

SOCIAL MOVEMENT THEORY AND THE ONSET OF THE POPULAR UPRISING IN SYRIA

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Abstract: This article takes stock of my attempt to scrutinize the onset of the Syrian uprising with the help of some key analytical concepts derived from social movement theory, including “opportunity” and “threat,” “social networks,” “repertoires of contention,” “framing,” and “diffusion.” These tools allow me to identify and disentangle the mechanisms of early mobilization and the uprising and explain why they commenced in relatively peripheral areas. Social networks and framing processes are argued to have been key in mobilization, by transmitting opportunities derived from the “Arab Spring,” by mediating the nexus between repression and mobilization, by creating and feeding a rich new repertoire of defiant protest acts and claims-making, and by aiding the diffusion or agglomeration of mobilization throughout the country.

Keywords: social movement theory, social networks, social mobilization, “Arab Spring”

Since the Arab uprisings took most Middle East pundits and analysts by surprise, calls have been made to examine the region’s unprecedented scale and intensity of popular mobilization with the help of social movement theory (SMT) (Gause, 2011; Hudson, 2011; Lawrence, 2012; Jamal, 2012; Korany and El-Mahdi, 2012). Likewise, social movement theorists scrambled to apply their insights to the Arab world (*Mobilization—An International Journal*, forthcoming; Alimi and Meyer, 2011). Together these efforts seem to have vindicated those few scholars who already had made a serious attempt to put the Middle East on the map of comparative social movement studies (Beinin and Vairel, 2011a; Bayat, 2007; Wiktorowicz, 2004; Kurzman, 2004 and 1996). If carried out non-mechanically and when informed by a close examination of instances of mobilization throughout the region, this research agenda promises to shed a new and refreshing light on Middle East politics. At the same time it carries the potential of enriching SMT by new insights from a region that hitherto received scant attention. In this chapter, I will take stock of my attempt to scrutinize the onset of the Syrian uprising with the use of some key analytical concepts derived from SMT, including “opportunity” and “threat,” “social networks,” “repertoires of contention,” “framing,” and “diffusion” (Leenders, 2012a; Leenders and Heydemann, 2012; Leenders, forthcoming).¹ Those adhering to a healthy dose of scepticism when it comes to superimposing theoretical models onto messy and

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varying realities do not need to be overly alarmed; despite its presumptuous name, SMT arguably never succeeded in generating a general theory of mobilization or “contentious politics,” and many doubt it should aim for this. As Tilly and Tarrow (2007: xiii) emphasized, its concepts should not be regarded as rules, but as tools. Accordingly, I will first present my main arguments on how in early 2011 Syria’s “early risers” (Tarrow, 1998: 86) perceived opportunities emanating from the region, why they read the regime’s stiff repression or threat as a cause for mobilization instead of submission, how their rich social networks endowed protestors with resources to initiate and sustain mobilization in otherwise unpermissive conditions, how these qualities help explain the initial spread of daring protests, and how protestors framed and acted upon their demands and grievances without being able to draw on rich, pre-existing repertoires of contention and collective action. Subsequently, I will reflect on the merits and risks of consulting social media sources, and YouTube in particular, which helped me obtain a glimpse of Syria’s “stories of revolution” (Selbin, 2010: 28) and piece together an explanation of the onset and early diffusion of mobilization. In the conclusion I will offer some suggestions as to how my study can be viewed as contributing to the study of mobilization more generally, particularly in settings of authoritarian rule.

The Puzzle of Syria’s Early Risers

Despite assurances by many pundits and regime incumbents alike that Syria would prove to be immune to revolution, and following several false starts and ultimately inconsequential skirmishes, Syria’s popular uprising commenced on March 18, 2011 but in a place no one had foreseen (and indeed some had never heard of): the sleepy, provincial town of Dar’a, situated on the plateau of Hawran covering southwestern Syria up to northwestern Jordan. Very quickly protests swelled and spread throughout Dar’a governorate, and then extended to, firstly, Latakia but foremost Homs, Idlib and Deir az-Zur governorates, which began to witness intense and sustained mobilization. Until the summer of 2011 Syria’s early risers succeeded in bringing about unprecedented levels of mass mobilization, thereby collectively posing the most serious challenge against Ba’thist authoritarian rule for decades.

