# 4 | *How Psychological Transformations Change Conflict Understandings*
## Narrative Evolution vs. Narrative Rupture

Exposure to violence does not influence civilian behavior on its own. Civilians have to cognitively process their violent experiences first. This includes psychological transformations from trauma in many cases, including PTG and PTSD. Psychological transformations like PTG and PTSD change the types of attitudes and behaviors that people select, but they do not automatically yield specific behaviors and attitudes. Instead, as I discuss in Chapter 1, psychological factors directly influence cognition, emotional states, and perceptions. Then, people need to consult their understandings of threats and responses to those threats.

Research into motivated reasoning provides substantial contributions to explaining how people develop and use these understandings (Kunda, 1990; Schon, 2020). Facing incomplete and imperfect information, people consult narratives – stories that provide broad understandings of a series of events. When new information is consistent with the narrative that they believe, people tend to believe the information. When new information is not consistent with the existing narrative, they are far less likely to believe it. Over time, narratives evolve due to the changing and complex dynamics of conflict. Civilians who are able to continue believing their chosen narrative tend to be able to adapt for a longer period of time. In some cases, however, civilians stop believing their narrative in a narrative rupture. As I show in Chapter 7, the sudden onset of uncertainty that results from narrative ruptures yields motivation to migrate, due to the inability to find an alternative survival strategy.

In this chapter, I draw from open-ended interview responses, public speeches, and secondary source material to illustrate how narratives evolve and rupture in Syria. My analysis highlights the importance of elites as producers of shifting narratives. Elites recognize that new information may require them to change peripheral narrative details, while maintaining the core of those narratives, in order to

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maintain plausible narratives that civilians can continue to believe. Then, civilians act as the consumers of the narratives that elites produce. Civilians who are able to continue believing narratives are able to adapt. In some cases, civilians stop believing narratives, in a process called a narrative rupture. When narratives rupture, I show in Chapter 7 that it is possible to qualitatively code responses into a respondent-driven typology of narrative ruptures: "everybody going crazy," loss of trust, and ruptures due to a specific event.

## Using Narratives to Understand and Respond to Threats

In Chapter 3, I show how social network characteristics influence the likelihood of witnessing violence, bearing in mind the discussion of Chapter 1 on the psychological transformations of PTSD and PTG that may result. These psychological transformations on their own do not automatically produce specific behaviors or attitudes. Instead, I argue that they influence reasoning processes. During conflict, they influence the process of reasoning to understand existing and anticipated threats, the set of available responses to those threats, and which of those responses is most appropriate in any given situation. This process arguably fits a pattern of motivated reasoning, where narratives guide civilian understandings of threats and responses to those threats (Kunda, 1990).

The motivated reasoning research program has identified several patterns in how people evaluate information. These patterns are critical in dangerous, uncertain situations. There are several key insights. First, people often believe false information (Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). This may be unintentional due to a lack of information or uncertainty about which information to believe. It can also be driven by an elevated skepticism toward information that is not congruent with the narrative that someone believes. Second, people may disproportionately search for narrative-congruent information to reinforce the narratives that they believe. This may restrict people to encounter specific subsets of existing information. If they do encounter information that contradicts their preferred narrative, then people may use extra energy to argue against it (Redlawsk, 2002). Third, people are resistant to changing their narratives even when their factual beliefs change (Nyhan et al., 2019).

Narratives are therefore critical foundations for people to develop broader understandings of the events occurring around them (Olsen,

2014). This is especially important as people face substantial danger and uncertainty (Allport & Postman, 1947). Narratives provide the story that weaves together and makes sense of factual beliefs and worldviews. In addition, when people lack sufficient information, narratives fill in knowledge gaps.

Narratives are formed and maintained through a combination of civilian-driven and elite-driven processes (Kaufman, 2001; Shibutani, 1966). Since it is distressing for people to not have a narrative guiding their understanding and reasoning, there tends to be strong efforts to maintain narrative belief (Taber & Lodge, 2006). Elites and civilians are active in this process, especially with elites as producers of narratives and civilians as consumers of narratives. Civilians can certainly play a role in narrative production as well, but I focus on civilians because of their role as narrative consumers. Here, civilians vary substantially in their ability to maintain narrative belief.

Motivated reasoning arguments can explain this durability in narrative belief. If people are more likely to search for information that confirms their chosen narratives, then it is already unlikely that they will even encounter information that contradicts their narratives (Taber & Lodge, 2006). When they do encounter such discordant information, people are unlikely to believe it (Redlawsk, 2002). These factors reinforce civilian belief in the status quo narrative that their chosen elites are producing.

