some peace, but instead of giving some information about the domestic future improvements in the Syrian society, Bashar prefers one more time, to claim Western blame for the Syrian negative state. He says, “Turning point was when we took the decision to fight terrorism in spite all the propaganda against us

abroad. Especially in the West, and against all, every pressure” (Isikoff). To put in another way, Bashar’s regime faces groups like ISIS, the Free Syrian Army or Kurds in Syrian territory, while Turkey, United States, Europe or the United Nations are frequently part of the opposition in the outside world. On the Assad’s side, only Russia and Iran complete a trio that communicate terrible war actions as legitimate and necessary to fulfill a big political goal: fight terrorism.

During the exclusive interview, the conversation’s mood goes to a high-level of tension, when the interviewer Michael Isikoff introduces the topic of recent allegations of human rights abuse in Saydnaya Prison. The investigation report called “Human Slaughterhouse”, done by the Amnesty International, exposes a reality of thousands of Syrians being hanged every week in horrific conditions, tortured in secrecy without the presence of lawyers to protect their behalf. At this moment, it is possible to see Bashar al-Assad, in first-person, revealing some weakness in his argument while his thoughts push him to a low level of credibility. Bashar shows being unprepared and uncomfortable with this topic, and by trying to proof what is apparently an evidence against his regime, he’s caught up in logical fallacies composed by bad examples, false analogies or simply ignorance in the topic questioned. This part of the interview, leaves him in a bad position, so evident that Isikoff ends up affirming that Bashar is disturbed by the report, which Bashar answered “No– no, not about the report. No– no. I don’t care about those– I’m– I’m– I’m disturbed about what’s happening in Syria” (Isikoff).

To explain in other words, logical fallacies are arguments with bad logic, so bad and so evident that the audience can easily understand that something

is wrong, considering the person who's committing that fallacies a crook or a foul (Heinrichs 146). Logical fallacies can be: false comparison, bad example, ignorance as proof, tautology, false choice, red herring and wrong ending (Heinrichs 162-163). For this case, just three of those are going to be used.

When Bashar is confronted by the cooperation failure within the US and Syria, as a consequence of the human rights abuse, he says that the "United States is in no position to talk about human rights" because of the cooperation with Saudi Arabia. For one moment to another, Saudi Arabia is introduced in a conversation that was supposed to be about Syria. The President Bashar uses this false comparison to attack the journalist and representative of the United States, instead of taking the opportunity to reflect about what is happening inside his country. In his logic, if Saudi Arabia is committing human abuses and they are partners within the US, so the *Yahoo! News* journalist Michael Isikoff, should not use the human abuses allegations as an excuse for the failure of the cooperation between the US and Syria.

When the conversation goes specifically to the Amnesty International report, Bashar refuses its content with no apparent knowledge about it, saying that "like [in] many other reports published by Amnesty International, put into question the credibility of Amnesty International. (...) It's always biased and politicized. And it's shame for such organization to publish a report without a shred of evidence". However, without hesitation, Isikoff presents him the evidence, reading from the report, "the process of the hangings is authorized by officials at the highest levels of the government. Death sentences are approved by the Grand Mufti of Syria and by either the Minister of Defense or the Chief of Staff of the Army". As

usual, Bashar denies the evidence, affirming that the report is fake, even recognizing that he never been at the prison and by this showing fallacy of ignorance. In this argumentative circumference placed around him, his logic is based in the idea that if these cases cannot be proven, so they not exist (Heinrichs 153). Even being clear that he may be misleading, he says "We're living in a fake news era, as you know. Everybody knows" to support a conclusion that for many times the audience heard before, which is a conclusion supported by the outside conspiracy against Syria and never vice-versa.

The last of the three logical fallacies seen in Bashar's argument is the "bad example" as a consequence of the misinterpretation of the evidence (Heinrichs 163). Above all the evidence presented to support the idea that Bashar al-Assad has been guilty for the Syrian humanitarian disaster; there's one evidence presented that is more clear than others. It's a story of a Syrian refugee, a woman, who in Spain filed an accusation on nine of the Syrian governmental intelligence and security officials for human rights abuses. The lawyers working on this case collected more than 3,000 pages of evidence, and over 50,000 photographs taken by a former government's photographer. To add to this, the American FBI was called to help verifying this evidence, especially the photographs, and their final report says "The bodies and the scenes depicted exhibit no artifacts or inconsistencies that would indicate they have been manipulated. (...) images appear to depict real people and events". Bashar argued unconditionally against this facts, putting in doubt the work done by the FBI professionals. He said "when you're institutions were honest about what's happening in Syria? That's the question. Never. For us, never. So we don't have to

rely on what they say. Whether, if the FBI says something, (...) it's not evidence for anyone, especially for us". This generalization of the American institutions as dishonest and the evidence that are not evident to anyone, gives a broad sense to a debate that needs to be discussed with a narrow perspective for the global audience understand better.

