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Narratology and US Foreign Policy in Syria: Beyond Identity Binaries, toward Narrative Power

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Narrative approaches have recently gained popularity in International Relations (IR), albeit often with a focus on instrumentality. This article analyzes the "value added" of narratology, complementing IR's existing focus on strategic narratives, by focusing on what it is that sets stories apart from other linguistic features. The article develops three contributions. First, we demonstrate that narratology contributes to efforts in IR to move beyond a propensity for identity binaries, analyzing the more nuanced relational identities that are formed within the web of characters that populate stories. Second, we theorize (structural) narrative power, conceptualizing how stories project and propel forward through time to guide policy. Our take on (structural) narrative power emphasizes audience expectations of narrative closure as creating a teleological impulse. This is narrative power—the life of stories. We mobilize this conceptual framework, analyzing US foreign policy during the early Syrian Civil War, with a focus on the war's storying and the writing of its characters across 600+ policy and media texts. Third, our article locates (the flaws and paradoxes of) US policy within the narrative power of its story, established in the war's opening chapters.

Los planteamientos orientados a las narrativas han ido ganando popularidad en los últimos tiempos dentro del campo de las Relaciones Internacionales (RRII). Sin embargo, estos planteamientos ponen, con frecuencia, el foco en la instrumentalidad. Este artículo analiza el ≪valor añadido≫ de la narratología, lo cual permite complementar el planteamiento existente dentro las RRII con relación a las narrativas estratégicas, y se centra en investigar qué es lo que distingue a las historias de otros objetos lingüísticos. El artículo desarrolla tres contribuciones. En primer lugar, demostramos que la narratología contribuye a los esfuerzos que se están llevando a cabo dentro del campo de las RRII para ir más allá de la propensión a estudiar las identidades de forma binaria. Para ello, analizamos las identidades relacionales y matizadas que se forman dentro de la red de personajes que pueblan las historias. En segundo lugar, teorizamos acerca del poder narrativo estructural, conceptualizando cómo se proyectan e impulsan las historias hacia adelante en el tiempo con el fin de guiar las políticas. Nuestra visión del poder narrativo (estructural) enfatiza las expectativas de la audiencia con respecto al cierre narrativo como una creación de un impulso teleológico. Las historias poseen una vida propia gracias a su poder narrativo. Movilizamos este marco conceptual mediante el análisis de la política exterior de los Estados Unidos durante las fases iniciales de la Guerra Civil en Siria, con un enfoque en la historia de la guerra y la construcción de sus personajes a través de más de 600 textos de política y medios de comunicación. En tercer lugar, nuestro artículo relaciona los defectos y paradojas de la política estadounidense con el poder narrativo de su historia, que quedó establecida en los primeros capítulos de la guerra.

Les approches narratives gagnent en popularité ces dernières années au sein des Relations Internationales (RI), mais souvent en se concentrant sur l'instrumentalisation. Cet article analyse la ≪ valeur ajoutée ≫ de la narratologie. Il vient ainsi compléter la focalisation actuelle des RI sur les récits stratégiques, en se concentrant sur ce qui distingue les histoires d'autres objets linguistiques. L'article développe trois contributions. D'abord, nous démontrons que la narratologie contribue aux efforts des RI cherchant à dépasser la focalisation sur les identités binaires, en analysant les identités relationnelles et nuancées qui sont formées au sein d'un réseau de personnages trouvés dans les histoires. Ensuite, nous théorisons l'idée de puissance narrative structurelle, en conceptualisant la manière dont les histoires nous projètent et propulsent à travers le temps pour orienter la politique. Notre approche de la puissance narrative (structurelle) met l'accent sur le fait que la résolution narrative attendue par le public crée un élan téléologique. Les histoires possèdent ainsi une vie propre au travers de leur puissance narrative. Nous mobilisons ce cadre conceptuel pour analyser la politique étrangère américaine au début de la guerre civile en Syrie, en nous concentrant sur la narration de la guerre et sur l'écriture des personnages dans plus de 600 textes politiques et médiatiques. Enfin, notre article lie les défauts et paradoxes de la politique américaine à la puissance narrative de son histoire, établie dans les chapitres d'ouverture de la guerre.

Introduction

> It is … necessary to encourage the systematic return of stories to social science methodology… and to identify the basic stories which fundamentally undergird people's conscious efforts of resistance, rebellion, and revolution. (Selbin 2010, 3)

> Telling the story of the Syrian conflict is a complicated endeavour, especially in a context in which popular understandings of Syria reduce the conflict to simple binaries (Sunni-Shi'a or regime/rebel) that betray both the complexity of Syrian society and the conflict itself. (Abboud 2016, 1)

How was the Syrian conflict narrated (as a story), and with what political implications? In this article, we take a narrative approach, rather than (for example) a "neopositivist" or "sociological" approach, to the study of conflict and civil war (Baczko et al. 2018). As Abboud (2016, viiii) notes, due in part to its complexity, Syria has been framed by the mainstream media and political pundits "in very convenient terms"—"good guys and bad guys," "rigid, dichotomous, and linear." However, these narrative choices are neither simple nor politically inconsequential. Even the term "civil war" "fails to carve out a natural object from the continuum of history" (Baczko et al. 2018, 2)—this labeling is a choice. Syria is complex—an evolving, multifaceted, and internationalized conflict, with myriad, often new, and usually (for a Western audience, at least) unfamiliar participants. This multifaceted war is built upon an already complex (narrative) history (Wedeen 1999). Such complexity has generated and sustained a range of competing narratives. In Syria, as elsewhere, "what really happened" (Selbin 2010, 2) was enabled, shaped, and constrained by the power of narrative. Syrians themselves have created various narratives; yet no story has been more consequential than the one written by the United States. Possessing the means to alter and determine the outcome of the Syrian conflict, the significance of US narrative for Syria and Syrians was no less than fundamental. Moreover, to a greater degree than any other nation or international institution, due to its gargantuan capabilities and hegemonic status, the United States leads in establishing and guiding international narratives and debates more broadly.

The article therefore analyzes the Syrian conflict, with a focus on the world's storyteller of foremost political consequence. Specifically, we consider the opening chapters of the Syrian conflict, as the Obama administration attempted to balance and negotiate their narrative inheritance from the War on Terror and quagmire in Iraq with the competing impulse to support the Arab uprisings sweeping the Middle East and North Africa (e.g., Mead 2010; Holland 2020). To do so, we build on the insights derived from a 40-year theoretical turn to narrative across the humanities and social sciences (e.g., Selbin 2010, 4 on the "storied turn") to further a more recent turn to (strategic) narrative in International Relations (IR) (e.g., Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2015). Both of these canons have shown that narrative is at the heart of the human experience, from everyday life (e.g., Nyman 2021) to superpower foreign policy (e.g., Pamment 2014). Here, we consider what it is that narrative analysis does that furthers the insights of IR (e.g., Shepherd 2015). We ask, specifically: What is the added value of narratology for linguistic analysis? In answering these questions, we develop two related but distinct theoretical contributions—centered on identities beyond binaries and structural narrative power—leading to a, third, policy contribution, centered on narrative foreclosing.

First, we argue that narratology can help overcome binary identity conceptualization thanks to its emphasis on nuanced characterization. We begin by tracing constructivist and discourse analytic propensities to analyze identity constructions as binaries, locating this tendency in the influence of ground-breaking poststructural research in IR and in the discipline's principal empirical concern with the exceptional and existential. We also identify relatively recent research working to overcome this duality, highlighting the role that narrative analysis can play in furthering this movement. This is essential: The limitations of dichotomous Self/Other approaches prohibit understanding and analysis of US foreign policy and the Syrian Civil War (e.g., Abboud 2016). Specifically, we show that the storying of the protagonist is key; because the figure of the protagonist is not necessarily coterminous with the Self, this character makes an important first step in helping us to move beyond a focus on binaries—a full Self and an Other as its negation—to reveal a more complex relationality. From here, a range of more nuanced characters can be identified, thus furthering efforts in IR to interrogate the complexity of "the Other" in its various forms. These characters enable the emplotment of distinct narratives—more complex and subtle than Self–Other inversions—with different political and policy options.