Explaining the onset of popular mobilization in a context of stiff and sustained authoritarianism and repression like in Syria is a difficult task. As game theorists argue, regime challengers face a robust collective action dilemma whereby information about fellow citizens’ preferences and preparedness to run the significant risk of taking to the streets is particularly scarce under more repressive regimes; isolated acts of openly defiant civil resistance are therefore rare (Kricheli, Livne and Magaloni, 2011). Social movement theory scholars variably suggest in this context to focus on changing “political opportunity structures” (Meyer, 2004; Kriesi, 2007).

In their comparative work, they predominantly point at shifting state or regime characteristics by which such opportunities, real or perceived, are generated (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 57-60). Perhaps most commonly, emerging divisions within a regime or sudden cracks in state strength are argued to expand opportunities and prompt contentious mobilization. But on the eve of the Syrian uprising, no such state or regime changes were tangible as the latter appeared to by and large continue its business as usual. But as it turned out, Syrians sensed that events in Tunisia and Egypt had opened a window of opportunity in their country as well. In short, not the regime's features appear to have changed, but many Syrians' perception of their ability to challenge it.

Much has been made in this context of the "domino" or contagious effect of the Arab uprisings, as if the tumbling down of a regime in one part of the region caused other regimes elsewhere to inevitably follow. Among many factors, such an approach overlooks three key questions. Firstly, what accounts for protestors' tendency to view events abroad as so significant to their own realities, and indeed identify a "region" to which they ascribe cognitive and emotional relevance in the first place? Equally important is that the opportunities for contentious politics could still have been missed, wasted, or lost. What, then, explains the effective use of perceived opportunities and their translation into defiant protests, especially in the face of a host of obstacles to collective action? Thirdly, as opportunities emanating from abroad were sensed throughout Syria, why did early mobilization occur in relatively remote and arguably "marginal" environments such as those of Dar'a and not in the country's main urban hubs or in the occasionally restive northeast?

The puzzle of Syria's early mobilization only starts here. Mainstream SMT purports that opportunities for mobilization often come with "threats" or the actual force of regime repression. Consequently, "most people engaging in contentious politics combine response to threat with seizing opportunities" (Tilly and Tarrow, 2007: 58). Syria's early risers, of course, encountered ample regime violence, exemplified by security forces' ruthless response to protest rallies and sit-ins in Dar'a starting at the end of March, culminating in the siege of Dar'a at the end of April and early May, followed by tanks and other heavy armory being sent to pacify Homs in May, and the shelling of Hama in July that same year. Yet theorists, and probably regime strategists alike, struggle to understand under what conditions regime threats and repression become a source of defiant action rather than a cause for submission (Davenport, Johnston and Mueller, 2004; Koopmans, 2007; Earl, 2011; Pierskalla, 2010).² Neither do they provide unequivocal answers to the question how mobilization, once set in motion, is sustained in the face of regime violence and repression, as it clearly did in Dar'a and elsewhere in Syria.

Another theme calling for our attention is the breathtaking richness of the defiant protests and resilient claims-making by Syria's early risers, their inventiveness in

designing and coordinating acts of protest and mobilization, and their lucidness in expressing their grievances and demands. Where did this come from? SMT scholars ascertain that “participants in public claim-making adopt scripts they have performed, or at least observed, before” (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001: 138); mobilizers are thought to this way draw and play on collective “repertoires of contention” (Tilly, 1977). Scholars of discursive “framing processes,” and their relevance for mobilization, similarly suggest mechanisms whereby mobilizers hark back to prior contentious politics, thereby embedding collective action frames in what is sensed as familiar or pretested (Benford and Snow, 2000: 623 and 629; Noakes and Johnston, 2005: 8). This, again, points up to the difficulty of accounting for the onset of the Syrian uprising. After all, Syria certainly witnessed important shades of contentious politics prior to the uprising (De Elvira, 2010; Pierret, 2013; Donker, 2013; Weiss, 2013; Cooke, 2007), but little of this resembled and none matched the collective insolence, the popular weight, and the determination exposed by the early risers of 2011. For one, and in sharp contrast with Syria’s contentious politics prior to the uprising, new forms of contention involved a popularly driven and concerted effort to confront the regime head-on and remove it; no longer attempts predominated that aimed at negotiating a space with, next to or despite the regime (Cooke, 2007; Wedeen, 1999; Heydemann, 2007; Heydemann and Leenders, 2013). Hence, we need to find out how acts and modes of intense revolutionary protest and claims-making developed without strong and consequential prior repertoires of contention due to the regime’s usurpation of public space and politics.

