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# The myth of the underdog in press photo images of the Syrian Civil War

Gareth Ross Smith  
*University of Iowa*

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**THE MYTH OF THE UNDERDOG IN PRESS PHOTO IMAGES OF  
THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR**

**by**

**Gareth Ross Smith**

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the Master of Arts  
degree in Journalism  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa**

**May 2015**

**Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Lyombe Eko**

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City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Journalism at the May 2015 graduation.

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## ABSTRACT

While the origin of the Arab Spring is well documented in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria, the role of press photography in presenting these conflicts is not. Images taken during a conflict often follow a particular narrative that comes to define how we remember a conflict.

Considering that Syria is composed of a heterogeneous, ethno-religious mix located at the center of intense regional and international rivalries, understanding the cause of the uprising and the trajectory of the conflict require a careful study of the socio-political history of Syria as well as her regional and international relations.

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how photographs taken of the Syrian Civil War that earned critical acclaim from photographic institutions mythologize the war. Semiotics provides a template for the interpretation of images that may be related to the underlying cultural forces shaping the conflict. Myth provides the forms in the presentation of archetypes in the images that we are able to readily identify so rendering the images relevant and recognizable to the viewer.

The mythologizing of images of war has been used since Frank Capa created an “aesthetic ideal” during the Spanish Civil War and been re-appropriated during subsequent conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries especially the Gulf Wars of 1991 and 2003. This study uses a semiotic and mythological approach to analyze the winning photographs as selected by the National Press Photographers Association, World Press Photographers Association and Pulitzer Prize awarded during the course of the Syrian conflict.

The myths of the “victim” and “underdog” were the two most commonly applied myths to the civilians and the Syrian rebels, who were portrayed as the “lovable losers” in the conflict. These narratives differ from previous depictions of the two previous Gulf Wars in their empathetic depiction of the civilian population and of the rebels.

If maintaining the status quo is one of the enduring functions of myth then the underdog myth perpetuates voyeuristic participation in the conflict without requiring the discomfort of the removal of the Assad regime.

## PUBLIC ABSTRACT

While the origin of the Arab Spring is well documented the role of press photography in presenting these conflicts is not. Photos taken during a conflict often follow a pattern that tells us how we should remember a conflict. Considering that Syria is composed of a many races and religions, each with different international or regional supporters and rivals, understanding the cause of the uprising and its progression requires a careful study of all the groups involved.

The aim of this study is to show how photographs taken of the Syrian Civil War awarded photographic prizes, use traditional tales (myth) to reinterpret aspects of the war. The study of signs (semiotics) simplifies the process by dividing the photographs into the written parts, self-evident parts and what these self-evident parts mean. Myth provides the recognizable stories of people in the images who we are able to readily identify with, allowing us to understand what the photographs mean today.

This study looked at which symbols and tales were used in the winning photographs as selected by the National Press Photographers Association, World Press Photographers Association and Pulitzer Prize awarded during the course of the Syrian conflict.

It found that stories of the “victim” and “underdog” were the two most commonly used tales. If maintaining the status quo is one of the functions of myth then the underdog myth helps further the idea that watching the Syrian conflict from afar is more comfortable than contributing the end of the Assad government.

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## GLOSSARY

Free Syrian Army (FSA)	Group of rebels opposed to the Assad regime. Most moderate of all the armed factions operating in Syria
Hizbullah	Also known as Hezbollah. Shiite Islamist militant group from Lebanon, enjoys financial support from Iran
Islamic Front	Affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood, Islamist but not Salafist in orientation
Islamic State	Also known as ISIS or ISIL: the Islamic State in Syria and the Levant. Extremist Salafist group intent on establishing an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria
Jabhat al Nusra	Also known as the Nusra Front. An al-Qaida affiliate operating in Syria
PKK	Kurdistan Workers Party. Paramilitary group of ethnic Kurds seeking to establish independence from Turkey.
PYD	Democratic Unity Party. Syrian Kurdish political party affiliated with the PKK.
Syrian Army (SA)	Conventional military forces of Syria loyal to Bashar Assad
YPG	People's Defense Units. The armed wing of the PYD

## **Chapter 1. Introduction and Significance**

While the origin and nature of the Arab Spring are well studied, the role of photography in documenting these various conflicts is not. The reasons for each uprising in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria were very different as were the results of each conflict. Scholars have studied the nature of photographs taken during both the first and the second Gulf wars (1991 Operation Desert Storm and 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom), and noted that many of the photographs taken followed a master war narrative (Griffin & Lee, 1995; Hackett & Zhao, 1994). Briefly stated, the narrative form created by the images taken during the conflict leads to an eventual mythologizing of the war, lending each conflict a particular appellation. This is especially true of the first Gulf war where precision strikes were televised from the perspective of the smart bombs and guided missiles striking their targets (Franklin, 1994). The impression of a clean “technowar” (also termed Nintendo Warfare) without the gory images of mutilated bodies became routine, and this was a recurring theme during the second Gulf war along with a demonstration of overwhelming Allied military power as part of this narrative.

Similarly, the award winning press photos emerging from the Syrian conflict are critical selections of a vast number of photographs taken of the conflict and submitted by photojournalists or their agencies. Winning one of the coveted titles brings professional prestige to the photographer so there is careful consideration given to images of a high visual impact and a high emotional involvement. The danger in such selection lays not in selection the image for its visual or emotional impact *per se*, but rather how the meaning of the image is eroded through the institutional publication and republication of the image (Griffin, 2010). In cases where this occurs the image functions less as a marker of historical relevance, and more as a marker for “cultural and professional myths” (Griffin, 2010).

The aim of this study is to demonstrate how press photos that earned critical acclaim from the National Press Photographers Association, Pulitzer and World Press Photo

organizations taken of the Syrian Civil War mythologize aspects of it. This serves to obscure the socio-political history of Syria and acknowledge the complexity of the tangled web of geo-political intrigue at the heart of Middle-Eastern politics.

The novelty of this study is in identifying the narrative structure emerging from the press photo images taken during the Syrian conflict, and how this in turn is being mythologized. To date, there are no studies relating to press photo images taken during the turmoil of the “Arab Spring” specifically, the Syrian conflict.

The Free Syrian Army (FSA) is a motley collection of Syrian Army (SA) defectors and local residents who first took up arms often in self-defense against the Assad regime. Their lack of a reliable source of weapons and supplies much diminishes their efficacy. Hizbullah of Lebanon and Iran provide essential weapons and soldiers in support of the Assad regime and recent evidence suggests that this occurs at the highest level (Dehghan, 2015). Support for Assad is not only to combat the FSA but also increasingly to attack Islamic State, or IS fighters. That IS was not a credible threat to regional stability in 2011, but now controls a vast stretch of territory in northeastern Iraq and eastern Syria, is indicative of the fluidity of the situation in the Middle East.

Ironically, IS owes its genesis to the Assad regime who were happy to provide training and support to al-Qaida in Iraq during the US occupation of the country (Tran, 2014). Once the US left Iraq, military control was turned over to an Iraqi Shia government who persecuted the Iraqi Sunni population. Al-Qaida was recruited to defend Iraqi Sunnis against these Shia-led attacks, and when the Assad regime persecuted the Syrian civilian population, a faction of al-Qaida, now under the leadership of Abu-Bakr al-Baghdadi, expanded their campaign into eastern Syria (Khedery, 2014). Under the leadership of al-Baghdadi, his al-Qaida faction declared itself to be the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (IS), defeated the Iraqi Army, liberated prisoners, robbed banks and armories and spread fear and terror wherever they went. Their reputation for brutality is matched by their sophisticated logistics system, and most

recognizably their macabre, yet effective use of social media to depict mass killings, crucifixions and public beheadings to define their narrative (Ian Black, Mark Tran, Shiraz Maher, Roger Tooth, & Chulov, 2014; Khedery, 2014). While IS was disavowed by Ayman al-Zawahiri -al-Qaida's leader at the time- for their brutality and violence (Tran, 2014), this may be interpreted more as regret from al-Qaida whose prominence in the Middle East is diminished by IS success (Abdul-Hussain & Smith, 2014).

The expansion of IS into northern Iraq and eastern Syria was met by a series of sustained air strikes carried out by the US and coalition partners including the Arab gulf states of Bahrain, Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These, along with ground support in fiercely contested battlegrounds like Kobane on the Syrian/Turkish border or around the Mosul dam, have succeeded in halting IS advance for now (BBC, 2015).

It is within this context of enormous personal risk that photographers documenting the Syrian conflict worked, and yet succeeded in taking technically brilliant photographs. Presently, Syria is the most dangerous place on Earth for a journalist to work, with 79 journalists killed and over 60 abducted there since the conflict started in 2011. Of the 60 kidnapped, 30 have been returned by the kidnappers (CPJ, 2015). Most of the journalists killed or captured are local journalists whose plight we do not hear of, but the abduction and subsequent beheading of James Foley and Steven Sotloff in August/September of 2014 drew attention to the brutality of IS and their expansion into Syria (CPJ, 2015).

There is however, a certain narrative developing around the images, that is, the myth of the plucky underdog. Ranged against foes on both sides (the Syrian Army and foreign Islamists), the Syrian rebels fulfill the role of the underdog by determinedly fighting a well-supplied and funded opposition on two fronts while receiving only limited support in return. Myth, (archetypal stories that offer exemplars for human life) offers a powerful narrative structure for stories to be told. Myths are essential in helping us append meaning to images that would

otherwise be inscrutable. These myths endure in their retelling because they provide readily identifiable forms that the viewer is able to recognize. Journalism, argues Jack Lule, (Lule, 2001) is a modern substitute for the myths that were told in the past. Analyzing the properties of myth and its construction in the context of image making in the Syrian civil war helps locate the intention of their creation to a worldwide audience and explain the narrative unique to this conflict. Each image will be analyzed using a semiotic approach: that is broken down into its three component parts of text (the photograph title and legend), denotative and connotative levels.

This case study analyzes the winning press photos taken in Syria awarded by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA), Pulitzer Prize and the World Press Photo competitions. This selection of photos represents a distillation of the images provided to them by photojournalists working in Syria and which they consider the most iconic of the conflict in Syria. The significance of choosing to analyze photographs from these institutions is that they comprise the “critical selection” of photographs taken during this conflict and serve as exemplars of the types of images produced by photographers in Syria.

## Chapter 2. Background to the conflict

### The Syrian people: a diverse ethno-religious mix

Syria is a country of approximately 22 million people, the majority of whom are Arab (59.1%). Alawite (11.8%), Levantine or Christian (9.3%) Kurd (8,9%), Druze (3.2%) and Ismaili (2.1%) compose the larger minorities with small percentages of Nusairi, Circassian, Assyrian, Armenian

and Turkoman (Izady, 2014a).

As far as the religious mix, Sunni Islam predominates (71.6%), followed by Alawi (12.6%), Christian (11.2%), Shia and Druze (both 3.2%). Other religions such as mainstream Shia comprise 2.2%.

Ethnicities are not specific to religions, with Sunni being the religion of Sunni Arabs, Kurds, Turkoman and Circassians.

Assyrians and Armenians are either Catholic or Orthodox Christian, while Alawites and Ismailis are members of

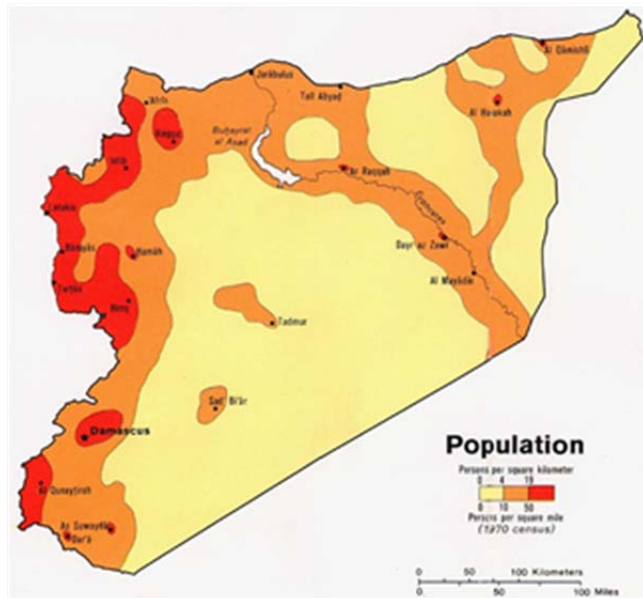


Figure 1. Population density in Syria.  
(<http://maps.nationmaster.com/country/sy/1>)

branches of Shiism, but distinct from mainstream Shia Islam (Izady, 2014c).

The population of Syria is densest along the western Mediterranean coast and the Euphrates valley (see figure 1) but most concentrated where it is centered in the cities of Damascus, Aleppo, Hamah, Homs and Latakia.

Regional identity is significant when considering the composition of the ethno-religious patchwork of Syria. Each region and town enjoys a distinct identity having different conventions, beliefs, familial patterns and tribal structures than others throughout Syria (Khaddour & Mazur, 2013). When Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafiz was buried it was not in



Damascus from where he ruled Syria, but in his birth town of Qardaha. Although his hometown was predominantly Alawi, this was not the reason for his burial here. His power “emanated from support within his own region” (Khaddour & Mazur, 2013) and his burial there indicated the acknowledgement and value of regional rootedness to a particular locale. Although sectarian divisions may appear to delineate the nature of the conflict in Syria, it is the underlying regional identities that are so powerful.

### **Prelude to the uprising**

At the time of the uprising in 2011, Syrians had lived under martial law since 1963 (Brandon, 2006), endured random intimidation, detainment and torture at the hands of the *mukhabarat* (state security/intelligence police), and lived in a country wracked with rampant corruption. Its infrastructure was poor, its education system was archaic and unemployment hovered around 30% (Lesch, 2012). After seizing power in a coup in 1970, Hafiz Assad channeled wealth to the state, then created a system of patronage by disbursing funds to the state bureaucracy, military, businesses and others connected to the state (Lesch, 2012). This symbiosis ensured that the military and the bourgeois would help the Assad regime maintain stability in return for enrichment. The inaugural speech made by Bashar Assad when he became Syria's leader in June of 2000 championed reform and the beginning of democratic change. For a brief period of about 8 months there was a political climate of openness; amnesties were granted to political prisoners, a free press began to take shape and political dissent was tolerated (Lesch, 2005). Such was the climate of optimism at the time that two human rights organizations opened up in Syria (Syrian Human Rights Association, and the Defense of Democratic Freedoms and Human Rights). Alarmed at the growth of the number of pro-democracy groups in Syria following his inauguration, Baath party stalwarts reined in the reforms and the status quo returned (Lesch, 2005). Although some halting economic reforms

were initiated over the next ten years, the malaise of corruption, nepotism and political oppression continued as it had done for the previous 30 years (Lesch, 2012).