Second, we define (structural) narrative power, i.e., the force of the story that propels a narrative forward. Such power moves narrative analysis beyond discourse analytic or framing approaches. We note that narratology has primarily entered the discipline of IR through the notion of strategic narratives, with a focus on agency and intentionality that oftentimes comes at the expense of what makes stories so compelling. In combination with (strategic) authorial agency (far better understood in IR), we argue that narrative power is underpinned by audience expectation, which derives from a popular will to narrative closure. This knowledge of narrative and desire for resolution results from the fact that we are all socialized into stories as children (Shepherd 2013). A deep impulse of expectation, learnt in early youth, helps produce a structural imperative that both projects and drives stories forward through time, shaping political and policy possibilities. We desire stories and their resolution; we root for the vindication and triumph of embattled protagonists. Once (well) written, a powerful, resonant story is soon unleashed, projecting and propelling forward from the opening scenes and the introduction of lead characters. Authors retain influence but less than total control, as stories themselves start to shape, enable, and constrain political possibilities. This is the "life" of stories: narrative power.

Third, and using both theoretical insights, we reveal the importance of the early introduction and characterization of a protagonist: the Syrian "people" and their familiar liberal story. Taking the American storying of the Syrian crisis as our case study, our empirical analysis (of 600+ texts from 2011 to 2013) shows how this narrative wrote a range of characters (including a less-than-wholly Other antagonist in Bashar al-Assad and hijackers to deuterogamist sidekicks in the form of the opposition) emplotted within an expected and desired journey. These characterizations and narrations mattered greatly for US foreign policy and the outcome of the Syrian Civil War. Crucially, furthering analyses of US foreign policy, we are the first to locate America's debilitating ends-means gap—the policy insistence that "Assad must go,"

coupled to US (military) restraint—as arising out of a process of narrative foreclosing, whereby policy options were delimited from the opening scene. We go on to show how this ends-means gap was then actively reinforced following the subsequent emergence of myriad opposition groups. Character construction and teleological impulse thus combined to enable, shape, and constrain US policy options, ultimately prolonging the war.

The article is structured in five parts. First, we outline IR's propensity to focus on identity binaries and strategic narratives. This sets the context for the development of our theoretical contributions and arguments that narratology adds value through an analysis of more nuanced characterizations of world politics and (often overlooked, structural) narrative power. In the second section, we detail our methodology and define the key concepts associated with narrative analysis. We then, third, deploy this analytical approach to investigate the case of US foreign policy at the start of the Syrian Civil War, noting first how the "Syrian people" are written as the protagonist of the story. Fourth, we subsequently explore how the emergence of a fractured opposition "interrupts" the US narrative, before, fifth, analyzing the opposition's innovative narration and partial re-integration into the compelling original story. We conclude that (i) narratives are distinct from other linguistic features, despite IR's tendency to conflation; (ii) narratology is allied theoretically and methodologically to the broader disciplinary moves beyond identity binaries; (iii) narrative power is structural; and (iv) structural narrative power shapes the political and policy realities of war, from a conflict's opening chapter.

Language and IR: Strategic Narratives and Identity Binaries

Narratives are an essential, omnipresent feature of social life due to the "human need to locate oneself in a story about how the world progresses" (Patterson and Monroe 1998, 319; see also Shenhav 2006). This arises from the innate desire to make sense of what is otherwise a disorderly social experience (Krebs 2015, 2 and 10). For Spencer (2016, 14), it is "through narratives that humans make sense of the world" and develop a means to understand behavior. In short, narratives and stories produce and reproduce the "cognitive frameworks" that we use to orientate ourselves in the world (Shepherd 2013, 3; see also Autesserre 2012, 206). This storying of life is as productive as it is explanatory; narratives construct social realities and, within them, human identities (Spencer 2016, 1). Narratives are thus profoundly political: They are "sites of the exercise of power" (Wibben 2011, 2). They arrest meaning, enable and limit representation, and shape what action is possible and legitimate (Wibben 2011, 65 and 43). As such, narrative is "fundamentally normative in nature" (Subotic 2016, 612; see also Snyder 2015, 178; Spencer 2016, 30), and "storytelling has serious sociopolitical repercussions" (Graef, Da Silva, and Lemay-Hébert 2020, 431), delimiting "the boundaries of being" (Shepherd 2013, 4 and 11), and indicating the narrator's worldview, at the same time as helping to naturalize it and authorize the speaker (e.g., Patterson and Monroe 1998, 316).

Given this importance, it is not surprising that the concept of narrative has recently become commonplace in politics and IR. This interest builds on around half a century of narrative scholarship from across the humanities and social sciences, with a longer heritage in the arts. Important foundational work is evident in Geography (from Ed-

ward Said's work in the 1970s, via Derek Gregory's in the 1990s and 2000s, to Critical Geopolitics, e.g., Muller 2008), Psychology (e.g., Bruner 1991), and Sociology (e.g., Richardson 1990), as well as, naturally, a wide range of work in English. Drawing inspiration from these studies, in Politics and IR, there is "a growing scholarly interest in narrative as a sense-making practice in the political realm and a strategic tool for legitimizing particular policy initiatives" (Graef, Da Silva, and Lemay-Hébert 2020, 435). A focus on language (and identity) is shared across a range of approaches in IR, including poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial, as well as critical, constructivist, and feminist (e.g. Shepherd 2008). For all, it is the poststructural influence, introduced and propagated to great effect by a range of prominent scholars (e.g., Campbell 1992)—as an early and formative disciplinary influence—that has predominated in shaping subsequent research agendas.

Until quite recently, however, "the concept of narrative has frequently been used as a synonym for discourse or frame and has not focused on the specific characteristics of what constitutes a narrative" (Spencer 2016, 25). At times, narrative has been taken as a broad equivalent for discourse and used "for everything said, written, viewed, or heard" (Spencer 2016, 2; see also Graef, Da Silva, and Lemay-Hébert 2020, 432). In this article, we understand narratives to possess a story-like quality, which distinguishes them from rhetoric (as the art of persuasion), frames (as the promotion of particular interpretations), and discourse (as a primarily linguistic structuring that regulates the production of meaning in relatively predictable ways) (e.g., Entman 1993; Barnett 1999; Charteris-Black 2005; Jackson 2005; Krebs 2015). Our argument here is that narrative analysis has much more to offer to IR's linguistic turn, and provides a new way of understanding and analyzing US foreign policy and the Syrian Civil War.

Beyond Identity Binaries

First, the manner in which prominent IR scholars mobilized poststructural research for their (disciplinary) audience led to a pronounced formative preference for Derridean understandings of identity and its deconstruction, over more nuanced discursive approaches (e.g., Foucauldian). Building upon the insight that identity is constituted through difference, this critical literature has contributed to the mapping of a world in which Selves emerge from their relational alterity. From foundational work (Campbell 1992; Walker 1993), through to more recent poststructural (e.g., Hansen 2006) and constructivist research (e.g., Jackson 2005), IR has mobilized and retained a preference for identity binaries in theorizing and analyzing world politics. This is visible in key formative texts (Doty 1993; Fierke 1996; Weldes 1999) through to contemporary studies of securitization, ontological security (see Browning and Joenniemi 2017), and Critical Terrorism Studies (e.g., Jackson 2005), as well as Foreign Policy (e.g., Guillaume 2002). There is power—and consequence—in this parsimony.