A final conundrum facing Syria’s early risers related to the spread or diffusion of mobilization to other parts of Syria. Following critical mass approaches within SMT one could argue that early risers “at the beginning stages of a cycle of widespread protest activity make opportunities visible that had not been evident, and their actions may change the structure of opportunities” available to others (Tarrow, 1998: 97-98). Varying on a similar theme, game theorists found that especially in strictly authoritarian and repressive settings, early and unprecedented mobilization is even more likely to cascade into a widespread uprising because such protests provide rare informative signals about the intensity of anti-regime sentiment and preparedness to take risks (Kricheli, Livne and Magaloni, 2011). However, most Syrian outsiders outside Dar’*a* also faced a dearth of contentious repertoires, and the skills and resources to initiate and sustain anti-regime mobilization were far from being evident. Even more importantly, and for protests in Dar’*a* to perform the role expected from it in SMT accounts of protest diffusion, it first had to be viewed not as a marginal or peripheral backwaters but as part and parcel of a national playing field ripe for countrywide mobilization. In short, mobilizers had to at least temporarily overcome Syrian society’s strong if not predominant local, regional and transnational identities, and counter regime tactics to play on such forms of national

fragmentation. The extent and ways in which protestors managed to overcome such obstacles therefore need to be scrutinized and explained.

Table 1 The puzzle of Syria's early risers

1. Opportunities from the "Arab Spring"	(a) Why and how did protestors view revolutionary events abroad as significant to them? (b) What explains the effective use of perceived opportunities? (c) Why early mobilization in remote and peripheral environments?
2. The repression-mobilization nexus	(a) How and why did regime violence become a cause for defiant mobilization rather than submission? (b) How was mobilization sustained in the face of increased regime repression?
3. Richness and effectiveness of defiant protest acts and claims-making	Given the dearth of established repertoires of open and defiant contestation, where did protest acts and claims-making come from?
4. Diffusion of protest	(a) How were the skills and resources generated to initiate and sustain anti-regime mobilization by other early risers? (b) How did mobilizers overcome Syria's strong local, regional and transnational identities for early risers to become part and parcel of a national playing field susceptible to mobilization?

Social Networks, Framing and Repertoires

While there are no short or even exhaustive answers to the questions listed schematically in Table 1, many important clues can be found by appreciating the nature of dense social networks in Dar'a and of Syria's other early risers, and by scrutinizing the processes of framing they were involved in. By adopting this focus, my approach matches the work of an increasing number of social movement scholars and others who emphasize the role of social networks in their attempts to understand mobilization despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles and collective action problems (Diani, 2003; Osa, 2003; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001; Einwohner and Maher, 2011; Scott, 1990). As recalled by Beinin and Vairel (2011b: 6), these authors propose a "relational" perspective where "interpersonal networks" allow for and mediate challengers' "perceptions of opportunities and threats"; "active appropriation of sites for mobilization"; their dynamic construction of framing, innovation of repertoires of contention; and a broad processual understanding of mobilization (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001). Local society in Dar'a, and as it turns out in most of Syria's early rising governorates, is characterized by dense, interlinked social networks affecting social, economic and cultural life. These networks informed, motivated and enabled unprecedented mobilization and its spread in the context of radically altered perceptions of opportunities generated by the "Arab Spring" in Tunisia and Egypt.