### **How the Syrian uprising began**

When, in frustration with his government, Muhammad Buazizi set himself on fire in the city of Sidi Bouzid, Tunisia, on December 17, 2010, he triggered a wave of change that resonated throughout the Middle East (Dalacoura, 2012). His death precipitated a popular revolt of the people against the regime that saw the president flee the country and a new government formed in Tunisia six months later. Popular action followed in Egypt with protests against Hosni Mubarak's regime that saw a rapid reversal of his fortunes. It took just 19 days of sustained protest to force his resignation from office (Dalacoura, 2012). These effective popular protests inspired uprisings in Libya, Bahrain, Yemen and finally Syria. Buoyed by the success of the Tunisian, Libyan and Egyptian revolutions, long-festering anti-government dissent in Syria found its voice.

Young, apolitical Syrians whose sense of despair for Syria's future compelled them to act were the organizers of the first protests. These "unknowns" led protest marches during March of 2011 throughout Syria in towns like Misyaf and Salamiya as well as the cities of Homs and Damascus. That these protesters displayed solidarity crossing ethno-religious lines undercuts the argument that the protests were sectarian in nature or organized through foreign intervention (Kahf, 2013). Non-violent protest was formalized throughout Syria by the creation of Local Coordination Committees (LCCs) who still exist but whose influence was negated as the protests became more violent.

### **Violent escalation of the uprising**

In March of 2011 a group of youths was arrested and tortured by the security forces for painting revolutionary slogans on their school wall in the city of Dar'a. Following this incident,

pro-democracy protests erupted in Damascus, Dar'a, Homs, Hama and Latakia. During the protest in Dar'a, security forces opened fire and killed four of the demonstrators. At the victim's funeral the next day, mourners were shot at, killing another person (Droz-Vincent, 2014).

The violent response of the Syrian Army to the peaceful national uprisings started almost as soon as the peaceful protests began throughout Syria in March 2011. Syrian Army soldiers were deployed to the cities of Damascus, Banyas, Hama, Homs and Dar'a (Al Jazeera, 2014). Protests were increasingly met with deadly force meted out by the Syrian army. Massacres were committed by the regime supported by tanks, artillery and snipers. The most prominent of these massacres occurred during August 2011 in the town of Homs when the Syrian Army fired live rounds to disperse a crowd (BBC, 2011), then in May of 2012 in Houla village 108 people (mostly women and children) were killed, and finally a chemical attack was carried out in a Damascus suburb in August of 2013 which killed approximately 1300 people (Al Jazeera, 2014). While the regime hoped that sustained violence would intimidate the protesters into settling for the *status quo* it galvanized an opposition that gradually became more organized and militarized.

## **Militarization of the conflict**

### *The Free Syrian Army and the Muslim Brotherhood*

In defense against regime attacks local armed groups began forming in August of 2011. The Free Syrian Army, (initially called the Free Officers Movement) was formally established in July 2011 by defectors of the Syrian Army. Subsequent militias formed within Syria from July 2011 onwards were franchisees of the FSA, who had swelled to about 40, 000 fighters by fall of 2011 (Kahf, 2013). Some FSA units were composed entirely of Syrian Army defectors, but typically were small groups of men (anywhere between 5 and 40) defending their hometowns or neighborhoods against regime aggression (Kahf, 2013). The Syrian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, brutally repressed by Hafiz Assad in 1982, saw an opportunity to exact revenge on the Assad regime and provided military, financial and logistical support to the uprising.

Although the Muslim Brotherhood is considered Islamist, they have distanced themselves from the Salafists and have also refused to be cast as a part of a sectarian faction (Sunni vs. Alawi) in the Syrian conflict (Droz-Vincent, 2014; Kahf, 2013). Within Syria the armed faction of the Muslim Brotherhood is known as the Islamic Front (IF).

### *Enter the Salafists*

By January of 2012 more violent Salafist groups began to enter into Syria to join the fight. “Salafism” is used to describe extremist Sunni belief that requires the literal interpretation of the Quran, and also the moral imperative to spread “reform, ...by force if necessary” (Kahf, 2013). Jabhat al Nusra, or the Nusra Front is an al-Qaida affiliate whose fighters had earned their spurs while fighting US forces during their occupation of Iraq. They are well-funded, well-armed and more interested in establishing an Islamic state in Syria than establishing a democracy (Kahf, 2013).

IS origin story is also very closely aligned with that of al-Qaida in Iraq and Syria in that they were a part of al-Qaida when they were recruited to defend Sunni interests in Iraq and later Syria against Shia persecution by Nouri al-Maliki and the Assad regime. The key difference is that al-Baghdadi, IS self-proclaimed caliph refused to operate under the mantle of either al-Qaida or the Nusra Front in either Iraq or Syria. Operationally IS goal is to take, hold and govern the territory that they occupy, while Al-Qaida and the Nusra Fronts tactics favor terrorism and guerilla warfare. Of all the rebels active in the conflict zone IS are the best organized, equipped and funded, counting elite former Iraqi officers among their leaders (Abdul-Hussain & Smith, 2014). Their proficient use of social media to spread terror and a formally trained officer corps make them the most capable force in the Middle East at present (Abdul-Hussain & Smith, 2014).

As the militarized rebellion gained momentum during 2012, foreign fighters were drawn to Syria, and by 2014 over 15,000 fighters from 80 countries had inserted themselves in the country (Ackerman, 2014; Chulov, 2012). As many of the foreign jihadists aligned with the Salafists this further skewed the nature of the opposition from being a regional struggle for democratic freedom in Syria to one being cast as a sectarian conflict of Salafist (extremist) Sunni opposed to all who did not share their faith (Droz-Vincent, 2014).

During the early stages of the protests, the ethno-religious composition of the protesters was still varied; however by 2012 nearly all the armed rebels were Sunni, with the Nusra Front and IS representing the avowedly Salafist factions (Carpenter, 2013). Despite strong gains during the early stages of the conflict, the FSA could not gain enough momentum to consolidate their grasp of the cities that they occupied, nor could they mount a coordinated offensive on Damascus in order to unseat the rule of Assad (Carpenter, 2013; Droz-Vincent, 2014; Jinying, 2013). During the first two years of the conflict all the factions shared a shortage of heavy weapons and reliable supplies, with the FSA having the fewest resources. Ranged against an enemy that enjoyed air supremacy and who had learned to coordinate ground offensives against rebel territory with air support, the FSA were restricted to waging urban guerilla warfare lacking any armor or anti-aircraft missiles to cover their advances (Jinying, 2013). Steadily throughout the end of 2012 and 2013 the war became characterized by hate, revenge killings and the indiscriminate use of weapons like barrel bombs against civilians by both the Syrian military and by the extreme elements of the energized Islamic movements (Droz-Vincent, 2014).

### *Allegiances and Alliances*

“Syria is at the intersection of every key strategic rivalry in the Middle East” (Droz-Vincent, 2014) and related to each regional rivalry are greater international strategic rivalries affecting the regional balance of power. Support for the Assad regime comes from Hizbullah in

Lebanon and Iran. Hizbullah is the dominant political and military force in Lebanon and a proxy for Iranian influence on Israel. Iran and Hizbullah are also Shiite counterweights to Sunni regional influence (Droz-Vincent, 2014; Lesch, 2012) and Syria's sympathy to Iranian influence is essential in order to keep Hizbullah a well-armed annoyance to Israel. Without a conduit to supply arms to Hizbullah, the regional prestige of Hizbullah would suffer and Iran would be marginalized. For this reason, Iran sent her Quds regiment to train Syrian forces following the uprising and Hizbullah defended Aleppo and Quasir in 2013 against FSA attacks and seems set to remain in Syria for the immediate future (Reuters & Jerusalem Post, 2013). Internationally, Russia is the sponsor that Syria relies on in order to maintain her political and military power. Russia (formerly the Soviet Union) has kept a military presence in Syria since 1971 and is her main benefactor, defending her politically and arming her, particularly with a sophisticated air defense system (Jinying, 2013). Syria is vital to Russia's geopolitical influence in the Middle East since being abandoned by Egypt in the 1980's. She has protected Syria politically by vetoing resolutions voted against it in the United Nations especially punitive measures against the Assad regime for using chemical weapons (Black, 2014).

As the number of armed FSA forces grew to meet the violent crackdown by the Assad regime, the ethno-religious mix of the fighters in 2011 and 2012 became steadily more Sunni but not extremist or Islamist (Carpenter, 2013). Most of the regional Arab monarchies (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Qatar) are themselves Sunni and see the defeat of the Assad regime as an end to Shiite apostasy, and more importantly, a fracturing of a lifeline to Iran. Saudi Arabia in particular has overtly provided funds to train and arm FSA militias (Ruth Sherlock, 2012). However, the supply of money and weapons attracted foreign jihadists who do not share the nationalistic ideals of the FSA. Although the Sunni funding did not directly support the Salafist organizations, it was still a "pull" factor in recruiting Salafists to fight in

Syria. What is termed an “Arab Cold War” is developing regionally, with the Sunni monarchies vying for dominance against the Shia-backed Assad regime and their supporters.

When Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared an Islamic caliphate in Iraq and Syria, he also declared independence from his ideological and financial backers, especially the Sunni Arab monarchies that had supported him when he was still aligned with al-Qaida in Iraq. Flush with heavy weapons looted from Iraqi Army arsenals, IS thoughtfully established sources of regular income by capturing small oil refineries in northern Iraq and Syria, and captured vital necessities like the Mosul dam in order to strengthen their influence in the region (Ian Black et al., 2014). Due to their self-sufficiency IS owes allegiance to no-one, and both Turkey and the Sunni monarchies consider them less of a threat than the persistence of the Assad regime in Syria. IS in turn, does require black market commercial ties with states in the regions it controls in order to sell the oil that it produces and fence the antiquities stripped from ancient sites through Iraq and Syria (Pringle, 2014).

Turkey is another regional player attempting to assert her influence by upsetting the balance of power within Syria in her favor. While initially supportive of the both the Syrian and Iranian regimes, Turkey now openly supports the end of the Syrian regime. In 2012 she recognized the FSA as the legitimate leader of the Syrians, (Arsu & Arango, 2012), is known to covertly arm them (Doherty & Bakr, 2012) and provides shelter to several thousand Sunni refugees within her borders. The Syrian National Council, which functions as the FSAs coordinating body is headquartered in Turkey. After Assad’s brutal response to the uprising in Syria, Turkey offered undeclared support for any rebel group opposed to Assad. At the time this included safe passage and succor for IS fighters along the Iraqi/Turkish border. Following the capture of Turkish diplomats in June 2014, and growing pressure by NATO to end support for IS, Turkey began implementing more stringent limitations of the movement of IS fighters in Turkish border towns (Faiola & Mekhennet, 2014). Still, IS is not considered Turkey’s greatest enemy; that distinction belongs to the PKK (Kurdistan Worker’s Party) who are an ethnic

minority of Kurds within Turkey seeking to establish their own state near the border with Iraq. Turkey has waged a long war against the PKK who they regard as a terrorist organization. However the (Iraqi) Kurds are regarded as allies to the West in their struggle against Islamic expansion led by IS in Syria and Iraq.

The battle for the town of Kobane provides a clear example of the extent of the interwoven rivalries both regionally and internationally. The Kurds of Syria (including those living in Kobane) were initially denied citizenship by Assad, but when it was apparent that his regime was under threat during 2011 he quickly granted citizenship in order to earn their allegiance during the uprising (Lesch, 2012). Whether or not the Kurds were willing to provide support for the Assad regime, this provided another reason for Turkey to mistrust the Kurds so close to their border. When IS started attacking Kobane in September 2014 Turkey was initially reluctant to defend the town against IS as she believes that the Kurds present a greater existential threat than IS does. The Kurdish defenders of the town (the Democratic Unity Party (PYD) and its armed wing, the People's Defense Units (YPG)), are allied to the PKK (Economist, 2014). At first, the border crossing was sealed preventing Kurdish fighters from reinforcing their comrades, but allowing some civilians to flee into Turkey. Instead, lack of Turkish military involvement earned a stern rebuke from Turkey's NATO allies and resulted in widespread rioting by her Kurdish population until Turkey agreed to allow Kurdish fighters and weapons to enter Kobane through her border. Following a sustained air campaign against IS materiel and personnel by the US and her coalition partners, and reinforcements of the YPG militia by Kurdish fighters, IS was driven out of Kobane in January 2015 (Sharkov, 2015).

The United States' policy to Syria was one of sympathy to the Syrian Rebel cause. Not wanting to be immersed in another middle-eastern ground war, the US government has resisted calls for direct military support for the rebels, also famously fudging its position in relation to the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime (Good, 2013). In September 2014 the US



Congress finally voted to arm and train the Syrian rebels, but still voiced concern over whether the arms might fall into the hands of the extremists in Syria and Iraq (Hughes, 2014). Indicative of their reluctance to be involved was also the concern that the rebels would use the weapons to overthrow Assad and not use them to defeat IS, who present more of a threat to US interests in the area than the Assad regime. Regionally, the US is more concerned with stopping the spread of IS in Syria and Iraq through sustained bombing campaigns and their support of the Kurdish population is not incidental either. Many of the international oil companies are located in Kurdish Iraqi territory near Erbil and protecting oil revenues also means supporting the only regional militia that has so far been effective against IS, the Kurdish militia known as the Peshmerga (Judis, 2014).