Second, this preference for the Self–Other binary has been reinforced—or confirmed—by the main empirical focus of the discipline: a desire to understand international order, forged in the fires of war and conflict—moments of exception and the need to vanquish enemies. This empirical preference to understand the material consequences of order's demise—the case studies of anarchy's ultimate consequence or multiplicity's existential encounters—has led to an empirical bias toward identity binaries. These are important but also a reflection of IR's tendency to study war,

rather than its avoidance. The focus is firmly on the way(s) the Self constructs itself in opposition to Others. As a result, the figures of the Self and Other remain powerful theoretical and analytical tools that are easily and readily understood and adopted in the critical literature (Ravecca and Dauphinee 2018).

Importantly, there are efforts to break down this dichotomy within IR, found in literatures analyzing, for example, liminality (e.g., Neumann 2012), hybridity (e.g., Rumelili 2012, 501), and diasporas (e.g., Adamson and Demetriou 2007), as well as in those works inspired by Queer approaches (e.g., Puar and Rai 2002; Weber 2014; Cooper-Cunningham 2020). Analyses of nuancing Self/Other binaries have focused on directly complicating the supposedly strict demarcation (e.g., Neumann 1999; Rumelili 2004; Paipais 2011; Combes 2017; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021; Mathieu 2022). For example, drawing on cultural anthropology, relatively recent research has extended the concept of liminality to study IR's liminars (e.g., Malksoo 2012, 481)—those dissidents, minorities, and groups in the discursive space between dominant category markers (e.g., Rumelili 2003, 220). Ambiguity, transformation, and betweenness characterize this literature, challenging IR's preferred dualities. Like narrative approaches, liminality can help to reveal the nuances of personhood at the heart of the political, "resisting binary opposition" by exploring the liminal space between Self and Other (Malksoo 2012, 483). A sensitive focus (Neumann 2012, 476; Rumelili 2012) on the complex social production of political subjects emphasizes interconnected processes of becoming—an antidote to essentialism (Malksoo 2012)—shifts us from the "what" to the "how" of identity construction betwixt polar extremes (Loh and Heiskanen 2020, 286). We argue that narratology can contribute—theoretically, methodologically and empirically—to these fruitful lines of inquiry into the construction of identity beyond Self and Other. The nuanced web of character constructions that emplot stories bears important resemblance to liminars (Malksoo 2012) and hybrids (Rumelili 2012, 501)—at once both "other and like" (Rumelili 2003, 220).

Indeed, one of the most readily identifiable aspects of narrative is the need for character construction (Krebs 2015, 11), and this need goes well beyond the Self and the Other. At its most simple, "narratives are also populated by characters (…) who have agency and are depicted as important to the narrative" (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014, 75). Characterization thus depicts the agency of actors (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014, 75) and the "main players" of the story (Shenhav 2006, 251). This is not achieved through a "one-off description" but "the small continuous predications that slowly build an agent into a character with a particular identity" (Spencer 2016, 30). Characterization includes naming, placing characters in relation to others, describing their attributes, "making" them speak, and reporting on their actions. Narratives therefore exercise a complex performative action (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019): They forge the variegated actors, assigning them nuanced identities and complex roles.

To IR's focus on the construction of Self and Other, we note the importance in narrative of the characterization of "third" actors. Foremost among these, we emphasize the figure of the protagonist—a character ubiquitous to narrative and yet rarely discussed in IR's narrative turn, unless coinciding with the Self or Other. The protagonist very often sits at the heart of a story, tying together its components, driving the narrative forward, and determining whether an audience is invested in how it will unfold. For Krebs (2015,

11), for instance, "Skeletal narratives are constituted by both plot and protagonist." To analyze the construction of a protagonist and their locating in a web of entangled characters is to explore how authors situate "individuals in a community and, by extension, the world by defining the spatio-temporal parameters from and toward which they can act as a community" (Berenskoetter 2014, 270). This characterization is vitally important, determining audience resonance—do you care enough about the protagonist's fate to continue (reading) the story?—and shaping the subsequent, relational but not oppositional construction of a range of other characters within a story. With the protagonist narrated as non-coterminous with the Self, a range of far more nuanced characterizations become possible, likely, and influential.

Toward Narrative Power

A second aspect of narrative analysis is a particularly powerful—but often overlooked—addition to linguistically focused research in IR. Narrative power, as we set out, refers to the structural drive of stories to project forward chronologically. Narratives possess the power to impose a seemingly "teleological sequence of events" (Spencer 2016, 16), and this begins from the opening scene (e.g., see Considine 2022 on the entelechial force of origin myths). Such a statement might seem unnecessary until it is considered how narratology has entered the discipline to date. Narratology has been a significant growth area in IR. For example, the 2023 annual conference of the International Studies Association saw "narrative" receive no fewer than sixty-five mentions in the program (and BISA 2022 had twenty-four). This growth has been uneven, however, with a disciplinary preference for the study of strategic narrative. The "narrative turn" in IR has demonstrated a general focus on instrumentality and the deliberate, intentional wielding of story to further (usually) state interests. This is an insightful move that injects much needed strategic agency into discourse analytic approaches, helping to hold leaders to account. However, it has also come at the cost of downplaying the structural elements of narrative power, which help to make stories so compelling and consequential.

"Strategic narrative's" germinal popularization occurred through Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle's (2015) *Strategic Narratives*, centered on work at Royal Holloway, which inspired a subsequent (2016) symposium in the journal, *Critical Studies on Security*. The reviews and the author's response quickly get to the heart of the research agenda on strategic narratives: "agency and intentionality loom as one of the core theoretical issues" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle 2017). Miskimmon, O'Loughlin, and Roselle (2015, 2017) offer a reading of Campbell (1992) that notes practitioners have choices, as reflexive agents, even while acknowledging their position within and constitution through discourse. Agency "kicks back in" even for those "thickest" of discursive approaches. We modify and clarify this claim, noting how structural narrative power constrains authorial agency. As others have noted, Miskimmon et al.'s "resolution" of the tension between structure and agency in strategic narrative analyses (Shepherd 2015) is centered on the constitution and/or extra-discursive agency of the author. We argue that narratives (and narrative analysis) do *more*, as important as unpicking this particular Gordian knot might be. Our "value added" is, instead, found in the structural qualities of stories themselves. We agree that narratives "structure and exercise power" (Hagstrom and Gustaffson

2019); here, we set out how that works, in a way that is unique to stories.

We define *structural narrative power* as the impetus provided by a story to unfold in anticipated ways. This impetus forecloses other options (making the main "storyline" the only one conceivable), creating expectations that things will happen in a certain way/order (and a feeling of interruption or pause when/if they do not). Narrative power drives the narrator from an initial change or disruption to a "solution" or "resolution." In this way, structural narrative power projects the narrator and the audience into the future (Feldman and Almquist 2012; see also Considine 2022). This narrative power originates from the fact that all narratives are constructed around a predictable evolution of beginning, middle, and end (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 390): "A story may be thought of as a journey from one situation to another" (Franzosi 1998, 520). In general, all narratives involve a move away from an equilibrium followed by a desire to go back to the old—or bring about a new—equilibrium. As such, narratives promise resolution or closure, with "medium- and long-term goals or desirable end-states" (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'loughlin 2010, 6). For Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014, 76), "Narratives are appealing to human beings in part due to the presentation of action to resolve a conflict or disruption to the status quo." As Shepherd notes, stories "effect closure" and humans learn this early (Shepherd 2013, 4 and 11). Shepherd urges us to consider, for example, the concern of a toddler watching a "scary" moment in a cartoon. For the adult, we *know* that the seeming peril will pass, and all will be well in the end. It always is. That is how narratives work and can also explain why some stories seem more powerful than others: simplicity, familiarity, and a straightforward solution/resolution all make some narratives more prominent than others (Autesserre 2012, 207).

