Sexual Rhetoric of the Syrian Arab Spring

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Abstract

The Syrian version of the Arab Spring is arguably unique in that it has generated right from the start a concurrent sexual rhetoric not so conspicuously noted in the Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, or Yemeni revolutions. This idiosyncrasy has to do with a number of reasons, the most seminal of which is the multi-sectarian mosaic of Syrian society. With Syria lacking attractive oil reserves, the international community has been scandalously divided between a huffing-and-puffing anti-Assad West and a veto-toting, pro-Assad Russian-Chinese alliance. This deep division over the Assad regime allowed the Syrian crisis to be so drawn-out that the good old inter-sectarian mudslinging, disguised in sexual terms, began to resurface as a noticeable phenomenon. Because this phenomenon is not peculiar to the current conflict in Syria, this study starts by giving a historical overview of the sexualization of conflicts both among Arabs and internationally. Then the paper moves to examine samples of the mutual sexual defamation by the Syrian regime and the opposition in order to shed light on a neglected byproduct/aspect of the still raging war in and about Syria.

Key words: Arabic media discourse, Addounia TV, inter-sectarian defamation, sex Jihad, Sexual rhetoric, Syrian revolution.
"Excuse my saying so, but we [Arabs] are castrated peoples, so why do you blame us if we revolt [against dictatorships]?”

Kaouthar Bachraoui

The use of sexual rhetoric to discredit opponents, tarnish their morality, trivialize their beliefs, or justify dispossessing, brutalizing, or revolting against them is a universal human déjà vu. Since the beginning of recorded human history, sexual rhetoric has been such an effective demagogic weapon in the employ of military, political and even religious contestants that their conflicts have themselves become sexualized. This sexualization is manifest in ancient mythology and representational art, modern literary expressions, recent graphic fabrications, and, closer home, in current Arabic media discourse on the Arab Spring, particularly in Syria.

Though the ubiquity of sex motifs in the representations of conflicts is too well-known to require documentation, a few representative examples will suffice here. In ancient Greek mythology, Kronus, the leader and the youngest of the first generation of Titans, is said to have deposed and castrated Uranus, his own father. A Greek vase commemorating the defeat of the Persians in the Battle of the Eurymedon (469 or 466 BC) shows a victorious Greek with an erect penis in hand pursuing a defeated Persian (in the same vein twenty-five centuries later, a Photoshopped image, widely circulated on the internet, featured Osama Bin Laden sodomizing then US President George W. Bush following the September 11 terrorist attacks). In Shakespeare's Hamlet, Claudius's usurpation of his brother's throne is coupled with the usurpation/rape of the queen as well. After the fall of Tunisian and Egyptian dictators in early 2011, Tunisian media personality Kaouthar Bachraoui, though a conservative woman, said to her hostess in an interview on a Lebanese satellite channel, "Excuse my saying so, but we [Arabs] are castrated peoples, so why do you blame us if we revolt [against dictatorships]?” In light of this latter summation, is it any wonder then that Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi, who presumably 'castrated' his own people for 41 years, was sodomized with a sharp instrument as soon as he was captured by some Libyan rebels on 20 October 2011?

Now because military occupations have always been coupled with raping the occupied country's women (and sometimes men) or taking them as booty prizes, such encounters have naturally been represented in sexual terms (Goldstein, 2003, 332ff); hence the feminization of occupied countries and the ubiquity of the female figure as a key instigator of action and reaction. English readers are better acquainted with Sir Walter Raleigh's feminization of El Dorado which, despite the presence of the Spanish conquistadores, still "hath her Maydenhead" (Raleigh, 1966: 96). No wonder, then, that collaborating with the occupying forces has invariably been termed not just as an act of high treason but also as an act of 'sleeping with the enemy.' And if the natives fail to repel the occupiers, it is because they are either 'impotent' or 'emasculated.'