Meanwhile, many contexts, including armed conflict, frequently change. New events happen. Relationships between various armed groups, governments, non-state actors, and individuals become extraordinarily complex (Christia, 2012). Strategies shift. As these dynamics unfold, elites are often able to develop explanations for how the core components of their narrative are the same. Peripheral details may need to shift, but core pieces of their narrative remain intact. These core pieces include components such as which actors are good, which actors are bad, how to stay safe, and whether and from whom people can secure protection if necessary. Tactical changes in armed group strategy, alliance formation, technical policy details, and many other changes can become classified as peripheral narrative details (Christia, 2012; Fine, 1992; Shesterinina, 2016). When these details change, narratives evolve.

Some people are better at adapting and continuing to believe evolving narratives than others. For example, people with more knowledge and

argumentation skills are better at incorporating new evidence into existing narratives (Taber & Lodge, 2006). These people are better at incorporating new information into existing narratives, even if it contradicts peripheral details of those narratives.

For people to believe evolving narratives, they need to be able to adapt to changing and complex conflict dynamics. PTG and PTSD can both influence the extent of this adaptability, with PTG increasing adaptability and PTSD decreasing adaptability. This means that people who witness violence and undergo PTG should be able to believe evolving narratives for a longer duration. This ability to believe evolving narratives delays migration (Schon, 2019).

## Syrian Government and Opposition Narratives

Narratives of the Syrian conflict arguably formed after a controversial event in Dar'a province in mid-March 2011. As tensions between the government and anti-government groups were escalating, fifteen schoolboys painted the words "al-Shaab yureed eskaat al-nizaam" ('The people want to topple the regime') on a wall in Deraa on March 6. On Friday, March 18, 2011, their parents met with the chief of Deraa's Political Security Directorate, General Atef Najib. General Najib was adamant that his men were entirely justified in arresting the boys. Two accounts of this meeting have survived. Proponents of the Assad regime claim that Najib agreed to meet with senior family members in his private office. He then defended the legitimacy of the continued detention of the boys while admitting to the potential that the boys had been physically mistreated. Opponents of the Assad regime claim that Najib berated the boys' fathers for allowing their children's misbehavior and effectively told them to forget their sons, go home, and make more children with their wives. If they should prove infertile, then they were instructed to deliver their wives to his office and he would ensure they gave birth to new sons. While either account would have continued the escalation of political contention in Syria, the opposition account was particularly inflammatory. Moreover, since the schoolboys were members of prominent tribes in southern Syria, including the Zoubis, Ghawabras, Masalmas, and the Baiazids, powerful communities in southern Syria were galvanized into action (Lister, 2016: pp. 14–15). It is this specific encounter that is often credited with ensuring that dissent in Syria would escalate into revolution.

These opposing accounts of a critical event as political contention was escalating in Syria in March 2011 became part of the broader government narrative and secular opposition counter-narrative of the Syrian conflict. These are not the only narratives active within various groups involved in the conflict, but it is useful to focus on them to illustrate how different narratives form within opposing groups. One respondent even explicitly recognized this dynamic for himself, "People at this time split into two sides. Information spread quickly within each side. It did not spread between sides … I always believe information from my own side" (Respondent T029).

On the government side, their narrative termed the uprising as a war on terror (Lister, 2016). This war is allegedly sectarian, with Alawites and other minorities under attack and in need of Bashar Assad's government for protection (Corstange, 2016). Tough counter-terrorism actions would therefore be required to quash the sectarian Islamist terrorists (Lynch, 2013). Throughout the conflict, the Syrian government has asserted that it is in control and that it is the only force in Syria capable of providing civilians with a normal life (Ciezadlo, 2016).

This government narrative can be observed in many aspects of Bashar Assad's speech to the nation on March 30, 2011. At this point, unrest in Syria had been building into demonstrations across the country. Clashes with the police had killed more than sixty people (Blanford, 2011). One respondent claimed that the conflict could have been avoided if Assad had made some concessions in this speech.[1] Instead, he confidently asserted that a conspiracy was at work, and it was being orchestrated by a wide variety of enemies, foreign and domestic. This conspiracy was meant to divide the country along sectarian lines and pose an existential threat to the very survival of the Syrian state. A key section of this speech, as translated into English, reads:

In the beginning they started with incitement, many weeks before trouble started in Syria. They used the satellite T.V. stations and the internet but did not achieve anything. And then, using sedition, started to produce fake information, voices, images, etc. they forged everything. Then they started to use the sectarian element. They sent SMSs to members of a certain sect alerting them that another sect will attack them. And in order to be credible,

[1] Personal communication with a Syrian university student in Istanbul on October 21, 2016.

they sent masked people to neighborhoods with different sects living in them, knocking on people's doors and telling each that that the other sect has already attacked and are on the streets, in order to get a reaction. And it worked for a while. But we were able to nip the sedition in the bud by getting community leaders to meet and diffuse the situation. Then they used weapons. They started killing people at random; because they knew when there is blood it becomes more difficult to solve the problem.