As such, stories rely on and generate *narrative closure*. Based on a knowledge of how stories unfold, we predict a story's completion and appropriate conclusion in the form of a new equilibrium established for the no-longer embattled protagonist. This impulse to narrative closure is powerful: We all *will* an end. Should we be deprived of a happy ending, or an ending at all, there is a sense of frustration. This *narrative expectation* is a crucial component of narrative power. Once unleashed, stories can take on a life and force of their own, structuring foreign policy choices and options regardless of subsequent author intentionality (Krebs and Lobasz 2007). Once told, stories can envelop their authors, recreating their own identities, and encouraging the adoption of specific behaviors based on the logic of narrative. Here, we end up back in the theoretical terrain of strategic narrative theory—the point where agency kicks back in, or does not. Our emphasis, though, is on a theoretical rebalancing, emphasizing those instances where, for example, narrative becomes more powerful than its author. Authorial agency never disappears fully but is limited to the writing of new characters or chapters, rather than plotting the story anew. As such, narratives can end up constraining those who use them, a fact recognized even by those interested in the "strategic" use of narratives (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'loughlin 2010).[1] Agency may well kick back in at the thick

end of discourse, but so too, we argue, can structure swallow authors.

To summarize our theoretical argument, before turning to our case study: Linguistic research in IR has brought a wealth of new insights about identities in international politics, but we argue that a deeper understanding of narratives can add value to IR for two main reasons. First, contributing to allied efforts, narratives introduce a range of characters, beyond parsimonious identity binaries, and wherein (as a crucial opening move) the protagonist is not necessarily the Self. Second, narratives possess a structural force that is both different from and goes beyond the persuasion of rhetoric, the preferred reading of frames, and the underpinning of discourse. Below, these two elements—(nuanced) character construction and (structural) narrative power—combine to help us make sense of US foreign policy in the Syrian Civil War.

Methodology

To study the narration of the Syrian Civil War and its associated character constructions, we conducted a qualitative analysis, focusing on January 2011 to December 2013 as the principal period during which the Syrian Civil War was storied. In line with Hansen's (2006, 57) Model 2 (which focuses on intertextual foreign policy debates), our dataset comprises texts from US political and media elites from across the political spectrum, including US foreign policy statements from high-ranking officials (e.g., President, Secretaries of State, and Defense) and elected representatives (e.g., senators and members of Congress) speaking from an "authorized" or elected position, as well as media coverage in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*, as the country's two foremost political newspapers. Comprehensive subject inclusion created an original dataset of 658 texts referring to Syria in the period under analysis. Data were analyzed via manual "in vivo" or open coding, i.e., codes were derived from an inductive reading of the texts combined with our knowledge and experience of analyzing US foreign policy and the Syrian Civil War. As we wanted to remain sensitive to the narratives produced by our storytellers (Bold 2012), open coding was preferred and helped us generate fifty-two codes divided into nine themes (as seen in online appendix 2). In the second stage, we undertook a narrative analysis of these codes. We focused on content and connections rather than on "precisely how [the] narrative is structured" (Riessman 2008, 73). Sticking to a strict sequential or structural model of what a story is and how it should unfold can be limiting (Bold 2012), especially when looking at a story that is still being written.

To connect the codes, we used the distinct features of narratives, first and foremost emplotment and characterization. *Emplotment* is "the chronological succession of events" (Franzosi 1998, 520), i.e., the process through which stories connect events and characters into a meaningful whole (Jannidis 2003, 43). Emplotment involves causality (Spencer 2016, 16; Graef, Da Silva, and Lemay-Hébert 2020, 432), temporal ordering (e.g., Todorov 1971; Jannidis 2003; Hagström and Gustafsson 2019), and, very usually, a predictable (dis)equilibrium cycle, involving the break-up of stability, resulting in the necessity of change and transformation in the quest for a new status quo (e.g., Todorov 1971;

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[1]This does not mean, of course, that narratives are "all powerful." In fact, events can sometimes overtake a story and its authors, switching processes of understanding to draw on alternative epistemologies. As Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin (2014, 78) note, "events … can counter the most sophisticated … narrative." In addition, all narratives exist in an environment of contestation and debate: "Even the most powerful narratives can be doubted, contested and re-

jected. Narrative power, in other words, is accompanied by a degree of narrative resistance, and the construction and dissemination of counter-narratives that challenge 'dominant and hegemonic narratives'" (Hagström and Gustafsson 2019, 396).

Patterson and Monroe 1998; Wibben 2011, 324). Using emplotment, the codes identified were connected into intelligible sequences (Antoniades, Miskimmon, and O'loughlin 2010, 4) that establish relations between events, time, and space (Somers and Gibson 1993, 27) in order to "find narrative meaning" (Kim 2016). To this central concern with emplotment, we add *characterization*—as the way in which actors are defined and related to one another—as well as several effects or consequences of the structural power of narratives (as defined in the previous section). In particular, we look for the *expectations* produced by the narrative to lead to a new *equilibrium* (that is, a resolution to the initial disruption or change of situation). Relatedly, we pay attention to the *interruptions* that emerge when these expectations are not fulfilled or when the story seems derailed.

Narrative Power and Syria's Protagonist

> Protagonist (noun) – the leading character; the advocate or champion of a particular cause or idea. (definition from Oxford Languages)

In addition to being a crushing and terrible conflict, the Syrian Civil War has also, inevitably, played out as stories competing to make meaning out of the complex situation on the ground. In the first section, we explore how the United States constructed the Syrian people as the narrative's protagonist and most important character. This character was clearly distinct from the US Self, positioned as a bystander to the people's fight and story. This character construction was important, creating a popular protagonist, whose victory was welcomed and inevitable, but who was not coterminous with the United States and its own interests. This construction of the Syrian protagonist also set the ground for the writing of an evolving but less-than-wholly Other antagonist in the character of Bashar al-Assad, before helping to set the stage for the even more nuanced writing of (later) emergent opposition forces.

The US writing of the protagonist was deliberately—*strategically*—very familiar to a US audience.[2] Those fighting Assad were portrayed as "the people" with recourse to liberal values in three principal ways: (i) articulating their liberal motivation; (ii) explicitly linking this underpinning desire to America's own (hi)story; and (iii) noting modernity's teleology. Specifically, in combination, these narrative themes entwined to produce a protagonist who was innocent, peaceful, and secular, as well as potentially being a liberal actor the United States could support, were it not for the fact that such support was not needed: within the narrative logic of US foreign policy, this was "the people's" struggle—their voice and their fight—and their victory was already inevitable. The narration of this opening scene was vitally important, populated as it was with a readily relatable protagonist and pregnant with narrative expectations. However, the (structural) narrative power inherent in this opening chapter also had profound political implications. Not only did this pitch the Syrian story as "theirs," but it also served to portray the United States as external to the story. This was written as a narrative of which the US Self was not a part; it was somebody else's story. And that would come to shape a debilitating ends-means gap in US policy.