### **Upsetting the balance of power**

So tangled are the geo-political bonds in the region that choosing which faction to support will profoundly affect the balance of power throughout the region. A stalemate has settled over Syria with IS content to occupy the sparsely populated but strategically important eastern portion, and the Assad regime comfortable with occupying the densely populated western portion, for now at least. While US and coalition partners bomb IS, not a single warhead has been directed at Assad, which vastly improves his prospects for survival (Liepman, Nichiporuk, & Killmeyer, 2014). Any territorial gains by IS into western Syria will risk conflict with Hezbollah and Iran, and perhaps open war with Russia. The non-Salafist rebels (the FSAs and the IF) remain divided and incapable of coordinating an effective offensive campaign against either the Assad regime or IS. Finally, the Syrian rebels have never enjoyed a reliable supply of the materiel needed to defend themselves, let alone attack Assad (Liepman et al., 2014). Given the fluid situation in the region, events favoring or harming Assad may develop very quickly, but it is evident, presently at least, that regional and international powers are not immediately concerned with the overthrow of the Assad regime or the unification of Syria under

a democratic government, as was the intention of the Syrian people during the early stages of the uprising.

### **Chapter 3. Theoretical perspectives: semiotics and mythology**

The power of an image lies in its persuasive and resonant qualities and its ability to become iconic and so define an epoch. Howells and Negreiros argue that because so much of today's culture is visual we need to be visually literate in order to understand the meanings of the visual texts that surround us (Howells & Negreiros, 2012). They provide a toolbox of theoretical approaches and techniques for analyzing the visual realm each of which may be applied to an image, although some are more appropriate than others depending on the context and subject of the image. Semiotics and its close cousin mythology are suitable theories in this particular case. Firstly, because the Barthesian structure of the image (linguistic component, denoted component and connoted components) fits with the images chosen that all have a title and a legend along with the visual component. Secondly, mythical representation functions like amnesia, in that it "represents the historical as natural but leaves the historical out" (Barthes, 1972; Howells & Negreiros, 2012). This furthers the contention that myth serves to decontextualize images of the Syrian Civil war.

Semiology (also known as semiotics) was described by Ferdinand de Saussure as a science "which studies the role of signs as a part of social life" (Saussure, 1983). Saussure regarded spoken language (comparable to writing) to be a system of the greatest importance because of the ability of the signs in this system to express ideas. A sign has a "linguistic value" that is entirely arbitrary, and explains Saussure: its value depends on nothing other than community agreement in order to establish its value. A sign is composed of a signal (a sound or a word, also known as a *signifier*) and a certain concept or signification (the thing that the word refers to, or the *signified*) (Saussure, 1983). Saussure provides the example of "mouton" in French and "sheep" in English. Both words refer to the woolly ungulate that we sometimes eat, but the word for the meat from a sheep is "mutton" in English while the French word "mouton" does service for both animal and food prepared from the animal. Key to this explanation is that English has a set of communal values that it accords to the signals "sheep", "mutton" and even

“lamb” that are not similarly agreed upon in French. Understanding the rules and culture of the society that agrees upon the meanings of these signals is essential in order to correctly interpret their meaning. The meaning of a sign is therefore a culturally learned phenomenon: an agreement between the signifier and the signified.

Roland Barthes applied the study of semiology to the study of visual images. In his seminal work “Rhetoric of the Image” (1977), he divided the image of an advertisement into three parts: the linguistic component, the coded iconic image and the non-coded iconic image (Barthes & Heath, 1977). Barthes explains that we perceive the image (both the coded and non-coded) components simultaneously. The non-coded component conveys the literal perceptual message, while the coded component conveys the cultural symbolic messages (Barthes & Heath, 1977). Barthes terms the non-coded image the denoted message and the coded component the connoted message. In order to discern the connotative meaning of visual images, it is necessary to first determine what they are and then agree what they signify. He explains that the elements of the sign are “drawn from cultural code” and the variation in their reading is drawn from different kinds of knowledge “practical, national, cultural, aesthetic invested in the image” (Barthes & Heath, 1977).

Mythology forms a part of Roland Barthes semiological system in that it is composed of the same tri-dimensional pattern of the signifier, the signified and the sign (Barthes, 1972). However it operates as a metalanguage, where the complete sign in language becomes a component (the signifier) in the mythical system. Barthes does not interrogate the origins of myth, but rather seeks to explain how myth operates in speech or images.

Semiological myth has a “form” and a “concept”. The form is represented by what we see in the image, the denotative part. The concept represents the “fundamental character” of the appropriated mythical concept. It is the constituting element of myth whose mode of presence is memorial or historical and therefore shared (Barthes, 1972). Myth then, is an inescapable part of our daily speech, intertwined with our histories.

In order to understand the relation of myth to news and news making we shall turn to the scholarship of Jack Lule. He defines myth in this instance as telling “the great stories of humankind for humankind” (Lule, 2001). Myths are a “sacred, societal story that draws from archetypal figures and forms to offer exemplary models for human life” (Lule, 2001). Mircea Eliade calls this an exemplar history whose “meaning and value” benefit from constant repetition (Eliade, 1958).

Lule (2001) explains that myths have persisted because the archetypes and frameworks that give them form provide the “original frameworks” for the:

patterns, images, motifs and characters, taken from and shaped by the shared experience of human life, that have helped structure and shape stories across cultures and eras. They are the fundamental figures and forces, such as heroes, floods, villains, plagues, patriarchs, pariahs, great mothers and tricksters. (Lule, 2001).

We encounter them daily through stories whose mythical foundations represent important contemporary issues and ideals. Myths are the models structured through these archetypes that “offer exemplary models for human life” (Lule, 2001). Lule affirms that although our present society dispenses with the idea of myth as being a part of our social narrative, it remains entrenched, perhaps disguised, but always present and recognizable if you choose to see it. Daily news is a part of this mythmaking process principally because it depends as much on narrative structure in the telling as it does on the facts being told. Certain themes and patterns emerge in the telling of a news story; certain themes are familiar precisely because they are drawn from archetypal characters that have been told and retold through the ages (Lule, 2001).

Perhaps the best example of the enduring power of myth making in the media is the myth of the hero. Both occidental and oriental hero myths follow a similar pattern: that of separation, initiation and return. From Jason and the Golden Fleece, Hercules, the great struggle of the Buddha, the narrative is the same: the hero leaves the common world, enters the

supernatural realm on a quest where he overcomes adversity then returns home with knowledge and power to share with his fellow man (J. Campbell, 1968). The modern retelling of this myth is most commonly related to the professional athlete who is often elevated to the status of mythical hero after breaking some sporting record or reaching some goal. The rise of Oscar Pistorius provides a fine example of this hero myth making at work. Through pain and determination he succeeded in competing in not only the Para Olympic 100m sprint, but also in the Olympic 100m sprint, with artificial legs. Hailed as a hero for overcoming this profound limitation he served as the perfect embodiment of the hero myth (Malala, 2013). After shooting his girlfriend in circumstances that remain murky, his fall from hero was immediate and complete.

This story serves to illustrate two observations of Lule's: that news and myth repeat stories and that news and myth tell real stories (Lule, 2001). In the first instance, news not only tells us what happened, but what always happened: "Flood and fire, disaster and triumph, crime and punishment, storm and drought, death and birth, victory and loss" all account for the repetitive structures in our daily news. Secondly, journalism places an emphasis on reporting objective truth and disregarding myth as a fictional construct. Myth, cautions Lule, should be regarded as "real" as it does the job of explaining the values, origins and beliefs that we regard as true (Lule, 2001). Myth should be regarded as a "true history" as it always deals with realities (Lule, 2001).

Myth making is also heavily mediated through the news, especially when it suits the news media to attach mythical attributes to a personality in order to create a mythical archetype. Pat Tillman, the former NFL player who died while serving with the US Army Rangers in Afghanistan, was initially lauded as the archetypal hero whose combat experiences were described with "superlative" zeal by sports journalists. When it became apparent that he was accidentally killed by friendly fire, and that he had moral misgivings about the war, the fabricated myth constructed by the military and the "sports enterprise" began to collapse (Chidester, 2009). Chidester explains that a second narrative arose after this first narrative had collapsed

where “Americans remain unwilling to accept that their sports idols are symbolically heroic rather than true heroes” (Chidester, 2009).

Even a cursory Google search for “Pat Tillman” will return stories identifying him as the all-American hero, despite the fact that his death was non-heroic. His status as “hero” was mediated first by his profession as a sportsman, then burnished through his “sacrifice” of leaving a lucrative career to enter the Army. This example of mediated myth creation suggests that not only are myths unwittingly retold, they may equally be crafted to suit a mythical purpose by prescribing an emotional response.

This analysis of the images of the Syrian conflict remains cognizant both of the archetypes emerging through the narrative process and also the myth-making process of the narrative by the media. The myth of the plucky underdog may not be as well codified as the myths of the hero, victim or great mother, but it shares components of existing myths (the victim and the hero) and has some historical precedent as seen by the British response to the threat of German invasion during the Battle of Britain (July-October 1940). How does a photojournalist communicate something as apparently intractable as the Syrian Civil War? Mythologies provide an explanation. Cousineau asserts that “Myths emerge from ... a cultural need to explain the inexplicable” (Cousineau, 2001) and with the help that mythical structures provide, an explanation is provided of how the narrative of the Syrian conflict has been mythologized and how this furthers our understanding of the conflict.

## **Chapter 4. Literature review: norms within the visual culture of war photography**

### *The ideal and the real*

The Spanish Civil War saw the birth of the modern photojournalist. Frank Capa's photograph "Death of a Loyalist Militiaman" propelled him to fame and established an "ideal of war photography" that would be mimicked throughout the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Griffin, 2010). This "ideal" conveyed an archetypal aura in its symbolism of death supported by its aesthetic framing in the Spanish countryside (Brothers, 1997). Considering that the provenance of this image is challenged, its enduring status as an iconic image of war testifies more to the need for this image to culturally represent ideals and desires about war, rather than provide accurate documentary evidence of war. Brothers argues that its popularity as an "ideal" war photograph lies in its suggestion that death in the pursuit of an honorable ideal is noble, heroic and even beautiful (Brothers, 1997). Photographs made during the Battle of Britain during World War II saw a similar deliberate incongruity between "pictorial realism" and the truth. In order to promote the British ideals of "steadfastness" in the face of bombing, British tabloids chose to print photographs of apparent normality in the face daily air raids. Images of the mass internal movement of civilians, those killed in the raid and "night-trekking" to underground bomb shelters were displaced by images of families enjoying meals in bomb damaged houses and scenes of daily life (the milkman and postman making deliveries) continuing (Taylor, 1991).

### *Perceived and actual freedom*

Contrary to the belief that war photographers are given the freedom to roam the battlefield and objectively record images of the war, are the physical and normative limitations contingent upon their work. During the Second World War, Vietnam and both Gulf wars the images produced followed a narrative that was informed by, and sympathetic to the nationalistic and patriotic ideals of the United States (Griffin, 2010). While it is true that photographers in



Vietnam were accorded the freedom to move around the country, the photographs that they took were generally supportive of US involvement in Vietnam. The idea that Vietnam was an uncensored war is challenged by the fact that the American public never saw many of the images recorded during the war until after US involvement in the war had ended. For example Ronald Haeberle's photographs of the Mai Lai massacre were passed over by the wire services and were only published 20 months after they were taken, and then only in a regional newspaper (Griffin, 2010).

Photographers involved in Operation Desert Storm (1991) and Iraqi Freedom (2003) were tightly controlled by the US military. Only a selected cadre of journalists was allowed to document Desert Storm, and during Iraqi Freedom journalists were embedded with US forces. As a result of this tight censorship images produced during the first Gulf war fell into three dominant categories: arsenal, troops and political leaders (Griffin & Lee, 1995). Images produced during Iraqi Freedom also followed this narrative, although observers have noted that these images did at least include images of Iraqi civilian deaths and the displacement of civilians within Iraq (Fahmy & Kim, 2008; Griffin, 2010). Strikingly absent from either Gulf war were any more than a handful of images of Allied deaths and actual combat footage. This in keeping with what is termed the "master war narrative":

Where the US may be compelled to take on the role of hero, and swoop down and destroy the enemy, skillfully and surgically employing the technological superiority of American weapons (Hackett & Zhao, 1994).

Although journalists may express a desire for objectivity in image making, the war environment physically limits where they can operate. They are reliant on the soldiers they are embedded with for protection and dependent on the military for access to the front lines in order to complete their task. Evidence of some of the tightest censorship and control of the press corps in support of nationalistic ideals was seen during the Falkland War in 1982. British

journalists that sailed with the task force to the Falkland Islands depended entirely on the goodwill and cooperation of the military and their handlers to get access to the front line. Their reporting was further constrained by a lack of dedicated communication equipment to send their dispatches to their respective news organizations, so nearly all communication had to be sent through military channels (Brothers, 1997). Journalists complained of deliberate logistical impedance such as being dropped off on land without food or camping gear forcing the reporters to return to the ships without the chance to fully appraise the progress of the war. Censors successfully altered the narrative of the war by selectively publishing images favorable to “Britishness”, “legitimising the campaign to re-establish sovereignty over it” (Brothers, 1997). For example a photograph that showed a British paratrooper leaning on a white picket fence drinking a cup of tea was wired to the United Kingdom two days after it was taken, but the image of *HMS Antelope* exploding during an attempt to dispose of two bombs dropped earlier that day was delayed by three weeks. Some of the iconic scenes of the Falklands war were only seen after the war had ended when the political impact of British warships being struck by bombs and Exocet missiles was less damaging to public morale and opinion than they would have been if they had been reported soon after they occurred.

Apart from the physical constraints of access and censorship, another constraint upon photographers working in the field are the norms and professional news practices underlying image production. Whatever the intention of the photographer, the image that they produce is still subject to several competing news values: such as grabbing attention yet avoiding public backlash and securing access to influential news sources (Griffin, 2010). Griffin and Kennedy (2010) observe that war images are products of a combination of influences, political, economic, military and practical that serve to “represent the values and interests of Western powers” (Kennedy, 2012).