We have not yet discovered the whole structure of this conspiracy. We have discovered part of it but it is highly organized. There are support groups in more than one governorate linked to some countries abroad. There are media groups, forgery groups and groups of "eye-witnesses." (Landis, 2011)

Brigadier General Abdel-Salam Fajr Mahmoud, director of the Investigation Branch at Syrian Air Force Intelligence in Mezze, Damascus, claims that the protests unfolded "by devilish means":

In the beginning of the events, there was action to get citizens into the streets by devilish means," the brigadier general said, like the promise of cash handouts. Protesters like Suleiman were duped into gathering in front of government offices to collect money, "and next thing you knew, banners were raised and the gathering was filmed and sent to TV channels as if it were a protest. There were people known as the *tansiqiya* who would wait for people to leave the mosques on Fridays, then they would appear carrying banners that they would film. This became clear during our interrogations. It is the truth and we have evidence. Foreign supporters, financial and otherwise, pushed Syrians to do this. We know this from confessions. (Abouzeid, 2018: quoted by author, page 238 of the eBook, Chapter "2013")

On the secular opposition side, their narrative termed the uprising as a revolution for freedom and democracy. This narrative contends that Syria experienced a popular non-violent revolution in line with other revolts during the Arab Spring. It is non-sectarian and not a civil war. As one respondent emphatically argued, "Why do you say conflict? It is a revolution. It is a revolution against everything. We are civilians. We do not do conflict. It is from the people, so it can't be conflict. We want to change the system, not just the dictator" (Respondent T044). Violence emerged and escalated in reaction to the regime's brutal crackdown to peaceful protest (Shehadi, 2013).

When Bashar Assad gave his national address on March 30, 2011, where government supporters may have felt reassured and protected, the opposition interpreted the speech as an insult. Opposition groups portrayed it as yet another assault by a harsh, repressive government, so they responded by calling people to the streets. For example, the Syria Revolution 2011 Facebook page posted shortly after the speech: "Go down into the streets now and announce the uprising – control all the cities and declare civil disobedience from this moment onward" (Blanford, 2011).

The FSA attempted to assume leadership of this revolution. It worked hard to present itself as a stark contrast to the brutality of the Assad government. For example, there are many accounts of FSA fighters helping civilians escape Syria and enter Jordan. One man that I interviewed in Zaatari camp in Jordan in 2014 explained that the FSA paid for his transportation across the Jordanian border, protected his transport, and that some of his drivers were even part of the FSA (Respondent J021). Many other respondents supported these claims.

Additionally, the FSA broadcasted its kindness to animals as a contrast to the brutality of government soldiers. While government soldiers appeared in online video footage killing cows and horses and torturing cats and goats, FSA fighters projected images of kindness to animals. This motivated a Syrian-American living in Atlanta to start the blog FSA Kittens in 2012 (Rickett, 2014). FSA Kittens collected photos of FSA fighters and kittens, furthering this element of the FSA narrative.

Eventually, these narratives had to evolve. There were many reasons for this, but one of the most important is that neither side could hide abuses that they were carrying out against civilians. Despite efforts to deny abusive behavior carried out on behalf of their side, pro-government and anti-government groups alike had to find a way to acknowledge these abuses within their narratives.

Pro-government actors struck a strong counter-insurgent tone, arguing that they were in a tough fight to protect Syria from terrorists (Lister, 2016). A variety of retorts were offered to opposition claims of government abuses, including the accusation that rebel fighters were hiding within civilian-populated areas and intentionally creating situations where there would be collateral damage. It also seizes upon any links it can find between self-proclaimed non-partisan groups like the White Helmets, the Syrian American Medical Society (SAMS), The

Syria Campaign, and foreign actors and rebel groups (Blumenthal, 2016). These retorts are crucial propaganda tools to influence the government narrative. Furthermore, as the government lost control of territory, the government emphasized its maintenance of a military presence in all corners of Syria, rather than all places. In Bashar Assad's words:

If you look at a military map now, the Syrian army exists in every corner. Not every place; by every corner, I mean north, south, east, west, and between. If you didn't believe in a unified Syria, that Syria can go back to its previous position, you wouldn't send the army there as a government. (Tepperman, 2015)

Secular opposition actors begrudgingly acknowledged that their revolution became a conflict, but they contend that this change happened because of intentional government actions and propaganda. They continued to call for freedom and democracy, but they argued that the revolution had been spoiled by jihadists and foreign fighters that the government had supported (Shehadi, 2013). In September 2016, Colonel Riad al-Assad, founder of the FSA, lamented in an interview with the opposition website Kuluna Shuraka, also known as All4Syria, "The revolution was stolen from us by an opposition that steered it in wrong directions" (Bar'el, 2016).