Syria's protagonist was written with recourse to mutually reinforcing (religious, economic, and political) traits

such as liberal, innocent (Lieberman 2011b, Representative Marino in House of Representatives 2013a)[3], peaceful (Obama 2011c; Lieberman 2011b), and secular (Kerry in US Senate 2013d). The emplotment of causality followed suit, with the narration of the protagonist's motivation: After years of oppression, an initial disequilibrium was created by the popular revolt, and the Syrian "people" were fighting for their fundamental, inherent, and universal human rights, "including peaceful assembly, expression, and speech" (see Clinton 2011c, also Clinton 2011e, 2012k; McDonagh 2011; Carney 2011b), as well as, of course, "the ability to freely choose their leaders"—a "representative government" (Obama 2011a, 2013a). This, then, was about "the legitimate aspirations of the Syrian people for dignity, universal rights, and the rule of law" (Clinton 2011i). There were moments where the US narration became particularly clear, for instance, in declaring that the Syrian people were calling for secular, market-based democracy—"to have an economic system that responds to their personal effort" (Clinton 2011i) and "to have the kind of democratic institutions that will maximize their individual opportunities" (Clinton 2011l). But this remained written as *their* story, imbuing the Syrian Civil War's writing with myopic propulsion, as an American audience now expected its successful resolution, in favor—quite naturally—of the embattled protagonist, located on the right side of history (Obama 2011b; Clinton 2011k, 2011o; Carney 2012a; Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Hof in House of Representatives 2011b).

In its first chapter, therefore, Syria was written as a liberal story, with a noble protagonist, locked in a battle that was at once particular *and* universal (Obama 2012c). The people fought for an outcome with which few could argue, and with which Americans were intimately familiar as it echoed "everything that we have stood for and pioneered over 235 years" (Clinton 2011m). Yet, as we show below, despite being "custodians of a great democracy that was forged in revolution" with a "special obligation to support and nurture the aspirations of others who seek to secure for themselves and their posterity the blessings of liberty" (Schiff 2011; see also Kerry 2011; Lieberman 2011a; House of Representatives 2011a, 2013d), the narrative expectation set by US foreign policy detracted from the possibility of greater assistance.

In part, because the rights that the Syrian "people" were proclaimed to demand are universal—and because they have been so successful in the United States—the US narrative explicitly emphasized the people's *inevitable* liberal triumph. Answering a question on whether the United States should not be "blowing" the winds of change in the direction of Damascus, Clinton (2011a) answered: "We don't have to blow. The winds are blowing. There's no stopping them." Underpinning a policy of passive approval, rather than direct assistance, was a particular understanding of the Syrian story as a part of modernity's teleology; liberal transformation must and will take place, in Syria, as elsewhere. As Clinton (2011g) confirmed: "It's caught people by surprise in terms of the timing, but not in terms of the inevitability that there would have to be changes." Storied as inexorable, resistance becomes futile—akin to trying to stop the passage of time: "President Assad may try to delay the changes underway in Syria, but he cannot reverse them" (Clinton 2011d; see also Clinton 2011e; Obama 2012a). As such, Syria's principal protagonist—"the people"—helps to set up a story of both liberal ethic *and* chronology. This was

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[2]This is also a narrative that is familiar beyond the United States: As noticed by Selbin (2010, 17), stories of revolution are often constructed around the character of a brave, valiant, and often young "people" demanding freedom, equality, or justice.

[3]Due to the size of the dataset, citations for empirical sources can be found in the online appendix.

in keeping with a line Obama never tired of telling staffers and Americans: that the arc of history bends, sometimes slowly but *inevitably*, toward justice. A familiar plot was established in the writing of the opening scenes. Structural narrative power emerged from the audience's familiarity with liberal stories. With a liberal narrative that tapped, primarily, into the optimism of a soft Wilsonian tradition (Mead 2010; Cha 2015), success (in the form of a new equilibrium achieved by a familiar protagonist) was seemingly inevitable. There was no way to "hold back the future" (Clinton 2011j, 2011o); the story simply must and unavoidably would unfold (independent of the will of its author).

The characterization of the Syrian protagonist was powerful and consequential in its resonance, as well as its narrative and policy impact. To begin with, a potent narrative logic rendered Assad, relationally, as antagonist to the protagonist of the Syrian people (e.g., Hansen 2006). This journey, however, took time through the opening pages of the Syrian story. Assad's identity was far from certain in 2011, marked as it was in contrast to his father, *and* via Western-friendly associations, dress, and demeanor. Indeed, liberal reform in Syria was contrasted to neighboring states in the region, led by a figure associated with sharp suits and formative years spent training (as a squeamish ophthalmologist) in London. The writing of a bloodthirsty tyrant took time, and followed violent crackdowns on protests, sparking recurrent if one-sided protagonist–antagonist clashes. Slowly, the identity of the antagonist hardened. Despite initial appearances, Assad was just another violent dictator. Early US policy pronouncements on democratic reform gave way, first, to transition, before ending in the irredeemable policy mantra of "Assad must go." Clearly, a liberal, peaceful protagonist was now locked in battle with an antagonist whose identity had rapidly evolved through changing characterizations of Assad and his family.

Yet the oft-repeated policy mantra of "Assad must go" remained coupled to the coercive force of narrative expectation, discouraging the necessary action to ensure that Assad would indeed fall. Liberal inevitability significantly reduced the perceived need to act, absolving the United States of moral responsibility to intervene. The result was that the United States could rhetorically support the people, without intervening to help them, beyond indirect (e.g., intelligence and training) and non-lethal humanitarian assistance (e.g., vehicles and meals ready to eat). This failure to match policy means and ends was established in the opening chapter of the story of the Syrian Civil War (Ralph, Holland, and Zhekova 2017; Holland 2020). We argue that it was formed, in significant part, through the construction of "the people" as a liberal protagonist cast in a narrative with universal appeal; a familiar liberal tale, widely understood as inexorable—an unstoppable wave of uprisings, washing away the relics of the past. This time, the story was Syria's— *their* will, the will of "the people," in Damascus as elsewhere before (Clinton 2011i, 2012a; Kerry 2013e). As such, the Syrian story was supposedly separate from and independent of the US itself. Yet, despite its force, the US narrative was about to be interrupted.

Narrative Interruption: The Emergence of a Fractured Opposition

One of the significant challenges to the crafting of resonant foreign policy storylines occurs when a protagonist's identity is altered by factors outside of policymakers' control (Roselle, Miskimmon, and O'Loughlin 2014, 78). As Shepherd (2013, 5) explains, the "linearity of narratives is always under threat" from disruptions. For the United States, as the Syrian Civil War entered a distinct second phase, the key protagonist became harder to identify as a new actor— perhaps, a range of new actors—entered the stage. With the Syrian "people" written as the quintessential embodiment of liberal desire, the unwritten emergence of a diverse range of Syrian "opposition" groups posed a stark challenge to the US narration of the civil war. To borrow Abboud's (2016, ch. 1) phrase, this was the challenge of narrating "parallel processes of revolution and civil war," within a single, resonant story. In the context of the US narrative, the new figure of the "opposition" would become characterized by three principal features in US foreign policy discourse from 2012 to 2013: (i) as entering the fray later than "the people"; (ii) as anti-liberal—fragmented (not unified), violent (not peaceful), and "sectarian" (not secular) (Ford in US Senate 2013b); and (iii) as essentially unknowable, thus requiring paradigmatic classifications. These narrative threads were tied together to construct a character at once adversarial to "the people" and, relatedly, simply not understood (with a potential to derail the Syrian story). The "opposition" was established as a distorted, perverse, or inverted form of the "people," as the United States temporally demarcated the two groups, with a focus on the (romanticized) simplicity of the people's initial liberal uprising, now sadly lost to nebulous complexity. This illustrates our earlier claim that authorial agency remains present (here in the form of the writing of new characters) even when structural narrative power limits the possibility of deviation from the now established story.