Images and copy produced during the Vietnam War offer some illuminating examples here. Civilian deaths and massacres at the hands of American soldiers were reported and wired

to editors and wire services in the US and Europe but were seldom published thanks to editorial norms based on a (misplaced) sense of patriotism (Knightley, 1976). Prior to news of the Mai Lai massacre reaching a US audience, photographs and stories of civilian killings and mutilation was considered by news editors to be “too harrowing for the American market” (Knightley, 1976). Work that ran contrary to the “body count” mantra of the US military that did depict the impact of deliberate or indiscriminate civilian killings were either suppressed or the credentials of the reporters withdrawn. This was the case for Martha Gellhorn and Philip Jones Griffiths who were banned from returning to Vietnam following the publication of their work that respectively reported on orphanages in Vietnam and Laos and a photographic collection showing the impact of the war on the civilian population (Knightley, 1976).

Unlike previous conventional wars fought in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, photojournalists documenting the Syrian civil war are not directly informed by nationalistic ideals or embedded with the military forces of their respective nations. This suggests that they have greater freedom in choosing how to structure their images. However, as noted previously, over 79 journalists have died reporting on the conflict and the beheading of Steven Sotloff and James Foley illustrates the perilous environment facing the press in Syria (CPJ, 2015). In order to gain access to the conflict zones, photographers have to negotiate their way to the front line where the Syrian rebels (usually FSA) are fighting and rely on them for their survival. The photographers are dependent on the Syrian rebels and therefore subject to their point of view of the conflict.

Presently there is no scholarship examining the role of the photojournalist in documenting the Syrian conflict, or indeed any of the nations affected by the Arab Spring. Scholarship has focused instead on the use of social media particularly in Egypt, Libya and Tunisia (Khondker, 2011; Lotan, Graeff, Ananny, Gaffney, & Pearce, 2011). Academic Journals discussed in the background and introduction to this study discuss the reasons for and violence of the conflict but not how this was presented to the world.

We have noted that wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries follow a narrative; one that is often photographically sympathetic to patriotic ideals. Physical impediments and ideological silos of the conflict shape photographs produced during war. Although the foreign press corps working in Syria are free of patriotic sympathies they still are still constrained by both the physical environment and journalistic norms when making their photographs. In this respect this conflict is not different from the two previous Gulf Wars, the Falklands War or the Vietnam War. How do photojournalists approach this conflict and what narrative structures have so far emerged?

The first research question seeks to understand what these structures are by analyzing the archetypes portrayed in the images, so:

1. What mythical archetypes are portrayed by the award-winning images?

Building on the first research question, the archetypes revealed will be compared to the myths and narrative forms of previous conflicts in order to see if they perpetuate existing myths, or if a novel mythical structure emerges particular to this conflict. The second research question becomes:

2. What myths do these archetypes fulfill?

## **Chapter 5. Methodology**

This case analyzes winning press photographs awarded by the National Press Photographers Association (NPPA), the Pulitzer Prize and the World Press Photo (WPP) competitions, of images taken during the Syrian conflict. Cumulatively, these three organizations represent the most prestigious photo award granting agencies. Entry to all three competitions are free and both NPPA and WPP allow international entries from either freelancers or agencies. To qualify for entry to the Pulitzer Prize, the photograph must come from a US Newspaper or news site with at least a weekly publication frequency. Photographs taken by a foreign photojournalist are permitted so long as they are employed by an American agency. All three competitions share several similarities: they do not pay their jurors for voting on the photographs selected and professional photojournalists and editors are the preferred jurors during the selection process and are chosen by each competitions committee. Pulitzer selects their jurors from the corpus of editors and US based photojournalists, some of whom are previous Pulitzer winners. The WPP rotates their jury selection each year and includes a diverse range of international professionals. For example the 2015 WPP award included jurors from every continent except South America (and Antarctica). The NPPA initially allows 40 “crowd sourced” jurors to screen the initial entries, but final selection of the winning images is made by a panel of three jurors selected by the NPPA committee composed of either academics or professional photographers and editors.

Each competition receives a large number of entries; the WPP competition accepted 97,912 for the 2015 competition year (World Press Photo, 2015) Pulitzer accepted 1 100 (Topping & Gissler, 2013), but NPPA did not provide the number of entries received for previous year’s competitions. Each agency follows a different selection process of for the winning images. The Pulitzer organization offers no criteria (Pulitzer Prizes, 2014) for the selection of the winning photographs, a privilege that remains the purview of the jurors. Five jurors adjudicate the submissions and offer three choices (in no order) to the Pulitzer board. Following board discussion the winner is announced. The WPP selection process follows four rounds of voting,

the first two and final round of which are anonymous. No selection criteria are provided, however the third round of voting allows for “extensive” discussion of the images, where the aesthetics, ethics, stereotypes amongst others of the images are analyzed (D. Campbell, 2014) . During the final round of voting, an anonymous vote is again imposed.

Explanation of the voting procedure for the NPPA entries is a little more opaque, with the NPPA explaining that 40 expert, international, crowd-sourced judges will make the initial selection of images, then forward their choices to a new panel of five jurors. Quite how the crowd sourcing of the 40 experts is managed is not explained. These jurors then vote, in person and in public for the winning photos at the Ohio University's School of Visual Communication (VisCom) in Athens, Ohio (NPPA, 2014, 2015). Selection criteria for the images are not provided, however the NPPA seems to be at great pains to make the judging process as transparent as possible.

Considering the volume of photographs received by three competition bodies and the thoroughness of the vetting process, the images of the Syrian Civil War presented in this study can be justifiably presented as critical selections of a vast body of work, and serve as exemplars for images of the conflict.

### **List of winning photographs included in the analysis:**

A total of 99 images were drawn from the prizewinners detailed in the list below. In cases where an image or a set of images was awarded a prize in a different competition this image was counted once for each competition where it was awarded a prize.

#### *National Press Photographers Association:*

2013 Goran Tomasevic Reuters International News Single, 2<sup>nd</sup> place. Young girl in rubble, Aleppo, August 15, 2012. <https://nppa.org/node/61498>

2013 Elio Colavolpe Emblema Aleppo July 26, 2012, picture story, Award of Excellence 2.

<https://nppa.org/node/61505>

*Pulitzer Prize winners:*

2013 Breaking News Photography: Associated Press, various. Rodrigo Abd, Manu Brabo, Narciso Contreras, Khalil Hamra and Muhammed Muheisen.

<http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2013-Breaking-News-Photography>

2013 Feature Photography: Javier Manzano. AFP. Aleppo, Syrian rebel soldiers in sniping positions. <http://www.pulitzer.org/works/2013-Feature-Photography>

2014 Goran Tomasevic, finalist breaking news: Rebel assault on rebel checkpoint, Damascus.

[http://www.pulitzer.org/2014\\_breaking\\_news\\_photography\\_finalist\\_2](http://www.pulitzer.org/2014_breaking_news_photography_finalist_2)

*World Press Photographers Association*

2013, Spot News, 2nd prize singles, Emin Özmen. Interrogating informer.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/spot-news/emin-%C3%B6zmen?gallery=6096#fullcontext>

2013, Spot News, 2nd prize stories, Fabio Bucciarelli. Siege of Aleppo.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/spot-news/fabio-bucciarelli?gallery=6096>

2013, Spot News, 3rd prize stories, Javier Manzano. Siege of Aleppo.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/spot-news/javier-manzano?gallery=6096>

2013, General News, 1st prize singles, Rodrigo Abd. Aida.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/general-news/rodrigo-abd?gallery=6096>

2013, General News, 2nd prize singles, Sebastiano Tomada. Wounded child, Aleppo, Syria.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/general-news/sebastiano-tomada?gallery=6096>

2013, General News, 1st prize stories, Alessio Romenzi. Syria under siege, various locations.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2013/general-news/alessio-romenzi?gallery=6096>

2014, Spot News, 1st prize stories, Goran Tomasevic. Damascus, rebels attack government checkpoint.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2014/spot-news/goran-tomasevic?gallery=1125526>

2014, General News, 2nd prize singles, Moises Saman. Bomb maker in Aleppo.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2014/general-news/moises-saman?gallery=1125526>

2014, Daily Life, 2nd prize singles, Andrea Bruce. Family mourns death of Syrian Army soldier.

<http://www.worldpressphoto.org/awards/2014/daily-life/andrea-bruce?>

### **Analytical Techniques**

The analysis begins by briefly evaluating the themes of the photos. This is not an attempt to quantify the selection of the photos, but rather to see which themes predominate in the selection.

Following the semiotic approach to images of Roland Barthes, each image is broken down into its component parts of linguistic, denotative and connotative components. As each image is provided with a title and legend (the linguistic component) this text is compared to the



image presented for validity (does the legend or the title accurately describe the scene depicted?). Textual information about the location of where and when the image was taken is essential in locating the image within the context of the Syrian conflict. The denotative analysis involves accurately describing the components of the image along with observing how the image was framed, what kind of lighting is used, the effect of hue and saturation (was the image made in full color or black and white) and the depth-of-field used (for example is the subject in focus with the background blurred or is the entire image sharply rendered). Based on the elements observed in the denotative analysis, a connotative exposition follows that draws from the temporal-spatial context, subject matter, staging of the image and the photographers caption to the image. In turn each image (or image essay) is considered for the type of archetype or mythical structure and *how* the image making process either contributes or detracts from this myth-making process.

## **Chapter 6. Results**

Of the 99 photographs selected for recognition by the awarding institutions two dominant themes emerge: that of resistance against the SA by the rebels and that of civilian suffering. The balance of the themes conveys scenes of grief and destruction of the cities and towns of Syria. There are also apparent outliers in the context of the dominant themes, grief displayed for the loss of a Syrian Army officer by his family and retribution being visited on a suspected collaborator by the FSA in order to extract information. Some of the images share more than one theme, this is especially true of images taken of rebels seen mourning the loss of their comrades (see plate 1, figure K and plate 2 figure L) and the fifth image in the series by Javier Manzano for his 3rd prize Spot News story entry in the WPP competition. Even where more than one theme is shared by the images presented in this analysis, themes of rebel resistance and civilian suffering constitute the overwhelming majority of images presented for analysis.

### **Archetypes and Myths**

Jack Lule identifies seven master myths (hero, victim, scapegoat, good mother, trickster, otherworld and the flood) that recur frequently in journalism (Lule, 2001). This list includes those popular myths that are re-told in news articles or in visual imagery daily. One of the essential functions of myth, and the reason that the seven myths identified by Lule persist, is their ability to sustain or, if needed, support the *status quo* and to make meaning of the apparent randomness of life (Lule, 2001). Lule explains that myths, through the news stories that articulate them, serve a social function in maintaining the social order. Civilians in a conflict often become victims when they are caught in the crossfire or deliberately harmed for ideological reasons (Jews, Muslim Croats, Tutsis, Armenians) or simply to cow them into submission to the dominant regime. Syrian Army incursions into densely populated urban areas were for the latter reason and were an extension of the crackdown to the peaceful protests.

After the number of images taken of the rebels, the next greatest proportion of photographs was made of the conflict victims. Nearly a third of the images in this corpus are of civilians or their family members who were killed or injured by the Syrian Army and present the visual evidence as victims of the conflict. The characteristics of the Victim Myth as defined by Jack Lule include:

- the selection and sanctification of the victim and those in proximity to them
- the elevation and transformation of the victim to a hero
- an affirmation of the value of the life of the victim which in turn affirms the value of the life of those still living (Lule, 2001)

The five images chosen as exemplars of the victim myth in the Syrian conflict satisfy each of the characteristics explained above. In fulfillment of the first point, each image chosen had a single focal point, either a person, or in one case, two people in a close embrace: this is crucial to satisfy the “selection” aspect; there can be no ambiguity about their central focus. The sanctification of the image occurs in these exemplars shared theme: the presence of a child or infant presented either centrally or peripherally as the embodiment of innocence as the victim.

## Image Analysis



Figure 2. NPPA caption: A man clears rubble surrounding a young girl who was killed during a recent Syrian Air force air strike in Azaz, in the north of Aleppo, August 15, 2012. REUTERS/Goran Tomasevic

*Figure 2, Goran Tomasevic. Linguistic and denotative.* This color photograph was made in Aleppo, Syria's largest city (population 2.3 million) and shows six individual arms gently removing rubble surrounding an infant or toddler who was buried under the rubble. The men's hands all point from the frame of the image towards the girl who rests at center, her legs covered in rubble, but her head and trunk raised on top. The arrangement of the arms radiating out from the girl in the center to the frame draw attention to the shape that they are uncovering. Without the visual guide of the arms she would be difficult to see, camouflaged by the layer of dust on her. A man's shoe is visible at the top left of the image. One pair of arms is discernable at the lower right portion of the frame, but it is not clear which other arms are paired. Despite being shot in color, greys and browns are the dominant hues with the entire image in sharp focus except for the blur of movement of the uppermost arm.

*Connotative and mythical.* What makes this image so striking and lends it poignancy is the juxtaposition of the gentle process of removing the rubble against the violent airstrike that caused her death. Instead of hauling the girl out of the rubble by grasping her under the shoulders, a space surrounding her is cleared. Although the caption indicates the singular, (a man), it is evident that at least three men are clearing the rubble from the little girl. No blood is evident, and the pose adopted by the girl in death is similar to that of a sleeping child. Were she alive or injured though, she would have immediately been removed and comforted, but the patience shown in painstakingly clearing the rubble reveals that there is no need to rush. There is a sense of overwhelming reverence in removing the rubble, similar to the care that a team of archaeologists would use in clearing away dirt surrounding a priceless artifact.

Value is accorded to the girl in the rubble through the painstaking process of her removal by several pairs of hands where one would do, and the care not to further harm the girl although she is dead. Although nameless, she is not just another “victim” of the bombing in Aleppo, she is a fragile little girl who needs to have the same care shown for her in death as was given to her in life. Value of life is strongly affirmed as evidenced by the desire to preserve her composure in the rubble. Although it is difficult to argue that she died heroically, the time and the care shown by those removing her suggests an act of bravery considering that the Syrian Army continued shelling the city. She is not identified, nor are the hands of the rescuers identified. This facilitates empathy through self-identification with the victim: if she does not belong to someone else she may have been our daughter, niece or sibling in the rubble, who we still value deeply.