St. John of Damascus (675-749 AD) is said to have been the first to spread the rumor among his Byzantine co-religionists that Muslim Arabs, otherwise his compatriots, are insatiable sex maniacs. By appealing to their sense of sexual honor, this cunning ruse was doubtless meant to rouse the slumbering Byzantines in order to prevent the 'lustful' Muslim Arabs from 'raping' both the land and women of the Holy Eastern Empire. Nor should we forget that the Arab-Islamic conquest of Andalusia in 711 AD is widely believed to have been caused by an au secours from La Cava Rumia (Mozoaarab for 'the Christian slut'). Daughter of Count Julian, Governor of Ceuta, this 'Christian slut'
is said to have been raped by Roderic, the last Visigoth King of Hispania, while she was studying at his court in Toledo. Enraged Count Julian appealed to Musa Ibn Nusayr, the Umayyad Governor of North Africa, for help. And the latter gladly obliged—but certainly not to avenge the defiled honor of a cava rumia but to wrench the whole of Hispania from Christendom. The Arab conquest of Amorium (838 AD) is also attributed to a similar au secours by a 'noble' Arab woman in the lands of Byzantium who, having been attacked by a Byzantine marauder, cried, as Arab legend has it, "Help, oh, Mu'tassim!" the latter being the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad. After the establishment of Israel and its sweeping victory over its Arab neighbors in 1948, the great Syrian multilingual poet-diplomat Omar Abu Risha (1910-1990) shamed the Arab regimes for failing to respond in the same chivalrous manner of Mu'tassim:

Perchance a "Help, oh, Mu'tassim!" was loudly shouted by many a girl orphaned;
Though clearly heard, their cries with the chivalry of Mu'tassim went unanswered.

In the same year, an Egyptian poet named Ali Mahmoud Taha (1902-1949) appeals to every able-bodied Arab male on behalf of all Palestinian sisters after the 'rape' of Palestine by the Zionists:

Brothers, the oppressors have transgressed beyond all limits: now is the time for jihad, now is the time for self-sacrifice!
Shall we leave them to divest [literally, 'rape'] Arabism of the glory and sovereignty of its forefathers?
Brothers, in Jerusalem we have many a sister for whom the oppressors have unsheathed their knives.5

Having said that, it must be noted that the sexualization of conflicts generally takes two forms, depending on the type of conflict: when there is an external military threat, the weak play on such sexual anxieties as rape and emasculation; but if the conflict is ideological, the contestants resort to sexual vilification of each other.

By all appearances, little has changed since the first human contestants resorted to their most instinctive weapon of defense and offense: sexual rhetoric and sex itself. Though not lone voices, two particular poems widely circulated on Arabic websites demonstrate that such a weapon has not yet lost its tactical leverage. Despite their scandalous lack of any aesthetic merit and outmoded declamatory tone, the poems are seminal examples of the current sexual warfare in and about Syria. The first is a polemical poem entitled, "Do Not Cause Syria to Fall, You Cows!" by the Palestinian poet and academic Ahmad Hassan Al-Maqdisi. In this poem, Al-Maqdisi harangues the heads of the Arab Gulf states for their support of the Syrian rebels, long before this support materialized into more than public media sympathy—and prayers, especially during Friday congregations, for Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad to fall. In the last line in the excerpt below, the atavistic poet expresses his arcane sexual fears if Syria (reduced here to the figurehead of its regime) falls:

Do not kill Syria; for history has taught us that without Syria Arabs are soundly defeated.
The Arab nation won't perish without Qatar, but without Syria's spear it will be broken.
We won't live like orphans without Hamad, nor will we perish if Qatar is wiped out.
But without Syria's sword, we will be like a slave girl sodomized by Turks, Romans, and Tartars.

The second example is taken from a riposte to Al-Maqdisi’s poem by the Tunisian poet Muhammad Najeeb Belhaj-Hussain:

Only cows, not Syria, shall fall; so shall the dreams of those who trade in Syria.
Filthy is the tyrant who spreads violence in it; and filthy is he who justifies his tyranny.
The Ba’ath party is nothing but a whorehouse around which hover hordes of debauchery.