The US characterization of the opposition portrayed three main traits: its disunity, its violence, and its illiberalism. First, the "opposition" is fragmented and, as such, complex. On this, Leon Panetta was particularly explicit: "there are so many diverse groups that are involved [… that it] is not clear what constitutes the Syrian armed opposition. There has been no single unifying military alternative that can be recognized, appointed, or contacted" (US Senate 2012a; see also Clinton 2011b). As Senator McCain lamented, "it is even more complicated than the day it started … every day that goes by, there are more and more of these extremists coming in and making it more and more complicated" (US Senate 2013c). This degree of perceived fragmentation in "a very multiple—multifaceted group" (Posner 2011) gave rise to some particularly vivid imagery: The opposition could be understood as the "the hydra-headed Syrian insurgency" (House of Representatives 2013b). US policymakers remained unclear as to whether "the opposition" constituted a single actor or (how) many. While Ford (House of Representatives 2013a) described two groups—political and military—the House noted "at least eight" (Representative Higgins in House of Representatives 2013c), while Generals identified "approximately 100" (US Senate 2012a). Tellingly, for Hagel (in US Senate 2013c), "shifting and fragmented," Syria's latest character(s) could usefully be thought of as "this opposition crowd"; plural, unruly, and identifiable together only by virtue of their occupation of the same geographic space.

Crucially for American efforts at character writing, disunity was accompanied by disorganization in lieu of leadership (Clinton 2012g; Representative Deutch in House of Representatives 2013c), limiting the possibility of emplotting the "opposition" into a causal sequence of actions. For the United States, "the pressure require[d] an organized opposition, and there [was]n't one" (Clinton 2011l). Rather, in contrast to the unified "people," "the opposition" was seen

to "fight each other sometimes with the same vigor that they fight the regime" (Ford 2013). Fault lines were described as ranging from "differences of opinion" (Kerry 2013a) to "bitter divisions" (see also US Senate 2013b; Ford 2013). In turn, Syria's central plotline shifted from liberal revolution to the tragedy of being mired in a "tribalized and sectarian-divided country" (MacFarquhar 2012; see also Bilefsky 2011; Editorial Board 2012; Friedman 2012).This reflected both active narration and its limits, as a paradigmatic and classificatory mode—or simple epistemological uncertainty—actively derailed and curtailed policy. The upshot was, quite simply, difficulty in knowing whom to assist. As the White House Press Secretary succinctly made clear, "there is not an organized opposition to whom we would give aid at this point" (Carney 2011a; see also Cardin 2013a). The media upshot was audience disinterest, as the story deviated from established and accessible narrative frameworks, becoming too challenging for most to follow.

The risk of engaging an "opposition" that comprised myriad groups, many of which were highly unpalatable for a US audience, was significantly off-putting for many US policymakers. This risk was compounded by the apparently unknown and unknowable nature of "the opposition's" exact composition. This epistemological murkiness was debilitating of US assistance and juxtaposed the easy familiarity supposed of "the people," written as a purely liberal, heroic protagonist. In the House, concerns about the identity of the "opposition" were expressed frequently. In June 2013, for instance, one representative simply asked, "there are numerous rebel groups trying to remove Assad from power. Who exactly are these rebels?" (Poe 2013a). The answer was (un)clear, "we're still not sure who all these people are" (Poe 2013b). The answer from the Obama administration similarly revealed confusion surrounding the new actor's identity. "As for the opposition … I think Ambassador Ford has done a superb job trying to meet with everyone and to understand who all the characters are. And I don't think we know yet how all of this will form" (Sherman 2011). For Ford, the "opposition" was notably "dynamic. It is always evolving and new groups appear and there are mergers" (US Senate 2013b). For Clinton (2011f), the outcome was straightforward: "I don't think we know how the opposition in Syria will be able to conduct itself or what kind of avenues for action are open to it." That epistemological lacuna prohibited help or assistance. It was hard to side with an actor without clear character, and it was hard to characterize such a murky new figure. Clinton (2012d) expressed this difficulty clearly when stating, "first of all, we really don't know who it is that would be armed … We don't have any clarity on that." Hence, "There are risks to dealing with an opposition that you don't know," and Syria remains "a very confusing environment" (Representative Tabler in House of Representatives 2012).

Second, and amidst this uncertainty, the efforts to characterize the "opposition" centered on their difference to Syria's protagonist, with a focus on violent illiberalism (e.g., US Senate 2013a). This illustrates the limited options available to the United States within the narrative they had constructed. This theme was shared across political and media elites, as commentary noted that peaceful protests were being replaced by a turn to violence with opponents of Assad "resorting" to taking up arms (Shadid 2011a, 2011b; Sly 2011).The "opposition" thus matched the violence of the regime, with claims of "massacres by pro- and anti-government militias" (Warrick 2012) commonplace and even early warnings of "atrocities carried out by some rebel factions" (Wilson 2013, see also Senator Udall in US Senate 2013a), including against women:

> … the persecution of women, specifically, is not really confined to Assad's forces … it's anybody. It's criminals from foreign countries, it's so-called Freedom Fighters, it's revolutionaries, it's just bad guys. (Representative Poe in House of Representatives 2013a)

Employing "the same brutal violence" as the "government" (Fortenberry 2013), it was easy to "question the wisdom of helping rebels who may be even more evil and barbaric than Syrian President Assad" (Brooks 2013). Nonetheless, there was recognition, among many policymakers, that "the opposition" had little choice: They were simply "moving to defend themselves, which is to be expected" (Clinton 2012b). Hence, ultimately, "the regime" remained "responsible for the cycle of violence and sectarianism" according to the Under Secretary for Political Affairs (Sherman 2011). The "opposition" was "taking up arms in self-defense" (Feltman 2011), combating "increasingly brutal repression," and pursuing the formation of the "political space to organize and make their voices heard" (Sherman 2011), just as Americans had once done (Representative Rohrabacher in House of Representatives 2011b). And yet, despite these links, opposition violence was lamented. For Clinton (2011n), America "strongly believe[s] it is their interest to maintain their nonviolent approach to this" since "they have the moral high ground right now." Hence, violence is "profoundly regrettable" or, as Senator Feltman put it (in explicit recognition of the importance of a liberal story), "counterproductive. It will play into the regime's hands, divide the opposition, and undermine international consensus against the regime" (Feltman 2011; Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Hof in House of Representatives 2011b). In short, this was a confusing characterization: The opposition were not only hard to understand and multiple; they were violent and illiberal, closer to Assad than the people, committing atrocities, but forced to act.

Finally, and coupled to violence, fundamental illiberalism was inscribed on the opposition in a variety of ways, including portrayals of fighting for power and individual interests rather than democracy (US Senate 2012c; see also Hagel in US Senate 2013c), sectarianism (e.g., Shadid 2011b), and links to extremism (e.g., Obama 2012b). The concern that parts of the opposition were in fact supported by or promoting terrorist groups was expressed regularly in both chambers (House of Representatives 2013a). In the Senate, 20–25 percent of the "opposition" was deemed to be "Islamic fundamentalists, some of them affiliated with Al Qaeda" (Senator Sanders in US Senate 2013a). For others, the number was far higher: "the majority now of these rebels [*sic*] forces—and I say majority now—are radical Islamists pouring in from all over the world to come to Syria for the fight" (Representative McCaul in House of Representatives 2013d). For a more proactive US foreign policy, the principal challenge became the identification of the "good guys" (Coats 2013; Collins 2013), with some expressing skepticism at the very possibility of "moderate" members of "the opposition" (or moderates even existing in the Middle East):

> We're told that al Qaeda's not more than a fourth of our new coalition and that the rest are moderates. Well, we were told the same thing about Libya. We were told the same thing about the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. The problem with moderates in the Middle East is that there aren't very many of them,

and they're quickly overwhelmed in any coalition they attempt. (McClintock 2013)

This made support difficult. In the House, for instance, skepticism was expressed since "even the strongest supporters of our direct and immediate military involvement in Syria admit that the rebel forces are made up of many groups, including al Qaeda, and no one is sure to whom the assistance should be given" (Paul 2012a; see also Paul 2012b; US Senate 2012b).