*Figure 3 Rodrigo Abd, Pulitzer Prize winner, 2013 Breaking News Photography and World Press Photo 2013, General News, 1st prize singles. Linguistic and denotative:* The legend used for the World Press Photo entry is written in the first person singular, “Aida cries” and “Her husband” but is otherwise identical. The photographer provided additional information about the image in his World Press Photo entry:

“Syrian troops launched a vigorous assault on Idlib, a center of the uprising against the rule of President Bashar al-Assad. The shelling of Idlib began just hours after UN envoy Kofi Annan had arrived in Damascus, on a high-profile international mission aiming to mediate an end to the conflict.”

Aida’s green eyes and the sharply defined outline of her right thumb form the focal point of this image. Even the fingers of her hand are slightly out of focus and the background blurs quickly. Her eyes are framed by the fingers of her hand and the gauze bandage underneath a



Figure 3. Pulitzer caption: A woman named Aida cries as she recovers from severe injuries after the Syrian army shelled her house in Idlib, northern Syria, March 10, 2012. Aida's husband and two children were killed in the attack. (Rodrigo Abd, Associated Press - March 10, 2012) Pulitzer Prize winner, 2013 Breaking News Photography and World Press Photo 2013, General News, 1st prize singles.

covering on her head. Dried blood cakes her face, and a bloodstained cloth can be seen under the bandage on her face. A tear can be seen on the cheekbone of her left eye. Although her mouth is hidden the expression in her eyes is undeniably pain.

*Connotative and mythic:* More so than any other image taken of the victims in this conflict, the composition of this image powerfully, almost exclusively focuses on Aida’s green eyes. Two narratives are at work here. Firstly, her eyes convey her emotion so intensely that the

rest of the image is rendered mute. Secondly, this invokes the mythical narrative of another image that connoted victimhood through vivid green eyes: Steve McCurry's "Afghan Girl". Although photographed in 1984, Steve McCurry did not establish the identity of Sharbat Gula until 2002.

Her portrait became famous (although she never did) but the image of her with her extraordinary eyes became adopted by National Geographic as one of their most valuable commodities and is central to their brand identity. Rodrigo Abd's image of Aida relies on the inherent association between the green eyes of Sharbat Gula and Aida for part of its potency. Aida is given an identity and an explanation for her grief; that her family was killed in the same bombing that she survived. What makes this image iconic is its striking similarity to portraits of the Madonna. With the extreme close-up her head covering is a motif for the Catholic shawl as seen in representations of the Madonna such as our Lady of Lourdes.

The iconic connection between Aida and The Madonna is not co-incidental for no-one knows the suffering brought about through the loss of a child better than Mary, Jesus' mother (Notermans, 2008). This is the sanctifying power of the victim(s) inherent in this image, through relation to the iconic memory of Mary, the sacred child is affirmed. Aida is not merely a mother, she is a global symbol of a mother's pain.



Figure 4. Pulitzer caption: A boy named Ahmed mourns his father, Abdulaziz Abu Ahmed Khrer, who was killed by a Syrian army sniper, during his funeral in Idlib, northern Syria, March 8, 2012 (Rodrigo Abd, Associated Press - March 8, 2012) Pulitzer 2013. Breaking news photography.



Figure 5. Pulitzer caption: A Syrian man cries while holding the body of his son near Dar El Shifa hospital in Aleppo, Syria, Oct. 3, 2012. The boy was killed by the Syrian army. (Manu Brabo, Associated Press - October 3, 2012), Pulitzer 2013





Figure 6. World Press Photo caption: A child, who fell and knocked her head on the floor at home, waits for medical examination at Dar al-Shifa hospital in Aleppo. The hospital, the only emergency service still operating in the rebel-controlled city, has been targeted more than 30 times by government forces. Alessio Romenzi. General News, 1st prize stories.

*Linguistic and Denotative Figures*

4, 5 and 6.

Taken by Rodrigo Abd, Manu Brabo and Alessio Romenzi respectively, each share a child as the subject of the image, yet each is startlingly different in its presentation. Figure 4 presents Ahmed with tears streaming down his face, howling with grief, being comforted by an older man, possibly a relative who is seen gently rubbing his head. Another face, partially obscured by the arm of the older man is seen crying in equal distress.

Above and to the right of Ahmed a young boy is seen peering over Ahmed's shoulder at the body of his father Abdulaziz Abu Ahmed Khrrer. In a video discussing the making of this image, Rodrigo Abd related

that this image was made in a public park used as a cemetery as there was nowhere else safe to bury the dead, and described the fear of being located by cell phone signal when transmitting the image to a wire service (Associated Press, 2013c). Ahmed's face, placed at the center of the image, is the only one fully visible and facing the camera.

Image 5 is another depiction of anguish that shows a father crouching over the body of his son in the street. Neither is named, we only know that they left the Dar El Shifa hospital where his son died. The boy is shoeless, shirtless and is covered in blood. Although the focus is

sharp and the father and son occupy the center of the frame the subject of the image is not level, evident in the slant of the car behind them. In a similar panel interview the photographer Manu Brabu described how he followed the then injured child into the hospital, and then after the child died, he furtively took the photograph of the grief-stricken father mourning over his son in the street (Associated Press, 2013a).

At first glance, image 6 made by Alessio Romenzi appears prosaic, and entirely out of place in the context of the previous two images. We learn from the caption that the reason this pretty young girl in a floral dress, finished with a necklace, bracelet and bow in her hair is here is because she hit her head at home. Both her neat appearance and her mundane circumstance for going to the hospital are incongruous with the pain and bloodshed seen in the two previous images, and indeed with the reason that most civilians were going to the Dar El Shifa hospital at all. Framing the girl, (in almost perfect vertical thirds) is a man to the right, and a man to the left of the frame holding an AK-series assault rifle. The tiled floor is covered in blood splashes and smears.

*Connotative and mythic.* Philippe Aries describes that the modern conception of children as “innocent” and sanctified is derived from 17<sup>th</sup> century iconography where the baby Jesus often appeared alone and came to represent the “holy childhood” (Aries, 1965). Chris Jenks explains that modern children lack a commercial value (they don’t work the farms, or take early apprenticeships), and are imbued by adults as innocent and uncorrupted Apollonian children, rather than Dionysian children who are viewed as evil (Jenks, 1996).

These three images of the children connote not mere innocence, but innocence sullied and corrupted by the adult world where they exist. Figure 6 juxtaposes the (innocent) girl in the pristine dress with the blood and violence of the (corrupted) adult world at the hospital where she received treatment. Her injuries are of no consequence in establishing this comparative contrast, but the horror of the violence is emphasized and critiqued by her porcelain doll like appearance in a room bearing the motifs of a bloody conflict. It is the loss of innocence in figure

4 that makes it such a sorrowful portrait of the boy mourning his father. With the only person facing the camera he appears quite isolated even though he is surrounded by men, one of whom is seen comforting him. Even though it was his father who was killed by a Syrian Army sniper he is still a victim of the conflict due to the difficulties of existence in a conflict zone that he will have to face without his guardian. Figure 5 is an incredibly heartrending image of the painful loss of a son. The presence of the dead boy hanging in his father's arms is not reverentially posed like the baby being uncovered in the rubble, but raw and exposed with still fresh blood on his skin. Empathy for the father's loss and the death of the boy is certainly the most powerful emotion associated with this image; there is no ambiguity about why the man is crying over the child. The background is blurred suggesting that the environment supporting this image is superfluous to the pain of loss, and the reason for that pain in this image.

Meaning and value of victimhood in these three images of children is constructed through our modern understanding of the innocence of children. Firstly this is due to the fact that the visual depiction of children (whatever the circumstance) is better able to capture the attention and imagination of an audience than an adult depiction (Moeller, 2002). If we perceive that children are already sanctified (Aries, 1965), then the sanctification process in establishing victimhood is complete.

It is the instinct and the task of parents throughout the world to guard and protect our young. With the exception of figure 2 by Goran Tomasevic of the girl in the rubble, all of the images depicted here include a parent-child relationship either as the victim themselves or as being directly affected by a family member killed by the Syrian military. The intense emotions captured by the surviving family members grieving over their loved ones establish the notion that this familial relationship inspires a communally defined sense of victimhood. The emotional power of this relationship does not require the physical presence of the victim to be present in the frame for it to succeed. Neither Aida's family, nor Ahmed's father are in the frame of the image yet it is the sense of traumatic and painful loss conveyed through the anguish of the

surviving subjects that gives these images their visual potency. In the case of figure 6 it the potential break of the familial bond between father and daughter in the loss of the young girl that lends it the same gravity as those that depict that actual loss of family members in figures 3, 4 and 5. The delicate doll-like presentation of this young girl emphasizes the fragility of this bond in the violent environment surrounding them in the city of Aleppo.

### **The Myth of the Underdog.**

#### *Delineating the Myth of the Underdog*

Stories of the underdog or the “loveable loser” populate our history and continue to fill the popular imagination. Many of the most recognized movies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century chartered the rise of a humble, underequipped or underprepared character called upon to overcome a powerful opponent or accomplish an apparently insurmountable task without the means to do so. Kim *et al* lists movies like “Rocky”, “Seabiscuit” and “Rudy” to mention a few, but the list could easily extend to cover the “Star Wars”, “Star Trek” and “Lord of the Rings” franchises (Kim et al., 2008).

The term “underdog” was first coined in a 19<sup>th</sup> century song and was drawn from the observation that the losing dog in a dogfight would roll onto its back in an act of submissiveness to the winning dog standing over it (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2012). In popular use today, the term is attached to an entity before the result is known and describes either the predicted loser or the victim of injustice or oppression (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2012).

Historical retelling of the narrative of the underdog is particularly useful in shaping patriotic myths; the defense of the Alamo in 1836 is one such example. The website curated by the Daughters of the Republic of Texas declares that:

While the facts surrounding the siege of the Alamo continue to be debated, there is no doubt about what the battle has come to symbolize. People worldwide continue to remember the Alamo as a heroic struggle **against impossible odds...** (Alamo.org, 2015), (my emphasis).

Integral to the myth of shaping the identity of Texan liberty is the notion of a brave band of defenders dying, rather than yielding to the army of Santa Anna. This underdog myth serves to obscure the reason for the attack of the Mexican Army, and suggests that the defenders were morally correct in their stand at the Alamo, while the Mexican Army were the immoral aggressors (Flores, 1998). Similarly, British wartime propaganda during the Battle of Britain nurtured the myth of the underdog in its presentation of “The Few” who flew to meet the German *Luftwaffe* during the summer of 1940 to 1941. The British War ministry took great care to direct the war effort in support of the pilots even having the civilian population collect metal pots and pans to use to build aircraft fuselages. Although the collected items were useless and the British Isles were under no immediate threat of invasion, having created the myth of the heroic underdog in the persona of the “The Few,” the propaganda value of having a small cohort of defenders in the face of overwhelming odds provided the necessary source of morale to the island defenders in the face of a German onslaught (Bishop, 1960).

David and his battle against Goliath as told in the book of 1 Samuel (Bible, 1984), presents the archetypal underdog myth, where a young boy too small to bear the weight of armor or carry conventional weapons was able to defeat a giant, heavily armed champion using only a sling and river stones (Kim et al., 2008).

From the above examples we can identify key characteristics suited to the mythical depiction of the underdog. Firstly, they begin their quest or their journey to success at a material disadvantage to their opponents. Usually the greater the measure of success depends in part on the extent of the material disparity. Secondly, underdogs show courage in the face of overwhelming adversity. After the fall of France (at the beginning of the Battle of Britain) in World War II Winston Churchill famously told the British public that “...we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender,” (Churchill, 1940). Thirdly, underdogs apply

their resourcefulness in securing and using situations or material to their advantage in a bid to beat their opponent.

In the context of this conflict the FSA and allied rebel groups may be considered the archetypal underdog, the diminutive David facing off against the giant Goliath. In the book of 1 Samuel, Goliath is described as giant standing over nine feet tall, fully armored with a bronze helmet, scale armor and bronze greaves protecting his legs. A shield bearer went ahead of him carrying his shield (Bible, 1984). His arms included both a javelin and spear. The allegorical comparison between Goliath representing the SA and the FSA representing David is useful at least in terms of the arms and armor borne by Goliath. He was equipped with a javelin and a spear so was able to engage his enemies at a distance with the javelin where they would not be able to respond and also carried a spear as a secondary line of attack once his javelin had been used. Under normal circumstances his armor would have been impenetrable to contemporary weapons. Similarly, the use of artillery and aircraft by the SA provide the means through which they are able to strike the FSA at a distance with impunity.

A direct comparison between the images of the ill-equipped rebels and their well-equipped opponents remain elusive, as the selection of images chosen for analysis are bereft of any images taken of the SA ranged in combat against the FSA. Instead we are provided images that testify to the destructive power and contempt for human life of the Goliath that is the SA. While the portraits of the victim's grief and suffering as described in Chapter 6 provides some evidence of the power of the SA, images of destroyed and collapsed buildings such as the ruins of Dar ElShifa hospital, and bomb damaged homes as photographed by Narciso Contreras (images 15 and 16, Pulitzer 2013) supports the narrative of a destructive giant. The pervasive presence of the SA is conveyed through the captions in the selected images; the men clearing rubble from around a girl killed in a "Syrian Air force air strike in Azaz", Aida mourns her family killed when the "Syrian army shelled" them, Ahmed mourns his father "killed by a Syrian army sniper". That

the SA is an invisible yet omnipotent presence in these images suggests the arbitrary power over life and death that they have over the civilian population and the rebels ranged against them. An obvious reason for the absence of images of the Syrian military is the danger inherent in photographing opponents during a firefight. Secondly, photographs taken from the perspective of the SA may be considered as sympathetic to the Assad regime and supportive of the destruction against the Syrian people.

### *Exemplars of the underdog myth*

The majority of the images awarded prizes by the NPPA, WPP and Pulitzer organizations were of rebels fighting, but also included those of injured and grief stricken rebels. Almost no images depict success against the Syrian army, and no images were made of dead, captured or wounded Syrian Army soldiers. This is contrary to many of the images produced by the dominant Western war narrative where images of vanquished soldiers or at least their destroyed weapons are the exemplars of the media industry (Griffin & Lee, 1995).