Firstly, Dar'a's family clan structure and its significance in daily life and coping is remarkable. There are about seven major clans that together constitute the bulk of the governorate's population and social life: the Abu Zeids (the largest clan in Dar'a city); the Zu'bis (the largest rural-based clan in the Hawran); the Hariris; the Masalmas; the Muqdads; the Jawabras; and the Mahamids. The clans provide a major source of solidarity, identity and socio-economic coping or survival. Religiously conservative, the clan structure maintains and guards strict Sunni Muslim values mostly associated with Sufi tendencies. Combining social conservatism with practical coping mechanisms, clans also provide strong values for and a social locus of local conflict management and dispute settlement based on notions of justice and dignity.

Dense social networks, partly interlinked but not wholly overlapping with clan solidarities, also emerged around the region's major source of income: (circular) labor migration. Whatever the exact number of workers and the volume of their remittances, there are strong indications that the Hawran's contribution to what appears to be a growing trend of (circular) labor migration to Lebanon, the Gulf and Jordan, has been disproportionately high. For our purposes what is particularly relevant in this context is that Dar'a's outbound (circular) labor migration has been largely organized via extended social networks, sometimes based on clan membership but also on city or village of origin, or both (Chalcraft, 2009: 69-71, 149).

Another, overlapping network involves cross-border traffic and linkages between Dar'a and Jordan. Due to Dar'a's proximity to the border, much of its social and economic life has been directed toward Jordan, particularly the border town of al-Ramtha and Irbid, 20 kilometers further west. Strong family or clan ties exist between these places, underscored by a strongly felt regional, Hawrani identity rivaling the two countries' respective national identities. Economically, they are closely linked as well, as agricultural produce from Dar'a and neighboring Sweidah, purchased and stored by quasi-monopsonist Dar'awi traders (Roussel, 2008: 219-221), ends up in al-Ramtha's markets. Numerous additional economic opportunities are offered by the major border crossing of Nassib-Jaber, which connects Syria to Jordan and the Arabian Gulf. The busy traffic of people and goods across the border is a major source of income for many Dara'wis, whether these being truck drivers or *bahara* ("sailors," informal taxis transporting or smuggling people and goods such as state subsidized diesel), across the border. All these various, highly mobile economic activities—legal and illegal—are organized via elaborate and trust-based networks linking family or clan members, traders, money exchangers, smugglers, truck drivers, taxi drivers and *bahara*, and corrupt customs officials.

Finally, the Hawran, and particularly Dar'a city, has been known for its disproportionately high crime levels. According to official statistics and based on anecdotal

evidence, Dar'a in 2009 surpassed all other governorates in terms of convictions for common law crimes. What interests us here is that involvement in crime or illegal activity, because of its banned nature and its social organization, generates particular skills, resources, social relations and a social space embedded in networks.

The intensity and qualities of Dar'a's social networks help us to put together the pieces of the puzzle of Syria's uprising. For one, transnational networks associated with labor migration appear to have been key in connecting people of Dar'a to the region and its politics. In short, their mobility made developments in Egypt and elsewhere in the region relevant to them. Such regional connectedness stands in sharp contrast with widely held assumptions of Dar'a as disconnected, peripheral, rural and backwards. The opportunity coming from the revolutions in Egypt and Tunisia was felt and made relevant to local activists through their transnational linkages (thus shedding light on question 1a in Table 1). Secondly, the social networks associated with Dar'a's clan structure help explain why the regime's threats and violence were seen as a cause for mobilization rather than submission. Dar'awis framed the regime's repression as an affront and as an insult to their values embedded in clan networks (answering question 2a). Stories were narrated and shared of the arrest and abuse of two women, one being of the Abu Zeid clan and the other of the Jawabra clan, followed by the arrest and torture of 15 school children who by drawing anti-regime graffiti had rallied in their defense. When a local MP tried to mediate for their release, a local security chief, 'Atef Najib, flatly rebuffed his request and purportedly extended an insulting invitation to send local women to make them conceive some new kids. Enraged and feeling insulted by the regime, the people of Dar'a rallied in protest and, as their numbers swelled, shouted *tuzz!* (which roughly translates into "to hell with you") when security forces opened fire.

