Middle East & North Africa
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 Lemaizzi analyses how rumours about the Moroccan monarchs and their ongoing role in psychological warfare. Haid Haid explains how disinformation impedes the campaigns of civil society organisations in the struggle over public space in Beirut.
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-Remmaneh, 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 the 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 he 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 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 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 he sensed that something serious was going on.

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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, didn’t bother confirm their information, but nonetheless it found its way into the media – and the media publish such articles, following their own political agendas.

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 Shites 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 Freya confims 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 other. ’ When the media spread news about certain news would affect the situation on the ground. ‘When the media spread news about right, and the news was immediately broadcast everywhere.

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 misinformation 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.’

According to Freya, 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 cause.

Kataeb leaders used reporters to spread misinformation in order to achieve a certain aim, ‘Admits Chaftari. ‘This rumour also served to divide the people between Muslims and Christians,’ confirms Amashi, ‘to encourage more of them to train militarily, and to spread armed men to other areas where they were needed.’

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Saleh recounts that, ‘There were we few experienced professionals in the radio stations at that time,’ admits Saleh, ‘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,’ recouts Freya. ‘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 insist 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 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 easy way to spread the rumour that such an invasion might actually happen, and a strategy to scare off the Lebanese and Palestinian civilians. ‘And now I am not sure why the Israelis spread this news,’ says Chahabi. ‘I conjecture that, ‘They probably did it so that the world would not be shocked when it actually happened – it was a strategy to scare off the world.’

Ziad Saab, a former commander of the Lebanese Communist Party, has a different memory of these events, ‘I remember that the first thing to speak about a possible invasion in public was Communist party leader George Hawsa,’ 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

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.

Detlev Mehlis, Public Prosecutor and former Special Investigator in Lebanon, 20/01/2006, Der Stern
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 grandson 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 Amshi. 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 the 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 Shufat city. 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 aboard 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 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. 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 Syrian President is being Made in Lebanon?

Haid Haid

Rumours and the Syrian Presidential Election in Lebanon

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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 laws were:

1) 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. This particular claim spread because some refugees believed that the law governing the entry of non-Syrians into Syria and their residence there was 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 in other countries, particularly following the death of Hadi al-Bahra, a prominent member of the Syrian opposition who was killed in a suicide bombing attack in Damascus in 2013.

2) Footprints of the regime

Rumours about the Syrian regime’s potential involvement in the presidential election also cast doubt on the legitimacy of the past elections. Some of these concerns were expressed in a draft law intended to punish those who participated in activities against the Assad regime within Syria or abroad. Despite the fact that the law was never translated into a draft law, it circulated widely. Some of the provisions of this draft law concerned the deportation of those who participated in activities against the regime, as well as the confiscation of property and restrictions on the freedom of movement of those who supported the regime. Such fears were further fuelled by the circulating claims that the regime had infiltrated electoral bodies, such as the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC), and that these powerful circles were involved in vote rigging, as well as the alleged manipulation of election results.

3) What is the new constitution all about?

As the Armed Forces, led by al-Assad, have strengthened their grip on various parts of the country, creating a political vacuum in which the regime could act with relative impunity, one of the more popular theories among refugees is that the regime is using the presidential election as a way of introducing new constitutional changes, particularly with regard to the proposed amendment to Article 137 of the Constitution, which would allow for the establishment of a presidency without term limits. This provision would effectively nullify the previous constitutional changes, which included the abolition of the office of vice president and the establishment of a unicameral parliament.

4) Will the Syrian presidency be made in Lebanon?

As the armed conflict in Syria continues, many refugees are beginning to believe that the Syrian regime is using the presidential election as a way of ‘making Lebanon’ into a Syrian province. The regime is using the presidential election as a way of extending its influence in Lebanon, and the fear of the return of a Syrian presence is being used to mobilize people to vote in the presidential election. This is compounded by the fact that many refugees believe that the regime is using the presidential election as a way of destabilizing Lebanon, as well as consolidating its grip on the country.