### *Linguistic and Denotative analysis plate 1 and plate 2. Goran Tomasevic Rebels attack a government checkpoint.*

Goran Tomasevic received a runner up prize in the 2014 Pulitzer Awards (see plate 1) and a first prize from the World Press Photo (see plate 2) for his photo essay documenting a two hour assault on a Syrian Army checkpoint made on January 30, 2013, in the Ein Tarma (also Ain Tarma or 'Ayn Tarma) neighborhood within the Damascus city limits. A similar narrative was submitted for consideration for both the Pulitzer and the World Press Photo prizes: rebels prepare to attack a SA checkpoint, one is mortally wounded by a sniper and his comrades remove him from the front line, the rebels return to the fight, fire a rocket at the SA position, receive return fire from a tank, disengage from the fight and mourn the loss of their comrade.

Two differences are immediately apparent between the two set of images: firstly the Pulitzer Prize submission is in full color while the World Press Photo submission is desaturated to appear as black-and-white. Secondly, the number and sequence of images is not the same between the two submissions with only the first four and the last two identical and in the same sequence. Although D, E and F from plate 1 are the same images used in E, F and I in plate 2 they do not appear in the same order.



Plate 1. Goran Tomasevic Pulitzer 2014, Breaking News Finalist



A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H



I



J



K

# Goran Tomasevic World Press Photo 2014, 1st Prize Spot News



A



B



C



D



E



F



G



H



I



J



K



L

The supporting captions introducing the narratives from both the Pulitzer and the WPP are similar:

Caption from Pulitzer

Syrian rebel fighters prepare to attack a government backed Syrian Army checkpoint in the Ain Tarma neighborhood of Damascus on January 30, 2013. A group of rebels planned an attack on a government controlled post but would soon lose a comrade to Army sniper fire. After evacuating their comrade, who would soon die after, the rebels would return to attack the check post, only to retreat after being hit by a tank shell. After the two hour ordeal, the rebels would return to their base and mourn the loss (sic) of the comrade. (January 30, 2013)

Caption from World Press Photo

Rebel fighters of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) attacked a government checkpoint, in the Ein Tarma neighborhood, on 30 January. The battle for the suburbs of Damascus was considered crucial to both parties. In this incident, FSA fighters launched an attack on the Ein Tarma checkpoint over the course of two hours, and were targeted by snipers. After evacuating a fallen comrade, the rebels returned to the attack while under rocket fire and then shelling from tanks.

Both captions include the exact time and place of the attack but differ on the spelling of the neighborhood (Ain or Ein Tarma). The biggest difference is in the identity of the rebels attacking the checkpoint, where the Pulitzer submission identified the attackers as “rebels” whereas the World Press Photo entry identifies them as members of the FSA. The first four images in each plate reveal jeans-and-trainers dressed men carrying AK-series assault rifles advancing in the open on both sides of a narrow street. One is mortally wounded by a sniper, and is immediately evacuated by his comrades. Figures D and E of plate 1 and Figures E and F of plate 2 show the difficulty of moving this severely injured man through the narrow spaces and low walls to reach the battlefield. Plate 2 of the World Press Photos emphasizes the difficulty of moving the wounded man by including seven images of him being dragged from the front line to a position of safety. Figure H of plate 2 continues with a call to action delivered supposedly after the wounded man was removed to safety and precedes the image of an RPG being launched at the SA checkpoint. While the call to arms is absent from the Pulitzer entry, the lurid orange back

blast from a RPG being launched at the rebel checkpoint bathes the entire frame in a warm orange glow and follows with an image (plate 1 figure G) of a rebel running towards the camera right arm raised while holding his rifle in his left hand while a barricade burns behind him and to his left. Images H and I in plate 1 and image J in plate 2 depict different images of the tank shell exploding above the heads of the rebels fighters. Motion is arrested rendering the smoke, bits of concrete and other flying debris in sharp focus while the rebels duck and cover their heads with their hands in order to protect themselves.

A dénouement to the battle (figures J, K in plate 1 and K, L in plate 2) has the rebels examining themselves for wounds following the shelling, then returning to their base or safe house to mourn the loss of their comrade who was mortally wounded when the attack began. With the exception of the last image in the series of both collections, all the photos have only one or two subjects as their focal point and never fill the frame with the images of the rebels, revealing the detail of the battlefield where the attack was launched. Using technical information available from the World Press Photo site about the photographs made in plate 2 reveals that they were all taken with a focal length of between 16mm and 35mm. None of the clothing worn by the rebels is uniform, nor are they wearing fatigues, although one of the rebels is dressed in a desert camouflage jacket of the pattern worn by US forces during Operation Desert Shield. Their battledress is composed of a random assortment of chest webbing worn only by some, nor are they equipped with helmets, combat boots or military radios, using a commercially obtained “walkie-talkie” instead. They are lightly armed with AK-series assault weapons and a RPG rocket launcher. No machine guns, mortars or modern anti-tank weapons are used in the assault. Conventional military units are usually provided with a medic on the front line to immediately attend to severely wounded personnel, yet none is evident here.

*Mythic and connotative analysis.*

Lightly armed and exposed to sniper fire during the course of the assault this daylight attack on a heavily-armed SA checkpoint was brave but lacked tactical advantage, coordination or

effective weapons. The most commonly used tank in the SA is a T-72 model that can be penetrated by an RPG-7 from the top, rear or side, provided that the operator has time to accurately launch the projectile. If the location of the attacking rebel force is already known to the defending SA, (as evidenced by the FSA fighter shot before the attack started), the advantage of surprise is lost, restricting the freedom of the attacking FSA soldiers to press home any advantage. A lack of cohesion, coupled with a shortage of heavy weapons and communication devices supports the notion of material (and tactical) disadvantage of the rebels. Their determination to start, then return to an assault against the SA even after it is apparent that they are at a material and tactical disadvantage supports the myth of the disadvantaged yet resolute underdog.

The combination of a shallow depth of field along with a focal point of only one or two subjects betrays the close proximity of the photographer to his subjects. Such a wide angle also includes a wealth of detail of the combat zone where the rebels launched their attack. Mud, rubble, and broken furniture litter the streets and alleyways. Uncollected garbage and damaged buildings add to the impression of squalor. The net effect of this proximity to the frontline and the difficulty in maneuvering through the streets suggests a claustrophobic restriction of the rebels; they are constrained by an unforgiving environment. Figure B (both plates) that depicts the hapless rebel shot by a SA sniper accentuates the confined nature of the fighting where any of the subjects seen in the frame (even the photographer) may have been shot.

That danger is a menacing presence facing the rebels is superbly connoted in figures H, I in plate 1 and J in plate 2. These are technically difficult photographs to make, taken just at the moment a tank round explodes above the heads of the rebel soldiers. Arresting the motion of the debris still flying through the air while showing the rebels protecting themselves is a remarkable achievement, considering the surprise of the explosion and the disregard for personal safety by the photographer in order to get the series of the three shots shown in the two plates. When measured against the structures of the underdog myth, these two narratives do fulfill some of

the requirements necessary for underdog myth creation. Fighting in a difficult environment, the rebels suffer an immediate setback, but then courageously regroup to press forward with the attack. However, there is no triumphant ending to this attack, and we are offered no tangible clues as to the damage dealt to the SA checkpoint by the rebels. Instead, the surviving rebels return to their safe haven to mourn. Rather than being a linear trajectory with the rebels advancing on, and taking an enemy position, the images describe a circular journey, similar in structure to the ancient Homeric myths.

It is curious to note that the photographer chose to submit monochrome copies of his color images to the World Press Photo competition. This is the only monochrome entry in this study and of the corpus of photographs made during the Syrian conflict. Historically, monochrome film dominated documentary photography until at least the early 1970's even though Kodak and Agfa produced quality saturated color film beginning from 1935 to 1940 (Theys & Sosnovsky, 1997). Due to the expense of a processing and printing color film, and its adoption by amateurs, black-and-white images were the preferred choice of documentarians and artistic photographers (Wright, 1999). Photographers like Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, along with Henri Cartier-Bresson are recognized for their proficiency in the medium of black-and-white photography. Although this was the only medium available to them at the time, some like Cartier-Bresson persisted with black-and-white photography even after color film became widely available. If, as Van Leeuwen and Kress assert that color (or in this case lack of color) has an association or provenance "where the colour comes from, where it has been culturally and historically" black-and-white images connote the aesthetic use of monochrome images in their depiction of sweeping grandeur (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2002). This is evident in the landscape photography of Ansel Adams or Edward Weston or the blending of the modes of representation as seen in the photography of Cartier-Bresson who is equally well regarded for his a documentary photographs as well as studies in form and composition. That Goran Tomasevic (or his agency Reuters) chose to submit desaturated copies of color images taken that

day draws on the aesthetic provenance of black-and-white images made between the 1930's and 1970's.

By deliberately invoking the historic and cultural aesthetic qualities of black and white imagery, is a symbolic attempt by the agency (or the photographer) to have this picture story regarded as not only documentary evidence of a fierce fight, but also aesthetically distinct from color images; a distancing from the amateur color snapshots that defined color photographs of the 1950's and 1960's (Wright, 1999). Choosing to submit a set of images with aesthetic alterations is not an accidental change, nor does it stray into being an essential change (a substantive change that would have altered the meaning and context of the image by adding or removing elements from it). The motivation for making this change from color to monochrome was an aesthetic one; a desire by the photographer to establish a distance between this narrative and others made in color. This act centers on the tension between creating a documentary of the conflict and producing images that are hoped will become iconic.

*Linguistic and Denotative Analysis, Figure 7. Javier Manzano 2013 Pulitzer Prize: Feature photography and 3<sup>rd</sup> Prize News Stories World Press Photographers Association.*

This image is the first in a picture essay by Javier Manzano that earned him a 3<sup>rd</sup> prize, news stories (WPP) as well as the winner of the feature section for the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for photography. Depicting two rebels in a profile position defending their position in Aleppo, the rebel on the right is aiming an AK-series assault rifle through a hole in the wall while his brother-in-arms peers through the hole at the aiming point. There is just enough light cast from the hole in the wall to reveal the details of the noses and eyes of the fighters, although the rifle is well lit. Light radiating through a bullet and shrapnel ridden metal door punctuates the darkness of the room above the rebel's head and reveals sandbags stacked against the door to provide some measure of protection against small arms fire.



Figure 7. World Press Photo caption: Two rebel soldiers in Syria guard their position in the Karmel Jabl neighborhood of Aleppo as light streams through more than a dozen holes made by bullets and shrapnel in the tin wall behind them. The dust from more than one hundred days of shelling, bombing and firefights hung in the air. Karmel Jabl is strategically important because of its proximity to the main road that separates several of the main battlegrounds in the city. Javier Manzano, AFP October 18, 2012.

In a detailed cover letter to the Pulitzer organization the photographer contextualizes the image by describing the strategic value of the Karmel Jabl neighborhood, the tactics used by the FSA and the SA in holding and taking territory and the material difficulties attendant on the rebel forces (Manzano/AFP, 2012). Included as a part of the submission was a quote relating to this image by Max Fisher of the Washington Post describing the rebels captured thus as “an immediately iconic photo of Syria’s rebels” (Manzano/AFP, 2012).

*Mythic and connotative analysis:* It is the radiating beams of light streaming into the shop that form the most striking element of this composition. They spear into the darkness of the room like the beams of a laser sight looking for a target to shoot. None of the beams of light



fall on the pair of rebels in the room, but they come perilously close to the head of the sniper holding the rifle. Many of the images made in this conflict depict snipers in shooting positions throughout their damaged battlefields, emphasizing the treacherous circumstances of urban warfare and suggesting the vulnerability of the rebels against their enemy. While the darkness does provide a measure of cover for this pair, the number of bullet holes in the metal door betrays the delicacy of their position. Nowhere it seems is safe from the searching gaze of the SA who appear able to penetrate the darkened hiding places of the rebels with their piercing laser-like gaze.

In the cover letter the photographer describes how both sides use snipers to dominate an area and so deny the opposition a chance to advance. It is significant to note the AK-series assault rifle used by the rebel is an ineffectual snipers tool. It is not equipped with a scope, nor it is renowned for accuracy at a distance greater than 100m. This is emblematic of the material disadvantage faced by the rebels and adds to the myth of their underdog status through the suggestion that they fight on with whatever weapons they have.

*Linguistic and Denotative analysis.* General News 2<sup>nd</sup> Prize singles 2014, World Press Photo, Moises Saman: Bomb maker in Aleppo, commissioned for Wired magazine.

This photograph was made in Aleppo during the later stages of the conflict in the city, the photographer describes this room as a “makeshift bomb factory” in an unidentified part of the city. The scene is well lit with natural light from the windows seen to the top right of the frame in a room filled with an odd assortment of boxes, chairs and pots with the focal point on the bomb maker pouring a concoction into three glass bottles in front of him. Behind him a large plastic jerry can rests on a table, and an electric grinder is placed near the rear wall.



Figure 8. World Press Photos caption. Bomb maker in Aleppo, 20 March 2013. Moises Saman. Commissioned for Wired magazine

To his right are two large vessels, one plastic, one aluminum, probably used for mixing the explosive, while to his left and in front of him are another three bottles already filled. The information provided by the photographer in support of this image explains the context of the photograph, but falls short of providing information about the bomb maker or his craft.

A bomb maker for Syrian rebel forces works in a makeshift bomb factory in the country's largest city, Aleppo. As the civil war in Syria dragged on into its second year, conflict broke out between factions within the armed opposition forces. Much of the in-fighting was directed against the al-Qaeda-linked Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, and other Islamist groups focused on enforcing sharia law. As rebel factions turned on one another, government troops took the opportunity to launch concerted attacks on rebel-held and contested areas, subjecting Aleppo to heavy bombardment.