For their part, the secular opposition tended to blame opposition abuses on jihadists, hardline Islamist and Salafist groups, and ISIS. These groups had benefitted from Syria's history as a transit point for fighters entering and exiting Iraq during the 2000s, a massive release of Islamist and Salafist prisoners that went on to become prominent rebel leaders, and the Assad government's strategy to focus its military offensives on the secular, moderate opposition (Lister, 2016). Syria's history as a transit point for jihadist fighters allowed them to develop important organizational capacity in Syria. The release of Islamist and Salafist political prisoners strengthened hardline religious groups in Syria, especially ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra (now Jabhat Fateh al-Sham), and Ahrar Al Sham, making it more difficult for secular and moderate groups to gain support (Gutman, 2016a). The Assad government's targeting of secular and moderate groups also severely weakened them, while allowing the hardline Islamist and Salafist groups to develop.

There is even a wide-ranging debate over whether Bashar Assad created ISIS, controls ISIS, influences ISIS, or has just periodically acted in line with the interests of ISIS (Al-Tamimi, 2014; Ehsani, 2016; Gutman, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c; Nabki, 2016). This part of the opposition counter-narrative may contain rumors, conspiracy theories, and propaganda. One of the most detailed versions of this component of the opposition counter-narrative was explained in a three-part article in *The Daily Beast* by Roy Gutman. Gutman interviewed several opposition members and argued based on their statements that the Assad regime staged terror attacks, intentionally radicalized Islamist and Salafist prisoners in its prisons, infiltrated ISIS to the extent that it could control its actions, and selected military targets in line with ISIS objectives (Gutman, 2016a, 2016b, 2016c). Ehsani (2016) questioned the credibility of Gutman's opposition sources, even comparing one of them to Ahmed Chalabi, the infamous Iraqi source who played a crucial role in convincing the United States to invade Iraq in 2003. Others simply accept that the Assad government and ISIS have overlapping goals that periodically lead them to act in line with the interests of the other.

Debate over these issues is unresolved, but it does illustrate efforts on the part of both the government and opposition to use propaganda to influence narratives and counter-narratives. Actions like target selection during military offensives and releasing certain kinds of political prisoners illustrate the use of deliberate actions to influence narratives and counter-narratives. If the opposition sources are being honest about the Assad–ISIS relationship, then the government engaged in several devious actions to influence its narrative. If the opposition sources are lying, then the opposition is using propaganda to influence its counter-narrative. No matter what the truth is, both the government and opposition use propaganda and tangible actions to influence their narratives and counter-narratives.

Elites therefore form and shift narratives over time. While elites shift narratives through word and deed, civilians maintain their ability to understand and respond to threats if they believe those narratives as they evolve. Civilian survival includes adapting to security concerns. As a man named Muhammad Nur explained in an interview with ORSAM, "It reached such level that the people in Aleppo got used to hear the bombardments, and learned where to run and hide not to be shot by snipers" (ORSAM, May 2013b: p. 48). In addition,

many people adjust food production or job choice. In Eastern Ghouta, many civilians switched from growing crops like potatoes, cucumbers, and tomatoes to growing mushrooms. Others sun-dry vegetables to preserve them for winter. As a man named Mohamed explained in an interview with journalists from *Syria Deeply*, "We replaced rice with corn. One piece of corn costs $1 or even less, so I buy six or seven pieces for my family, which is sometimes more than enough" (Bouidani & Safwan, 2018). A Mercy Corps survey in 2018 also found that more adaptable civilians tend to hold different jobs than less adaptable people (Howe et al., 2018). Civilians would not be able to implement this wide range of adaptations without maintaining their belief in evolving narratives. They cannot avoid all economic and physical harm, but it is often possible to adapt and minimize harm.

Yet, people are not always able to continue believing evolving narratives. There comes a point where narratives cannot stand up to bombs and bullets, hunger, and extreme poverty. For many, conflict is bound to become too much. When a core component of one's narrative breaks (which side is good, there are ways to stay safe and obtain protection, etc.), a narrative rupture occurs.