Aside from these fears, many refugees are also concerned about the impact of the presidential election on their daily lives. There are concerns that the regime may use the presidential election as a way of increasing its military presence in Lebanon, as well as increasing its influence in the country. There are also concerns about the impact of the presidential election on the economy, with many refugees fearing that the regime is using the presidential election as a way of increasing its control over the country’s resources, as well as increasing its influence in the country. There are also concerns about the impact of the presidential election on the country’s political stability, with many refugees fearing that the regime is using the presidential election as a way of increasing its influence in the country, as well as increasing its control over the country’s resources. There are also concerns about the impact of the presidential election on the country’s economic stability, with many refugees fearing that the regime is using the presidential election as a way of increasing its control over the country’s resources, as well as increasing its influence in the country.
Despite the regime's long history of brutality in Syria, 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 organized, 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 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. 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.4 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 Syrian 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.

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

In May 2014, the Ministry of Justice discussed a proposal to rent out houses and real estate that had been 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 encountered 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.4 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

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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 Mustapha Alloouch 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.3 Minister of Labour, Saedan 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 Forces, and they have to be deported!’ He added, ‘If you have thousands of people loyal to the Syrian regime trying to vote in it, 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.’ Many media figures and artists close to the March-14 Movement have also called for Syrians to be deported. On CNN, a satirical news analysis show, presenter Nadim Koteich called for Syrian refugees to be ‘resisted’, and even ‘expelled from the country.’ It is interesting to note that the reactions of opponents of Assad mostly failed to take into account the above remarks 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.3iii

iii 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 Syrian refugees in Lebanon’s 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.’

This decision prompted widespread concern among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and 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 on 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 the 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.

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 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.

2. Facebook post: https://www.facebook.com/ syrahreisysyria/posts/429537356216192
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* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger
Regime Strategy and Opposition Tactics: Rumour in Syria

Mohammed Dibo

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 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’ — this doesn’t mean that the violence within prisons and detention centres is just rumour or that it does not 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 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

1) 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 Banias, 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 Strategy and Opposition Tactics: Rumour in Syria

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

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 knew that people will always cleave to 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, here we see rumour and counter-rumour resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes break out. Whatever happens, the “others” deserve their punishment and “we” shall not forget “everything they have made us suffer.”

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 its own sectarians. This was achieved 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 instigate conflict between the Alawites and the Army of Islam. 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. They sent them all home. The reason they had attacked was because they were afraid of being caught by the police. Someone asked them what was their number with knives. That would mean they were coming to commit suicide, not to fight. The next day I saw my friend from Al Zahra. 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!’ Here we see rumour and counter-rumour resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes 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, here we see rumour and counter-rumour resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes break out.

Regime Strategy and Opposition Tactics: Rumour in Syria

The situation was exacerbated by the death of Nidal Junoud, an Alawite who died when the army came under fire at the Banias 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 to 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, here we see rumour and counter-rumour resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes 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, here we see rumour and counter-rumour resort to extreme measures, which might fulfill revenge, inflame feelings and sometimes break out.
Salmiye 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 Saan and began looting, rumours went round that it was residents from Al Saan who were committing the thefts and not the soldiers — all in an effort to preserve the army’s reputation!

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 of 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 their support, though often at a remove. In both cases the regime used religious figures to encourage the different minorities 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, Salmiye, 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 Sunni and Shia minorities in an attempt to entrench the idea that these minorities must stick together. After 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 Nura Front was threatening to shell the city and enslave women — this had certainly not happened at an earlier stage.

The use of rumour is not the sole preserve of the regime, but has also been practiced by the armed 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.