*Connotative and mythical:* Without the supporting information this image has the mark of being quite ordinary; there is no dramatic shading, smoke, weapons or fear evident on the bomb makers face. Whatever the purpose of the room was before it was used for bomb making is difficult to tell: the equipment in the background of the room may have been brought in to make the bombs or existed originally. This image connotes more in the significance of the action of the bomb maker, than the mechanical process and the setting itself. The rebels, as noted, have lacked sufficient weapons and supplies to make strategic gains during the fighting in urban areas. This image demonstrates the determination and resourcefulness of the rebels in turning ploughshares into swords, or making weapons with common household products. This is not the only image depicting the use of improvised weapons employed as a tactic in addressing the material disadvantage faced by the FSA. The fifth image in the series taken by Fabio Bucciarelli in his 2013 World Press Photo entry shows rebels standing on a ladder about to throw a homemade hand grenade through an opening in a building. In this precarious situation, the thrower is launching the bomb without being able to see to aim at his target, all the while the fuse to the grenade is burning. This theme of improvisation and tenacity demonstrate more fearless hope by the rebels than effective combat doctrine, emblematic of the myth of the plucky underdog in using homemade explosives to combat a well-supplied conventional army.

In the literature review section the process of myth making was seen to be both a consequence of ancient myths that benefit from constant retelling but also formed to suit a purpose. This appears to be the case with a related picture story made by Hamid Khatib of ten-year-old Issa, the bomb maker of Aleppo that shares a thematic bond with the image by Moises Saman.



Figure 9. Exemplars of the 15 photos taken by Hamid Khatib of “Issa” the 10-year-old bomb maker of Aleppo. Hamid Khatib, Reuters, September 7, 2013

This narrative of 15 images was made for Reuters by Hamid Khatib on September 7, 2013 and purports to show a 10-year-old boy making and repairing heavy munitions in an Aleppo neighborhood (Khatib, 2013). The authenticity of the images is disputed due to unlikely level of proficiency shown by Issa, and the difficulty in locating Issa to independently corroborate the workshop scenario following the publication of the images. Over six months since the photographs were taken, no-one was able to locate Issa, but several anonymous sources declared that the photographs were staged (Winslow, 2014). One journalist who was able to find the weapons factory was told that Issa was not working there that day, although the figure captions provided by Khatib reported Issa worked at the factory with his Dad for 10 hours each day, except on Friday. While Donald Winslow’s article raised ethical concerns about several Reuter’s photographers, it is Hamid Khatib’s choice of subject matter that nurtures the myth construction surrounding the rebels as underdogs. Whether or not this narrative was staged (although it seems likely that it was), going to such lengths to depict the themes of resourcefulness and gritty determination in fighting the SA and Islamist insurgents provides fertile ground for the narrative to develop as a myth. Issa, the ten-year-old subject inspires empathy with the rebel cause in a way that the adult bomb maker in Moises Saman’s photograph cannot. This desire to stage images to encourage sympathy for the rebel cause through the depiction of the rebels as the brave, yet materially handicapped fighters extends to a photographer, Narciso Contreras, whose deliberate alteration of a rebel photograph cost him

dearly. His award winning photos are analyzed next while his altered images form a part of the “Discussion” section.



Figure 10. Pulitzer caption: A rebel sniper aims at a Syrian army position, as he and another rebel fighter are reflected in a mirror inside a residential building in the Jedida district of Aleppo, Syria, Oct. 29, 2012. (Narciso Contreras, Associated Press - October 29, 2012)

*Linguistic and  
Denotative, figures 10  
and 11, Narciso Contreras*

Narciso Contreras was one of a cohort of Associated Press photographers who won a 2013 Pulitzer Prize in the Breaking News category. Two of the best exemplars of the myth of the underdog are shown in figures 10 and 11. Figure

10 is a continuation of the theme of the rebel sniper in position against the unseen enemy as seen in figure 7. The scene is divided in two halves, with the left dominated by the forward section of a SVD Dragunov sniper rifle held by the left hand of the marksman resting on a hole made in the wall. A gold signet ring is seen on the ring finger of the marksman. The right half of the image frames the face, front section of the rifle and a masked rebel fighter in the outline of a broken mirror. Only the eyes of the rebel behind the marksman are visible while the marksman has made no attempt to disguise himself. Filling the rest of the frame of the mirror it is evident that the rebels have taken position in a home as a glass vase is seen resting on a shelf against the rear wall. A small silver ring is seen on the right pinky finger of the marksman.



**Figure 11. Pulitzer caption: A rebel fighter gestures for victory after firing a shoulder-fired missile toward a building where Syrian troops loyal to President Bashar Assad were hiding as they attempted to gain terrain against the rebels during heavy clashes in the Jedida district of Aleppo, Syria, Nov. 4, 2012. (Narciso Contreras, Associated Press- November 4, 2012)**

Figure 11 is a jubilant portrait of a rebel, right arm holding a RPG launcher raised above his head in salute. Dust from the back blast lingers in the air behind the rebel shooter forming an umbra around the edges of the photograph. Behind and to the left of the shooter is a shattered, pock marked pillar leaning over to the right. Occupying the far left of the frame are three men, two of whom can be seen wearing webbing, observing the rebel shooter. He is the focal point of the image, however the context of destruction is visible to the right of the shooter conveyed by the twisted corrugated panels lying to his left and right. He appears to be the same person as the marksman in figure 10 with the same facial features and rings on the same fingers (just visible in figure 11).

*Connotative and mythical analysis.* These photographs were taken six days apart so it is intriguing that the same rebel is the subject of both of the images. While it is entirely plausible that the photographer was bound to this group of rebels it is still unusual that a single rebel would feature more than once in a series of images and in more than one role. Compared to the picture stories of Goran Tomasevic where the rebels are seen crouching and hugging the wall to minimize their exposure, the rebel in figure 11 has made no attempt to fire from behind cover, remaining exposed to return fire during what the figure caption refers to as “heavy clashes” with the enemy. Figure 11’s jubilant portrayal of the rebel fighter is particularly sympathetic to the mythic narrative of the underdog because it visually realizes our desire for the underdogs victory over the enemy. It is also a very unusual image, one of the few that records an ostentatious display of victory even when the result of the combat is not evident to the observer. Without any display of fear or caution by the rebel this public display of braggadocio differs with the cautious documenting of the conflict by the balance of the photographs of rebels taken during this conflict. The subject of the photograph wears chest webbing and camouflage pants but the white sleeve of a shirt is poking out from under his black top layer, diminishing the effectiveness of any attempt a camouflage. In the background standing against the wall, three of the subject’s comrades are standing nonchalantly with their backs against the wall. They appear to be unarmed, and are dressed in civilian street clothes, except for camouflage vests worn by two of the rebels. Their relaxed pose, standing exposed to return fire is also at odds with the caption of the photograph that describes heavy clashes in district where they are fighting. None of the rebels have helmets, body armor or any item of clothing that is uniform among them.

The use of the mirror in figure 10 provides an unusual perspective to photographs taken of snipers during the conflict, which are typically profile views of the sniper and their rifle inclusive in a single frame. This image effectively splits the perspective between the shooters point of aim, and the expression of the marksman and his comrade as reflected in the mirror. Instead of a profile shot the entire face of the sniper is visible revealing his focus and

concentration as he stares through the riflescope. Mirrors are metaphorically rich symbols whose artistic iconography includes representations of narcissism, purity (*speculum immaculatum*) even sexual awareness (Schneider, 1985). They have been used by artists throughout the ages for various purposes including creating illusions and as compositional aids (Schneider, 1985). As a compositional aid, it provides an unique perspective, at least as far as images of snipers in warzones are concerned. Yet, it is just such a use of the mirror that both separates it from the conventional sniper image and imbues it with the aesthetic qualities of a portrait, becoming a rebels view from a rebel's point of view. Such a self-reflexive pose adds a narcissistic quality to the role of the rebel sniper in the warzone. Considering the circumstances that the photographer took this image (the rebels were being fired upon by SA snipers with the bullets striking the wall behind them), establishing an aesthetic perspective during a sniper fight certainly adds to the mythic qualities of the rebels through the serene presentation of the combatants.

Another photograph taken during the same fight presented in a *Guardian* article expresses more of the tension and danger inherent in this kind of warfare, but this was not submitted for consideration to a photographic competition (Powell & Contreras, 2012). This image may also be considered as a critique of the nature of civil wars in general and of this war in particular. The effect of the mirror is to point the rifle back at the shooter suggesting that the fighting is ultimately inflicting self-harm, or rather harm on the civilian population of Syria. Considering that only a relatively small cabal of hardline military and political figures in the Syrian government benefit from the perpetuation of this barbaric war, it is the civilian population who suffer the most. Many of the rebel fighters were once members of the SA who after seeing the ruthlessness of their actions against an unarmed civilian population took up arms against the Assad regime. This suggests that the larger Syrian civilian population, including non-Sunnis is horrified at the tactics and methods of the Assad regime yet fear more severe reprisals should they openly oppose him.





Figure 12. World Press Photo caption: 30 September 2013, Latakia, Syria. People mourn the death of a 24-year-old Syrian Army lieutenant, who was known by the name of Abu Layth, in a village in the coastal province of Latakia. The soldier had been killed in an ambush at the other end of the country. Support for the government was strong in the region, and the soldier and his family were Alawites, members of the same religious group as Bashar al-Assad, the Syrian president. Abu Layth was the first soldier from his village to fall in a conflict that had been racking the country for two years. Fatalities at the time were thought to exceed 100,000, but figures were extremely hard to verify because of lack of access on the ground to independent observers. (2014 Daily Life 2nd prize singles-Andrea Bruce, World Press Photo)

Two exemplars of images that run contrary to the myth of the underdog that were awarded prizes are figures 12 and 13. Figure 12 taken by Andrea Bruce (2014 Daily Life 2nd prize singles-Andrea Bruce World Press Photo) in 2013 is the only image taken from the perspective of civilians supporting Assad during the conflict.

*Figure 12, linguistic and denotative analysis.* The photographer provides a long and detailed description of the death of the Syrian Army lieutenant Abu Layth and identifies his regional origin and ethnic identity as an Alawite. Light streaming in from a window behind the four subjects in this image adds a “soft focus” glow. A young man is seen pressing his cheek in comfort against a middle-aged lady, who head is seen in portrait. Behind them stand two

women, one with downcast eyes and tight lips being spoken to by a third lady whose wide -open eyes show their whites.

*Connotative and mythical analysis.* Any image showing loss on the side of the SA obviously does not support the myth of the underdog more so as displaying the vulnerability of the opponents diminishes the difficulty of the struggle of the underdog. By acknowledging that civilians on both sides of the conflict are affected by the death of loved ones affirms the identity of Syria as a nation, although a divided one. The subjects in the photograph are described as “people”, and their relationship to the dead soldier is not established. Missing too, are signs of grief on the faces of the subjects; they show concern, worry even, but not the unambiguous expressions of grief seen in Figures 4 and 5. They are also isolated too from the visible effects of the war; they bear no physical wounds of the conflict, nor did they narrowly escape calamity like many of the civilians photographed in Aleppo and Idlib. This perceived distance between the dead and the living provides a sympathetic portrait of those mourning the soldier but lacks the emotional proximity of the civilians who were on the receiving end of SA bombing.

*Figure 13, linguistic and denotative analysis.* A barefoot man grimacing in pain is seen lying on the floor, his feet bound together and raised by a man to his left and to his right. An assault rifle serves as the improvised “stock” to secure the feet and raise the soles off of the floor. The shadow of a fourth man, whip raised above his head is seen on far wall of the image. Only the face of the man being beaten is visible, although one of the rebels holding the rifle is seen smoking a cigarette. This caption to this image describes the unlucky man on the floor as a suspected informer working for the *shabiha* militia, a group of Shiites loyal to the rule of Bashar Assad.



Figure 13. World Press Photo caption: Interrogation, 31 July 2012. A man suspected of giving money to government informants is held at a school occupied by the dissident Free Syrian Army (FSA), in the northern city of Aleppo. He was one of two captives believed to be members of the pro-government Shabiha militia, who were held and interrogated for 48 hours before having the money that was on them confiscated. The men were then released. World Press Photo. 2013-Spot News-2nd prize singles-Emin Özmen-Aleppo.

*Connotative and mythic analysis.* The rather euphemistic title and caption to this image describing an “interrogation” contradicts the image of a man being savagely beaten on the soles of his feet by three members of the “dissident” Free Syrian Army. Depicting the torture of a civilian is a theme incompatible with that of the determined underdog fighting a uniformed and well-armed enemy. The effect of seeing only the shadow of the torturer with the whip, but not his features, is more consistent with the theme of the rebels suffering –and fighting against, an unseen enemy. Like the SA who deal death delivered over a distance whether it be by artillery, bombs or a snipers, the shadow suggests a menacing arbiter of pain, more expected of the SA than of the rebels.

## **Chapter 7. Discussion**

### **Archetypes: Heroes, underdogs and victims.**

The three most prominent archetypes that appeared in this study were dependent on the types of photographs submitted and selected for these three competitions. Rebels were by far the most popular subject to photograph, followed by civilian victims and then a wide variety of subject matter including scenes of bomb damage, grief and refugees fleeing. With a few exceptions the rebels were consistently portrayed as actively resisting the SA, or wounded (or killed) after clashes with Assad's forces. A similarity shared by heroes and underdogs is where they coincide on the journey to triumphal heroism. At some stage of their journey a hero must be faced with the mythical challenge in order to metamorphose and emerge as the victor. All heroes' start as underdogs, but not all underdogs emerge victorious.

In answer to the first research question, the rebels present the hero/underdog archetype and the civilians caught in the crossfire present us with the victim archetype. Compared to the portrayal of civilian victims during recent regional conflict like Operations Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, victims in the Syrian conflict feature far more prominently and their suffering is visceral and engaging. Over the course of the conflict in operation Iraqi Freedom, an estimated 200, 000 Iraqi civilians were killed for a cost of 4500 US soldiers. Images taken of the conflict however were disproportionately sympathetic to the Allied forces and only a handful of images suggesting the ambivalence of Allied forces to limiting civilian casualties were published. One notable exception was a photograph taken by Chris Hondros of Getty Images of Samar Hassan (figure 14) whose parents were killed when the car they were driving failed to stop at an Army checkpoint. After signaling the vehicle to slow down, and firing a warning shot, the nervous soldiers opened fire on the car killing the parents in the front seats. Incidents such as these were rarely reported, or made public. Chris Hondros transmitted this image to his editor without the permission of the officer in charge, and left the unit that he was embedded with shortly thereafter.