As this latter poem is in the form of the classical Arabic tradition of naqa'idh or riposting, Belhaj-Hussain, particularly in the last line, argues along the same demagogic, atavistic lines evident in Al-Maqdisi’s poem. To counter Al-Maqdisi’s sexual anxieties about the future of Syria without Assad, Belhaj-Hussain slaps him with a reminder to heed the no less shameful present of Syria under the Ba’ath party. Other typical effusions, both pro and con, followed suit. But such effusions need not detain us any further.6

Long before these poetic outbursts, a rumor of an explosive sexual charge hit the airwaves and cyberspace as soon as protests broke out in the Syrian city of Deraa in mid-March 2011. In a meeting with the fathers of the schoolboys arrested for scribbling anti-regime slogans on the walls of their school, Colonel Atef Najeeb, Chief of Political Security in Deraa, and a cousin of President Bashar Al-Assad, is reported to have told those fathers, "Forget about those brats. Go f… your wives and give birth to others. And if you can't do it, we can f… them instead." Propagators of this hard-to-verify rumor claim this was the reason demonstrators in Deraa shouted, "We'd rather be dead than humiliated!" True or not, the rumor is credible for three reasons: first, for well over half a century now Syrian security forces have always mistreated and humiliated their own citizens; second, the well-connected henchman enjoys such unbridled powers that it is hard to believe he has not insulted the fathers of those 'treasonous brats;' third, the rumor itself is consonant with the public perception of any insult or external threat as a castration threat as illustrated by both Freud's analysis of Little Hans's problem and Franz Fanon's argument in Black Skin, White Masks.

And sure enough, the castration anxiety was soon literally materialized in the brutal murder of Hamza Al-Khateeb, a 13-year old boy from Deraa province. After participating in an anti-regime demonstration, the boy was arrested at a checkpoint on April 29, 2011, tortured to death, and then his corpse was delivered in a body bag to his family the following month—with his penis amputated and stuck in his mouth! The profound significance of this amputation is worthy of the scholarly attention of psychoanalysts of all stripes. The absurd justification given by pro-Assad apologists (dubbed by the opposition as minhibakjiyya—‘We-love-you-ists') is that the boy was arrested on his way to a military officers' compound to rape their women! I do not think any of these apologists has read Fanon's mention of the Algerian man who became impotent soon after learning of the rape of his wife by French soldiers during the Algerian war of independence (Fanon, 1968, 181). But those who amputated Hamza's penis, or justified it, were responding to a profound unconscious call urging them to castrate this little transgressor and broadcast the brutality as widely as possible—to be a lesson to potential castrators who are older and more powerful than this negligible 'pecker.' Psychoanalysis aside, the amputation is of a piece with two other incidents of no less symbolic
import: the gruesome ripping out by the Syrian regime of the throat of singer Ibrahim Qashoush on 3 July 2011 and the breaking of the hands of world renowned cartoonist Ali Ferzat on 25 August 2011, the one for being 'the nightingale of the Syrian revolution,' the other for being its staunch cartoonist.

Sexual vilification of one's adversaries is not only a rabble-rousing tactic, but also a profoundly resonating indicator of illogic and irrationality. A case in point is the response of Joseph Abu Fadhel, a Lebanese Christian Assad apologist, to the Syrian opposition figure Muhyeddine Ladhqani on Al-Jazeera's January 31, 2012 episode of "The Opposite Direction," a weekly current events debate program modeled on CNN's now defunct "Crossfire." Whenever unable to respond to Ladhqani's detailed and sophisticated arguments, Abu Fadhel would yell at his opponent, inti wahad ibn karfoukha ('You are one helluva whoreson'). Abu Fadhel was apparently trying to hide his vulgar expletive by using an idiosyncratic Lebanese expression (karfoukha = whore) unknown to people outside the Lebanese speech community (the debate host, Dr. Faisal Al-Kasim, is also Syrian). But in the last two minutes of the program, the bulky and tall Abu Fadhel dropped his mask of verbal dissimulation, rose from his seat like a towering giant, walked over to Ladhqani, and slapped him on the face, all the while heaping sexual profanities on the absent sister and mother of his shorter and smaller opponent—in plain Arabic, this time.