Dar'a's social networks also can be viewed as having laid a foundation for protestors' open and defiant articulation of their grievances and demands in the absence of a solid repertoire of contention (question 3). In hindsight it appears that much of the substance of the themes, slogans and rallying cries of the early risers indeed had already been scripted for years on end; not by re-enacting smaller scale dress rehearsals in mass protest, but by what Scott (1990) calls the "hidden transcript" of the subordinated. Relatively insulated from the regime's surveillance, Dar'a's prime social networks had generated a social space for the expression of ideas and a debate on a range of topics ranging from Syria's social and political ills up to the regime's foreign policies, and regional and international politics. Protected by the built-in trust of social networks and their relative insulation from regime surveillance, individuals jointly developed strong notions of their shared grievances and non-conforming views on Ba'hist rule. As soon as mobilization began, protestors' framing appeared to heavily lean on this "hidden transcript," with protestors taking full advantage of the shock-effect realized by giving a public

podium to the inexpressible. The public airing of the “hidden transcript” had an almost intoxicating effect on protestors as several expressed profound delight in instantly recognizing their own longstanding grievances in what was now displayed and shared publicly for the very first time. It indeed appears to be this sentiment that gave many Dar’awis the feeling that mobilization and protests happened almost spontaneously; something that helped foster an extraordinary level of group solidarity, camaraderie and a sense of collective purpose.

Protestors’ ingenuity further addressed the dearth of a solid repertoire of contentious politics by way of “revolutionary bricolage” (Selbin, 2010: 40-41); by patching together elements from various scripts and registers and putting them to the use of anti-regime mobilization. Thus while pushing their hidden transcript into the open, activists resorted to copying and then amending slogans and acts of protests by their Egyptian and Tunisian counterparts with the effect of underscoring the opportunity coming from abroad and importing revolutionary energy to their own environment. An even richer source of protest innovation and framing efforts involved and appropriated the regime’s own utterances in response to the unrest. Protestors this way managed to generate three powerful effects at once. It created the unprecedented and empowering effect of the people responding to the regime in a country where officialdom is used to lecture its subjects expecting applause and staged acts of conformity. It gave ample scope for ridiculing the regime (for example by immediately mobilizing to disprove the regime’s assurances about the situation “having calmed down”). It also provided the important advantage of informing actual and potential protestors, without having to coordinate much themselves, about the timing of significant mobilization (i.e. whenever the regime spoke). Rapid and effective protest framing was similarly attained by appropriating and tinkering with the regime’s own well-known slogans and chants. Adding these slogans to protestors’ rapidly developing repertoire was facilitated by their very resonance with dull, repetitive regime propaganda few could not have memorized. Furthermore, protestors built on common Arab and Muslim narratives and symbols of resistance and commemoration. Perhaps most importantly, the celebration and remembrance of martyrs in the region at large (although certainly not being unique to the region or indeed to Islam)³—from Palestine, Hizbullah, to Iraq—appears to have made this narrative and practice a modular and, hence, recognized choice for protestors in Dar’a. Likewise, cultural expressions and folklore, such as traditional poetry recitals, being familiar to all, were readily adapted and deployed to frame protestors’ demands and grievances, and to deliver their messages. While each of these discursive processes helped protestors to frame their endeavors in ways that encouraged others to join in, they inexorably transformed into acts of protest challenging and confronting the regime. After all, in a harshly authoritarian

environment like that of Syria, each publicly and collectively expressed view or frame of non-compliance becomes an “oppositional speech act” (Johnston, 2005).