Figure 14. Agency caption: Samar Hassan, 5, screams after her parents were killed by U.S. soldiers with the 25th Infantry Division in a shooting Jan. 18, 2005, in Tal Afar, Iraq. The troops fired on the Hassan family car when it unwittingly approached them during a dusk patrol in the tense northern Iraqi town. Chris Hondros/Getty Images

By the end of 2013 over 100,000 Syrian civilians had been killed and millions had been displaced. However, their suffering was portrayed by the photographers in the areas where they were able to safely operate, principally in the cities of Aleppo and Idlib or where a sufficiently strong rebel force was able to offer protection to the journalists. These are sympathetic civilian portraits of the victims of this conflict and their preference for the depiction of children harmed in the conflict makes them doubly so. American public reaction to the image of Samar Hassan was of revulsion and anger at the killing and even prompted a re-evaluation of the rules of engagement. Gauging public reaction to the images of the victims in Syria is more difficult as there was no direct US involvement at the time that these pictures were taken. While the journalists taking these photographs may be unconstrained in their subject choice, and their

images are sympathetic to the horrendous suffering there is no enduring empathy between western audiences and the events unfolding in Syria.

### **The underdog effect**

According to Goldschmied, disadvantaged competitors are significantly supported in comparison to their stronger opponents (Goldschmied & Vandello, 2012). Kim *et al* provides five reasons for this “underdog effect”: it may satisfy their need for uniqueness, it may satisfy their need for fairness or equality, successful underdogs are inspirational, an unexpected success is more compelling than an expected success and finally, since the underdog is expected to lose, “rooting for him costs very little, but the vicarious rewards of an expected success of the disadvantaged protagonist are great” (Kim et al., 2008).

By portraying the rebels (still mostly FSA at this stage) as archetypal underdogs in this conflict is a judicious use of this mythical structure. They were not expected to win the fight at this stage of the conflict so rooting for them did not require as much emotional (or in the case of the foreign policy), tangible physical investment. FSA fighters that were drawn from the areas they were defending also satisfy the need for equality and were portrayed as inspirational especially in the photographs showing the ingenuity of the rebels in building improvised weapons to fight the SA, such as the bomb maker of Aleppo or the image of the rebels throwing a home made stick of explosive through a gap in a roof. Without exception the rebels are not uniformly dressed and lack even the most basic infantry equipment like combat boots, helmets and webbing to carry ammunition and supplies. Instead we are confronted with images of the rebels wearing jeans and running shoes, occasional camouflage jackets ill suited to urban warfare and lacking radios or medical support.

Images portraying the rebels/FSA as underdogs are a morally safe method for conveying the conflict to the international community, that apart from providing limited amounts of covert



Figure 15. Associated Press caption: In a photo taken, Sunday, Sept. 29, 2013, a Syrian opposition fighter takes cover during an exchange of fire with government forces in Telata village, a frontline located at the top of a mountain in the Idlib province countryside of Syria. In the original image (top photo), a fellow journalist's video camera is visible on the ground in the left corner of the frame. Freelance photographer Narciso Contreras altered the image (lower photo) by "cloning" other pieces of the background and pasting them over the camera, before sending it to an AP photo desk. The Associated Press has severed ties with the freelance photographer, who it says violated its ethical standards by altering the photo. (AP Photo/Narciso Contreras) (source; [www.ap.org/Content/AP-In-The-News/2014/AP-severs-ties-with-photographer-who-altered-work](http://www.ap.org/Content/AP-In-The-News/2014/AP-severs-ties-with-photographer-who-altered-work))

help has not directly confronted the Assad regime economically or militarily. Should they prevail in their struggle we may feel delighted that the "good guys" the determined few, have won against all the odds. Should they lose, we have lost nothing because the odds stacked against them from the beginning of the conflict were so immense. In answer to the second research question, the archetypal hero, portrayed at the early stage of his heroic journey fulfills the function of the mythical underdog.

### **Narrative Myth and fabricated Myth**

In this section we will consider how the process of documenting the conflict has influenced the nature of the photographs that have emerged of the conflict with regard to the mythologizing of the rebels in their role as underdog.

#### *The photographers*

Narciso Contreras, winner of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize for Breaking News photography was fired from the Associated Press for removing a colleague's video camera from an image that he took of a FSA rebel seeking cover in a firefight (see figure 15). It was an

impulsive gesture done he said because viewers might find it “distracting” from the scene. He admitted fault, was expelled from the Associated Press and had his images removed from their public archive. None of the other 494 images submitted during the course of his employment with them were found to be altered (Associated Press, 2014). Similarly, the narrative set of images taken by Hamid Khatib of “Issa” the bomb-making boy of Aleppo were found to be posed. This compunction to alter or pose images is indicative of a desire to either produce an iconic image, or add to the myth of the underdog. Narciso Contretra’s alteration is in the former category as is plate 2 by Goran Tomasevic (although Tomasevic’s alterations were not unethical). The AP admits that the removal of the video camera did not alter the narrative of the image, but that the removal violated their policy on cloning or altering images. The intention and the result of the change were aesthetic, just as the switch from color to monochrome was in plate 2 of the “assault on the army checkpoint” narrative.

This suggests that whatever constraints and dangers these photographers face in the field, they are still guided by an aesthetic consciousness of their images as they are in their role as documentarians to the conflict. They seek to produce images that not only capture the intensity of the conflict but also are cognizant of the value in establishing the iconicity of their images through aesthetic means.

Hamid Khatib’s images of “Issa” sought the emotional appeal of posing a young boy in servitude to the rebel cause by deliberately mimicking the motif of ingenuity used by the rebels in their fight against the SA. This series of images has not been removed from public archives, and a search for “Issa the bomb maker of Aleppo” will return news sites where his exploits are regarded as fact. The danger of fabricating this aspect of the myth and allowing it to persist is that it not only legitimizes the use of child labor in a warzone, it perpetuates the mythical impression of plucky determination whatever the odds. Michael Griffin warns that this is how images become “iconic, ie broadly symbolic” of a conflict when they are repeated and thereby decontextualized through constant repetition over time (Griffin, 2010). When the FSA is as



isolated from international sponsors (as they are) and in constant need of personnel and materiel, perpetuating the myth of the underdog through narratives that suggest that skillful ingenuity and slavish dedication to the cause will win the day is counterproductive. It does nothing to further understanding of the conflict or provide the kind of international intervention that will alter the course of the war in Syria, to the benefit of the civilian population.

### *Unintended sympathies*

When considering the circumstances under which the photographers have to operate in Syria it becomes apparent why similar themes are repeated even though the photographers share no national identity. Taking photographs from the front line during combat requires the photographer to establish a relationship with rebels who offer protection against the SA, but also from being kidnapped or killed by Salafist elements fighting near the front lines. This level of trust between rebels and photographers means that images of, and sympathetic to the rebels are produced. However, the corpus of images taken by the pool of photographers working in Syria is thematically united in their sympathetic portrayal of the rebels-as-underdogs. This unintentionally aligns with the foreign policy perspective of the United States who are happy to covertly support the existence of the rebels forces without ever providing public backing or sufficient materiel support to allow them to face the SA equally.

### *Jurors and judges*

In discussing the review and judging process for the WPP competition David Campbell, secretary of the 2014 competition likened it to a “peer review” process “where people from the industry and wider photographic community make the judgements (sic)” (D. Campbell, 2014). Given that the jurors judging the images taken in each of the three competitions are themselves professionally employed in media industries in the same field as the competition categories, it is fair to argue that their normative processes in choosing and selecting the winning images are

analogous to their approach to choosing which images to publish in a news environment.

Although it is impossible to know what criteria the competition jurors use to judge the winning images (Pulitzer denies having criteria), the fact that different competitions with different judges (no two competitions in the same year used the same judges) selected some of the same images for awards suggests a convergence in either the reasoning processes of the jurors, or in the characteristics of the images themselves that resonate with the jurors.

Selecting a winning entry in an international photographic competition, and selecting which image to publish both require similar skill sets in order to determine which images are best suited to each particular situation. The difference between selecting an image for publication and for an award lies in the immediacy implicit in the former and the iconicity implicit in the latter. It is for this reason that aesthetic considerations may weigh more heavily in the judging process than news value, and so begins the cycle of myth perpetuation as the image is removed from its original context and republished in a different one.

### **The untold story**

That these portraits of victims and rebels are sympathetic to the rebels and the Syrian civilian population is largely due to the empathy with their subject matter. It is easier to empathize with an individual than it is with a group. However, intimacy does little to convey the humanitarian disaster caused by this conflict. Cold-blooded murder was committed by the Assad regime against the civilian population of Ghouta when chemical attacks were launched in that Damascus suburb, only a handful of images captured on mobile phones were taken of the effects of the gas attack (Sinjab, 2014). Some 55,000 images showing the starvation, torture and execution of 11,000 alleged enemies of the Assad regime are only publically available on a limited basis (Jalabi, 2015). Over 2 million refugees have fled since the fighting began and apart from the 3 images that were apart of the 2013 Pulitzer Prize entry the extent of the diaspora and the effect on the neighboring countries remains largely an untold story.

Even if these images were widely published, would it move us from ambivalence and apathy and motivate us to see an end to the conflict? The photograph of Samar Hassan was enough to precipitate a change, not enough to end the war, but at least to reconsider military protocol against unarmed civilians. If, as it is hoped that the photographers who have taken these images of the Syrian Civil war have done so in order to document the atrocities and galvanize action against the perpetrators, why is there so little Western momentum to end the war?

The possible reasons are many. Firstly, the lack of an overtly interested international sponsor to support the rebels provides an unhealthy symbiosis between the durability of the myth of the underdog and their existence as an ineffectual force. Having an underdog remain an underdog saves them from the uncertainty of providing meaningful support, lest they disavow international support and provide a tenacious persona for the population to identify with. Secondly, racism influences how the West views the Arab populace as subordinate to Europe and North America (Amin-Khan, 2012; Bresheeth, 2006). During the opening phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Iraqi forces and Iraqi civilians became “othered orientals” who were expendable during the pursuit of the military objectives during the campaign (Rogers, 2012).

Thirdly, IS use of social media has usurped the demand for images of the Syrian civil war. Graphic images of grisly deaths that include beheadings, public immolation and torture provide a fresh level of horror and a new expectation of the level of violence to an international audience. Whether or not legacy media should publicize these images is moot. Once they are published online they are easily accessed electronically circumventing publishers who are morally uncomfortable with publishing them. Ironically, these macabre images have achieved what the portraits of suffering taken by the photojournalists in Iraq have failed to do, and that engage a public and political response to IS. Being so repulsive gives them the gruesome distinction of being capable of breaking through the noise and clutter of an oversubscribed media. US and coalition forces bomb IS positions, while US and Western politicians condemn

IS' atrocities. Ironic, because IS owes their existence in part to the Assad regime and the murderous attacks on the Syrian population are far more destructive than the selected killings of IS.

The fourth reason is war fatigue, or the constant barrage of Middle-Eastern conflict images. Images of the Syrian conflicts were made at the same time as operations "Returning Echo" and "Pillar of Defense" in the Gaza strip and destruction visited upon Gaza City competed for a very limited attention span of the foreign audiences. Libya had just lived through their bloody uprising and tumult was continuing in Egypt providing more images of gore and violence to saturate the limited attention spans of a war weary world.

### **Mythical structures in a global context.**

Despite, or perhaps because of the efforts of these photojournalists in risking their lives in uncomfortable situations we have an intimate selection of portraits of the Syrian conflict. By sheer weight of numbers the nature and the subject matter of this selection differs from the previous two gulf wars, indicating that at least the photojournalists were not reproducing images in support of any one ideology. It can be argued that the representation of the Syrian civilians as victims, in fact consigns them to the expected role of victims within the context of violence in the Middle East (Bresheeth, 2006). Much like images of Africa narrate famine and war as staples that we expect, so images of victims and terrorists are expected narratives from Middle Eastern conflicts.

Similarly, images narrating the myth of underdog don't have the currency they used to have, unless the images are of the FSA fighting IS, not Assad. Photographs of Peshmerga warrior women were particularly popular during the assault against IS in the town of Kobane. This suggests that fighting IS is more important than fighting the Assad regime which is in keeping with the political position of the major western backers involved in the conflict.

Very recent developments in the areas surrounding Damascus indicate a renewed interest in the Syrian conflict due to the surprise presence of IS close to the Damascus city center and the threat that they pose to the Yarmouk refugee camp (Shaheen, 2015). Focus it seems has shifted from the mythical plight of the rebel to wherever IS may rear its head.

### **The role of myth**

In the Results sections we alluded to the fact that one of the roles of myth is to support the status quo (Lule, 2001). As of early 2015, there is still no overt international action directed at removing Bashar Assad from power. Through the mythical portrayal of the rebels as underdogs we afford ourselves the expediency of only having to root for the underdog, without having to deal with the discomfort of actually advocating for the removal of Assad.

In the absence of a dominant ideology guiding how images are made during a conflict, it falls to the journalistic norms contingent on the photojournalists and photo competition editors who made and selected the images that have helped shape our perception of how the Syrian Civil is narrated. The myth of the underdog is useful in portraying the difficulties facing the FSA in opposing the Assad regime. While certainly sympathetic to the cause of the rebels and the suffering of the civilians, some familiar conflict tropes were employed in the image-making process. Victims are an expected feature of war imagery and featured most prominently after images of the rebels. Although these images are initially compelling, they have failed to sufficiently engage our emotions to advocate for political change in Syria.

Just as in other conflicts in the Middle East, freedom of movement was limited to those areas of the conflict zone where there was a certainty that the photographers would not be captured by the Syrian Army (and possibly be accused of espionage), or worse be captured by the Salafist's and face a violent end. These norms influenced the nature of the photographs made and were at least uncritical of the role that the rebels were undertaking in the neighborhoods that they were defending. If one perspective is missing from the images taken, it

is that of the scale of the war and of the destruction. The nature of the images is such that they convey the proximity of the suffering well, albeit at the cost of seeing the full extent of the destruction vested upon the Syrian population. For this to happen, the lens must be drawn upwards and outwards to include the plight of the neighborhoods, districts, cities and countries implicit in this destruction and cast an unblinking eye on those who have allowed a closed perspective to persist.

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