Another regrettable fallout of the Arab Spring in Syria is the emergence of a neo-sectarianism. This neo-sectarian discourse, of which both pro- and anti-regime factions are varyingly guilty, has been conscripted in the frantic effort to mobilize the Arab populace at large against this or that camp. The crudest form of this neo-sectarianism was attacking Assad or defending him for no other reason than being an Alawite. And with the emergence of this neo-sectarianism there also surfaced the good old politics of sexual defamation. In the absence of restrictions on the publication of comments on the Yahoo! Maktoob Arabic news service, cyberspace provided open platforms for neo-sectarians to vent out their once pent-up sectarian sentiments. While ignoring the fact that neither all Alawites endorsed Assad's policies blindly nor were all Sunnis opposed to him, such comments were rife with indiscriminate anti-Alawite slurs preposterously describing them as "children of concubinage" or "offspring of adultery" and the like. Other countless anti-Assad comments dubbed him as Bashar the Sheep, the Ostrich, the Lame Duck, or the Giraffe (the latter due to his tall neck and stature) instead of Bashar Al-Assad ('Bashar the Lion'). A favorite slogan tirelessly repeated by protesters is this, "With us, he is a lion; with Israel he is an ostrich." Such epithets were meant not only to dehumanize but also to sissify Assad—as sheep, ostriches, and ducks are symbols of putative feminine cowardice in popular Arab culture. Other web comments dwelled on his so-called 'effeminate' lisp, and in Deir Ezzoar, in particular, this lisp became the theme of a favorite irreverent slogan (untranslatable into English) in some anti-Assad demonstrations.

The famous Saudi cleric Muhammad Al-Oraifi, too, jumped on the anti-Alawite bandwagon. In one of his Friday sermons, he reiterated all the anti-Assad charges of rape (including homosexual rape) and penis-amputation of detainees circulated in the Arabic media. Then, Al-Oraifi added his own personal spice, "Bashar Al-Assad himself is from a malignant sperm-drop." By strict Islamic standards, the cleric committed a sin of hubris by arrogating to himself two exclusive markers of divine omniscience: knowing the unseen and knowing what is in wombs. Bordering on casuistry, this faux pas is not a mere dead Arabic metaphor but an intimation of deep-seated sectarianism in the collective unconscious of the mainstream Sunni establishment.
Likewise, a Syrian opposition website published a fabricated news article claiming that First Lady Asma Al-Assad was cheating on her husband with a Lebanese businessman.¹

A stock charge by the opposition against those who did not revolt against the Syrian regime is lack of virility and chivalry. Hence the shaming slogan repeatedly chanted by protesters, "He who does not take part [in protests] is without virile honor."¹² During the first year of protests, the rebels of Homs, the powerhouse of anti-Assad protests, nicknamed the relatively calm province of Raqqa as the province of Abu Badr, the latter being a notorious nervous Nelly in the machoist hit Syrian TV series, Bab Al-Hara ('The Quarter's Gate'). Likewise, during visits to Deir Ezzoar in the summer of 2011, some of my friends from Raqqa, a small town on the northern bank of the Euphrates, (now the capital of ISIS), were uniformly and provocatively asked, "We hope you have plenty of carrots in Raqqa?" The implication is that natives of Raqqa are de facto rabbits not real machos like the anti-Assad protesters. This slur was ironically reversed when Raqqa fell in the hands of the rebels on 4 March 2013, and its natives were immediately promoted from “rabbits” to “lions of the Euphrates.”

Likewise, because Aleppo generally steered away from protests during the first year of the crisis, despite desperate pleas by the opposition to the country's second largest city to join, frustrated protesters in Kafrnobbol, a flashpoint of protests in the province of Idlib, flashed a placard with a nifty pun scribbled on it, "Even Viagra won't get Aleppo up!"¹³ When it was first rumored in mid-May 2012 that General Assef Shawkat, Deputy Chief of Staff of the Syrian army, and the husband of Assad's only sister Bushra, was killed, protestors in Deir Ezzoar carried placards saying, "Don't be sad, Bushra: we are all Assef!" And when he was finally killed in July 2012, protestors across the country carried placards saying, "Bushra for all!" This clever commercial-like statement not only promises the now widowed Bushra to horny protestors, but also commodifies her by playing on the meaning of her name (good tidings).