The "opposition"—as divided, violent, and illiberal—thus seemed to unravel America's storying of the crisis, moving the plot away from the Syrian "people" as the original protagonist fighting for liberty. At this stage, however, the policy lessons for the relationship of "the opposition" to the United States were ironically rendered clear by virtue of the group's opacity. That the "opposition" were so fundamentally unknowable in their foreignness, identified through their illiberalism, rendered American support for those now fighting Assad too risky for all but the most hawkish of foreign policy elites. If limited insight was insufficient, that "the opposition" failed to share American values did the trick in dissuading those initially predisposed to militarily confront Assad. The rise of an opposition narrated as antithetical to the people served only to enable the Obama administration to double down on the preferred anti-war policy and embrace an ends-means gap established in the war's opening chapter.

Narrating the Opposition: Hijackers and Sidekicks

The emergence of an "illiberal," if largely unknown, opposition as the main opponent to Assad created significant challenges for American foreign policy and liberal storytelling. Alternative stories—narrating complexity and partisan aims, with apt historical analogies (e.g., W. Clinton and "Balkan Ghosts")—were possible, but America's liberal story now possessed and displayed considerable narrative power. America's liberal story continued, due to its resonance and the desire for narrative closure, i.e., the (re-)establishment of equilibrium. By this stage, therefore, the United States was discursively entrapped within its own liberal storytelling, as well-written characters and emplotments combined to further the story of the Syrian Civil War. America's foreign policy and its liberal storytelling had developed a "life of its own," pushing the United States to move on the plot while preserving "narrative coherence" as the persuasive and perpetual power of story battled alongside external events (Kluver, Skye, and Hinck 2019, 97). Crucially, strategic agency was constrained by structural narrative power; the United States could shape new characters but was entrapped within a plot that could no longer be transformed. At the same time, and to preserve the story itself, the United States could not change the key protagonist nor give itself a more prominent and interventionist role in a story built around another character. How, then, was the story continued, despite the emergence of a new, complicating, and less-than-liberal character? In this section, we show how the United States used two strategies to narrate the "opposition" *back* into the story: hijacking and the reconnection of the "opposition" to the "people."

First, the emergence of the opposition was written through a familiar and well-understood narrative development: It was a hijacking. This authorial innovation presented the development as an interruption, which the audience would immediately understand as temporary and wrong. Americans knew that, as protagonists, the Syrian people—their plight and liberal quest—would soon, once

again, be center stage. Hence, the most important move made by the United States in its liberal storytelling centered on the notion that the people's cause had been hijacked by new, illiberal actors: The "force for good" had "now been taken over by forces that are not so good" (King 2013). For example, terrorist organizations were repeatedly written as attempting to "hijack the struggles of the legitimate Syrian opposition" (Assistant Secretary Glaser in US Senate 2013b). This was a powerful narrative development in that it enabled the preservation of a pure image of the "people"—America's preferred liberal protagonist. Senate hearings heard of how "the opposition" had "been co-opted by the extremists" (Representative Ros-Lehtinen in House of Representatives 2013a). Or, as one declaration in the House of Representatives established, the "people" are caught in the middle of the extremists who now dominate among the rebels (Poe 2013a). Specifically, for the White House Press Secretary, "the al-Nusra front is al Qaeda in Iraq's attempt to rebrand itself in order to hijack the struggles of the legitimate Syrian opposition to further its own extremist ideology" (Carney 2012b). The suggestion of "taking over" is interesting not only because it reinforces the illiberal depiction of "the opposition," but also for the suggestion that a formerly pure movement had been infiltrated by non-liberal forces.

However, this disruption of the story was not sustainable. The key to the preservation of the liberal narrative would be the reconnecting of this new character—the "opposition"—to the achievement of the desired new equilibrium and therefore to the protagonist itself: the Syrian "people." This was done in several ways. As a first step, the United States focused on identifying (and, ultimately, narrating) a specific character—the "moderate" opposition—that was believed to better represent the liberal goals of the "people." There was scope for greater support for those fighting Assad, if only the United States could marginalize the extremists seeking to hijack the liberal people's cause. The White House Press Secretary, for instance, declared, "we believe that those elements within the Syrian opposition who do not hold the views that Syria needs to move towards greater democracy and rights for their citizens, that they should be isolated" (Carney 2012b). As Kerry (2013g, emphasis added) also explained in September 2013:

> We all know there are about 11 really bad opposition groups – *so-called opposition*. They're not – they're fighting Assad; they are not part of the opposition that is being supported by our friends and ourselves. That is a moderate opposition (…) and we are busy separating the support we're giving from any possibility of that support going to these guys.

This required the articulation of liberal goals, or, as Obama (2012b) explained, "making sure that that opposition is committed to a democratic Syria, an inclusive Syria, a moderate Syria." American policymakers frequently insisted on democracy, tolerance, pluralism, the rule of law, and human and minority rights (e.g., Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Hof in House of Representatives 2011b; Clinton 2012c, 2012i; Kerry 2013b). Clinton (2012e), for instance, repeatedly emphasized the need for "democratic principles and international human rights standards that the Syrian people have been demanding and that we in the international community expect." Theirs was a "struggle for justice, dignity, and self-determination" (Clinton 2012l).

> They're not fighting and dying and sacrificing their lives because they're Muslim extremists. They're fight-

ing and dying because they want the same universal rights and freedom that we guaranteed in our Constitution. (US Senate 2012a)

Yet crucially, and in a second step, this new character also had to be supported or helped from the outside. Preserving the story meant making sure that liberal actors were still the main force in Syria. To further strengthen the "moderate" opposition as a new character, the United States worked on mobilizing or helping those that could make this character play its part in the story, or, as Obama (2012d) put it, "[we are] particularly interested in making sure that we're mobilizing the moderate forces inside of Syria." General Dempsey (in US Senate 2013d) argued as such (while also revealing America's role) when he declared, "the path to the resolution of the Syrian conflict is through a developed, capable, moderate opposition, and we know how to do that." For Deputy National Security Advisor for Strategic Communications Ben Rhodes (2013a), "part of the rationale of supporting the opposition is to create a more moderate foundation for opponents of the regime so that we're marginalizing extremists and empowering people that we believe will respect the rights of the Syrian people in a post-Assad Syria."

The United States did not hide their efforts, with non-lethal assistance, such as nearly expired Meals Ready to Eat, supplied to the moderate opposition. It was clear that the role of the United States was "to help organize and mobilize a political opposition that is credible" (Obama 2013b) and "stand up" (Clinton 2012h) moderate forces. As Rhodes (2013b) noted, "we have carefully designed our assistance programs to ensure that it's focused on strengthening a moderate opposition." Similarly for Clinton (2011o), in a stark case of condescending liberal hypocrisy, the United States "has real expertise to offer as a democracy" because "democracies, after all, are not born knowing how to run themselves." Clear recognitions of external support thus appeared in US foreign policy discourses—e.g., the United States was "doing all that we can to support the opposition," assisting the opposition in order "to save Syria" and "find the right path forward" (Clinton 2012n). If "a Syrian-led political transition leading to a pluralistic political system representing the will of the people" (Clinton 2012m) was needed, it became increasingly clear that the United States was an active participant in that transition. After all, the United States shared the "same goal as the Syrian people … peaceful, political transition" (Kerry 2013c).