The opposition and revolutionary forces

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

ii) Rumours after the militarization of the revolution

As the revolution transitioned into an armed movement the rumours changed. The authorities became more certain of their ability to persuade large swathes of the population of their point of view, particularly since they had, at an earlier stage, circulated many rumours about the presence of weapons. The movement’s militarization served to convince minorities and regime supporters that these rumours had been true, and part of 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. A few months before the event in Qamishli, the Provoke SDF Brigade was fighting for control of the city, and the authorities in the regime were concerned that this might result in the SDF taking control of the city, which was the headquarters of the regime’s military command in northeastern Syria. The authorities wanted to ensure that the city remained under their control. The pro-regime Al Akhbar newspaper published a story claiming that the SDF had been forced to withdraw from the city due to a military operation conducted by the regime’s forces. The story was later confirmed by the regime’s media, which reported that the SDF had been forced to withdraw due to a military operation conducted by the regime’s forces.

As the opposition and revolutionary forces continued to operate in the region, they began to circulate more detailed and specific stories about the regime’s activities. These included reports of the regime’s use of chemical weapons, the detention of political prisoners, and the persecution of ethnic minorities. These stories were often published in local media outlets and shared on social media platforms, where they were widely believed by the general population.

These stories were often used by the opposition and revolutionary forces to rally support for their cause. They were also used to criticize the regime and to try to influence the course of the conflict. The regime responded to these stories with its own propaganda efforts, including denials and attempts to discredit the stories.

Despite the regime’s efforts to counteract these stories, they continued to circulate widely. As a result, the public became increasingly aware of the regime’s actions and began to question the legitimacy of its rule. This was a significant factor in the eventual collapse of the regime and the establishment of a new political order in Syria.
The regime would frequently generate rumours spread that, ‘The governor of Deirezzor, Samir Othman, has been killed and the head of military security Jami Jami Ali wounded by a mine.’ The news was confirmed by numerous opposition figures, including Louay Hussein, on their personal Facebook pages. But it was 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 Syria, is a case in point. 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 selfsame 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 consciousness 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 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 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 stumble blindly along, continues to do so.

References

2. Amin Maalouf, Les Identités meurtrières (Arabic: Al Huway'ah Al Qat'liyyah), Translated by Nabil Bedour, Dar Al Farabi/2011 (2nd Ed.), p.41
3. ibid, p.42
6. Conversation between the author and one of the intellectuals and activists in Salamiye to establish the text.
7. In the Arabic the author preserved the spelling mistakes and orthography of the original posts, and this has been followed (except 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/salamehkh
8. Conversation between the author and one of the individuals involved.
11. 13. For more information, see the following Wikipedia article on Zeinab al-Hosni http://ar.wikipedia.org/wi ki?%D8%A8%DB%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C%DA%AF%DB%8C%DA%AF
12. Personally interviewed by the author.

*a* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger
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 set him down again after the photograph was taken.

Two years ago, many activists and even some Western officials were caught up with rumour: how could it be that the ‘Crisis Room’ bombing in Damascus that killed Assaf 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 rumours, which in September 2011 were circulating 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’ Alawiite leader. He was seen as a moderate who had refused to stain his hands with the blood of Syriats (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 deferential culture into an abstraction freighted with a fantasy that has for decades, since the start of the revolution, denuded them of their reality. 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 mythical 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 sealed 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 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.
The Iconoclasts: How Syrian Citizens Brought a God back down to Earth

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, planning 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, and 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 world was surrounded by a fog of legend and rumour. Among the stereotypes were: ‘Alegue to whom we pointed with our fingers would treat the similarly anonymous ‘Above’ to whom we pointed with our fingers treated others, we couldn’t believe it either. The tyrant could be a god, a king, a mother, an Angel, an idiot, a robot. It’s claimed that his body-double was killed, and that he ended up inside the palace, assassinating the president. He is a robot. He is an idiot. He has a body-double. He is a robot. He has a body-double.

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… the regime. Muammar Gaddafi! And us… and us…

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, a requirement, an obligation to our people. We have been taught that ‘every Alawite is loyalist’; ‘every Sunni is in the opposition’; the Nusra Front. ‘Elements’ (an abstraction) ‘assassinate a president’ (another abstraction). 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 way, the security regime became a nursery not just for the spreading of rumour, but for believing it, too.