By the same token, Addounia satellite channel, owned by Rami Makhlouf, Syria's most formidable business shark and a cousin of Bashar Al-Assad, consistently defamed Syrian rebels since the outbreak of protests on 15 March 2011. After a period of denying the protests even existed, Addounia started labeling the rebels as foreign-backed conspirators, saboteurs, and terrorist armed gangs with a blatant sectarian agenda, despite the fact that the crisis unquestionably cut across the country's sectarian fault lines. On the surface of things, Addounia did not adopt an open sectarian agenda, but its consistent reduction of a complex national crisis (and a tragedy later on) to a mere sectarian conspiracy makes the channel itself guilty of reverse sectarianism. An atavistic aspect of this reverse sectarianism is the channel's sexual defamation campaign against dissidents of all sectarian hues. In contrast to its extremely scanty coverage of the crisis (despite the too many assumed local and global conspirators), sexual defamation became a paradoxically prominent gimmick. To rob the protestors of any political legitimacy and moral credibility, the channel's standby coterie of pro-regime ninnyhammers regurgitated unverifiable rape charges against the erstwhile peaceful demonstrators. At the same time, the channel turned a blind eye and a deaf ear to the numerous charges of rape committed by pro-regime paramilitary hooligans (known as shabbeha), which charges were independently verified and documented by Amnesty International (Amnesty International, 2012, 24).

And though Addounia initially denied reports of Syrian refugees flocking to neighboring Turkey, it soon began spreading claims that 400 Syrian women were raped by Turkish gangs and, more preposterously, that 250 of these rape victims have already given birth—all in a span too short even for frisky cats to conceive and deliver! The net result of this outrageous lie? These refugee women are now de facto whores—thanks either to the Turkish government which sold gullible Syrians a bill of goods in order to decoy them into its territory for the sole purpose of tainting their pristine Syrian honor, or thanks to their myopic male guardians, now virtual cuckolds, who did not see through all these wicked designs. In other words, these refugees have committed the ultimate political anathema: sleeping with the enemy! Of course, none of the channel's parliament of parrots bothered to ask himself, What drove these refugees to the arms of the enemy?

When in mid-August 2011 Arab Gulf states began mounting pressure on Assad to end his crackdown on peaceful demonstrators, Shareef Shehadah, a pro-Assad loyalist, said on Addonia that Sheikh Hamad, then emir of Qatar, outdid even his American masters in viciousness because he did not stop Al-Jazeera from covering (and thus inciting more) protests in Syria. To deliver his coup de maître, he capped his diatribe thusly, "If the Emir of Qatar does not know who his real father is, then let him ask his mother about that; because had he been the real son of his [supposed] father, he wouldn't have done this to Syrians." The message here is unmistakable: only a bastard would support the rebels who are already nothing but gullible cuckolds!

At the same time, another pro-regime apologist named Ali Al-Shu'aibi (né Ali Shawwakh Ishaq) sent a live challenge on Addounia's airwaves to the then foreign minister of Qatar to be a "man" (what an oxymoron!) and admit, "Yes, I was once an afflicted homosexual and I used to be sodomized!" This same apologist then flashed a USB drive across the screen—but he suddenly and solemnly paused with a significant headshake of disgust, a scowl of affected religiosity, and a modicum of self-righteous effusions. Theatrics over, he swore that he has a 3-minute, 20-second video clip on his USB drive (note the precision) that shows how a certain Gulf ruler used to bring a CIA agent to his palace to copulate with his wife before his own very eyes! To his credit, though, the self-styled moralist did not deign to name the cuckold-turned-head of state, nor did he show the clip itself—for that would be "some stooping," and a la Duke of Ferrara, he chooses "Never to stoop!" Aha, so it is not just rapists and bastards who support the rebels but cuckolds as well.15 Birds of a feather conspire together.

While the Arab League summit was being held in Baghdad on 28 March 2012, to which Syria was not invited—a first in the history of the League—Addounia continued its frenzied defamation campaign, particularly against Qatar and Saudi Arabia for "conspiring against the national and territorial integrity of Syria" (a recycled cliché from the late 1970's) and "for having Syrian blood on their hands" (a patent-worthy invention). A recurrent motif in Addounia's ethos has been its tireless campaign to unmask "the neo-Qaradhawis," a coined reference to followers of Yousef Al-Qaradhawi, President of the World Congress of Muslim Scholars, and a staunch critic of the Syrian regime. To prove that Qaradhawi is not morally qualified to speak on behalf of Syrians seeking freedom and dignity, Addounia unearthed a trove of unspeakable moral filth on the Egyptian-born Qatari cleric. In the 1960's, Qaradhawi "issued a fatwa," crooned one of Addounia's young beautiful newscasters with a straight face, "in which he sanctioned a man to copulate with his own daughter—if necessary, that is!" See who else supports the rebels? Incest advocates!
Sex Jihad!