As significantly, an appreciation of the qualities of the social networks of Syria’s early risers goes a long way toward explaining protestors’ effective use of perceived opportunities and their success in gaining critical mass while withstanding intense regime violence (questions 1b and 2b in Table 1). Dar’a’s social networks provided an important sense of solidarity and presented the background against which recruitment for mobilization took place, both voluntarily and because of social pressure. Many, of course, joined out of sheer conviction but “when your clan tells you what to do, there’s no way you can ignore it” (Author’s interview with activist from Dar’a, September 29, 2011). Security forces inadvertently encouraged clan solidarity as they suspected members of the Abu Zeid clan of militancy, and targeted them accordingly. The clans’ social pressure to join the movement, or at least not to oppose it, was most tangible when it came to regime loyalists in positions of influence who originated from the area. Many of them felt compelled to criticize the regime, or its security forces, for the violence, and some resigned in protest. Meanwhile, Dar’a’s social networks supplied key skills and resources for mobilization to be effective and to be sustained under prohibitive conditions. Connections with (circular) labor migrants and clan members abroad turned useful in that the latter quickly provided Thuraya satellite phones in anticipation of the regime shutting down local communications’ networks. Villagers used their remittances to cope amidst strikes and a collapsing local economy, and to purchase supplies. With internet coverage down or heavily monitored, truckers, taxi drivers and *bahara* crossed the border to smuggle out YouTube footage of the protests on memory cards, which were then uploaded by relatives in al-Ramtha or emailed to internet activists from Dar’a in Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. On their way back, they smuggled in weapons, food and medical supplies. Criminal networks provided their own skills, resources and connections to help the smuggling of goods. Sharing the chutzpah and cunningness of the migrant worker and the smuggler, the typical *zged*—a local term to denote the trickster type entrepreneur who flourishes in these circles—began to provide protection and intelligence as quickly as the regime augmented its violence. In sum, dense and interlinked social networks—and the resources they generated—made it extremely difficult for the regime to contain mobilization in a context wherein repression had largely lost its deterrence and merely added fuel to the protests. The elusive nature of the dispersed and leaderless networks added to the regime’s failing response. To some extent, this all made it principally feasible that Syria’s uprising commenced in what appears as a periphery, or borderland, exactly because the latter is so richly endowed with the social networks and associated resources that proved essential to mobilization (question 1c).

Against this background, it may be argued that other early risers in Syria's uprising—Idlib, Deir az-Zur and Homs—mobilized in a context sharing with Dar'a some important characteristics in terms of prevalent social networks, related practices of framing and inventing repertoires, and available resources. From this perspective, nation-wide protests did not "diffuse" as much as they occurred in parallel since protestors in these other governorates similarly drew on the mechanisms and resources associated with and generated by social networks variably built around clans, (circular) labor migration, border proximity and "crime" (question 4a). However, a quickly developing perception of the varied instances of mobilization as constituting a coherent, nation-wide endeavor—and hence a formidable challenge to the regime—was still important for further recruitment and for giving momentum to the protest movement. Game theorists' assumptions about the informative function and hence diffusive effects of early protests are likely to have been at play here, if one recalls the eagerness by which Syrians throughout the country and abroad followed events in Dar'a. Yet country-wide protests were not inevitable given Syrian society's strong if not predominant local, regional and transnational identities. Early risers quickly developed a simple but powerful framing tactic that addressed this challenge, and that helped spread and sustain mobilization throughout the country. Cross-referencing protests, mobilization and regime violence geographically was to become key to framing the national relevance of early and arguably "localized" mobilization (question 4b). Such conscious efforts form a reminder that structural factors alone—or in the case of game theory, generically applied deductive logic—cannot fully explain revolutionary mobilization as protestors act and improvise to overcome obstacles particular to the context in which they operate.

(Digitalized) Stories of Revolution and What They (Don't) Tell Us

Now I have presented my overall approach and arguments, a few remarks are in order to clarify my reliance on social media sources. Much already has been said about the supposedly pivotal role of social media—Facebook, Twitter and YouTube—in the Arab uprisings. Positions on this issue have varied sharply between those celebrating social media as essential carriers and facilitators of revolutionary mobilization in especially Tunisia and Egypt and others offering more sober assessments emphasizing "offline" contention and protests or downplaying the role of social media altogether. The questions raised in this still inconclusive debate are beyond the scope of the current article, but I would be inclined to agree with provisional assessments that linger somewhere in between these extreme positions in careful appreciation of the role of social media in revolutionary mobilization next to a host of other mechanisms (Lynch, 2011).