The job of a journalist while interviewing personalities like Bashar al-Assad is definitely not easy. No matter how the journalist seek truth, the interviewee will always find a way to argument against the evidence. The clear misinterpretation of this evidence happened when the examples given by Bashar didn't support his final conclusion (Heinrichs 153). The ping-pong of inarguable argumentation just continued as Bashar said "It's just propaganda. It's just fake news. They want to demonize the Syrian government" and Isikoff concluded "the F.B.I. is just propagating propaganda. Amnesty International is propagating propaganda. Everybody is conspiring against the Syrian government. Why?" (Isikoff).

Bashar al-Assad shows that he knows how to swim in a tank full of sharks. With his father, he learned the skills to control rather than be controlled. It's true that both them are born in different generations, but they are not exactly different in terms of religious ideology. The only thing that makes Bashar be different from his father is the present and the tools that we have nowadays. We live today, in a confused cyber-nautic reality where either the cell-phone with advanced recording technology or the internet and the social media, are easy weapons to communicate fast, although not every time for good purposes. Certainly, it's about how people use these tools and sometimes, tools created to improve human life are used in an unethical way. Social

media is definitely a form of easy propaganda, but because things happen fast and people get used to have new content everyday, there's no more necessity to think in a deliberative way about many of these sensible topics. Nowadays, it's all about emotion in the moment and certainly, social media is the most effective way to persuade globalized publics.

The best well-known example is the ISIS "marketing department". The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria officials understood the importance of having a good social media in order to be effective. The way they communicate their cause and persuade hundreds of people to join their cult, made a lot of people reflect about the rebels cult in a different way. ISIS, when compared to Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah and other Middle-Eastern groups, have a different approach in the way they see the society around them. ISIS' videos showing the Crusaders killings are done with high definition cameras, dramatic sound and post-production effects. This makes vulnerable viewers almost believe that it's a hollywood production, but no, it's real... it's happening. It mixes with the appeal of those who are confused about a purpose of life and see in this ideology a life cause that will belong in the scripts forever. However, what makes ISIS super-effective is not the blood or the torture. This type of aggressive content is mostly shared by the Western media to present them as a "as inhuman monsters [and] members of a death cult" (Lewis). On their specifically social media, only 5% of the content shows them as violent people. Instead, they communicate videos and photos showing brotherhood, friendship and loyalty, inviting more people to become part of an "idealistic caliphate" (Lewis). In the streets of the cities conquered by the ISIS, it's possible to see them cleaning trash, fixing sewage systems,

collecting blood donations and providing healthcare, education and security (Lewis). They fill a gap left by the government (Berti). They get the people that is oppressed by the highest institution in the society, which is the government, and by helping them, they convince them to be part of the cult and fight for it. On the contrary side, Maria Finoshina does a different type of work while using the same tools.

Maria, a Russian journalist covering children stories in Syria, is regularly Live on Facebook to show how life goes beyond the war. Everything she does is raw. She walks in the street with a smartphone camera always recording and everything happening around her is fortuity. She shows the culture, she shows a different Syria. Although, because the consequences of war are evident in this type of work and because Syria is a close-minded country, for the good and the bad; just recently, she was forced to stop recording as she wrote on her Facebook page "So many of you ask me why I don't do LIVES from Syria anymore. (...) Not everybody was happy with what I was doing, and how I was working on the ground. (...) Some of them went as far as preventing me from continuing. At least for now." (Finoshina). Even doing a positive job and even being Russian, although not from the governmental system, she was controlled as many other people, by officials who don't want all the information to be out there.

The war in Syria will continue. Not because the civilians want to, but mostly because a small percentage of an elite needs to. For one side, there's suffering. There's the people living in Syria, without life conditions or education becoming servants of the occasional leaders controlling their territory. There's the people leaving Syria, that in a desperation to run from the war became refugees and a target for pun-

ishment from all the sides: the Syrian regime and the international public opinion who label them as terrorists. These people suffering live in a maze without end. For the other side, there's the people who profit from the war, the ones who benefit from the territories they conquer and manage. There's history and the pride. There's oil markets and a weapon industry to be satiated. There's an old desire to control, rather than be controlled. The war in Syria will continue. The referendums will continue giving votes to Bashar al-Assad, and old historical opponents will continue to fight each other, to kill each other and with them take thousands of innocent lives. This will happen until no more Syria remains. The war in Syria will not be stopped, and the propaganda will continue being used as a weapon of persuasion and international influence, because winning an argument unconditionally in the present is more important than the future of many Syrian generations.

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