The most outrageous of all fabrications by the regime and its apologists is sex Jihad. The fabrication was first publicized by pro-Assad Lebanese media in the summer of 2013. It claims that the Saudi cleric Muhammad Al-Oraifi has issued a fatwa urging Muslim girls to go to Syria in order to provide sexual relief to Jihadists fighting Assad forces. Al-Oraifi naturally denied having ever sanctioned such an adulterous practice. The Free Syrian Army and Jabhat Al-Nusra, Assad’s strongest opponents, likewise denied such claims.

In late September 2013, one month after the Assad regime was internationally condemned for having used chemical weapons against civilians in rebel-held rural Damascus on 21 August 2013, the Syrian TV aired an interview with a Syrian teenage girl named Rawan Qaddah who “confessed” that her own father had coerced her to practice sex Jihad with several foreign fighters, and that she finally resorted to government forces in order to save her honor! The irony is that the Syrian TV aired the interview with the girl without hiding her face—thus further humiliating her.

It soon turned out that the girl was kidnapped more than 10 months earlier by regime forces in revenge for her father’s role in the Free Syrian Army. By contrast, the Syrian TV aired a video of a young woman (with a hidden face) who claimed that she was kidnapped and gang-raped by terrorists. And in a few weeks, the original video tape was leaked by an insider: the alleged rape victim turned out to be a collaborator who was asking her prompters what to say on camera about her alleged attackers.2

In both cases, the regime’s goal is obvious: humiliating the families of rebels or accusing the rebels themselves of indulging in the most unspeakable filth. It should be noted, however, that this kind of mudslinging by media commentators on both sides of the Syrian divide is neither without a historical precedent nor does it operate in a cultural vacuum. As sectarian conflict is essentially an ideological one, Islamic sects have since inception put sexual defamation against each other to good use. Such defamation, especially among the uneducated masses, continues unabated even today, alas. The Shiites, for instance, continue to recycle the long discredited charge of adultery against Aysha, the Prophet’s favorite wife. That Omar Ibn Al-Khattab (585-644 AD), the second Rightly-Guided caliph, suffered from a deep rectal itch that only men’s hot semen could cure, and that Sunnis see nothing wrong or shameful about homosexuality or anal sex with one’s wife are still popular Shiite beliefs. Sunnis, on the other hand, counter that it is the Shiites and Alawites who engage in such shameful practices, and that they are nothing but a horde of consenting cuckolds who have no sense of protective jealousy over their womenfolk. The greatest irony of all is this: both Shiites and Sunnis are united in their belief that the Ismaelis, an offshoot of Shiism, hold an annual adult meeting where men offer verbal homage to the genitalia of a publicly displayed naked beautiful girl of their sect, after which lights are turned off and every man worthy of his name grabs the nearest woman within reach—even if she’s his mother, sister, or aunt—and both take part in a communal orgy; the Shiites, the Sunnis, and the Ismaelis again believe that this annual orgy is also part of the religious culture of the Murshidis, a twentieth-century offshoot of the Alawite sect; and finally, all the four above-mentioned sects plus Christians believe that the Druze tolerate premarital sex between boys and girls.

2 http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uL1bio5ZRwk
provided that it happen naturally, i. e., a boy and a girl are alone in a village house and the door is accidentally shut, say, by a gust of wind!

All these privately, but widely, circulated platitudes are totally unfounded. If there are any shameful sexual practices among some followers of this or that sect, they are certainly to be ascribed to individual rather than blanket sectarian reasons. Such sexual politics is basically a brazen act of twofold propaganda: an implicit act of self-propaganda that typifies the propagators as the unrivaled beacons of purity, decency, and virtue; and an explicit counter propaganda that casts rival sects as the unparalleled paragons of shameful sexual promiscuity and moral decadence. Furthermore, these repugnant and discreditable claims are part of the sometimes unpronounced, sometimes blatant cultural inter-sectarian war. These claims are also very effective demagogic ploys used to discredit—by verbal craft not rational argument—the religious beliefs of other sects by instinctively appealing to the self-righteousness of the naïve and gullible.