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 ‘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 detention. They are 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 make us want to believe in hope, to make us want to believe that we are not praying or fasting and who drink alcohol;

we encounter the problem of the individual best by a priori fear.

Sometimes it was the Free Army, sometimes the Nusra Front. ‘Elements’ (an abstraction) ‘assassinate a president’ (another abstraction).

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.

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

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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 without any 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 Muslims 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 misinformation; 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 misinformation, 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...
One Aspect of the History of Political Rumour in Syria

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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.

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: the group 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 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, or even the same whether the raids were ‘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 motivated these 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.

One Aspect of the History of Political Rumour in Syria

Rumours to distort

At an early stage in the Syrian revolution it was rumoured that myself and other opposition figures like Razan Zaitouneh and Rad 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’s 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 rumour aims 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 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.

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Rumours to deceive

This is an exercise in how something massive gets made out of nothing when the desire for passing judgment grips people. If it wasn’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 embassy 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 anything of it? Aside from their self-inflicted 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 Khalili 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 Jash al-Islam (theSalafist 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 Jash 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 Jash al-Islam himself spread the rumour that his own spook, known for his 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 found 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.

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Rumours to deceive

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 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 abducted, 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, and 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 of 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 right because 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 and 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 misinformation.

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 it to 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, 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 royal family. Due to its central position 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, 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 ‘Mr. M6’. As Beau and Graciet assert, in the 2000s ‘the origin of the rotavirus contracted by the sovereign had been placed in convalescence 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-Oula’.

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, 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 ‘Mr. M6’. As Beau and Graciet assert, in the 2000s ‘the origin of the rotavirus contracted by the sovereign had been placed in convalescence 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-Oula’.

The King’s health and the press trial

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 suspended 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 Anouzia, editor of al-Jarida al-Oula. Meanwhile, the journalist who had written the incriminating
Morocco: the Monarch and Rumours

‘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 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 the moronic campaign against Morocco.’

A compendium of conditional sentences about the 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. The most spectacular case of the photographs of the King in Tunisia, a private trip to the United Arab Emirates, rumours were circulating about the health of the Monarch in the Algerian press. Two months later, in June 2003, Jmahri, editor-in-chief of the daily partisan newspaper al-thad al-iktikak, 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 can result in confusion; it can even unintentionally distort the attention of the general public;’ she says. These reasons force the journalist to analyse rumours from a political standpoint.

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 assassinations’. He offers as an example the cases of Abderrahim Bouabdallah and Fathallah Oualalou, 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 scandal out of it. The rumour 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, disenfranchisement 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 to solve the mystery that is ‘MC: 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 Mohammed 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 back!’ 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.’

Books about the King: revelations and rumours

Unable to interview him, Moroccan and foreign journalists throw themselves into investigations 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 being 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 the moronic campaign against Morocco.’

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Morocco: the Monarch and Rumours

An analysis of rumours in the Moroccan political ABC of journalism'.

2. Meaning the 'bloc'. A coalition of four opposition service of political competitors.

strategy contributes to the propagation of corroborated and ordered information - it is the out its principal mission, to search for verified, exchange rather than merely one-directional communication is absent. 'Naciri does not onto one another. The former consider the political actors 'still oblivious to the vital role of 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 public communication. This is a process that should ideally consist in an ongoing exchange rather than merely one-directional 'communication'.

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 allow 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.

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 public communication. This is a process that should ideally consist in an ongoing exchange rather than merely one-directional 'communication'.