A question that has been far less frequently raised in this context is whether and how social media and YouTube footage, uploaded by protestors and “citizen journalists,” should be regarded as useful for analysts in getting some clues about the mechanisms of mobilization and, hence, be treated as a valuable resource on the Arab uprisings.⁴ Next to a limited number of interviews with Syrian activists and residents (via telephone, Skype and email), official Syrian state documents and some (Arabic) media sources, much of my analysis resulted from scrutinizing large amounts of YouTube uploads while contextualizing these with the help of secondary literature on Syria and benefiting from my past fieldwork in the country. Similar to the unreserved enthusiasm about the purported role of social media in unleashing revolutions, impressions have been created that, thanks to the almost instant digitalization and distribution of footage on the Syrian uprising, the latter can be continuously and reliably monitored. Indeed, social media tell some powerful stories of revolution, and all the more effectively and accessibly so because they are digitalized. Yet as Tilly (2002: 35) reminded us, “the trouble with stories” generally is that they provide “an execrable guide” to both facts and social explanation. Stories of revolution, in digital format or not, inexorably oversimplify complex social processes inherent to mass mobilization and contentious politics; they are highly selective and often even manipulative to the degree of distorting “what really happened”; they may be rightly or wrongly considered inauthentic by others claiming authority to speak; or they may be made up altogether (Selbin, 2010). In this sense the digitalized storytelling of Syria’s uprising should be equally, or perhaps especially treated with great care and, whenever possible, be considered with the aid of multiple alternative sources. As can be vividly illustrated in the Syrian context, from Dar’a and other locations, the use of virtual media generated ample opportunity to distort or fabricate “facts,” both by activists and regime incumbents.⁵ This discouraged some researchers to the extent that they chose not to make use of the bewildering amount of digitalized material on offer for it appears to be riddled with “false testimonies” and “misleading accounts” (International Crisis Group, 2011: 3). Unsurprisingly, the Syrian regime has been quick to highlight and take advantage of the trouble with Syria’s digital stories of revolution, purportedly with the aim of advancing a portrait of Syria as “a land of confusion, where the truth is elusive, undefined, impossible to verify, and impossible to know” (Hanano, 2011). Yet for my purposes, and despite their pitfalls, Syria’s digitalized stories of revolution remain an incalculable resource if consulted and used carefully. Firstly, stories generally, and stories of revolution particularly, reflect people’s perceptions and to some degree their motivations (Selbin, 2010: 31-33). Whether in digitalized format or not, such stories give us important hints of how people perceive themselves, their conditions, their goals, their tactics, and their opponents. Indeed, as revolutionaries by definition aim to change the realities in which they live, it makes little sense to blame them for not accurately reproducing

these realities in the stories they tell. Secondly, the stories told by Syrian activists and victims of regime repression also need to be heard and understood if only because of their urgency and the lack of other means to know what happened to them and how they acted in response. Thirdly, social media, although certainly not accessible to all Syrians, can serve as an important correction to the urban bias in much academic and media coverage of Syrian politics and society, and indeed conflict and contentious politics generally (Kalyvas, 2006: 38-48). A vast amount of footage can now be found on the internet depicting protest marches, demonstrations, and regime violence in the remotest and tiniest villages across Syria. Fourthly, Syrian activists quickly learned through repetition and adaptation to render their footage more reliable and verifiable when their uprising proceeded (Author's interview with staff of BBC-UGCU, October 6, 2011). Of course, pitfalls remain. Yet in addition to other available sources, social media will have to suffice before conditions in Syria change to the extent that conducting fieldwork on its uprising, in Dar'a and beyond, becomes feasible.

Conclusion

By using some key tools and insights offered by SMT I have been able to deconstruct and analyze the onset of Syria's uprising in ways that transcend a mere descriptive narrative. These tools allowed me to identify and disentangle the mechanisms of early mobilization and the uprising without assuming, as more common analyses of the Syrian uprising do, that structural and material inequalities associated with Syria's shift to neoliberalism were bound to cause anti-regime mobilization and contentious politics (Hinnebusch, 2012; Baroutt, 2011; Yazigi, 2012). SMT scholars assert that "[h]istory is replete with examples of aggregations of individuals who are deprived relative to their neighbors, who are exploited economically, or who are objects of stigmatization and differential treatment, but who have not mobilized in order to collectively challenge the appropriate authorities regarding their situation" (Snow, 2007: 37). While accepting this assessment and acknowledging its implications for choosing an appropriate analytical approach when it comes to studying the onset of the Syrian uprising, it remains important to investigate to what extent and how an analysis of Syria's economic "reforms" and resultant cronyism, and the growing inequalities and discontent this generated, can be reconciled with SMT-informed analysis such as proposed in the current article. A promising research project in this regard would be to carefully explore regional variations in the costs or burdens of economic "reforms" especially since the early 2000s, and link these to the prevalent social networks that in many ways developed in response to increased hardships. Equally important may be to study protestors' framing of their demands and grievances to the extent these suggest a deep sense of socio-economic

discontent, although one here will have to take into account the views of protestors themselves who often stressed that their frustrations and motivations cannot be reduced to bread-and-butter issues.