The final narrative step, however, was to make sure that the role of the United States in shaping the opposition would not contradict the narrative itself (in which the United States is, supposedly, only a secondary character). The structural power of the narrative demanded continuation, leaving the United States (as narrator) constrained parameters to act. By reconnecting the "moderate" opposition to the "people," the narrative logic of the story—that of an ultimately triumphant, independent, and liberal Syrian "people"—would be preserved. The US policy, as Ambassador Rice (2013) put it, was about "helping the opposition better serve the needs of the Syrian people." As became clear, far from merely noting a pre-established connection, the United States was narrating and creating it. As Clinton (2012j, emphasis added) explained, "we will continue to do everything we can to assist the opposition to be perceived as—and in reality become—the alternative voice for the Syrian people's future" (see also Kerry 2013b). If successful, the story of a home-grown movement would be preserved.

Reconnecting the "moderate opposition" to the "people" also served a second purpose: to limit the possibility of seeing the United States as intervening in a narrative where the protagonist was portrayed as endogenous and independent. The role of the protagonist could thus be preserved, ensuring the coherence of the story. The United States, moderate opposition, and Syrian people were related thusly: The United States would "continue to support the moderate opposition … in its efforts to be able to defend the interests of the vast majority of the people of Syria" (Kerry 2013h). This tension was encapsulated in Kerry's (2012a) explanation that "it is time for us to redouble our efforts to engage with Syria's political opposition to try to shape their thinking, to understand it more fully" (read: "we will understand them, when we have taught them to think like us"). In conjunction, Kerry (2012b) called for more temperate opponents of the regime to "present to Syria and the world a coherent vision of a tolerant and pluralistic post-Assad society." Hypocritical policy formulations followed: "we will support the opposition in order to see that the people of Syria can choose their future in an appropriate way" (Kerry 2013f). This clear tension between intervention and non-intervention was a direct result of the liberal American narrative, as US policy became a prescriptive construction of a liberal opposition that the United States could see itself supporting, in pursuit of goals it helped design, in accordance with the liberal narrative that it built.

Reconnecting the "moderate opposition" to the "people" thus served the goal of preserving the liberal narrative. The Syrian story was still attached to the figure of the protagonist—a "liberal people" fighting for their rights. To maintain the credibility of the story, the Syrian "people" as the main character was again placed center stage: The moderate "opposition," supported from outside, was, in reality, defending the same objectives as the liberal "people" of the inside, thus making this moderate "opposition" a home-grown movement and a true representation of the popular movement in Syria. This narrative move enabled the United States to portray its own role as enabling a movement that had little to do with their own normative preferences. It also served to obscure the role of the United States in this story, such as in this statement of the Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs of the Department of State:

> The opposition, obviously, is not a creature of the United States of America. It is very independent. It is made up of a coalition of extraordinarily independent people. They have their own thoughts on how to proceed. They have their own thoughts on what the transition from dictatorship to rule of law should look like. (House of Representatives 2011b)

This was a powerful narrative move that served to hide the interventions of the United States in the story. On "their" guiding principles, the United States argued: "it's their document" (Kerry 2013d). On "their" plans, "we need the opposition to come forward and say: This is how we would put it together" (Ford 2013). On "their" actions, "we're encouraged by what we see of the Syrian people doing for themselves. This is not anything the United States or any other country is doing. It's what the Syrians are doing" (Clinton 2011h). The policy implications of this narrative move were profound, enabling the United States to maintain the fiction that the country was merely the stagehand to the liberal protagonist in the story of the Syrian Civil War. As Clinton (2012f) emphatically declared, "lasting change comes from within. Societies must be the authors of their own futures." In reality, of course, the United States had written the characters and their lines, helping to shape the unfolding story, based on their own experience. It was an American story

transposed onto Syria. And it continued to be written, in the face of unforeseen events, as the United States was compelled by narrative power to write the protagonist (hero) and deuterogamist (sidekick) of the Syrian story, reducing the rest of the opposition to the role of tertiary characters, such as (temporary) hijackers.

Conclusion

This article has theorized and demonstrated the added value of narratology to IR, through a narrative analysis of the US storying of the Syrian Civil War in its opening chapters. Throughout, we have shown how a US narrative interacted—complemented and competed—with the messy reality of events "on the ground" in Syria, enabling, shaping, and constraining the political possibility of a range of policy options. First, and focusing on the protagonist of the story, we discussed how "the people" were neither the Self nor an Other but came to occupy a position that enabled both "sides" to be defined—one as the example of (liberal) progress and the other as evolving into a tyrannical dictator. Constructed in these terms, the United States was able to link the Syrian people to the plight of all Americans, who themselves had shrugged off the yoke of demagoguery to pursue the American Dream, protected by the liberal institutions of democracy, capitalism, and the rule of law. This chapter of the Civil War illustrates the first theoretical contribution of the article: the importance of nuanced character construction, beyond Self and Other. Yet this portrayal of the protagonist also implied a resolutely non-interventionist stance for the United States: Constructed as the protagonist of the story, the Syrian people were to fight their own revolution.

Second, this article has also illustrated the way stories exercise expectations and call for closure. A resonant story, such as this, takes on a life of its own. Once told, a resolution in the form of a new status quo is expected. This can constrain actors, limiting and shaping their policy options. In the case of Syria, we traced how the original construction of those fighting Assad was challenged by the emergence of myriad "opposition" forces, defined by a combination of violent illiberalism and a fundamental unknowability derived from complexity. Faced with this situation, American policymakers/storytellers worked to preserve their liberal narrative—even when faced with difficulties and contradictions—thus illustrating the power of narratives. In order to preserve narrative coherence, policymakers wrested back narrative control through the metaphors of hijackers and sidekicks, demarcating and characterizing a liberal, moderate opposition. This points to a central tension unleashed by narrative power: forced to follow the logics of its original story, and thus having to intervene in order to maintain it in the face of unexpected or contradictory developments, the narrator is at risk of disrupting its own story of endogenous liberal revolt. Here, the United States insists on its role as "facilitator" and on its limited intervention in a story that is supposedly unfolding independently and propelled forward by its liberal protagonist: the Syrian "people."

Third, we have shown how complex character construction and narrative power combined to not only set the scene, but also help to shape how the conflict has developed; US language established the narrative conditions that underpinned the possibility of America's policy response, eventually constraining action. Between 2011 and 2013, US narratives established a fundamental tension, whereby Assad had to go, because his identity was understood relative to a liberal people, but the United States could not fully back the people as it was their story to tell and a battle they would inevitably win. This ends-means gap was reinforced by the emergence of a complex opposition that was difficult to narrate and demonstrated the interaction of (structural) narrative power with strategic authorial agency.

The implications of this research are significant. First, in this article, we have shown how narratives are a distinct linguistic feature, different from those such as frames and discourses, despite IR's tendency to conflation. Second, this distinctiveness is useful, theoretically and methodologically, as it enables IR to continue to move beyond identity binaries, exploring a broader and more nuanced range of characters, such as protagonists and antagonists, as well as deuterogamists and others. Third, what really sets stories apart is not their strategic usage but their structural narrative power—their myopic and teleological propulsion, derived from the deep and early learned expectations of humans pertaining to narrative closure. Fourth, IR should pay greater attention to the structural power of narrative and mobilize narratology to analyze complex relational identities in conflict because doing so can unlock the vital role of stories in shaping political and policy possibilities, even in war.

Supplementary Information

Supplementary information is available at the *International Studies Quarterly* data archive.

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