## Narrative Ruptures

Narratives are remarkably durable, but they are not all powerful. Continuing to maintain an understanding of armed conflict over time is extremely difficult. Conflict dynamics change in ways that can be extremely confusing. When narrative belief breaks, the "narrative rupture" leaves people without their guide to understand ongoing events (Rosen, 2017). This produces a sudden onset of uncertainty that heightens anxiety about how to stay safe (Schon, 2016).

The difference between narratives rupturing and evolving comes in whether people perceive contradictions to the core or peripheral details of the narrative that they believe. As I discuss in the previous section, contradictions to peripheral narrative details can be incorporated into evolving narratives. During conflict, justifications for armed group actions and claims about specific events are often relegated to peripheral narrative details. For example, a peripheral component of a government's narrative may be its claim that none of its violence is targeting innocent civilians. This claim may shift over time as it

becomes impossible to deny that some civilians are being targeted. In these cases, narratives evolve rather than rupture.

Contradictions to the narrative's core are a fundamentally different matter. In the example of government violence against civilians, it may shift from peripheral to the core of a narrative if it stops people from believing that the government's actions are justified, that the government is trying to protect them, or if it changes their minds about which side to support. Broadly, narrative ruptures can result from any change that contradicts the understanding of which actors are good or bad, how to stay safe, and whether and from whom people can secure protection.

Across these triggers for narrative ruptures, there is a common thread that they cause people to lose capacity to select survival strategies at home. This is why, regardless of whether narrative ruptures occur in insecure urban contexts or within civil war as I show in Chapter 7, migration often follows a narrative rupture (Rosen, 2017; Schon, 2019).

## Implications for the Debate Over Safe Return vs. Voluntary Return

Understanding that civilians who migrate have often lost their understandings of how to survive in origin locations has substantial policy implications for destination locations. In most cases, hosts believe that they should only be hosting IDPs and refugees temporarily. In their minds, when violence subsides, people are supposed to return home. This view produces frustration when refugees resist encouragement to return home after violence subsides. Such frustration has facilitated the use of a "safe return" standard for refugee returns, as opposed to the voluntary return standard (non-refoulement) that is codified in international law. The international shift in preferences for safe return over voluntary return was noted formally in a 1992 UNHCR Working Group report that raised the following question:

Should the principle of voluntariness continue to be cardinal in this type of situation, or does the existence of safe conditions diminish the need for the freely expressed wish of the individual refugee? Some of us argue that voluntary repatriation as a corollary to non-refoulement remains valid as long as refugee status continues, and that there can be no modification to this position. Others among us feel that the corollary of non-refoulement is

not voluntary return but safety of return, and therefore, the issue at stake is the extent to which conditions in the country of origin are safe for return rather than the willingness of refugees to return. (Zieck, 1997: pp. 112–113)

While the UNHCR Protection Guidelines on Voluntary Repatriation that were issued in 1993 and 1996 continued to support voluntary repatriation over safe return, host states have followed safe return in practice on multiple occasions (Zieck, 1997: p. 113).

On these occasions, countries following the safe return norm have repeatedly placed refugees at risk. Host countries use tactics such as removing humanitarian aid from refugee camps in order to follow the safe return norm and avoid accusations of forcing people to return. When civil war in Mozambique ended, Malawi announced in 1993 an end to food distribution in its refugee camps. Mozambican refugees would have to return to Mozambique in order to access food aid. India also used the announcement of the cessation of food aid in 1987 to help convince Tamil refugees to return to Sri Lanka (Zieck, 1997: p. 437). More recently, refugee returns to countries like Afghanistan, Bosnia, Croatia, Kosovo, and South Sudan have also been justified more along the lines of safe return than voluntary return (Blitz, Sales & Marzano, 2005; Englbrecht, 2004; Gerver, 2015).

The danger of the safe return norm for refugees has highlighted the importance of defending the norm of voluntary return. Refugees are unlikely to return voluntarily in large numbers, however, based on declining violence levels alone. They also need new narratives of how to stay safe. The role of narrative ruptures in motivating migration must be acknowledged in order to derive this insight on refugee return.

This chapter, in combination with Chapter 3, unpacks the causal mechanisms underlying the findings on motivation from Chapters 6 and 7. Future research considering IDPs and refugees in destination locations would benefit from considering the combination of psychological, social, and violent processes that produce motivation to migrate. From this chapter, the recognition that narrative ruptures play a powerful role in motivating migration could influence analyses of decisions to return. Since refugees and IDPs do not necessarily return to their origin locations when violence subsides (Whitaker, 2003), they may need reassuring new narratives to replace the old ruptured narratives in order to voluntarily return home.