The case study of the Syrian uprising points up a few themes SMT theorists may find instructive for their efforts in establishing and understanding wider trends in mobilization especially in an authoritarian context. Firstly, my case study helps to extend the usual focus in SMT further beyond Western settings. It shows that by critical and attuned use, and with an appreciation of contextual specificities, some of its tools and insights are useful. Secondly, my case study backs up growing arguments among SMT scholars to tear down the barriers between their approach's diverse schools of thought—"political process theory," "resource mobilization theory" and "framing theory"—as they appear to be compatible and complementary, while in blended form better able to capture and explain mobilization in all its complexities. More specifically, I hope to have shown that the common distinction between "acts" of protests—stressed by those studying repertoires of contention—and the more discursive dimensions of mobilization—analyzed by scholars of "framing"—is unhelpful. Especially in the context of authoritarian rule where speaking out is banned, non-compliant "talk" in public inherently constitutes acts of protest, or oppositional speech acts. Also, my case study points up to a limitation of common understandings of political opportunity structures in the context of early mobilization as it is too often assumed that changes at state or regime levels alone generate such key opportunities. My findings suggest that opportunities can also be derived from outside developments (in revolutionary Tunisia and Egypt), provided that certain vehicles (social networks built around labor migration) are in place to transmit, convey and mediate associated messages and meanings for such relatively distant developments to gain local significance. On top of this, on the eve of the Syrian uprising not the regime's features appeared to have changed, but many Syrians' perception of their ability to challenge it.⁶ Finally, I hope to have demonstrated that established repertoires of contention, conspicuously absent in an authoritarian setting like that of Syria, are not to be viewed as some panacea for those hoping to set off mass mobilization. The hidden transcript of the subjugated, combined with human agency's ingenuity and conscious efforts in revolutionary bricolage, can cause activists to effectively mobilize and create a new repertoire almost from scratch. Finally, the Syrian case suggests that country-wide protests may not solely result from diffusion as such, but occur in parallel because challengers, while perceiving the same opportunities and facing similar threat levels, share some of the social network characteristics that are conducive to mobilization. To the extent that nation-wide diffusion or agglomeration of mobilization did take place, it should be kept in mind that in fragmented social spaces like Syria's, protestors had to discursively create a national playing field first. At least until the summer of 2011,

they succeeded in this by relentlessly citing each other's courage and suffering in their amplifying rallying cries for revolutionary change.

Notes

1. All examples and empirical data in the current article are documented and annotated in these previous works unless stated otherwise.
2. Yet see the proposals, informed by and contingent on case studies, by Hafez and Wiktorowicz (2004) and Goodwin (2001).
3. See, for instance, Laba (1990) on the veneration of martyrs by the Polish Solidarity movement.
4. Social scientists rarely reflect on the difficulties of data collection in the region's prohibitive authoritarian contexts altogether. Yet see Clark (2006), Suleiman and Anderson (2007), Malekzadeh (2011) and Ahram (2011) for a discussion.
5. According to a staff member of the BBC's User Generated Content Unit (UGCU), a team especially created to verify and double-check digital media sources for news reporting purposes, examples include YouTube footage supposedly originating from Syria and showing police and security forces' brutality against protestors actually having been filmed elsewhere (such as in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon), patching together disconnected footage of protests and security forces using forceful means, and dubbing the footage with shouting and the sound of gunfire, and repeatedly uploading footage of protests to claim they reoccurred (Author's interview, October 6, 2011). Security forces and the military are even said to have staged their own (faked) atrocities in order to sell their footage to international television channels (Author's interview with Rami Abdul-Rahman, Syrian human rights activist, October 7, 2011).
6. On this point see also Kurzman (1996) and his analysis of the Iranian revolution in 1979.

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