Likewise, Addounia's self-righteous discourse blatantly consigns the channel's owners, benefactors, and unwaveringly devoted congregation of viewers to the camp of virtue, and everybody else to the camp of vice. Its goals are the same goals of historic warriors engaged in inter-sectarian mudslinging. When rebels are accused of being hired agents remotely controlled by such countries and bodies as Turkey, GCC states, and strangely even Al-Qaeda, the US, Israel, and France, such a claim requires substantiation. In the embarrassing absence of such evidence, reductive rhetoric is mobilized to silence skeptics and other dogs barking at the wrong tree. By portraying the rebels and their Turkish and GCC 'decoyers' as cuckold, rapists, and afflicted homosexuals respectively, the channel thus hopes to manipulate the minds of its unsuspecting viewers who took this jingoistic mouthpiece on trust as their own vicarious thought machine. By demagogically appealing to its viewers' sense of exceptional uprightness in a world permeated by wicked conspiracies and moral filth, the channel hopes to blow up the presumably disgraceful past of the regime's most notorious opponents. So, is there any one in their right mind who believes that the rebels seek a bright, nay 'honorable,' future of freedom and democracy for Syrians? What person of virtue and integrity supports a rapist rebel, or listens to a cuckolded ruler, an afflicted homosexual-turned-minister, and an advocate of incestuous relationships? Is such a prospective democracy really better than the current unique system of governance whereby presidency is handed down from virtuous father to no less worthy a son?
Endnotes


4. Taha's inciting masculinist appeal was broadcast far and wide in the Arab world, thanks to Muhammad Abdel-Wahhab (1902-1991), the great Egyptian singer, and his Syrian disciple Safwan Bahlawan, who both sang these verses beautifully, yet their enchanting songs, alas, failed to wrench Palestine back from its usurpers. Singers and bards in the Arab past performed the role played today by the internet and social networks: they broadcast news, incited action, spread rumors, and even composed commercials—Miskeen Al-Darimi (d. 708 AD), a profligate-turned-hermit, is known to have written a commercial (for seductive black veils) whose verses are known to every Arab today, thanks to Sabah Fakhri whose song popularized these much adored verses.


6. In a rather uncanny coincidence, the English mistranslation by Bassem Mroue of the rallying point in Qashoush's bouncy, jokey song is more relevant to the theme of this paper than the Arabic original. A faithful, albeit archaic, rendition of that particular line yields, "Fie upon you, Bashar, and fie upon those who salute you..." But in Mroue's rather sporty rendition the song became, "Screw you, Bashar, and screw those who salute you" (my emphasis). See Bassem Mroue, "Ibrahim Qashoush, Syria Protest Songwriter, Gruesomely Killed." Retrieved April 12, 2012 from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/07/27/ibrahim-qashoush-syria-protests_n_911284.html

7. Retrieved April 7, 2012 from http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GYf3WQsFC7s

8. Dehumanizing one's opponents has also been noted in the Syrian Arab Spring discourse. The surname of the Sudanese Lieutenant General Muhammad Al-Dabi, chief of the short-lived Arab League monitoring mission in Syria (December 2011 to February 2012), was much made of by the Syrian opposition. In Sudanese Arabic "Dabi" means "serpent," but Syrian opposition media commentators, who accused General Dabi of pro-Assad sympathy, consistently referred to him as "Dab-bi." By putting the stress on the last syllable, his name came to mean "beast," or even "beemoth" (whose appearance from the sea signals the end of the world, according to Muslim theologians). Likewise, when Dr. Faisal Al-Kasim hosted Shaikh Abdel-Majeed Al-Sa'eed, a Syrian opposition figure, and the Arabic-speaking Russian political analyst and former diplomat Vyacheslav Matuzov on "The Opposite Direction" (Al-Jazeera 7 February 2012), Shaikh Sa'eed kept referring to
his Russian opponent as "hatha al-dob lomasi ar-russi." (this bear-like Russian diplomat). By deliberately pausing after the first syllable of the word diblomasi and by changing the vowel in this syllable from I to O, Shaikh Sa'eed coined a new insult in Arabic that meant "a bear-like diplomat." Such verbal gimmicks remind us of US President George H. W. Bush's deliberate mispronunciation of the name of Iraqi president as "Sodom Husain" in the 1990's.


10. It must be noted that the rather flat English translation given here fails to capture the bouncy aspect of the Arabic original.


13. For references in this and the previous paragraph, see the relevant clips, retrieved April 6, 2012, at the following link on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uc0QI6Qfn9k
References


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