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"Gossip", 'chit-chat', 'little-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’,

Translated from the French by Sarah Morris

1. For more on this topic, see Mountain Najib, Pouvoir et communication au Maroc: Monarchie, médias et acteurs politiques (1956-1999), L’hamattan (2008).
2. ‘Meaning the ‘bloc’. A coalition of four opposition parties: Istiqlal, USFP, PPS and OADP.
3. ‘Meaning the ‘bloc’. A coalition of four opposition parties: Istiqlal, USFP, PPS and OADP.
4. A 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.252
6. Ak Amr, Mohammed VI, le grand malentendu. Calmair-Levy (2009), p. 78
8. For more information on the reporter’s version of events, see Ali Amar, Chut! Le roi Mohammed vi est-il malade? http://www. dejournaldenews.com/2013/04/05/chut-le-roi-mohammed-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.
11. The government of Bekkay Ben Mbarek is the first Moroccan government since independence in 1956.
12. The Socialist leader paid the price for a rumour suggesting that his imprisonment in 1961 had been a deal agreed with Hassan II.
13. A rumour on the homosexual habits of this Socialist party 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.
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 Tunisian Minister of the Interior Lotfi Benjeddou, 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.

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 and intensive amplification and regurgitation 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 mainstream news providers must firstly – and as a matter of urgency – be independent, unfettered and as a matter of urgency – be independent, unfettered and 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.

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 Magreb 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 now acquire a global dimension in a matter of minutes. Where uncertainty and 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 Tunisian Minister of the Interior Lotfi Benjeddou, 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.

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2. B. Paillard, op.cit.
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 of 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 garden, causing its temporary destruction before its final reconstruction); the Beirut pine forest (Horsh Beïrut), 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.’

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

How rumours are used as a political tool

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 official’s behaviour. Or we can thwart their attempts through getting information provided by expert consultants, as is the case with the Fouad Boutros highway 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, followed closely, rarely 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.

Matters of public concern are not dealt with efficiently, says Michel Aks. ‘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 nothing to hide?’

Abir Saksouk and Mohamed Zbeeb both agree that transparency and revealing the truth are the only way to pre-empt the effect of rumours. They have both worked on changing the stigmatizing portrayal of places like Dalah. ‘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 Dalah 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 Macha’s style of work. ‘For instance, we have recently listed in the press the names of all the accused 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 protect the public spaces in Dalah. It is not on us to 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 Aks 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 Mutasarrifya 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 simply not be provided in public spaces. This is the individual’s doing, and everybody in the State should be involved in combating it. ’

Foreigners would be astonished to know that 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 Daleh? ‘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 Daleh. 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 who are involved in this. The new generation is 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?’

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

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

Noor Baalbaki is a Program Manager at the Heinrich Böll Foundation’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 local capacity to work on environmental issues. She holds a Masters degree in Political Sciences with a minor in Arabic from AUB.

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.
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, said, I don't care what 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 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 women 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 exercises that immediately ripped 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 opinion 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 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 exercises that immediately ripped this problem in the bud and the outcome was fabulous.

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?

IM: Arab media historically have been controlled by governments or political groups. In Lebanon it's political groups, in the Arab countries it's the 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 was how the central government should have been exactly the other way of the 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 Arsal is a predominantly Sunni town while Bir Hassan is predominantly Shiite. The alert read 'Arsal residents invade (yas'oun) Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan', whereas it should have been 'Arsal residents offer their condolences to Alsalha residents in Bir Hassan'. In an environment fanning the flames of a purported Sunni-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 'yas'oun' 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: ی instead of ی.
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.

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’.

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
A Sisyphean Task: Rumour Control

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 of 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 rumours’ 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 focused on where ISIS was, 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 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.

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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 lead to the international
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 as 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’


2. Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

‘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 questions 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

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

1. ‘A fantastical death, worthy of a pharaoh’

1. For more information please see ‘A fantastical death, worthy of a pharaoh’ 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


2. Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger
Heinrich Böll Foundation - Middle East & North Africa

Our foremost task is civic education in Germany and abroad with the aim of promoting informed democratic opinion, socio-political commitment and mutual understanding. In addition, the Heinrich Böll Foundation supports artistic, cultural and scholarly projects, as well as cooperation in the development field. The political values of ecology, democracy, gender democracy, solidarity and non-violence are our chief points of reference. Heinrich Böll's belief in and promotion of citizen participation in politics is the model for the foundation's work.

This edition is published jointly by the offices of Heinrich Böll Stiftung in Beirut, Rabat, Ramallah and Tunis.